Centering Trans-Gender Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation: Developing a Theory of Trans-Precarity

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CENTERING TRANS-GENDER EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZATION, PRECARITY, AND REPRESENTATION: DEVELOPING A THEORY OF TRANS-PRECARITY

by

Christine E. Strayer

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Sociology Western Michigan University December 2021

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The LGBTQ+ community is commonly perceived as homogenous, affluent, and inclusive. Despite these perceptions, there is substantial evidence to suggest that trans* people, particularly those of color, experience greater levels of marginalization and precarity than gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to develop an understanding of how trans* people experience and navigate various forms of marginalization, precarity, and distorted public representation by implementing an intersectional framework and a transfeminist methodology. Semi-structured interviews were used to document the experiences of 34 trans* participants, ranging in age from 20-55 years. Constructed grounded theory analysis was used to explore their intersectionally complex experiences of marginalization, precarity, representation, and navigation. Participants described their marginalization at both personal and systemic levels, implicating institutional barriers in infrastructure, institutional practices, public policy, healthcare systems, and employments sectors. In addition, participants experienced precarity, both social and economic, that they attributed to their gender identities. Participants with multiple marginalized identities described more nuanced experiences with marginalization that they associated with their race, ethnicity, disability, status within the LGBTQ+ community, and their ability to pass as their intended gender. Representations of trans* identities were characterized by participants as primarily negative, but they also offered examples of positive
and trans* affirming representations. Participants’ accounts of how they navigated their adverse experiences associated with their trans* identities reflected strategies that demonstrated agency and a capacity for resilience. These participants’ experiences provide strong evidence that significant systemic change is needed to dismantle transphobic institutional barriers in our public policy, institutional practices, and corporate sectors. These findings also demonstrate the importance of centering diverse trans* voices and experiences in this important work.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to first thank my LGBTQ+ students who opened my eyes to the daily challenges they faced because of their nonconforming sexualities and gender identities. Their willingness to trust me and let me be their advocate has been lifechanging, and I am deeply grateful. Similarly, I thank the participants in this research for graciously sharing their ideas and experiences and making this study possible.

Secondly, I want to express my gratitude to several people who provided vital guidance and feedback along the way. Dr. Angie Moe has been an essential mentor from the very beginning of this journey, and most specifically, I appreciate her support as the chair of my dissertation committee. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Karen Vocke, Dr. Melinda McCormick, and Dr. Codie Stone for offering their thoughts and perceptions of the ideas that are discussed and proposed in this work. Also, I extend my thanks to Dr. David Hartmann, Dr. Zoann Snyder, and Dr. Melinda McCormick for rounding out my dissertation committee.

Lastly, I would have been unable to complete this work without the support of my family who have been beyond patient as I have earned my bachelor’s, master’s, and now, doctoral degrees. Without their love and encouragement, I would not have been able to arrive at this point. Thank you, Greg, Braden, and Madison.

Christine E. Strayer
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

To get a clear idea of the sanctioned enactments of gender and sexuality in American society, one only needs to indulge in a bit of American television or examine the various marketing campaigns of corporate America. For the LGBTQ+ community, the endorsed ‘poster-children’ for public representation have been constructed as fashionable, White, affluent gay men with an occasional nod to White, affluent lesbians. DeFilippis (2016) observes “in contemporary American society, the dominant cultural narrative about the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community is rooted in issues of economics, class, and race” (p.143). Admittedly, seeing representations of non-heteronormative lifestyles is a positive shift toward acceptance that has taken decades of activism to achieve. With that said, in the context of greater social tolerance and acceptance, there are vast disparities and inequities that must not be overlooked.

Background

In the past several decades, the LGBTQ+ community and its allies have confronted discriminatory practices and policies by working diligently to gain social visibility and equitable

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1 There is evidence that many younger members of the community do not identify with this label as they have begun to formulate emergent and self-actualized identities (Bates et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2019). While I acknowledge this development, my choice to use the acronym LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender, queer, +) when referring to this community is, nonetheless, intended to be more inclusive. The ‘+’ is not meant to suggest that all additional identities are of lesser importance, but convey the understanding that the realm of gender and sexual identities is still evolving and expansive. In places where I have not used this acronym, I am adhering to the authors’ uses of specific language or terminology.
access to civil liberties for people who do not conform to heteronormative gender enactments. Progress has been made in instituting inclusive policies at not only local, but also state and federal levels. This has undoubtedly empowered many members of the LGBTQ+ community to move further into mainstream society, gaining a modicum of acceptance from society at large. However, there has also been the simultaneous consequence of an emerging prevalence of homonormativity (Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Ghabrial, 2017; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Knee, 2019; Vogler, 2016; Ward, 2008) that has perpetuated a stereotype of ‘gay affluence’ that is most often perceived as the prevailing class status of all LGBTQ+ citizens (Badgett, 1998; DeFilippis, 2016; Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). As such, this brand of gay identity has slowly become synonymous with White, well-educated, economically affluent, male identities (DeFilippis, 2016; Knee, 2019; Ocampo, 2015). Within this framework, those who are socially privileged have been intentionally constructed as the ‘right’ kind of gay, consequently delegitimizing all of those in the community who do not meet these parameters (Brown, 2012; DeFilippis, 2016; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Knee, 2019; Steele et al., 2018; Vogler, 2016; Ward, 2008).

In contrast to the seemingly positive gay affluence stereotype, the negative stereotypes about the ‘other’ members of the LGBTQ+ community have historically been leveraged to stigmatize individuals who do not or cannot conform to heteronormative (Connell, 1995/2005; DeFilippis, 2016; Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Kimmel, 2011) and cisnormative (Bauer et al., 2009; Hudson, 2019; Vermeir et al., 2018) gender norms. This stigma has real-world implications for a large portion of the LGBTQ+ community, making them highly vulnerable to being marginalized as well as experiencing social and economic instability (Butler, 2009; DeFilippis, 2016; Ehrenreich, 2015; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Kimmel, 2011). Despite a
recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that ensures federal legal protections against employment
discrimination for LGBTQ+ people, Mallory and Sears (2016) estimated that more than half of
the LGBTQ+ adult population in the U.S. does not have state-level legal protections against
housing discrimination. Furthermore, in the same week that the Supreme Court handed down its
historic decision about employment protections, President Trump signed an executive order that
rolled back healthcare protections for trans-gender\(^2\) people that were previously provided under
the Affordable Care Act. Fortunately, in the wake of the 2020 national election, this order and
many other anti-trans orders and policies have been rolled back as the Biden Administration has
placed an emphasis on a more socially-just political agenda. While this is certainly an
improvement, there are still numerous instances where legal protections have been put in place
for *sexual minority groups* but not for *gender minority groups*.

In many states, a large proportion of LGBTQ+ citizens are neither legally nor socially
recognized or acknowledged as oppressed or marginalized, thereby denying them fundamental
protections under anti-discrimination policies. Thus, they may be denied housing (Graham, 2014;
Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015), health care (Bauer et al., 2009; Boe et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2011;
Hettinger & Vandello, 2014; Kcomt et al., 2020; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016), child
custody (Holtzman, 2013; Minter, 2018), and until recently, employment (Hettinger & Vandello,
2014; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). One of the outcomes of heightened and prolonged exposure to
poverty, homelessness, criminalization, and discrimination that has been empirically linked to
gender and sexual orientation is poor health and higher prevalence of disability for lesbian, gay,
and bisexual populations (Badgett, 2018; DeFilippis, 2016; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2012;

\(^2\) This term has been intentionally hyphenated, and the significance of this terminology will be discussed on page 6
of this chapter.
Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). In addition to these institutional barriers, trans-gender people also face higher rates of harassment and violence (DeFilippis, 2016; Dinno, 2017; Graham, 2014; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015) and inequitable policing and criminalization (Graham, 2014; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Steele et al., 2018) without the benefit of legal recourse. This harsh reality is a clear illustration of institutionally sanctioned marginalization and violence that Hollibaugh and Weiss (2015) aptly refer to as *queer precarity*, a complex web of social and economic injustices that has profound psychological and material consequences in the lives of millions of LGBTQ+ people. In considering the relationship between gender performativity and precarity, Butler (2009) observed that,

> ‘Precarity’ designates that politically induced conditions in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. Precarity also characterizes that politically induced conditions of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection. (p. ii)

When considering the circumstances of groups who have been marginalized within the auspices of the LGBTQ+ community, which has itself been historically marginalized, the economic and social ramifications are abysmal and extensive.

There are also compounding circumstances that have made the precarity of so many LGBTQ+ people essentially ‘invisible’ to society; Many social scientific researchers have historically treated members of the LGBTQ+ community as a homogenous population, and the body of social scientific research focused on trans-gender and gender nonconforming experiences with marginalization and precarity is limited. For example, the largest data set available on lesbian, gay, and bisexual people is the annually administered National Institute of Health Survey (NIHS), which neglects to ask questions about gender identity, fails to address the
concerns of more than a million members of the LGBTQ+ community. Based upon data from the 2016 U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, researchers at the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law determined that there were an estimated 1.4 million adults in the U.S. who are trans-gender (Flores et al., 2016). It is also important to remember that social stigma and vulnerability to violence associated with nonconforming gender identity have likely led to statistics concerning trans-gender populations being underestimated (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017).

The only large body of data in existence that focuses on the concerns of trans-gender and gender nonconforming people is the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey,\(^3\) which is only the 2\(^{nd}\) iteration of the 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey (James et al., 2016). With the constraints of limited data in mind, it is not particularly surprising that most of the work has predominantly focused on the concerns of lesbian and gay people, often with the acknowledgement that more research on the precarity of bisexual, trans-gender, and queer people is necessary (Badgett, 2018). A dearth of research in this area is clearly problematic when you consider that the existing empirical findings consistently reveal that poverty rates are higher for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, but in varying and complex ways that demonstrate the intersections of multiple forms of oppression i.e., race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and disability (Albelda et al., 2013; Badgett et al., 2008; DeFilippis, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2013).

Of all the subgroups, the experiences of trans-gender people are most often either admittedly absent or invisible altogether. This is particularly concerning, given findings that

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\(^3\) Delayed by the global implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, an updated U.S. Transgender survey is scheduled to be released in 2021.
depict a web of intersecting sites of oppression and vulnerability that have a significantly negative impact the daily lives of trans-gender people. Trans-gender people are at four times greater risk of poverty than lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are, with the rates for trans-gender people of color being significantly higher (DeFilippis, 2016; Grant et al., 2011; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). In many cases, they are also concentrated in low-wage service jobs that rarely offer access to health, retirement, or sick-time benefits (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018). In addition to employment instability, there is a high prevalence of housing discrimination and homelessness among the trans-gender population. “Job, health, and housing discrimination and harassment all produce inflated rates of homelessness among queer and trans adults” (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015, p. 21). Troublingly, trans-gender youth face significantly higher rates of violence and harassment in school from peers and faculty, struggle with educational attainment, and are more likely to be homeless because families do not accept their gender identities (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015).

Trans-gender people also encounter significant institutional barriers in accessing the limited social support and resources. They are often denied access to homeless shelters or face the potential of violence or harassment from other shelter clients as well as staff (DeFilippis, 2016). Homelessness and employment instability can often lead to heightened vulnerability to increased criminalization. In many cases, the lack of viable employment opportunities and the prevalence of homelessness heightens the likelihood of negative encounters with law enforcement for trans-gender youths as well as adults (Graham, 2014; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Flores et al., 2016). When faced with overwhelming economic and social barriers, many resort to alternate exchange economies to replace or supplement their low-wage income, often trading sex or drugs for resources such as food or clothing. Because these exchange economies
fall outside the auspices of labor-law protections, “[sex] workers lack the right to organize and are subject to criminalization, incarceration, and police violence” (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015, p. 22). This level of criminalization provides a stark illustration of the concentrating effects of the multiple forms of discrimination outlined thus far.

When engaging in public settings, trans-gender people often face transphobia and institutional barriers that can dramatically affect their health and well-being (Kelleher, 2009; McKinney, 2008; Seelman, 2016). They often struggle to access basic medical care as well because of either institutional barriers or well-founded fears of being the victim of gender-identity related stigmatization or violence (Abelson, 2016; McKinney, 2008; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). Researchers have found that experiences with transphobia are prevalent across settings such as schools, college campuses, and workplaces (Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2017, Rood et al., 2017; Seelman, 2016; Wagner et al., 2016). In her analysis of homicide rates of transgender individuals from 2010-2014, Dinno (2017) found that Black and Latinx trans-gender women were at much greater risk of homicide than transgender men as well as cis-gender men and women. Transphobic messages from non-affirming families as well as society at large have also had devastating effects on trans-gender youth and adults. Grossman and D’Augelli (2006) found that more than 25% of their trans-gender adolescent participants had previously attempted suicide, and Seelman (2016) found that trans-gender college students who were not granted access to bathrooms and dorms, appropriate to their gender identity, on college campuses, demonstrated higher suicidality rates than their cis-gender peers.

Given these grim findings and the recent American political context of explicit stigmatization and anti-trans policies that have negatively targeted trans-gender and gender
nonconforming people, there is an urgent need to make the remarkable precarity of this marginalized group visible through research that places their experiences with marginalization, social and economic instability, and representation at the center of the conversation. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that their lives most assuredly hang in the balance if the experiences of trans-gender people continue to be delegitimized and silenced.

**Research Questions**

When we consider the gravity of how trans-gender people, particularly those of color, are so profoundly marginalized in society, it is vital that we confront how they have been silenced and made invisible. I believe that the term queer precarity, although insightful, is not sufficient to truly capture the uniquely difficult social and economic circumstances that trans-gender people endure. While people with queer identities have undoubtedly been marginalized, this reclaimed term is often still associated with sexual nonconformity, with gender nonconformists adopting the genderqueer label (Stryker, 2017). My contention is that gender nonconformity, rather than sexual nonconformity, has played a more consequential role in how trans-gender people have been marginalized and experienced social and economic instability. Thus, in this work, I pursued a line of inquiry that I hoped would authentically capture these experiences from trans-gender individuals’ situated knowledges that would serve as a foundation for a substantive theory of *trans-precarity*. The following research questions framed my work:

How do trans-gender people experience, make sense of, and navigate marginalization in their daily lives?

- How do trans-gender people’s marginalizing experiences and understanding of those experiences impact their socio-economic stability?
How does one’s intersectional identity, particularly regarding race and ethnicity, impact a trans-gender person’s marginalizing experiences and understanding of those experiences?

How do trans-gender people experience and make sense of the way trans-gender identities are represented in the public domain?

How do trans-gender people navigate experiences of marginalization, socio-economic instability, and trans-gender representations?

Key Terminology

To provide clarity and consistency in my discussion, I have provided further explanation of two key terms that I used throughout this research.

Trans-gender

It should be noted that the term transgendered has been used, but this is perceived by many trans-gender people as offensive. Joanne Herman (2011), a well-known trans advocate, explained that the added -ed implies that something has happened to the trans-gender person that has made them this way, denying the individual’s dignity of having been born this way. To further illustrate the point, Herman (2011) offers a similar comparison of referring to a person of color as ‘colored.’ The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD, n.d.) also considers the term ‘transgendered’ to be problematic because it causes confusion and is not consistent with other LGBTQ+ identity terminology. In essence, we would not refer to person being ‘gayed’ or ‘lesbianed,’ so the same logic should reasonably apply when referring to someone who is trans-gender.

Although there is variation across the literature of how to define transgender as well as how it should be textually represented, I have hyphenated this term as trans-gender. Vincent
(2018) emphasizes the importance of exercising sensitivity by using contextually significant language carefully to navigate the complexities of operationalizing trans-affirming language as well as recognize the heightened importance of self-determined language for trans-gender people. By hyphenating both trans- and cis- when discussing gender, Vincent (2018) asserts that both become equally viable concepts, thereby destabilizing the traditional normativity of an entrenched gender binary. As Susan Stryker (2017) tells us, “Transgender is a word that has come into widespread use only in the past couple of decades, and its meanings are still under construction” (p. 1). To facilitate the centering of trans-gender people’s experiences and knowledges, I will be recruiting individuals who are trans-gender. In turn, I will seek their guidance about how they have reached their own determinations of gender identity. When speaking collectively about participants, I will use the abbreviated term trans* to indicate more inclusivity of the spectrum of trans-gender identities, including nonbinary, genderqueer, and bi-gender participants when appropriate (Seelman, 2016; Stryker, 2017; Wagner et al., 2016).

**Cis-gender**

In April of 2016, Merriam Webster first recognized the term cisgender in its dictionary. It is defined as “of, relating to, or being a person, whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth” (2020). While this is a practical starting point, it is more critical to acknowledge how this term marks a distinct shift in how gender has been discussed in society. Prior to this term being introduced into mainstream society, the word gender was universally unproblematized (Johnson, 2015; Stryker, 2017; Vincent, 2018). Historically, cisgender identity has been perceived as an unmarked or unnamed category that also worked to frame “transgender identity as always already subordinate, marginal, and extraordinary” (Johnson, 2015, p. 27). However, the introduction of the prefix cis- to the
discourse signals that universalizing gender constructs can no longer be assumed or unmarked (Stryker, 2017; Vincent, 2018). As with the term trans-gender, I will be using the term cis-gender in its hyphenated form to ensure that the social privilege associated with a cis-gender identity is intentionally marked and named. It should be noted that this term has also been problematized by a few scholars as it could be weaponized to reify the binary power of normativity by suggesting that the prefixes of *cis/trans* signify ‘opposed’ gender identities (Enke, 2012). Given my previous discussion of the gender binary, I admit that this danger must be acknowledged. In light of this concern, I explicitly assert that my use of hyphenation in this research is intended to convey that these gender identities are two among an array of gender identities that are still awaiting names.

**Additional Salient Terminology**

While additional terminology emerged during the research process, I felt it would be cumbersome to frontload information at this point. Instead, I have provided pertinent definitions and clarifications when the terminology is introduced in its relevant context. For the readers’ convenience, a consolidated list of these terms and concepts is provided in Appendix E (p. 316).

**Overview of Research**

As indicated by my research questions, the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how trans-gender people experience various forms of marginalization, social and economic instability, and distorted public representation as well as how they navigate those experiences. The focus population I worked with consisted of people who felt their gender identity aligned with the label trans-gender. The body of literature in this field has consistently argued that this segment of the LGBTQ+ community is more significantly marginalized than other segments and is markedly under-studied, particularly given the depth of their
intersectionally complex marginalization (Abelson, 2016; DeFilippis, 2016; Dispenza et al., 2012; Doan, 2016; Grant et al., 2011; Johnson, 2015; Mathers et al., 2018; McKinney, 2008; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016, Rood et al., 2017; Rudin et al., 2014; Seelman, 2016; Vincent, 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). Furthermore, research has found that trans-gender people of color tend to be more vulnerable to marginalization and precarity than their white counterparts (DeFilippis, 2016; Grant et al., 2011; Hollibaugh & Wiess, 2015). Considering these findings and wanting to honor diverse knowledges and voices, I chose a theoretical framework and a methodological approach that have proven to be effective tools for gaining valuable knowledge about the experiences of marginalized groups.

Intersectionality Framework

To best place the experiences of trans-gender participants at the center of the discussion, I used an intersectional theoretical framework. At its inception, scholarly women of color formulated the concept of intersectionality to serve as a new theoretical perspective from which to acknowledge and examine the multiple hierarchies of oppression and dominance that were indicative of their own experiences in society (Baca-Zinn, 1990; Baca-Zinn & Dill, 199; Collins, 1990; McCall, 2005). Kimberlee Crenshaw (1991) has been credited with coining the term intersectionality to conceptualize the idea that oppression cannot be perceived as a singular or unified concept, but rather there are multiple types of oppression that work together and intersect to produce a variety of social injustices. To further develop this concept, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) used a web-like metaphor, referred to as the matrix of domination, to illustrate the way various sources of oppression, such as race, class, and gender work simultaneously. This matrix
represents the various hierarchies in which we are all located and how the intersections have the power to produce varying oppressions as well as opportunities.

Intersectionality represented a pronounced shift away from mainstream feminist theoretical perspectives, signaling a fundamental desire to abandon the notions of a universalized version of women’s oppression. McCall (2005) has suggested that “one could say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (p. 1771). Initially, the call for intersectionality was viewed by some feminist scholars as a sign of disloyalty to the mission of placing gender at the forefront of fighting oppression. However, Baca-Zinn and Dill (1996) argued that the search for some essential or universal essence or identities for women as a singular oppressed group must be abandoned to “challenge systems of domination, not merely as gendered subjects but as women whose lives are affected by our location in multiple hierarchies” (p. 321). It is within those multiple hierarchies that women of color most clearly experience how different degrees of social and economic advantage, privilege, and power are socially constructed according to one’s location within each of those simultaneous hierarchies. While the scholarly work of intersectional feminists clearly aligns with the core argument of gender as a system of unequal relational power that privileges men, women of color argue that the consideration of various ‘locations’ of oppression, such as race and class, are also critical to understanding how women of color have experienced oppression differently.

While the original body of literature about intersectionality focused primarily on the intersecting sites of oppression that shaped the lives of women of color, the concept has since been developed and expanded over time to consider how other ‘locations’ of oppression might also be studied, such as sexuality and gender nonconformity. As Carbado et al. (2013) observed,
No particular application of intersectionality can, in a definitive sense, grasp the range of intersectional powers and problems that plague society. This work-in-progress understanding of intersectionality suggest that we should endeavor, on an ongoing basis, to move intersectionality to unexplored places. (p. 305)

With this work-in-progress mindset, several researchers have emphasized the value of this theoretical framework to effectively study multiple sites of oppression experienced by various members of the LGBTQ+ community (Badgett, 2018; Badgett et al., 2013; Badgett et al., 2008; Badgett & Schneebaum, 2015; Meyer, 2012). Some scholars in this field have characterized the current body of literature regarding trans-gender marginalization and precarity as limited, particularly in comparison to the body of literature focused on issues affecting lesbian, gay, and bisexual members of the LGBTQ+ community (Albelda et al., 2009; Badgett et al., 2013; Badgett et al., 2008; DeFilippis, 2016; Grant et al., 2011; Pew Research Center, 2013).

Despite these espoused limitations, there is agreement among scholars that an intersectional theoretical approach has proven instrumental for researchers who have begun building this body of knowledge about the complex lives of trans-gender and gender nonconforming people (Abelson, 2016; Doan, 2016; Johnson, 2015; Mathers et al., 2018; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017; Parent et al., 2013; Seelman, 2016; Vincent, 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). While literature in this field confirms that there are certainly multiple points of oppression that impact how trans-gender people experience marginalization, what also emerges is the unfortunate fact that a great deal of this social scientific work is conducted with racially and economically privileged participants (Abelson, 2016; Dispenza, 2012; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018, Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock, 2017; Rood et al., 2017; Rudin et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2016). Parent et al. (2013) emphasizes the salience of an intersectional epistemology in studying experiences of marginalization of trans-gender individuals as it “maintains that multiple identities construct novel experiences that are
distinctive and not necessarily divisible into their component identities or experiences” (p. 640). To address the limitations identified in previous research endeavors, I purposefully constructed my sample to ensure that people of color were represented.

In addition, I initially narrowed my focus to participants who were between the ages of 18 and 35 years old. Data from the Williams Institute, UCLA School of law showed that the age distribution of trans-gender people was comparative with that of the general U.S. population with 13% being 18-24 years or age and 63% falling in the range of 25-64 years (Herman, Flores, Brown, Wilson, & Conron, 2017). I chose the span of 18-35 years of age because, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2019), 2018 data suggests that workers younger than 25 years of age account for slightly less than 50% of all workers who earned the federal minimum wage or less. In addition, workers between the ages of 25 and 34 accounted for slightly more than 20% of all workers who earned the federal minimum wage or less. Furthermore, this data also indicates that approximately 60% of the individuals earning at or below the federal minimum wage rate were employed in service occupations, primarily in food services or restaurants. These statistics are particularly significant, given that there is a high prevalence of trans-gender individuals working in low-wage service sector jobs (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018). I anticipated that those ages 18-35 years, would likely be able to provide the most significant insights about experiences with financial hardships and precarity. A caveat to this is that I later raised the age limit to 60 years based upon feedback from trans-gender participants about limited representation of “older” trans-gender people. I have provided further explanation of this change to methodology in Chapter 3.
Transfeminist Emancipatory Methodology

For this work I combined several key elements of Sandoval’s (2000) “Methodology of the Oppressed,” Schostak and Schostak’s (2008) self-described ‘radical’ framework, and what Johnson (2015) has termed a transfeminist perspective. As such, the methodology for my research was emancipatory in nature, meaning that the intent was to empower my participants to define their diverse experiences and understandings as well as create a space in which their viewpoints and voices held comparable social power. Ultimately, the greater goal of emancipatory work is to foster opportunities to strive for a more socially just and equitable world for all people.

Positioned as a ‘third world feminist,’ Sandoval (2000) formulated her methodology to directly resist the colonized nature of Western institutions, identities, and ideologies by promoting psychic and then social emancipation. In response to how Western feminist research traditions have engaged in colonizing practices and served to marginalize people of color in the academy and society at large, Sandoval proposed a ‘tactical’ form of subjectivity that works to decentralize and recentralize ideological paradigms, requiring the development of first and oppositional consciousness and then later a differential consciousness. Schostak and Schostak’s (2008) self-described ‘radical’ methodology is similarly positioned in their assertive argument for a less ‘orderly’ form of inquiry that not only holds itself open to the promise of difference, but also seeks to foster the development of “ever-inclusive communities” (p. 9). This work begins by creating a psychic space for individuals to perceive their own differences as intentional defiance of standards of societal ‘normalcy,’ and then proceeds through a process of actions and advocacy to work toward social justice and societal equity.
Johnson’s (2015) *transfeminist* methodology was also expressly intended to be implemented through emancipatory research practices that empower trans-gender people while simultaneously challenging and undermining knowledge claims and power structures that are inherently rooted in cis-sexist privileged assumptions. From the positionality of a trans-gender man, Johnson proposed that to conduct meaningful social scientific inquiry about trans-gender experiences, scholars must push beyond feminist methodology to develop a transfeminist methodology. This methodology pays homage to feminist standpoint theory and the concept of situated knowledge but aligns more appropriately with studying trans-gender people’s experiences with marginalization and precarity. Feminist scholar, Donna Haraway (1987) emphasized the pivotal importance of recognizing that our viewpoint and knowledge of the world are both embodied and situated. This recognition is crucial when marking and confronting what she referred to as the *gaze* or default viewpoint that is defined and reinforced by those who hold and seek to maintain social power.

Initially, feminist standpoint theorists were concerned with the embodied, situated, and subjugated knowledges of women. That said, because gender enactment is interpreted as an overt and visual embodiment of one’s physical genitalia, standpoint and situated knowledge seem particularly relevant to considering the experiences of trans-gender people. While many feminist scholars would agree with this premise, over time, they have also engaged in constructing a feminist *gaze* that is rooted in heteronormative, cis-gender privilege. From this standpoint and gaze, some feminists have sought to delegitimize the situated and embodied knowledge of trans-gender women. Johnson (2015) maintained that while mainstream, intersectionally-focused feminist research has placed an emphasis on engaging with the “multiplicity of lived experiences in order to form a grounded understanding of social phenomena” in the lives of marginalized
people, these practices are often rooted in “cissexist or gender blind” standpoints (p. 23). The focus of a transfeminist framework is to assist in the design of research methodology that actively works to center the ‘expert’ knowledges of trans-gender people by “actively resist[ing] cisgender privilege” (Johnson, 2015, p. 24).

To subscribe to Johnson’s methodology, I deferred to what Smith (1987) and Sprague (2005) called epistemic privilege to trans-gender knowledges. Sprague described epistemic privilege as the power granted to the knowledges of those who are living their lives from diverse social locations within social power hierarchies, such as race or class. In my research, this epistemic privilege was demonstrated in my decision to conduct semi-structured interviews and to preserve the words of my participants as much as possible. In addition, I consulted with trans-gender colleagues and associates, throughout the research process, including the formulation of the interview protocol, recruitment strategies, as well as data analysis and interpretation. Through these practices, I invested significant energy in confronting my own privilege whenever possible.

**Chapter Summaries**

In this chapter, I have discussed how the homogenized perception of the LGBTQ+ community, cultivated by society at large as well as the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement, has essentially colonized the experiences of marginalized members of that community (DeFilippis, 2016; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). I then explained how the efforts of the mainstream LGBTQ+ community to assimilate have solidified their good standing as citizens, while simultaneously reinforcing marginalization and precarity for many others (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). I have also demonstrated how trans-gender people have been most profoundly affected by marginalization and precarity, while having their experiences denigrated, delegitimized, and
silenced. Next, my research questions were presented. Finally, I outlined how an intersectional framework implemented through a transfeminist emancipatory methodology was an effective approach to gaining critical trans* knowledges that have contributed to developing a substantive theory of trans-precarity.

In Chapter 2, you will find a review of literature, beginning with an examination of trans-gender experiences with systemic transphobia in multiple social contexts. Then I delve into the intersectional complexities of trans-gender experiences with marginalization. Embedded within that discussion is a consideration of how the gender binary and ‘traditional’ masculinity power structures have been instrumental in marginalizing trans-gender people, even within the LGBTQ+ community. Next, the implications of language, discourse, rhetoric, and distorted representations in constructing trans-gender identities as deviant and dangerous are explored. The last area of concern in this review focuses on the coping strategies that trans-gender people have developed to navigate their experiences with marginalization.

Having considered the implications of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, I present my methodological framework in Chapter 3. The chapter begins with a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings that have guided my decision to use a trans-feminist emancipatory methodology. A detailed explanation of my choices for data collection, data analysis, and finding dissemination is then provided. The chapter concludes with a consideration of not only the benefits that I believe this research represents but also how I addressed the ethical concerns and risks that this research posed to my trans-gender participants.

In Chapter 4, I consider how the findings of this work might address my primary research question of how do trans-gender people experience, make sense of, and navigate marginalization in their daily lives? and my first sub-question of how do transgender people’s marginalizing
experiences and understanding of those experiences impact their socio-economic stability? I first discuss how participants defined various relevant gender identities. Then, I present what participants shared about their experiences with marginalization and precarity at personal and systemic levels.

In Chapter 5, I delve into participants’ beliefs about how their intersectionally complex identities had impacted their experiences with marginalization. Their nuanced understandings provide interesting insights in consider the second research sub-question of how does one’s intersectional identity, particularly regarding race and/or ethnicity, impact a trans-gender person’s marginalizing experiences and understanding of those experiences? This discussion includes various findings that emerged from participants’ accounts of how their multiple marginalized identities had impacted their lives. Race, disability, gender identity, gender nonconformity, and an ability to pass as their intended gender were all implicated in the context of these experiences.

The findings associated with the final two research sub-questions of how do trans-gender people experience and make sense of the way trans-gender identities are represented in the public domain? and how do trans-gender people navigate experiences of marginalization, socio-economic instability, and trans-gender representations? are presented in Chapter 6. The participants’ experiences with negative and distorted representations of trans-gender identities are first examined. Then, to provide some balance, participants’ examples and experiences of positive trans-gender representations are discussed. Wanting to provide further balance and participants’ capacity for agency, findings regarding their navigational strategies in response to experiences of marginalization, precarity, and negative representations are also explored. Their
stories of navigation seemed to suggest that many participants maintained the capacity for resilience despite the profound marginalization that many had experienced.

The final chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 7, revisits the overarching purpose of this work to confront how the underrepresented experiences of profoundly marginalized trans* folx, particularly those of color, have been silenced and made invisible. An overview and analysis of key findings is presented, organized according to the focus of each of the four sub-questions. Four primary themes that emerged from this dissertation are then considered. The first is the significance of being visibly trans* and the implications of that visibility. The second is the importance of recognize opportunities for dismantling institutional barriers. The third is the critical importance of continuing to explore trans* experiences with an intersectional lens. The last notable theme is the significance of centering trans* voices and the capacity for resilience in research endeavors in this field. In the context of these discussion, connections are drawn to the salient research in this field and implications of future empirical work are considered. Finally, the limitations of this research are presented. In its entirety, this dissertation represents a salient foundational step in authentically illuminating the experiences and situated knowledges of trans-gender individuals to develop a substantive theory of trans-precarity.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

To fully demonstrate the significance of the research I have conducted, the implications of the literature from several areas of scholarly work are reviewed in this chapter. There is a strong premise in the literature for specifically focusing research endeavors on the marginalization and precarity of trans-gender people (Badgett, 2018; Collins et al., 2015; Dispenza et al., 2012; Downing & Przedworski, 2018; Mathers et al., 2018; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017; Rood et al., 2017; Seelman, 2016). Thus, I first discuss the empirical work that has focused on how trans-gender people experience systemic transphobia at both personal and institutional levels and how those experiences impact multiple facets of their daily lives (Dispenza et al., 2012; McKinney, 2008; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017; Rood et al., 2017; Seelman, 2016; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016; Xavier et al., 2013). Because there is strong evidence to suggest that a person’s intersecting identities often have a significant impact on how one experiences marginalization, I next examine the importance of using an intersectional lens when considering trans-gender experiences (Abelson, 2016; Boe et al., 2020; Dispenza et al., 2012; Farmer & Byrd, 2015; Ghabrial, 2017; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Kcomt et al., 2020; Knee, 2019; McCormick & Barthelemy, 2020; McKinney, 2008; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Parent et al., 2013; Rood et al., 2017; Rudin et al., 2014; Seelman, 2016; Vogler et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2016). The hierarchical power structures of the gender binary, traditional Western masculinity, and homonormativity are implicated in this discussion of
how queer precarity is constructed, reproduced, and maintained in the context of our patriarchal society. I then explore what the literature tells us about how gender nonconformity and trans-gender identities are socially-constructed as transgression and deviance through language, societal discourses, and distorted representations that serve to marginalize those identities while simultaneously justifying that marginalization. The final area of literature discussed is concerned with how trans-gender and gender nonconforming people cope with the systemic transphobia, institutional barriers, and subsequent marginalization they experience. Finally, I consider the implications of these various areas of the literature for my own research.

**Trans-gender Experiences with Systemic Transphobia**

The literature reviewed herein reflects overarching concerns about how trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals experience systemic transphobia in their interactions with institutions and individuals as well as how those experiences construct marginalization and precarity in their lives. Researchers in this area have considered how institutional transphobia is often constructed through the process of cisnormativity (Boe et al., 2020; Hudson, 2019; Kcomt et al., 2020; Stryker & Aizura, 2013). In addition, empirical work has been focused on the effects of systemic transphobia within the institutions that often have the greatest potential impact on the social and economic stability of trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals’ daily lives, such as college (McKinney, 2008; Seelman, 2016), workplace (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock et al., 2017; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018), and healthcare (Boe et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2011; Kcomt et al., 2020; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016; Xavier et al., 2013) settings. Given what is known about institutional transphobia in the context of a cisnormative society, researchers have also considered how individuals within those institutions
(Mathers et al., 2018; Rudin et al., 2014) may feel emboldened to engage in transphobic thinking and behavior.

**Transphobia and Cisnormativity**

To begin, Serano (2007/2016) defined *transphobia* as “an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against people whose gendered identities, appearances, or behaviors deviate from societal norms” (p. 12). Going beyond this definition, Serano explained that transphobia, like homophobia, is rooted in a person’s fear of one’s own repressed tendencies and insecurity about an inability to conform to the rigid and oppressive “expectations, restrictions, assumptions, and privileges associated with the sex they were assigned at birth” (p. 12). While Serano framed her definition in the context of personal fears and insecurities, the prevalence of transphobia transcends individuals and is embedded within all our societal institutions. Before discussing the societal prevalence of systemic transphobia and how it has facilitated the marginalization and precarity of trans-gender individuals, it is important to address the process of cisnormativity.

While heteronormativity governs our sexual identities and behaviors in society, *cisnormativity* specifically refers to the cultural belief that every person’s sense of gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth. Further, it is expected that they will engage in gender appearance and performance that is expected for all who are assigned that sex (Hudson, 2019; Stryker & Aizura, 2013). Because cisnormativity is so pervasive in society, those who do not conform to these gender mandates of identity, presentation, and behavior are marginalized by institutions as well as individuals in a variety of contexts (Bauer et al., 2009; Dowers et al., 2019; Hudson, 2019; Vermeir et al., 2018). The ever-present threat of social stigma and derision for failing to conform has proven to be an effective way to foster widespread transphobia in society.
Refusing to acknowledge the existence of gender diversity, cisnormative Western society has systematically constructed and sustained a campaign of erasure to reinforce the lack of interest or investment in producing and disseminating information about trans-gender lives (Bauer et al., 2009). Consequently, they are rendered ‘invisible’ to most of us who live within and navigate the power structures of a cisnormative patriarchal society. As such, when a trans-gender person becomes visible in this context, they are marked as someone who is worthy of society’s disdain. As Kcomt et al. (2020) observed, there is compelling evidence that when someone is visibly recognizable as trans-gender or they have made their trans-gender identity known, they are more likely to experience discrimination and marginalization. For mainstream society, a trans-gender person’s perceived ‘refusal’ to conform to the gender binary and all that it implies has served as ample justification for legitimizing transphobia.

Marginalizing Experiences with Systemic Transphobia

Every day and in almost every context, trans-gender and gender nonconforming people face transphobia in their interactions with institutions as well as individuals. The following empirical literature provides valuable insights into the negative impacts that these daily encounters have on trans-gender and gender nonconforming lives.

Transphobia in College Settings

Researchers have considered how trans-gender and gender nonconforming students might be negatively affected, physically or psychologically, by institutional transphobia encountered on college campuses (McKinney, 2008; Seelman, 2016). Most of McKinney’s trans-gender and gender nonconforming participants indicated they had encountered heightened hostility on their respective campuses as well as a lack of access to trans-affirmative health, educational, and support resources or services. Overwhelmingly, the respondents believed that the colleges and
universities did not seem “to be aware of these issues, much less providing institutional support to address them” (McKinney, 2008, p. 73). Although the researcher suggested that the lack of support and services from the institution may not have been intentional, given what is known about transphobic institutional barriers, this may be an overly generous assertion.

Concerned with the potential risk to psychological safety related to transphobic institutional barriers, Seelman explored the potential relationship between trans-gender students’ access to gender appropriate bathrooms and campus housing and rates of suicidality. Findings revealed that 25% of the trans-gender respondents were denied access to a gender-appropriate bathroom, and 21% were denied access to gender-appropriate campus housing. What is most compelling about these results is that “denial of access to bathrooms and denial of access to campus housing due to being trans* were both statistically significantly associated with lifetime suicide attempts” (p. 1393). Based on these findings, Seelman called for greater focus on institutional awareness and inclusivity. McKinney and Seelman presented findings that clearly illustrate the negative impact that systemic transphobic and institutional barriers on college campuses can have on trans-gender and gender nonconforming students’ lives. Based on this research, failing to confront and address transphobia in institutions of higher learning pose an alarming threat to the physical and psychological safety of trans-gender students.

**Transphobia in Workplace Settings**

For most adults, the workplace is where we spend a significant proportion of our waking hours. It is the setting that we have been enculturated to believe we can invest our labor and intellect in exchange for achieving economic and social stability. However, these institutional settings are infused with a variety of power hierarchies that ensure socially-privileged individuals will have greater opportunities while members of marginalized groups will likely face barriers.
Such is the case, particularly for trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals. In their review of empirical literature related to the experiences of trans-gender people in occupational environments, Dowers et al. (2019) found that transgressions of the cisnormative ideology of Euro-Western society cause trans-gender identities to be delegitimized. Consequently, trans-gender participants in the studies they reviewed commonly reported that their occupational experiences had been shaped by “exclusion, discrimination, and harassment” (p. 506).

Perceiving a paucity in this area of the field, some researchers have focused their work on experiences of trans-gender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals with marginalization and precarity related to workplace settings (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock and Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017). Dispenza et al.’s (2012) explored how and why the career trajectories of trans-gender individuals may be impacted by systemic transphobia and institutional barriers. Working with predominantly white, FTM (female transition to male) trans-gender participants, the authors conceptualized a continuum of distinct forms of trans-gender discrimination experienced both within and outside of the workplace that participants believed had affected their work experiences or career trajectory. The external influences of discrimination from educational institutions, health care systems, housing, government policies, and horizontal oppressions from other LGBTQ+ people were implicated in these findings. In addition, participants believed that microaggressions, lack of social supports, and their perceived threat to patriarchy experienced within workplace not only affected their career trajectory but also caused them personal stress. These finding provide important insights about the complex cascading effects of systemic transphobia and marginalization. They also affirm my decision to examine the multiple institutional contexts that trans-gender participants would likely encounter systemic transphobia and institutional barriers.
Concerned with identifying gaps in public policy and clinical treatment for trans-gender or gender diverse individuals affected by transphobia in the workplace, Mizock et al. (2018) focused on forms of transphobia encountered in workplace settings. Lack of social support, workplace gender policing from colleagues and superiors, threats to personal safety, barriers to advancement or increased compensation, intersectional discrimination, microaggressions, and a lack of inclusive policies for gender minorities were themes that emerged from this grounded theory analysis (Mizock et al., 2018). Taking another step toward illuminating the social and economic impact of marginalizing experiences with transphobia in the workplace, Mizock and Hopwood (2018) developed rich trans-gender narratives from previously collected data (Mizock et al., 2017). The authors contended that experiences of transphobia within the workplace or consequences of being driven out or barred from the workplace led to the likelihood of financial hardship. Their findings indicated the most common effects of workplace discrimination were unemployment, underemployment, lower average incomes despite higher average incomes when compared to the general public, and homelessness associated with fiscal instability. Mizock and Hopwood also found that trans-gender individuals who were unable to acquire trans-medical care to assist them in passing as their intended gender were at much greater risk of social stigmatization, overt verbal abuse, or physical violence. Common themes in their findings about economic instability were lack of social support when transitioning is delayed or prevented, the dangers of being subsequently ‘outed’ because of an inability to ‘pass,’ and heightened vulnerability to economic downturns in the context of a blue collar/working class employment sector.

Dispenza et al. (2012) and Mizock et al.’s (2018) discussions of the types of systemic transphobia that their participants experienced both within and outside of the workplace provide
valuable insights about how complex and multi-faceted trans-gender and gender nonconforming people’s experiences can be. Further, Mizock and Hopwood’s (2018) findings drew critical connections between the transphobic marginalization experienced and the complex and cascading effects of social and economic precarity.

**Transphobia in Healthcare Settings**

One of the fundamental ways that cisnormativity has effectively punished gender nonconformity has been to create social and institutional obstacles for trans-gender and gender nonconforming people to maintain health and wellness as well as accessing critical transitional care. In addition to college and workplace settings, research about the challenges of accessing healthcare has revealed the institutional transphobia that persists in healthcare systems (Bauer et al., 2009; Boe et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2011; Kcomt et al., 2020; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). This is particularly problematic, given that it is generally recognized that trans-gender people suffer from poorer health than the rest of the population, due in part to their tendency to avoid the stigma, discrimination, and abuse they have faced in accessing healthcare (Bauer et al., 2009; Grant et al., 2011; Kcomt et al., 2020; Puckett et al., 2017; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). Arguing for creation of trans-affirmative healthcare settings, Kcomt et al. (2020) contended that,

> Cisnormative assumptions are so pervasive that health systems and providers often do not question the experience of gender, do not anticipate the possibility of a transgender existence, and thus may be unprepared when a transgender person seeks their services. (p. 2)

Vermeir et al. (2018) sought to identify the barriers that trans-gender people were encountering when pursuing medical care. Concerned with a common tendency of trans-gender individuals avoiding vital healthcare, the researchers found that the respondents’ experiences reflected interpersonal, physical, and social barriers. Many indicated that the lack of healthcare
provider knowledge and cultural sensitivity about people with trans-gender identities created frustration as well as worries about receiving insufficient or incorrect care. Respondents also shared that they were more likely to experience discrimination and intolerance when accessing care in rural healthcare settings, and they felt their privacy was often threatened because of how these settings were physically organized. Participants discussed the transphobic stereotypes that pervade society, and they “felt that fallacious social discourses were incorporated into the social environments of healthcare settings” (Vermeir et al., p. 240). Consequently, many said they often felt ignored or that the healthcare system was intentionally marginalizing them through common experiences of discrimination, unreasonably long wait-times for appointments, issues with accessibility to care, and a lack of trans-friendly healthcare facilities. These findings suggest that our system of healthcare is yet another institution that has actively marginalized trans-gender individuals in intersectionally complex ways that threaten their physical as well as psychological safety.

**Individual Enactments of Systemic Transphobia**

Having discussed the insidious nature of systemic transphobia embedded within our fundamental institutions, it should not be surprising that cis-gender people who are continuously immersed in cisnormative ideology often feel empowered and justified to personally enact transphobic attitudes and behavior. Research conducted with cis-gender heterosexual participants has provided clear evidence of this.

Working with undergraduate business students, Rudin et al. (2014) found their participants would likely act upon transphobic discriminatory inclinations in the workplace despite potential legal implications. Presented with a business management scenario involving a trans-gender employee, students who mistakenly believed that the trans-gender employee had
legally enforceable rights were “not much less likely to recommend a hostile response than their classmates who recognized that they could do so with impunity” (Rudin et al., 2014, p. 728).

Also working with undergraduate students, Mathers et al. (2018) spoke with 20 self-identified cis-gender heterosexual females who attested to actively practicing their Christian faith. Findings revealed that the participants’ perceptions and responses about trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals reflected themes of deletion and denigration. When engaged in deletion, respondents rejected trans-gender and gender non-con-forming individuals as unnatural, disobedient, or immoral. With denigration, they often attributed the existence of trans-gender or gender nonconforming people to the ‘devil’s work’ and that transgender people “were not supposed to exist in God’s world” (Mathers et al., p. 943). Both Rudin et al. and Mathers et al.’s findings provided strong illustrations of the blatantly transphobic ideas that individuals felt emboldened to express and act upon because of the widespread systemic transphobia in institutions, such as college campuses. These findings also provide strong support for my decision to study how trans-gender individuals experience marginalization and precarity through their engagement with both systemic and individual transphobia.

After considering how trans-gender and gender nonconforming people have experienced and been impacted by systemic transphobia, I now move to a discussion of how various power hierarchies and structures have effectively worked to construct and maintain a web of intersectionally complex marginalization and precarity that trans-gender and gender nonconforming people experience in significantly different ways.

Dimensions of Intersectionally Complex Marginalization and Precarity

This area of the literature review focuses on the importance of using an intersectional lens to explore how one’s various social identities are likely to impact a trans-gender and gender
nonconforming individual’s experiences with marginalization and precarity. There is substantial and compelling empirical support for emphasizing and exploring trans-gender experiences of marginalization and precarity through an intersectional lens (Abelson, 2016; Boe et al., 2020; Dispenza et al., 2012; Doan, 2016; Farmer & Byrd, 2015; Ghabrial, 2017; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Johnson, 2015; Kcomt et al., 2020; Knee, 2019; Mathers et al., 2015; McKinney, 2008; Meyer, 2012; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017; Parent et al., 2013; Rood et al., 2017; Rudin et al., 2014; Seelman, 2016; Vogler et al., 2015; Vincent, 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). In the context of this discussion, the theoretical lenses of postmodernist, feminist, and queer theoretical perspectives of gender are used to examine how the social stigma associated with gender nonconformity has been constructed and reified in Western patriarchal society. Then, how the power structures of the gender binary and traditional masculinity have worked to profoundly intensify the marginalization and precarity experienced by many trans-gender and gender nonconforming people is considered. Embedded within this discussion is an exploration of the gendered, raced, and classed implications of how the processes of homonormativity have created and perpetuated queer precarity for marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+ community (Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Ghabrial, 2017; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Knee, 2019; Vogler, 2016; Ward, 2008).

**Recognizing the Gender Binary as a Power Structure**

To ultimately understand how and why gender nonconforming and trans-gender people have been subjected to such profound marginalization, it is vital to problematize the premise that sex and gender are biological imperatives. In the context of a patriarchal society, in which White men hold primary power, the concept of gender, as one of the most consequential underlying social frameworks in Western culture, has effectively served to demarcate deeply guarded
boundaries of social power and privilege (Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This divisive construct is so culturally ingrained that challenges to the binary have historically been met with negative and often violent responses, intended to neutralize and eradicate gender nonconformity.

**Postmodernist, Feminist, Gender, and Queer Theoretical Lenses on Gender**

Historically, concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality have been placed in a realm of ‘natural’ immutability. The most substantial contribution that postmodernist, feminist, gender, and queer theorists have made to our contemporary sociological understanding of gender has been to problematize the ‘naturalness’ of assigning feminine or masculine genders (Beauvoir, 1949/2009; Bourdieu, 2001; Butler, 1990; Connell, 1987; Derrida, 1982; Foucault, 1978; Kimmel, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Wittig, 1992). As Fausto-Sterling (1993/2004) posited,

> Western culture is deeply committed to the idea that there are only two sexes...But, if the state and the legal system have an interest in maintaining a two-party sexual system, they are in defiance of nature. For biologically speaking, there are many gradations running from female to male. (p. 191)

Challenging the notion of male and female sex as ‘oppositional” biological ‘truths’ imbued with ‘natural’ gendered appearances and behaviors, these theorists argued that gender is a constructed power structure that sanctions both domination as well as denial of social power and prestige based upon one’s ability to dominate others (Beauvoir, 1949, 2009; Butler, 1990; Connell, 1987; Risman, 2004; Wittig, 1992). As Butler (2009) argued, “gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power” (p. i).

Theorists such as Wittig (1992), Connell (1987), and Reynaud (2004) argued that regardless of what sex category one is assigned at birth, 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 (1949/2009) 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 through socially-compelled gender behaviors, certainly speaks to the notion that both males and females are subjected to a set of social expectations rather than biological processes. In response to Beauvoir’s (1949/2009) work, Judith Butler (1990) went even further in her analysis of gender, suggesting 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 supposed immutability, is determined to be an arbitrary distinction based upon perceived differences, then the driving question becomes: what purpose do such distinctions serve?

These theorists suggested that the emphasis on difference effectively reifies the Western notion that universal truths are the foundation for what is ‘real,’ thereby severely limiting the likelihood of social and cultural ambiguity. In an obscure 1965 speech at Johns Hopkins University, French philosopher and postmodernist, Jacques Derrida angrily argued that the Western articulation of difference as opposition serves to “suffocate alterity” (as cited in Wilchins, 2014, pp. 49-50). Fausto-Sterling’s (1993/2004) discussion of how Western society has responded to the existence of intersexuality provides a compelling illustration of this. Acknowledging that many people are born with diverse combinations of sex chromosomes, hormones, and anatomies, Fausto-Sterling observed that society has historically sought to make alterity to the gender binary invisible by compelling intersexed people to choose and adhere to being either male or female. In the Middle Ages any transgression of one’s chosen gender was
punishable by death, and in contemporary society intersexual bodies have been pathologized and medically managed to discipline gender nonconformity. “Society mandates the control of intersexual bodies because they blur and bridge the great divide. Inasmuch as [they] literally embody both sexes, they challenge traditional beliefs about sexual differences” (Fausto-Sterling, 1993/2004, p. 205). Opposite sexes and subsequently opposite genders are, indeed, social constructs that advantage those who conform and silence or marginalize those who do not. Given this, 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 apt.

**Purpose and Power of the Gender Binary.** Simply defined, the gender binary is a construct that legitimizes only two genders, and they are relationally defined and ingrained 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). A critical component of this conversation of sex and gender is the bias toward heterosexuality and the relational nature of gender. Nonconformity to the prescribed notion that women will only have sex with men and vice versa has historically been cast as a threat to the ‘sanctity’ of the ‘natural’ relational order existing between men and women. As Bourdieu (2001) observed, “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” (p. 23).

Many theorists have long contended that the primary purpose of the gender binary is 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) suggested that the connotative meanings mapped onto the gender binary are polarizing and divisive, with implications of positive versus negative characteristics, such as ‘‘assertive’/‘submissive’; ‘decisive’/‘uncertain’, ‘detached’/‘dependent’’ (p. 72). Similarly, Derrida (1982) criticized Western society’s use of simplistic binary relationships that are often skewed toward covert implications of seriated ‘good/bad’ relational dichotomies, one being referent and the other merely derivative. When the implication of ‘good/bad’ is understood as a moral or qualitative measure, power dynamics become evident. Possessing the referent ‘good’ or desirable traits inherently implies that all others not possessing those traits are definitionally ‘bad’ or less than. In the context of the gender binary, the socially-sanctioned opportunity for men to exercise power over women is evident. When we step beyond the framework to consider the individuals in society who do not or cannot conform to the binary, these dichotomies serve to delegitimize, silence, and erase nonconforming identities and behaviors.

**Traditional Masculinity – a Fragile Referent Gender Category.** The gender binary and its ‘traditional’ form of masculinity dictate what is required to possess and enact social power over all others who do not adequately enact this type of masculinity. Gender identity and gender performance have also been heavily implicated in research concerning how trans-gender and gender nonconforming people have been marginalized in society. Because it has been vested with an unparalleled privilege to define all other enactments of gender as derivative or ‘lesser’ within the social hierarchy, it is important to consider how traditional masculinity has been constructed as well as how it has been instrumental in marginalizing gender minorities.

A great deal of literature regarding masculinity has focused on Connell’s (1987, 1995/2005) and Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) concept of *hegemonic masculinity* because
it definitionally encapsulates the relations of power and domination inherent to the gender framework. “Hegemonic masculinity [frames] 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 et al., 2004, p. 154). This seminal concept in the masculinity literature astutely acknowledges the existence of this power differential. Michael Kimmel (2004) also considered the intersectional dynamics that have been infused into this power structure, observing,

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 more often than not, found wanting. (p. 184) Reynaud (2004) observed that because of the inherent power associated with setting the standard of power within the gender power structure, men have come to view themselves as a “reference for the species” (p. 139). While membership in this referent category of gender is essentialized for most men, it is also a relentless quest to preserve one’s masculinity by acquiring “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, pp. 184-185). In the context of the patriarchal Western gender framework, there is undoubtedly a great deal at stake in preserving traditional masculinity as the sanctioned site of concentrated power.

*Rejection of Being Female.* A central tenet to this framework of manhood is the “othering” of women. As Sharon Bird (1996) astutely asserted, “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 being the foremost requirement, enacting traditional masculinity represents a “relentless test” (Kimmel, 2004, p. 185) in which men are at
constant risk of being stripped of their manhood if they are viewed as effeminate. The constant fear of failing to enact traditional masculinity provides some explanation for the prevalence of sexism and misogyny in society, as femininity and vulnerability have been cast in opposition to manhood (Wilchins, 2014). Bourdieu (2001) asserted 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). Constantly at risk of having their masculinity denigrated, the deeply ingrained compulsion to maintain one’s hold on traditional manhood prompts men to perceive any loss of that power as a “crisis of gender-identity” (Tolson, 2004, p. 78).

The violent rejections of being female or feminine that are so essential to preserving Western traditional masculinity seem to warrant closer consideration. First, it should be acknowledged that as with most mammals, all human embryos begin as biological females, and only become biological males when masculinizing hormones are introduced into the embryos (Chu, 2019). Rather than genetic or anatomical traits, Andrea Long Chu (2019) has contended that it is the psychic conceptualization of ‘female’ that lies at the heart of our patriarchal society’s general tendency toward misogyny. Further, Chu observed that society has constructed femaleness as, “any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another … the self is hollowed out, made into an incubator for an alien force. To be female is to let someone else do your desiring for you, at your own expense” (p. 11). Most provocatively, Chu asserted that every human is fundamentally female, and how every man and woman copes with or pushes back against their femaleness, “defined by self-negation,” determines what we have come to understand as gender (p. 12-13). Within a framework of suppressing and rejecting this psychic formulation of female, “All gender is internalized misogyny” (p. 35). Although
contentious, Chu’s theory does offer thought-provoking insights about how femininity has been constructed as the focal point for masculine loathing. When thinking about the sexual oppression that has long been exerted upon men in patriarchal society, Chu posited that it has “existed not to express man’s maleness, but to conceal his femaleness” (p. 59).

The inherent fragility of traditional masculinity and the social stigma associated with violating sexual and gender norms has all too often motivated men to respond with aggression or violence when their masculinity is ‘threatened.’ A prime illustration of this is the ‘gay panic’ defense that has played out in the United States legal system for more than 50 years. Although ‘gay panic’ is not an “officially sanctioned, stand-alone defense” (Tomei & Cramer, 2016, p. 218), it has been used by male defendants to justify committing violent crime against a homosexual individual because they felt threatened by unwanted sexual advances from that individual (Lee, 2008). Nichols (2013) found evidence that from 2002 to 2013, ‘gay panic’ had been utilized in at least 45 trial defenses. Similarly, the argument of uncontrollable fear and panic when faced with having one’s sexuality and gender identity challenged has emerged in what is characterized as the ‘trans panic’ argument. In these cases, a man’s violence against a trans-gender woman is defended by claiming that the discovery of having been sexually intimate with a person who was assigned male at birth caused him to lose utter self-control (Steinberg, 2005). Although many states have worked to delegitimize these tactics as homophobic and transphobic, the existence of the ‘gay panic’ and ‘trans panic’ defenses seem to suggest an implicit understanding that sexual and gender nonconformity are recognized as significant threats to masculinity. Given the power and prestige associated with successfully enacting traditional masculinity, it becomes clearer why challenges to that framework are most often viewed as violations or threats that warrant visceral and vitriolic responses.
In the context of our male-dominated patriarchal society, abandonment of masculinity and manhood has also been heavily stigmatized. Trans-gender women and individuals with trans-feminine identities, who were assigned the male sex at birth, have been profoundly marginalized and victimized because of their intersecting identities of being trans-gender and being women.

In a male-centered gender hierarchy, where it is assumed that men are better than women and that masculinity is superior to femininity, there is no greater perceived threat than the existence of trans women, who despite being born male and inheriting male privilege “choose” to be female instead. By embracing our femaleness and femininity, we, in a sense, cast a shadow of a doubt over the supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity. In order to lessen the threat we pose to the male-centered gender hierarchy, our culture (primarily via the media) uses tactics in its arsenal of traditional sexism to dismiss us. (Serano, 2007/2016, p. 15)

Julia Serano (2007/2016) characterizes this intersectionally complex form of discrimination as transmisogyny; This means that trans-gender women and individuals who have trans-feminine identities are subjected to both the gender discrimination that women are subjected to in a patriarchal society (misogyny) and the discrimination that trans-gender people experience in a cismnormative society (transphobia). For the perceived transgression of abandoning masculinity, society has seemingly imposed a profound penalty upon trans-gender women and individuals who have trans-feminine identities by systematically pathologizing, hypersexualizing, and fetishizing them in ways that other gender nonconforming individuals do not experience. More than any other gender minority, they have been “maligned or misunderstood [and] as a group …and in too many instances, been made the victims of violence at the hands of men” (Serano, p. 11).

**Hierarchy of Masculinity.** Even among men who adhere to the mandate of heteronormativity, 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 structural relationship to hegemonic masculinity and the access to power each one enjoys. Connell (1987, 1995/2005) 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. Thus, there are men who enjoy power due to gender but not due to class or race are considered *marginalized* (Connell, 1987, 1995/2005). These categories clearly articulate the idea that the power associated with traditional masculinity is reserved for a select few and inherently denied to others.

Historically speaking, American manhood, a white, heterosexual middle-class cis-gender 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). This, of course, has significant implications when considering how people with multiple marginalized identities might be impacted. 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.* One example of manipulating masculinity is *gay masculinity*, which refers to the range of masculinity enactments associated with homosexual men. The integral element of heterosexuality embedded in traditional masculinity inherently categorizes gay masculinity as what Connell (1987, 1995/2005) refers to as an *oppressed* masculinity. Historically, gay men have represented a perceived threat to the integrity of traditional masculinity. Kimmel (2004) argued,

*The great secret of American manhood [is that] 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 was a highly provocative assertion, it provided some explanation for virulent public rhetoric that has characterized homosexuality as deviant, perverse, or even criminal (Carrigan et al., 2004; Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2011).

In the last several decades, however, the stigmatization of effeminate behaviors of homosexual men has had a compelling effect on the enactment of gay masculinity. Messner (1997) and Wilchins (2014) posited that many men in the gay community have subscribed to a hyper-masculine form of gender enactment to gain social acceptance, essentially reifying the gender binary and traditional masculinity. Because marginalization and exclusion are often experienced when individuals do not adhere to sanctioned forms of behavior in society, many gay men have moved to assimilate and reap the advantages of being deemed ‘legitimate’ (Serano, 2013; Ward, 2008). Consequently, the enactment of gay masculinity in its contemporary form, has made many gay men complicit in marginalizing individuals who do not conform. I will later explore the social and economic implications of this complicity in the context of my discussion of homonormativity and queer precarity.

Another form of manipulated masculinity takes place outside of male bodies in the context of trans* masculinity and female masculinity. Trans* masculinity is defined as the form of masculinity enacted by someone who was born with female genitalia but aligns more closely with a masculine gender presentation and performance and in many cases the individual self-identifies as male (Wilchins, 2014). When thinking about female masculinity, we are referring to an individual who has female genitalia and perceives one’s gender to be female, although modified, but enacts varying degrees of masculine gender performance (Halberstram, 1998; Nguyen, 2008). It should be noted that these forms of manipulated masculinity can and often do
overlap. Within the lesbian community, the identity of “butch” and its different expressive forms (boi-grrls, baby butch, stone butch, diesel dyke, bull dyke, etc.), has gained common usage and historical significance, representing the various enactments of feminine masculinity that women engage in (Nguyen, 2008). In her article considering the feminist potential of the “butch” identity, Nguyen argued that if a “butch lesbian” rejects the oppressive aspects of traditional masculinity, then she has the power to threaten “male power by severing the naturalized connection between masculinity and male bodies” (p. 665). Both trans* masculinity and female masculinity expose and problematize the presumed connection between masculinity and male bodies. Halberstam maintained that “It is crucial to recognize that masculinity does not belong to men, has not been produced only by men” (p. 241). If masculinity does not occur at the culturally-sanctioned site of the male body, then theoretical denial of gender as a social construction is essentially nullified.

Despite this realization, traditional masculinity remains a primary cultural conduit for acquiring significant social power, for those with male bodies. Halberstam observed,

Gender, it seems, is reversible only in one direction, and this must surely have to do with the immense social power that accumulates around masculinity. Masculinity, one must conclude, has been reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies. (p. 269)

Given the ‘sanctity’ of masculinity within the gender power hierarchy, Dispenza et al. (2012) contended that in addition to transphobic discrimination, trans-masculine or FtM individuals may experience the added burden of being perceived as “challenging conventional patriarchal values of male gender identity and expression” in the workplace (p. 67). In the context of perceived threats to the gender binary and manipulating masculinity, this point seems salient. However, given what is known about the intense marginalization and precarity experienced by trans-gender women (MtF) in multiple contexts (Boe et al., 2020; Hudson, 2019; Serano, 2007/2016),
Dispenza et al.’s (2012) implication that FtM individuals may have greater social burdens than MtF individuals seems overstated.

Given the social power at stake, it should not surprise us that for many people with female bodies, the primary goal of enacting these forms of masculinity is often to ‘pass’ as a man, adhering to the tenets of traditional masculinity (Carrigan et al., 2004; Halberstram, 1998). Regardless of the body enacting the masculinity, the intent is to imply the existence of male genitalia and thus imply legitimate right to power. Trans* masculinity has not necessarily been welcomed by many in the lesbian community who have raised concerns about the perceived abandonment of female identities in exchange for an unwelcome introduction of oppressive masculinity (Nguyen, 2008). In response, a growing discourse has emerged from authors such as Halberstram and Nguyen who contend that if these manipulated masculinities avoid the oppressive enactments of traditional masculinity, then the power hierarchy of the gender binary could still be effectively challenged. Unfortunately, when gender nonconformity takes the path of adhering to the social expectations of traditional masculinity to access power and privilege, unequal systems of power within the hierarchy are preserved. While this approach has proven to be beneficial for some socially privileged members of the LGBTQ+ community, it has often come at the expense of marginalized groups within the community.

**The Dimensions of Queer Precarity**

The existing literature and empirical work in this area provides compelling insights about the significant social and economic injustice and instability that many LGBTQ+ people experience within a complex web of stereotypes, delegitimization, and stigma. Although the LGBTQ+ community has often been characterized and approached as a homogenous group, the “U.S census and Gallup polls show that [LGBTQ+] people are more racially and ethnically
diverse than the general U.S. population [including] an estimated 904,000 LGBT adult immigrants” (Hollibaugh & Weiss 2015, p. 20). As discussed in Chapter 1, the depths of social and economic marginalization that these individuals may experience because of their gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality are further intensified by their sexual orientation and gender nonconformity. Despite commonly held misconceptions and stereotypes, data suggests that a large contingent of the LGBTQ+ community are poor female people of color (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). Empirical findings about the poverty, employment and housing instability, criminalization, and poor health that many in the LGBTQ+ community endure paint a raw picture of the intensified marginalization that persists for so many. Recognizing these substantial disparities, the National Institute of Health (NIH) has designated sexuality and gender minority populations as “health disparity populations” and has allocated research funding to develop a better understanding of the intersectionally complex factors that often influence and impact the health and well-being of many LGBTQ+ people (Sexuality & Gender Minority Research Office, 2017).

**Ramifications of Assimilation and Homonormativity**

Historically, people distanced from hegemonic heteronormative privilege, either by race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, nationality, disability, or a combination of these, were more likely to occupy a lower socioeconomic location within the hierarchy. An essential element of this power hierarchy has long been the presumed connection between traditional masculinity and superior access to economic and cultural resources (Ehrenreich, 2015; Kimmel, 2011). At the beginning of the twenty first century, that began to change as the LGBTQ+ community was making progress in advocating for inclusion in mainstream society albeit with notable dissensions within the movement. Vaid (2000), a long-time progressive LGBTQ+ social organizer, outlined “two
major fault lines” of overall goals for the movement (p. 72). The conservatives and libertarians were sharply focused on fighting for gay and lesbian rights to access public sector institutions, such as marriage rights, military service, and adoption rights. In contrast, the progressives argued that because experiences with discrimination and homophobia were highly contextualized by gender, class, and race the movement also needed to address social and economic injustices on a systemic level (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Vaid, 2000). Despite Vaid’s plea for unity, the conservative / libertarian segment of the community has since become the dominant voice and face of the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement, and the material consequences of a divided agenda have become painfully clear.

Our society’s steady march toward neoliberal capitalism has altered the dynamism of the gender hierarchy, creating significant social and economic fissures within the LGBTQ+ community. As some in the LGBTQ+ community gained visibility, they were also recognized as candidates for consumption and the commodification of ‘gay’ began to take hold. Affluent White gay men and lesbians became a lucrative, niche market for commercial entities (Bell & Binnie, 2004; DeFilippis, 2016; Duggan, 2003; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). “In the context of commodification, a person becomes visible as ‘queer’ only through deployment of particular marketed goods and services” (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015, p. 23). To gain and maintain access to social power and resources from a racially and economically privileged heteronormative mainstream society, many larger LGBTQ+ interest-groups have subscribed to respectability politics, promoting assimilation to garner social acceptance (Duggan, 2003; DeFilippis, 2016; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). These assimilation efforts have often been sustained by veering “away from poverty, class, and economic justice, dismissing the relevance of the economic crisis
to [LGBTQ+] lives as though ‘economic justice is simply not a gay issue’” (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015, p. 23).

Lisa Duggan (2003), a vocal critic of this trend, coined the phrase ‘new homonormativity’ as commentary on the infiltration and domination of sexual politics by neoliberalism. Rather than contesting the institutions and assumptions of the dominant White middle-class heteronormative society, Duggan contended that the politics of new homonormativity affirms and preserves them while suppressing radical activism in exchange for opportunities of protected privacy, domesticity, and consumption. Although the banner of diversity is championed by gay and lesbian organizations in public spaces, under the paradigm of homonormativity and respectability politics, it is defined by a corporate brand of neoliberal logic. This logic dictates which types of diversity are ‘respectable’ and worthy of being recognized, counted, and often funded (Ward, 2008).

Given how White cis-gender heterosexual men dominate the gender power hierarchy in mainstream heteronormative society, we should not be surprised that homonormative spaces are also predominantly occupied and dominated by White cis-gender gay men (Duggan, 2003; Farmer & Byrd, 2015). Ferguson (2005) observed that just as heteronormativity favors White middle- and upper- class heterosexuals, homonormativity favors the same social privileges for gays and lesbians, making the process distinctively raced and classed. Mirroring mainstream society, power hierarchies within the LGBTQ+ community have set the stage for vast social and economic inequalities. Knee (2019) argued that the process of homonormativity,

Favors those in the LGBT population that can trade on their privileged identities to “normalize” the LGBT population to the existing white, cisgender, upper-class, male power structure. Those outside of this norm are both physically and symbolically excluded from this homonormative space. (p. 500)
Those with the greatest social power within the LGBTQ+ community can and often do use that power to exclude and marginalize groups, such as trans-gender and queer people for their own benefit.

Constructed under the auspices of homonormativity, the framework of normalizing for the sake of respectability serves the dual purposes of preserving power for the privileged while intentionally marginalizing those who are viewed as ‘not respectable’ (Brown, 2012; DeFilippis, 2016; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Knee, 2019; Vogler, 2016; Ward, 2008). To sustain these power dynamics, ‘respectable’ members have practiced intentional and symbolic boundary-making to first ‘other’ the less economically and socially privileged members of the LGBTQ+ community and then exclude them from homonormative spaces (Knee, 2019; Rosenberg, 2017; Vogler, 2016). The gendered, raced, and classed elements of homonormativity are evident when those with multiple marginalized identities are most often excluded from LGBTQ+ spaces by symbolic boundaries created by those with greater social privilege (Ghabrial, 2017; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Knee, 2019; Vogler, 2016).

**Respectability and Symbolic Boundaries.** As previously discussed, there are powerful implications of mapping qualitative evaluations onto proposed relational dichotomies. As Derrida (1982) argued, most of these arbitrary binaries create a ‘good/bad’ dynamic that is affirmed and reified using language such as ‘respectable’/ ‘non respectable.’ From the position of ‘respectable,’ Bourdieu (1984/2010) argued in *Distinctions* that dominant groups have the power to define their tastes and culture as superior to those of less privileged groups. “These distinctions can have powerful influence in defining legitimate cultural meanings” (Vogler, 2016, p. 171). One aspect of leveraging this type of social privilege is the act of setting ‘symbolic boundaries.’ Lamont and Molnár (2002) characterized symbolic boundaries as “conceptual
distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices and even time and space. … They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality” (p. 168). Using symbolic boundaries, a dominant group legitimates its own culture while simultaneously delegitimizing and symbolically distancing themselves from the cultures of other groups. By positioning “Others” as oppositional outsiders, social power and resources are concentrated within the dominant group and denied to those marginalized groups (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). When applied to the political context of the LGBTQ+ community, we can see that “Just as heterosexuality’s self-understanding relies on a perverse opposite (i.e., homosexuality), homosexuals come to identify themselves as a unified group through expelling other ‘others’” (Vogler, 2016, p. 174).

The power of symbolic boundaries is evident when considering how the concerns of gender nonconforming and queer people are delegitimized as well as when they are excluded from public spaces through policy and policing. Directly linking precarity to gender nonconformity, Butler (2009) posited that gender appearances and performances principally determine who will be deprived of protections from the law or law enforcement in their homes, in their workplaces, or in public; who will be stigmatized and criminalized; which spaces we will be permitted to occupy; and “who will be the object of fascination and consumer pleasure? Who will have medical benefits before the law? Whose intimate and kinship relations will, in fact, be recognized before the law?” (p. ii). Further, she argued that gender appearances and performances determine who is recognized and counted as a human being, worthy of being sheltered and mourned when lost, but in contrast, “precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable. And in this way, precarity is rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless” (p. xiii).
Researchers have exposed how a neoliberal homonormative brand of inclusivity has worked to marginalize LGBTQ+ people who are impoverished, gender nonconforming, and members of racial minorities (Bell & Binnie, 2004; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Rosenberg, 2017; Vogler, 2016). Taking an intersectional approach, Vogler (2016) and Knee (2019) sought to determine how homonormativity and symbolic boundaries have constrained the potential for authentic diversity in supposed LGBTQ+ safe spaces. While mainstream society has come to interprets the presence of LGBTQ+ neighborhoods, particularly in urban areas, as a sign of diversity and inclusion, many of these spaces are implicitly governed by homonormativity.

Vogler (2016) examined the power dynamics at work in the controversial decision of a mainstream LGBTQ+ organization to hold their annual Pride festival in an urban space that instituted a heavily enforced dress code. Vogler found that the dress code, serving as a symbolic boundary, was used to define what was ‘respectable’ and ‘non-respectable.’ This essentially marginalized and excluded gender nonconforming and queer members of the community who do not dress according to heteronormative expectations. With similar concerns about symbolic boundaries, Knee (2019) focused on the symbolic boundaries created in public LGBTQ+ leisure spaces. Despite its origin as a gay neighborhood or ‘gayborhood’ that provided refuge and safety for marginalized members of the community, “through a process of hegemonic boundary-making,” homeless LGBTQ+ people of color were excluded from the public leisure spaces of Boystown, Chicago (Knee, 2019, p. 500). While White residents contended that these spaces were inclusive, the implementation of symbolic boundaries of “respectability, policing, and exclusionary nonprofit practices” had facilitated the exclusion of those with marginalized intersecting identities (Knee, 2019, p. 500). Vogler’s and Knee’s findings clearly demonstrate how homonormative LGBTQ+ communities have created and maintained symbolic boundaries.
to preserve spaces that are classed, gendered, and raced. In this context, the concerns of individuals who are marginalized by their race, gender identity, and lower economic status are silenced and made invisible in the name of ‘respectability.’

**Gay Affluence.** In addition to being marginalized from within LGBTQ+ communities, members of these marginalized groups are also at the mercy of mainstream society’s homogenizing misconceptions about LGBTQ+ identities. While there is substantial empirical evidence to dispel what Badgett (1998) refers to as the ‘myth of gay affluence,’ for many heterosexual cis-gender Americans, “the image of the ‘typical’ gay or lesbian person is a white, middle-class professional who lives without kids in a city” (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015, p. 20). Undoubtedly, assimilation has resulted in some significant social and economic gains for a small segment of the LGBTQ+ community, but there is evidence that the myth of ‘gay affluence’ has also negatively impacted mainstream society’s willingness to recognize queer precarity as a significant social justice issue. The popularized rhetoric has yielded losses of important political and legal battles for the LGBTQ+ community when used by political conservatives to deny ‘special rights’ to a group they perceive as White wealthy gay men (DeFilippis, 2016). The perpetuation of the gay affluence myth delegitimizes economic injustices and makes the precarity of LGBTQ+ ‘invisible.’ This invisibility has proven problematic in gaining public support for advancing LGBTQ+ social justice reforms and policies (Hettinger & Vandello, 2014) as well as gaining housing and labor protections (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). Because the promotion of a false stereotype can deepen the precarity of marginalized LGBTQ+ people, Hettinger and Vandello (2014) argued that the community should pursue an ideological shift away from assimilation toward accentuating the wide array of diversity in the LGBTQ+ community.
The literature and empirical work reviewed provides substantial evidence that many members of the LGBTQ+ community experience greater degrees of marginalization and precarity when they have multiple marginalized identities. What is also notable is that there is a dearth of research that has explicitly focused on trans-gender experiences of marginalization and precarity. There is certainly quantitative evidence to suggest that trans-gender people, particularly those of color, are at a significantly heightened risk of poverty, compared to other groups in the LGBTQ+ community. However, our understanding of how trans-gender people experience and navigate these circumstances has been characterized as limited by some scholars in the field (Albelda et al., 2009; Badgett et al., 2013; Badgett et al., 2008; Grant et al., 2011). Despite perceived limitations, there is sufficient evidence to justify the importance of studying the experiences of trans-gender and gender nonconforming people, with multiple marginalized identities of race, class, sexuality, and gender with an intersectional lens.

The Construction of Gender Nonconformity as Social Transgression or Deviance

Generally, mainstream society’s systemic response has been to stigmatize and marginalize individuals who do not conform to the power structures that preserve the ‘natural’ enfranchisement of traditional masculinity. This has most often been accomplished by widely constructing gender nonconformity as social transgression and deviance. In the context of this discussion, I consider how public policies and sanctioned rhetoric in Western society, in essence our language and discourses, have been leveraged to cast gender nonconformity as one of the worst social transgressions or acts of moral deviance an individual can commit.

The Power of 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 suggested, 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 suggested 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). Therefore, language simultaneously serves to repress that which is perceived as socially undesirable or that threatens societal power structures like the gender binary.

Although Foucault (1978) focused on sexuality rather than gender, his assertion about societal creation of definitions to repress individuals’ desires is useful for considering how language has framed gender nonconformity as transgression. First, society creates what is ‘real’ through the act of naming, but that which society does not wish to recognize remains unnamed and consequently non-existent. This Western tradition of privileging language has led to the cultural misstep of equating language with reality (Derrida, 1982). Wilchins (2014) observed that,

> Non-normative experiences of gender are excluded from language [and] 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, gender nonconformity is marked in Western language with an abundance of pejorative references, but not one “positive, affirming, complimentary” or even neutral word exists for gender nonconforming individuals (Wilchins, 2014, p. 43). Furthermore, Western language has
more negative words associated with men who enact femininity than for women who enact masculinity (Wilchins, 2014). This clearly illustrates how abandoning masculinity for femininity is viewed as a dire threat to the stability of gender power structure and explains the disturbing prevalence of transmisogyny.

The Power of Discourse

The social construct of gender binds socially-reproduced men and women within a foundationally unequal system of power. For this discussion, Foucault’s (1978) concept of discourse is useful, referring 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 adherence to the gender binary, discourses are exceptionally instructive about how society constructs nonconformity into transgression. There are three primary discourses that create this gender transgression: legal discourse, medical/psychiatric discourse, and feminist/academic discourse. Each of these discourses are embedded with pronouncements of authority, such as methods of documentation, specialized vocabulary, and professional procedures - all leveraging institutional power to expose nonadherence to gender stereotypes (Wilchins, 2014).

By subjecting people to these discourses, the documentation, vocabulary, and procedures ‘speak’ in terms of pathology and deviance, framing those who do not conform as “suspect populations” (Wilchins, 2014, p. 67). These social discussions do not focus on revealing how the system silences difference and delegitimizes ambiguous identities, but rather they 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). It is not
the binary that is subjected to examination, but rather the transgression of that binary. In this cultural context, discourses frame the daily lives of trans-gender and gender nonconforming people in terms of deficiency or distortion.

**Leveraging Language and Discourses Through Rhetoric and Representation**

Theorists have clearly offered some provocative insights about how language and discourse have been fundamental in constructing gender nonconformity as transgression and deviance (Derrida, 1982; Foucault, 1978; Wilchins, 2014; Wittig, 1992). An important element of this discussion is the role that our institutions play in leveraging marginalizing language and discourses to maintain power structures. As we know, institutions often control who has access to social and economic power while denying access to others. Barbara Perry’s (2003) concept of “permission to hate” clarifies how particular groups become targets of delegitimizing rhetoric with significant material consequences. In her work on the historical “demonization” of Arabs and Muslims in America, she discussed the decades-long campaign of politicians and policy makers to stigmatize Arab identities and the Muslim faith in the United States.

Perry observed that a critical consequence of these efforts has been that the “demonization” becomes embedded “into policies and practices that further marginalize the group” and codify discriminatory practices which often violate the rights of group members (p. 190). Once codified into policies, this discrimination and marginalization is enforced in the public and private sectors, effectively othering members of the group in their daily lives. Perry (2003) contended that the political rhetoric often utilizes language, discourses, and cultural symbols to create a contentious ‘us’ and ‘them’ binary, and then positions the othered group as a threat to not only our cultural identity but also our existence. Once the marginalized group is cast...
as a dire threat, bigotry, including “hate-motivated violence,” becomes a viable response to protecting and preserving our societal values (Perry, 2003, p. 193).

Regardless of whether the ‘state’ or mainstream media is responsible, the perpetuated discriminatory language and discourse finds its way into the private sector, influencing how individual actors within our institutions respond to members of the marginalized group. Perry argued that the context for this hate-motivated violence,

Lies within the disadvantages that accrue to one’s identity as the Other. Here, then we are referring to forms of institutional and structural discrimination that limit the opportunities and capacities of subordinate groups. Paramount among these forms are the practices of marginalization and disempowerment that constrain the everyday participation of minority groups in education, employment, and the exercise of basic civil and political rights. (p. 193)

When considering the discourses promoted by many policy makers and the mainstream media that have particularly marginalized trans-gender and gender nonconforming people, Perry’s arguments seem particularly salient. Challenges to the integrity of the gender power structure have been deemed threatening to ‘our way of life.’ Thus, our institutions as well as individual actors have been granted “permission to hate” to protect society. In so doing, the state and mainstream media have sanctioned and facilitated the marginalization and subsequent precarity that so many trans-gender and gender nonconforming people experience.

One of the primary ways that mainstream society encounters this powerfully rhetoric is through distorted representations of and embedded messaging about trans-gender and gender nonconforming identities and lives. Repeated and ongoing exposures to distorted representations shape public perceptions and understandings of these identities and serve to further marginalize the most vulnerable trans-gender and gender nonconforming people. As McLaren et al. (2021) observed,
Historically, transgender people have largely been represented on screen in negative and/or stereotypical ways. Perhaps the most insidious aspect of these representations is that in the absence of other complex characterizations, these stereotypes become embedded in the public imagination. (p. 172)

Further, the authors indicated that current literature perceives the representation of trans-gender identities to be fraught with distorted stereotypes, “simplistic” portrayals, and negativity (McLaren et al., 2021). However, their analysis of content and discourses involving trans-gender characters, from the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black* and *The Fosters*, revealed more “positive,” “progressive,” and “nuanced” representations (McLaren et al., 2021, p. 186). While these depictions still suffered from many of the binary tropes that place oppressive pressure on trans-gender bodies to conform and pass as the gender they associate with most, McLaren et al. cautiously suggested that progressive depictions of trans-gender identities and lives hold some promise for further progress.

Concerned with how trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals experienced and understood representations and social messages that focused on their gender identity, Rood et al. (2017) explored what types of social messages were being received as well how their participants were impacted by those messages. One of the most prevalent social messages discussed by participants was that “their gender identity was something they chose, that they pursued for secondary gain, and that their gender was not ‘real’” (p. 421). Participants understood the social messaging about trans-gender and gender nonconforming identities to convey that their gender identities were negatively regarded by society and that most negative messaging originated from the media and religious ideology. They also experienced emotional distress and negative self-perceptions in response to those transphobic social messages. Participants contended that negative social messages impacted trans-gender and gender nonconforming people of color most profoundly.
Despite negative impacts, Rood et al.’s participants also described resilience processes that they used in response to negative messaging about their gender identities. The authors’ findings are particularly salient for my research as they align directly with my own concerns about how trans-gender individuals not only experience marginalization and distorted representations of their identity, but also how they might navigate those experiences and messages. In addition, their finding about trans-gender people of color being more deeply marginalized is consistent with my emphasis on the intersectional complexities of experiences with marginalization and precarity. Having considered how language and discourses have been leveraged as rhetorical tools to other and marginalized trans-gender and gender nonconforming identities through distorted representations and social messaging, I now move to explore what has been presented in the literature about how trans-gender individuals respond to and navigate their experiences.

Navigating Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation

Although a great deal of the literature has demonstrated the vast array of negative experiences that many trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals have endured, I now explore what has been found about their responses to encounters with systemic transphobia. While there is no shortage of discrimination and oppression, there is also evidence that trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals have developed coping mechanisms and demonstrated resilience in response to adversity (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2016). Mizock et al. (2017) explored how their trans-gender and gender diverse (TGD) participants navigated and coped with experiences with transphobic workplace marginalization. The authors identified several key themes associated with coping strategies used in transphobic work environments, which included strategies of gender presentation, gender
detachment, relationship navigating, resource utilization, job-performance, maladaptive coping, structural, and power-acquisition. While not all were necessarily constructive, these strategies, nonetheless, demonstrated participants’ abilities to determine how they would respond to negative experiences in their workplaces.

Concerned with how gender identity affected individuals’ navigational approaches to various forms of stigma (i.e., individual, interpersonal, institutional) in acquiring preventative care, critical care, and trans-care, Wagner et al. (2016) identified a distinctive “tension between individual, interpersonal, and institutional stigma, all of which intersect problematically for trans* people seeking healthcare support” (p. 56). Tough decisions, fear, and benevolent oppression emerged as themes in participants’ experiences. Tough decisions often involved financial constraints of accessing trans-care as well as being unwilling to put themselves in healthcare situations that would make them vulnerable for ‘identity outing.’ In many cases, respondents avoided healthcare support to navigate around the likely stigma and marginalization that would result from being outed as trans* while seeking care. Fear was evident when participants were concerned about being exposed to aggression or violence, and benevolent oppression occurred when participants were excessively questioned or objectified by health care professionals. Rather than their own personal challenges, their efforts to seek healthcare were most often suppressed by a prevalence of systemic, institutionalized anti-trans discrimination and heightened risk of violence or harm.

Mizock et al. (2017) and Wagner et al.’s (2016) findings about participants’ coping mechanisms and navigational strategies affirm my decision to explore the strategies my participants have developed and used to navigate their own experiences with marginalization, precarity, and representation. Notably, the literature regarding trans-gender representation and
navigation was not as robust as the areas of systemic transphobia, intersectionality, homonormativity, and precarity, but the findings discussed here still suggest that these are areas of trans-gender experience that warrant further inquiry.

**Implications of the Literature and Conclusion**

In the body of literature and empirical work dedicated to understanding the diverse experiences of trans-gender people, researchers in the fields of psychology and sociology have provided compelling calls for further research. In the research reviewed here, several overarching concerns emerge. First, trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals experience pervasive systemic transphobia and subsequent marginalization and precarity in their daily lives. Second, the heterogeneity of the trans-gender community must be recognized, and the experiences of marginalized trans-gender people studied through an intersectional lens. Third, the negative impacts of transphobic language, discourses, and representations must be examined to determine how experiences of marginalization and precarity for many trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals are constructed and maintained. Finally, to explore their capacity for agency, navigational strategies used by trans-gender and gender nonconforming people in response to their marginalizing experiences should be considered. I will now discuss some of the implications of this literature in relation to my work.

This body of literature clearly reflects the fact that trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals must often live under a shroud of transphobic intolerance. The literature reviewed here provides pieces to the puzzle of why so many trans-gender individuals face persistent marginalization and precarity. Scholars in this field have explored how that transphobia has negatively impacted the psychological, physical, and social well-being of trans-gender individuals. Some have researched the implications of the institutional barriers and
obstructions encountered by members of gender-minorities in college settings (McKinney, 2008; Seelman, 2016) while others considered the effects of transphobia experienced in the workplace (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017). The implications of trans-gender experiences with institutional barriers to accessing healthcare have also been examined (Boe et al., 2020; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016).

While all these studies are undoubtedly focused on exposing the numerous ways that trans-gender individuals are so profoundly marginalized, only Mizock and Hopwood (2018) and Vermeir et al. (2018) explicitly spoke about the connection between transphobia and precarity, both economic and social. These findings are critically salient first steps toward gaining more substantial insights into how trans-gender individuals experience, make sense of, and navigate marginalization, precarity, and distorted representations. In this project I have attempted to draw clear connections between trans-gender experiences with marginalization and the subsequent precarity that can occur.

One of the significant focal points identified in this literature is the necessity to understand that the experiences of trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals are diverse and complex, due to a host of intersecting sites of oppression such as race, social class, sexual orientation, and gender identity (Bauer et al., 2009; Dispenza et al., 2012; Hudson, 2019; Knee, 2019; Mathers et al., 2018; McKinney, 2008; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017; Rood et al., 2017; Seelman, 2016; Vogler, 2016: Wagner et al., 2017; Xavier et al., 2013). Recognizing the critical significance of this heterogeneity, these researchers consistently advocated using an intersectional lens in conducting this work. They contended that this approach was instrumental in exposing how transphobia facilitates marginalization and how that marginalization is constructed and reinforced, affecting trans-gender people in diverse ways.
The empirical research reviewed here provides pieces to the puzzle of why so many trans-gender individuals, particularly those of color, face persistent social and economic marginalization. This work provided valuable insights about how processes of homonormativity have constructed and stigmatized gender nonconformity and trans-gender identities through transphobic discourses (Knee, 2019, Mathers et al., 2018; Rudin et al., 2014; Vogler, 2016). That said, what also emerged is the undeniable fact that much of existing research has been conducted with racially and/or economically privileged participants which researchers cited as limitations in their work (Abelson, 2016; Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018, Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al. 2017; Rood et al., 2017; Rudin et al., 2014; Seelman, 2016; Wagner et al., 2016). While Mizock et al. (2017), Mizock et al. (2018), and Mizock and Hopwood (2018) touted the importance of using an intersectional lens, their samples were overwhelmingly white and part of an educationally and economically privileged demographic. In addition, because all samples were extracted from attendees at the same conference, their findings inherently overrepresented the experiences of a specific sector of an already small population of trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals. The inability to delve more deeply into intersecting oppressions because of a lack racial and ethnic diversity in samples was discussed by several researchers (Dispenza et al., 2012; Seelman, 2016; Wagner et al., 2016). Wagner et al. (2016) observed that because their respondents were privileged by race, class, education, and access, they suspected that “these identity elements may explain why none of [their] participants experienced egregious offenses within their actual healthcare experiences” (p. 66).

When considering the empirical findings regarding homonormativity, several researchers provided critical groundwork for understanding the disparities in social progress that have occurred for sexual minorities but not gender minorities (Knee, 2019; Mathers et al., 2018;
Vogler, 2016). These findings clarified how processes of heteronormativity and cisnormativity have fostered homonormativity, thereby further marginalizing and delegitimizing vulnerable trans-gender and gender nonconforming members of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly those of color and lower economic status. Vogler (2016) and Knee’s (2019) work with homonormativity and symbolic boundaries are of particular interest because the researchers spoke more directly about how race, class, and gender identity have been implicated in the exclusion of trans-gender and gender nonconforming identities in LGBTQ+ spaces.

The salience of a trans-gender person’s ability to pass was briefly acknowledged by Mizock et al. (2017) and Mizock et al. (2018) when they called for future research to focus on the different experiences of trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals who engage in diverse enactments of varied genders regarding ‘passing privilege’ and ‘gender privilege.’ Dispenza et al. (2012) also focused their research on the oppressive experiences of trans-gender men who face the significant challenge of ‘passing.’ The authors contended that because of the significant privileges associated with masculinity, trans-gender men experience a significantly higher level of scrutiny than trans-gender women. While I think their discussion of the significance of gender and the monumental pressure associated with ‘passing’ is worthwhile, I doubt that trans-gender men suffer worse social oppression than trans-gender women, given significant evidence to the contrary.

In response to the literature regarding the intersectional complexities of trans-gender experiences with marginalization, I prioritized diversity in my own sample and explicitly spoke with participants about the implications of their race, class, gender, and ability to pass. Further, I initiated discussions about experiences of marginalization within the LGBTQ+ community to explore the prevalence of homonormativity.
Theorists have provided substantial insights about how language (Derrida, 1982; Foucault, 1978; Wilchins, 2014; Wittig, 1992) and social discourses (Foucault, 1978; Wilchins, 2014; Wittig, 1992) have been used to construct gender nonconformity as social transgression and deviance. Additionally, Perry’s (2003) explanation of how the state and mainstream media have leveraged language and discourses to other and marginalize particular groups drew crucial connections for understanding how members of mainstream society have been encouraged to discriminate against trans-gender people through distorted representations and messaging about trans-gender identities. Rood et al.’s (2017) findings certainly suggest that these messages have been received and understood by trans-gender people. What stood out to me about the literature regarding the representations and messaging experienced by trans-gender and gender nonconforming was that it was markedly limited. As such, I felt it was important to prioritize these experiences in this project in hopes of adding the knowledge in this area.

Although much of this literature paints a rather bleak picture of how trans-gender people are negatively affected by systemic transphobia that pervades large sectors of their daily lives, it also reflects a few instances of their agency or resilience. In several studies, the idea of actively acquiring ‘passing privilege’ through focused and intentional gender performances was a strategy for navigating transphobic contexts and barriers (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock et al., 2017). In addition, researchers found that trans-gender individuals tend to respond to marginalization and transphobia by demonstrating exceptional competence in areas such as work productivity or positive inter-personal communication (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock et al., 2017; Rood et al., 2017). Unfortunately, evidence also suggested that many trans-gender individuals feel compelled to engage in avoidance strategies to protect themselves from the risk of being ‘outed’ or subjected to potential violence (Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al.,
2017; Rood et al., 2017; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). In many cases, this meant they chose to forego critical resources or accessing healthcare rather than be exposed to transphobic discourses, institutional barriers, and distorted representations.

**Conclusion**

The literature reviewed herein provides strong support for my contention that the social scientific community must focus our efforts to understand and expose the profound levels of marginalization and precarity that trans-gender individuals, particularly those of color, experience in their daily lives. More so than any other group within the LGTBQT+ community, gender minorities face denigrating discourses and institutional or cultural barriers that construct and maintain heightened levels of social and fiscal instability. In this research, I have made every effort to ensure that diverse trans-gender voices are heard, and that their experiences and challenges have been made visible from a trans-centric perspective.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I discuss how my methodology was designed to further the work that has already been conducted in this field as well as address some of the gaps and limitations that I identified in Chapter 2. First, the aspects of a feminist methodology that guided my work have been outlined, and then several distinctions between feminist and trans-feminist practices are explained. Given the concern for colonizing trans-gender experiences from a cis-centric perspective, I have provided some relevant context about my own social location. Then, a detailed explanation of my methodological choices and practices is provided. Finally, the inherent ethical considerations and risks for my trans-gender participants as well as the anticipated benefit that this work represents is considered. To focus attention on the goals of my research methodology, I ask the reader to please revisit my research questions:

How do trans-gender people experience, make sense of, and navigate marginalization in their daily lives?

- How do trans-gender people’s marginalizing experiences and understanding of those experiences impact their socio-economic stability?
- How does one’s intersectional identity, particularly regarding race and ethnicity, impact a trans-gender person’s marginalizing experiences and understanding of those experiences?
- How do trans-gender people experience and make sense of the way trans-gender identities are represented in the public domain?
How do trans-gender people navigate experiences of marginalization, socio-economic instability, and trans-gender representations?

**Feminist Methodology**

The diversity in perspectives across feminist research is “irreducible to any uniform set of theses,” with often only the commonality of sharing a “commitment to unearth the politics of epistemology” (Alcoff & Potter, 1993, p. 3). While offering optimum opportunities for generating a vast array of knowledge, all feminist scholars maintain that there is more than one type of knowledge and that these knowledges are often equally legitimate (DeVault, 1999; Fonow & Cook, 2005; Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1993).

Thus, women as well as other marginalized groups are legitimate producers of knowledge who possess the authority to produce the most authentic knowledge about their own experiences. Of course, this premise stands in stark contrast to the androcentric, conventional, positivist epistemology which has historically reserved this legitimacy and authority for White, socially-privileged men. Despite the diversity in feminist perspectives, there are several key characteristics that emerge in feminist methodology. I will first discuss several common characteristics of a feminist approach, before delving into how these should be altered to ensure my work is trans-centric.

One of the key elements of feminist methodology, is that it seeks to develop research problems that focus on gender and gender inequality that exist in patriarchal societies (Alcoff & Potter; 1993; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Fonow & Cook, 2005; DeVault, 1999; Harding, 1987; 1991; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991; Knight, 2000; Stanley & Wise, 1993). Emphasis is placed on problematizing inequities in women’s lives (Knight, 2000) to determine how research may improve those conditions (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991). The goal of emancipation and enacting
social change is the second notable characteristic of feminist methodology that distinguishes it from positivist practices. Feminist researchers recognize their work as a political endeavor (Harding, 1987; Jayaratne & Steward, 1991) that offers opportunities to center women’s experience and to push for social change (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, DeVault, 1999; Fonow & Cook, 2005; Knight, 2000; Maynard, 1994; Stanley & Wise, 1993), and “transformation of patriarchal social institutions” (Fonow & Cook, 2005, p. 2213). This is a distinct departure from the work of non-feminist researchers who mistakenly argue that scientific research should and can be conducted from a non-political, non-interventionist stance.

A third hallmark of feminist methodology is that, unlike non-feminist methodology that prioritizes phenomena in the domain of public life, feminist researchers maintain that the best way to address the problems of gender inequity is to study women’s everyday lives. As many of women’s experiences of inequity occur in private spaces and mundane circumstances (Harding, 1987; 1991), feminist research provides a space for women’s voices to articulate their own knowledge of their interactions in the context of a patriarchal society (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Knight, 2000; Stanley & Wise, 1993). This approach can be extremely powerful in the work of consciousness-raising (Fonow & Cook, 2005) as it “challenges the routine and mundane, the taken-for-granted nature of everyday life” (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 134). This foray into the personal and everyday lives of women requires that the researcher also alter the traditionally sanctioned position of researcher objectivity.

This leads to a fourth definitive characteristic of feminist methodology which insists that researchers recognize that they cannot realistically remove themselves from the process of engaging with the researched subjects’ experiences. In fact, it is imperative that the feminist researcher situate herself, himself, or themselves within the frame of research (Fonow & Cook,
Stanley and Wise suggested that this approach exposes the fact that a singular reality cannot exist, and “the ‘objective’ reality is subjective […] merely one reality which co-exists with many others” (p. 134). An admission of necessary subjectivity brings me to the last key element of feminist work which is the acknowledgement that research creates ethical concerns regarding the power differential that exists between the researcher and research participants. The feminist researcher must be reflexively diligent in mitigating the potential for objectifying and exploiting participants’ experiences which often arises from relationships established during the research process (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Stanley & Wise, 1993). This diligence often extends to matters of managing the representation as well as dissemination of research results to foster social change (DeVault, 1999; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991; Knight, 2000; Reinharz, 1992; Sprague, 2005).

Trans-feminist Emancipatory Methodology

While these fundamental tenets of feminist research provide critical framing for my research design, I must consider Johnson’s (2015) contention that there are several modifications that must be made to appropriately honor the ‘truths’ of trans-gender participants. Research problems and questions should still focus on issues of gender-based inequality, but the focus of this work must be placed on improving the lives of trans-gender individuals by focusing on and centering their experiences and perspectives (Johnson, 2015). In addition, Johnson argued that an instrumental element of this practice is to engage with transgender scholarship rather than relying solely upon feminist scholarship that is often produced within cissexist power-structures. To adhere to this recommendation, I directly communicated with trans-gender scholars through email and in-person discussions to gain their insights and feedback throughout this research process.
Another shift involved the significance of acknowledging the dynamics of unequal power between (often marginalized) participants and an (often privileged) researcher. While confronting and problematizing objectivity and motivation would be essential for any feminist researcher, with trans-feminist research the stakes are even greater. Because trans-gender individuals are most often confronted with the threat of stigma, oppression, and violence in all facets of their daily lives, Johnson’s contention that researchers “interrogate their own subject positions when approaching the study of transgender people and phenomena” is imperative. As a researcher, it was essential for me to confront and be transparent about my own subjectivity and hold myself accountable for transparency and placing my trans-gender participants’ experiences and voices at the center of the work. I made every effort to exercise what Sandra Harding (1991) referred to as ‘strong objectivity.’

By considering one’s own standpoint throughout the research process and problematizing how our own practices and questions are value-laden, Harding contended that the researcher can better ensure that the voices of her participants are listened to, understood, and accurately represented. Throughout this research endeavor, I adhered to Johnson’s contention that trans-feminist researchers must exercise reflexivity in clearly specifying my motivations for studying trans-gender experiences. Throughout the research process, I also was conscious of and marked my own interpretations while speaking with my participants as well as when I was analyzing this data to preserve balance, clarity, and transparency. This perspective guided each element of the research design with the intent of challenging cis-centric privileged knowledge claims about trans-gender experiences.

While my decision to use an emancipatory methodology clearly aligns with a feminist practice, I placed more explicit emphasis on this aspect because marginalization of different
groups has also occurred under the auspices of feminist research. Sandoval’s (2000) critique of the inadequacy of feminist theory to address the lives of women of color and her argument for a “new methodology of liberation” lends itself well to conducting work with trans-gender people who have clearly experienced pervasive marginalization (p. xii). The author proposes that a ‘Methodology of the Oppressed’ begins with a differential consciousness, under which one perceives their difference as intentional defiance of standards of societal ‘normalcy.’ Sandoval offered the five technologies of semiology, deconstruction, meta-ideologizing, democratics, and differential movement to enact this methodology. She further asserted that one of the most powerful means to emancipating one’s thinking and sociological imagination is to critically analyze signs and symbols and then deconstruct and expose the arbitrary relations that exist. From a differential consciousness, Sandoval contended that one can borrow and graft new emancipatory ideologies onto dominant, oppressive ideologies, thereby resignifying the elements of the dominant power structure through meta-ideologizing. She suggested that this tactic will expose the initial ideology as contrived, thereby disempowering it within the social structure.

The technology of democratics is the guiding principle that frames the employment of the previous three technologies with the express intention of developing and preserving egalitarian social relations.

As previously indicated, I also relied upon elements of Schostak and Schostak’s (2008) conceptualization of radical research. As emancipatory scholars, Schostak and Schostak presented a pathway to navigate toward an egalitarian society in which the multitude of viewpoints and voices from the ‘masses’ hold comparable social power. This is evident in the assertion, that engaging in this form of research requires researchers to identify “what is at stake for people in engaging in ‘normal’ everyday practices, those practices of ‘fitting in’ and getting
others to ‘fit in’ or engaging in strategies in response to their refusal to fit in” (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, p. 17). In their chapter, “Bodies in Chains,” they made the case that individuals in society, to varying degrees, are held constrained within the tension between their own desires and those of the society to maintain order. Within that context, they argued that social research should “be designed to be inclusive of all the viewpoints of the multitudes of individuals and thus accept diversity” (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, pp. 34-35). By accepting diversity as a norm, authentic democracy becomes possible.

Like Sandoval’s emphasis on semiology, Schostak and Schostak insisted that the cyclic and persistent power maintenance of the status quo may be disrupted by problematizing signs, symbols, and language and exposing the intentionality of systems that objectify individuals and their experiences. Even though power structures are highly effective at preserving the desirable constraints on individuals to the benefit of religious, political, and market structures (among others), Schostak and Schostak suggested that the heavy investment in constructing and enforcing institutional practices to preserve the status quo is a sign that the entire structure is fragile and rooted in fear of the ‘other’. The authors called for marginalized people to engage in creating and deconstructing ‘provocative identities’ that emerge in the ‘seams’ between our arbitrary social boundaries because the only path to establishing an authentic democracy is to create a society that develops a universal “sense of being at home with otherness” (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, p. 269). This reference to being ‘at home’ also gets to the heart of the ‘everyday’ lived context in which radical inquiry work must be pursued. Schostak and Schostak argued that to truly emancipate and bring inclusive democracy to marginalized people, the research design must “drive democracy into the very weave of the mundane in order to rethink the meaning of the ‘everyday’ and its potential for radical practice” (p. 206). For it is in those
mundane contexts that privilege, power, and domination are encoded and experienced on a daily, material level.

Having considered both Sandoval’s and Schostak and Schostak’s frameworks as models of emancipatory methodology, I will now outline several themes that were particularly relevant to my study. Both methodologies focused on semiotics, deconstruction, and democracies. While Sandoval and Schostak and Schostak clearly outlined the potential for substantial, unprecedented paradigm shifts, fully undertaking these methodologies would require an extensive investment of time and resources beyond my capacity. Considering these limitations, I positioned my research as a first step toward engaging with these frameworks. Both maintained that semiology, the science of signs in culture, is an essential approach to problematizing the arbitrary nature of how meaning is layered upon a wide variety of signs and symbols, including language. It is argued that one of the most powerful means of emancipating one’s sociological imagination is to critically analyze, deconstruct, and expose the arbitrary relations that are embedded in signs, symbols, and language (Sandoval, 2000; Schostak & Schostak, 2008). Potentially, marginalized people can then borrow, graft, and invent a multitude of new, emancipatory representations and meanings that are all of equal social value, thereby creating a social space for democracy (Sandoval, 2000; Schostak & Schostak, 2008).

In my research, I worked to lay the foundation for creating opportunities for democracy by first placing the experiences of my trans-gender participants at the center of the research and then exposing cis-sexist mainstream constructions and representations that likely reinforced their marginalization. As a marginalized group, trans-gender people have been defined by society as the ‘others,’ but they also expose the ‘seams’ of the arbitrary relationship between sex and gender, as Schostak and Schostak have suggested. While diverse trans-gender experiences of
marginalization and precarity have been under-represented in the literature about the LGBTQ+ community, in this work I intended to give my volunteers a platform to define the truths of their different experiences. During my data collection process, the idea of semiology was loosely in play when I asked participants to discuss how they not only experienced, but also interpreted and navigated representations of their gender identities.

My questions were designed to probe the imagery and language that they encountered and to consider not only how they have been constructed but also how they might be deconstructed and replaced. My intent was to foster what Sandoval characterized as *psychic* emancipation for my participants which has the potential to ultimately inspire *social* emancipation if opportunities are created and pursued. By delving into how trans-gender people experience, make sense of, and navigate representations of trans-gender identities in a heterosexist patriarchal society, I hoped to empower my participants to expose the arbitrary nature of the signifiers that have served to stigmatize and marginalize them in many ways and to propose more authentic and normalizing representations.

**Positioning of Self**

As a feminist researcher, I believe that failing to acknowledge and address concerns about one’s own subjectivity will allow for a researcher’s biases to affect any data obtained and distort any subsequent interpretations. If unchecked, our social positionality can cause us to make decisions during our research endeavors, about our participants, their experiences, and the data created, that are dismissive, exploitative, and distortive (Leavy & Harris, 2019; Miles et al., 2014). To avoid objectification and distortion, a healthy practice of reflexivity is imperative throughout a qualitative research process. Hesse-Biber (2007) described reflexivity as the “process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how his or her own
social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process” (p. 129). Through this process the researcher demonstrates sensitivity to how interactions between the researcher and her participants can influence how knowledge is created within the research context (Hesse-Biber, 2007). One way to demonstrate reflexivity is to acknowledge one’s own presence within the data, thus, placing oneself within the frame.

In the spirit of being reflexive and transparent, I fully acknowledge that this research is a political endeavor. Not only am I a researcher in this field, but I am also an advocate and activist for the trans-gender community, thereby making this research inherently value-laden (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The fundamental tenets of trans-feminist research are to address problems of inequality related to gender within a cis-sexist patriarchy with the intention of improving the lives of trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals who are marginalized in their daily lives, thereby working toward emancipation and freedom from oppression (Johnson, 2015; Vincent, 2018). I believe that the prevalence of marginalizing trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals is an essential lever of the patriarchal mandate to preserve the gender binary and masculinity power structures. Ultimately, by denigrating, delegitimizing, and deleting trans-gender identities through transphobic discourses and institutional barriers, society can maintain the status quo and sanctify the exclusive social privileges associated with gender conformity.

To address my own social positionality and privilege, without devolving into self-indulgent reflection, I acknowledge that I am a white, middle-aged, educated, middle-class, bisexual woman who has often consciously rebelled against gender conventions. From this social location, I recognize that I benefit from racial, economic, and class privileges that I not only acknowledge but have also problematize throughout the course of my research. With that said, I
also have some valuable insights that I believe were critical in conducting this work. I have lived most of my life as an invisible member of the LGBTQ+ community because of the very material consequences of my sexuality. As I indicated, there are still 30 states that do not have full, legal protections for members of the LGBTQ+ community, and Michigan is one of those states. As an educator, I have primarily hidden my sexuality to avoid a potential loss of employment. While not comparable to the level of marginalization experienced by trans-gender individuals, my own marginalization remains relevant.

In addition, for several years I have been the advisor and advocate for the students’ gender and sexuality alliance at the high school where I am a member of the faculty. I was approached about being a faculty sponsor by a student who is trans-gender and wanted to start a group to provide community and support within the high school. Since that time, I have been heavily engaged in supporting and empowering my LGBTQ+ students. Notably, my trans-gender and gender nonconforming students have most often needed my advocacy when they have been confronted with a variety of barriers and challenges that their sexual minority peers have not encountered. In this role, I have often relied upon their impressions and understanding for guidance as we have navigated various marginalizing experiences over the years, ranging from being dead-named and mis-gendered to significant rites of passage, like graduation. I also have several trans-gender or gender nonconforming academic colleagues and close acquaintances who have graciously agreed to serve as experts and provide guidance and essential trans* knowledge that I do not possess. For instance, I consulted with a fellow academic who is trans-gender about using language that is culturally sensitive and respectful during my interviews and then again, providing essential feedback about my findings to ensure that I was centering my participants’ experiences and understanding.
Phenomenology and Constructed Grounded Theory

As detailed in Chapter 2, I used an intersectional theoretical lens which guided my choices to use a phenomenological approach in my data collection and constructed grounded theoretical approach in analyzing my data. These techniques not only allowed me to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of my trans-gender research participants but also to develop a substantive theory of trans-precarity that is grounded in the data shared by participants.

Like McKinney (2008), Parent et al. (2013), and Pohjanen and Kortelainen (2016), I believed that a phenomenological approach would be most helpful in gaining critical insights about how trans-gender individuals experienced and navigated the common phenomena of marginalization, precarity, and representation that are clearly evidenced in the current body of literature in this field (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is particularly useful in studying trans-gender experiences as it is so acutely focused on our “lived experiences of inhabiting a body” that must come into contact with objects and forces of the social world (Ahmed, 2006, p. 2). More so than any other members of the LGBTQ+ community, trans-gender individuals are confronted with the social and material consequences of how they inhabit their bodies; thus, making this approach quite valuable.

I also found the researchers that have practiced various components of grounded theory particularly instructive because of limited volume of research and substantive theory regarding trans-gender experiences with marginalization, precarity, and representation. Given the current body of knowledge, we need substantive theories to build our collective repository of empirical knowledge about how trans-gender people experience, make sense of, and navigate these phenomena (Leavy & Harris, 2019). By using this inductive and iterative approach to the collection and analysis of data, researchers in this field have been able to identify the prevalence
of diversity of experiences within the trans-gender community (Abelson, 2016; Dispenza et al., 2012; Johnson, 2015; Mizock et al., 2017; Mizock et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). I do, however, want to clarify that I chose to use Charmaz’s (2006/2014) constructivist approach to grounded theory which differs from Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) practice in a distinctive way.

The conventional grounded theory approach prescribes an objective and narrowly rigid approach to data collection, analysis, and theory development. In contrast, Charmaz argued that the practice of grounded theory should be viewed as a ‘constellation’ of methods that frame the practice of qualitative inquiry, all founded in the logic of inductive reasoning. In the 1980s and early 1990s, frustrated with the suggestion of social constructionists that they could objectively and transcendentally ‘construct’ themes and theories from participants’ data, Charmaz pushed back by appending the term ‘constructivist’ to grounded theory. In doing so, she sought to intentionally acknowledge “subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of data” (p. 14). This approach “emphasizes theory development resulting from a co-construction process dependent upon researcher interactions with participants and field” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 84).

Both my trans-feminist framework as well as my focus on intersectionality made Charmaz’s (2006/2014) constructed grounded theory more opportune for flexibly and reflexively considering the diversity, multiplicity, and complexity of my trans-gender participants’ experiences. It also provided a way for me, as a subjective researcher, to acknowledge my position within the frame of research. As Charmaz astutely observes, the role of the researcher cannot be obscured as she/he/they must exercise decision-making, question the data, and prioritize while engaging with the data in an iterative and inductive process. Creswell and Poth observed that a constructivist approach to grounded theory focuses on developing theory “that
depends on the researcher’s view, learning about the experience within embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships as well as making visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity” (p. 86). The gender hierarchy has played a fundamental role in the pervasive denigration, delegitimization, distortions, silencing, and erasure of trans-gender experiences, so constructivist grounded theory was essential to developing substantive knowledge about those experiences. Having outlined the ontological and axiological assumptions that guided my methodological decision making, I now move to a detailed discussion of my research design.

Methodology

Population

As I formulated this research design, I tried to maintain perspective on the practical challenges that my choices represented to create a design that could realistically be implemented and still contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the diverse experiences of trans-gender people with marginalization, precarity, and representation. As outlined in Chapter 1, my population of concern for this research were individuals who considered themselves trans-gender. As previously indicated, empirical findings in this field strongly suggested that trans-gender people, particularly those of color, are profoundly more vulnerable to various forms of social and economic instability and are under-studied (Abelson, 2016; Bilodeau, 2008; DeFilippis, 2016; Dispenza et al., 2012; Doan, 2016; Grant et al., 2011; Johnson, 2015; Mathers et al., 2018; McKinney, 2008; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016, Rood et al., 2017; Rudin et al., 2014; Seelman, 2016; Vincent, 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). Because trans-gender people of color seem to experience
more significant levels of marginalization, I explicitly worked to represent their experiences in the sample.

**Sampling**

Given the challenges that previous social scientists have encountered with recruiting a diverse sample of trans-gender participants, I used a combination of both purposeful sampling and snowball sampling strategies. A highly common sampling approach among qualitative researchers, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) and Creswell and Poth (2018) contend that purposeful sampling is useful in ensuring that certain ‘characteristics’ of one’s target population are represented in my sample and that the desired participant characteristics can best be guided by one’s research questions. For similar reasons, McKinney (2008), Mizock and Hopwood (2018), and Rood et al. (2017) used this method of sampling. Because of the inductive nature of theory development in qualitative research, it is more logistically feasible to construct a sample that is purposefully selected to achieve the goal of answering research questions about specific phenomena that are contextually bound (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Reinharz, 1992; Siedman, 2013).

Based upon what is currently known about trans-gender marginalization and precarity, I focused on recruiting a sample that included trans-gender people of color. Because many researchers have admitted to significant recruitment challenges with the trans-gender population, I also used a snowball sampling approach to allow for leveraging social networks and gaining credibility (Abelson, 2016; Dispenza et al., 2012; Mathers et al., 2018, Wagner et al., 2016). My well-established social networks with strong ties to local trans-gender communities as well as a large virtual network via social media proved to be crucial resources in reaching participants with diverse insights and perspectives.
Recruitment

Vincent (2018), an experienced trans-gender researcher, provided an exceptionally helpful set of guidelines for recruiting trans-gender participants. Following Vincent’s recommendation that researchers should demonstrate sensitivity and build rapport by knowing trans-history, I sought to further develop my knowledge in this area with readings such as C. Riley Snorton’s (2017) *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* and Susan Stryker’s (2017) *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*. In addition, Vincent asserted that researchers should be prepared to demonstrate transparency about the purpose of the research, who the research is for, who will benefit from the research, how the research process will be conducted, and how the findings will be used. While it should be understood as a standard component of ethical research practices, it bears repeating that being intentionally forthcoming in the recruitment process is essential to building trust with potential participants because it demonstrates recognition of the burden of emotional and psychological labor that is being asked of potential participants.

Another way to build rapport and demonstrate sensitivity is to consciously navigate the complexities of operationalizing trans-affirming language as well as recognizing the heightened importance of self-determined language for trans-gender people. When dealing with the significance of pronouns, Vincent suggested that when engaging in introductions, rather than using hedging language about ‘preference,’ the researcher can demonstrate respect of identity ownership by directly stating what their pronoun(s) are and asking for those of the participant. Taking Vincent’s advice, I included a question about pronouns in my demographics survey (Appendix A), and then confirmed those pronouns with each participant during the very earliest stages of every interview. Recognizing how this simple but effective strategy could re-center the
social context for subsequent interactions, I consciously avoided implications of ‘preference’ when speaking about gender identity with participants.

The one recommendation that presented some challenges to protecting participant confidentiality was Vincent’s assertion that trans-gender participants should be given the freedom to determine whether they wish to remain confidential or be identifiable in the data because of the importance of determining one’s own identity. Although I see the author’s point, safety and privacy was of utmost importance in not only gaining IRB approval for my work but in also protecting my participants. In lieu of complete agency, I compromised by asking my participants to select their own pseudonyms. In a few cases, my participants insisted that they had no concerns about potential exposure, but I gently pushed for them to use an initial or nickname so that the work would not compromise them in some unforeseen manner. All were amenable to that arrangement. Finally, Vincent cautioned that researchers must be respectful of spaces that have been explicitly constructed by and for trans-gender people. For this research, I practiced this precaution by expressly asking site or group administrators for permission to recruit for this research on their private pages and listservs. In each case, the administrator asked a variety of probing questions about the focus and purpose of the research as well as who was intended to benefit from this work. In all cases, I answered transparently and provided any additional information that was requested. Fortunately, only one group administrator expressly banned research recruitment on their page, and I thanked them for their consideration and respected their restrictions.

After gaining HSIRB approval for this research and my recruitment ‘ad’ that included a scannable QR code (Appendix C), I immediately disseminated the ‘ad’ to Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and my broad social network of professional and personal contacts. I also gained
permission from site administrators to post on several private forums and listservs, dedicated to pro-LGBTQ+ and more specifically, pro-trans content (Dispenza et al., 2012; McKinney, 2008; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016; Rood et al., 2017). At a localized level, I also asked my liaisons with our local pro-LGBTQ+ advocacy organization to share this information with their clients, and they graciously agreed. The combination of using a snowball approach to tap into the wide array of social networks of my colleagues, acquaintances, and former trans-gender students in conjunction with purposeful sampling of trans-gender folx from under-represented groups yielded a relatively diverse sample of 34 people. In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, my participants were also geographically diverse, representing every time zone in the contiguous United States.

Response to the recruitment material was immediate, and requests for access to the demographics survey began coming in within an hour of posting the recruitment material online. In addition to requests for access to the online demographics survey (Appendix A), I also fielded questions from people who were interested in participating but did not fall within the initially proposed age range of 18-34 years. Volunteers contended that trans-gender people often don’t transition until they are older than 34 because of financial and social constraints and that older trans-gender people are often excluded from research. I also received inquiries from people who were genderqueer, nonbinary, or gender fluid, wondering if they would be eligible to participate. In addition, I quickly realized that I would likely exceed the maximum number of approved participants based on the initial level of interest. Because I was fully focused on providing a platform for under-represented experiences and voices, I was concerned about excluding people who believed they had important experiences to share in relation to the questions I was trying to answer with this work. Although I was not certain how all these developments might impact this
research, I felt it was important to remain open to what they might add to my findings. In response to these developments, I contacted my advisor early in the recruitment process to discuss my concerns and get approval to raise the age limit to 60 years, raise the maximum number to 35 participants, and expand the language regarding gender identity. Once approval was granted, I submitted a revision for IRB approval, and it was subsequently granted.

Based upon previous challenges of accessing a diverse array of participants, I had the reasonable expectation that my snowball sampling would likely result in responses from a predominantly white cross-section of trans-gender folx. With that in mind, while the snowball sampling was in process, I purposefully reached out to several trans-gender people of color that I had already established communication with through Instagram in the months leading up to this point. I was able to successfully recruit one Black trans-woman and two Black trans-men in this manner. While I had reached out to several more trans-women of color, they were understandably guarded and indicated they were engaging in intensive self-care in the wake of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the racial tensions that had boiled over in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in St. Louis, MO. In all cases, they were exceptionally gracious and said that they would like to work with me in any future work I might conduct. I thanked them for their time and continued to manage the logistics of fielding inquiries, providing access to the online Qualtrics demographic survey, and scheduling participants for interviews.

**Demographic Data**

Because of the dearth of research focused on illuminating the experiences of trans-gender people of color, I used my demographic survey as a tool to ensure that these voices were being included as I recruited my sample of participants. In Table 1, I have included the data regarding my participants’ pseudonyms, self-described gender identities, pronouns, racial/ethnic identity,
as well as age. I was able to successfully recruit 10 participants who were members of diverse racial and ethnic groups. Six participants, representing 18% of my sample described themselves as Black, African American, or Biracial. Two participants described themselves as Asian/Filipino, representing 6% of the sample. One participant described himself as Cherokee/Lakota/Scotch, representing 3% of the sample, and one participant described themselves as Columbian/Latinx, representing 3% of the sample. The remainder of the sample, 24 participants, described themselves as White or Caucasian and represented the other 70% of the sample. While the age range for my participants spanned from the age of 21-55 years of age, 19 were between the ages of 21-29 years. Nine of my participants were in their 30s, 3 in their 40s, and 3 in their 50s. Although I began my recruitment process with a tighter window of 18-34, I believe that the participants between the ages of 35-55 years brought some interesting perspectives to this work and also highlighted the fact that many trans-folx do not transition until later in life or sometimes not at all, specifically because of concerns about social and economic stability.

Table 1

Participants’ Gender, Racial, Ethnic Identity, and Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIS</td>
<td>Male/nonbinary</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White (Italian)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aod</td>
<td>Trans-man/2-spirit</td>
<td>any and all, respectfully</td>
<td>Cherokee/Lakota/Scotch</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ares Nero</td>
<td>Trans-man</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>Caucasian/African American</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnell</td>
<td>Trans-man</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>Trans-gender, bi-gender, nonbinary</td>
<td>she/her/they/them</td>
<td>Caucasian (English/German)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Trans-woman</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>White (German/Irish)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colt</td>
<td>Trans-man</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crow</td>
<td>Trans-male - FtM</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td>Pronouns</td>
<td>Racial/Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>Trans-gender man</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>MtF – Trans-gender</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>White (English/Irish/American Indian)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>Nonbinary trans-masculine</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliott</td>
<td>Trans-man/nonbinary</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>Biracial – Black/White</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Nonbinary trans-man</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>White (Ashkenazi Jewish)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gene</td>
<td>Genderqueer, gender nonconforming, AFAB</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harper</td>
<td>Nonbinary/cross-dresser</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Trans-woman</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>Trans-woman</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Trans-gender male</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady in Pink</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Caucasian (Spanish, Navajo, German)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Trans-gender man</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxwell</td>
<td>Trans-masculine</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White (Caucasian/American)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Trans-gender FtM</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mish</td>
<td>Trans-woman of color</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>African American/Nigerian</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrow</td>
<td>Trans-sexual FtM-always male</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moshe</td>
<td>Trans-man</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>Black/Ashkenazi/non-Hispanic</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.</td>
<td>Trans-masculine genderqueer</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>White (Italian)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nin</td>
<td>Trans-man</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>Asian/ Filipino</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Gender fluid/nonbinary</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.</td>
<td>Nonbinary/gender rebel</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>Trans-woman</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>White (Dutch)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>White/Caucasian/Jewish</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Trans-masculine</td>
<td>he/they</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Trans-woman</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarrow</td>
<td>Trans-masculine/Nonbinary</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>Columbian/Latinx</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I have also included the demographic data in Table 2 to provide context for the discussion of precarity that I develop in Chapter 5. This information includes the level of education attained by each participant as well as their employment status, occupation, industry/field of work, as well as their income levels. The demographic data has been organized first by the participants’ educational level, then by employment status, and finally their income range. The formal and informal income represents the participants’ annual net income from sources. In the survey, formal was defined as coming from an employer who deducts payroll taxes, and informal was defined as coming from side jobs or helping friends. As a precautionary measure, I have chosen not to include my participants’ pseudonyms in this table to limit the likelihood that they might be more easily identified by connecting their education and occupation demographic information to their true identities.

Table 2

*Participants’ Education, Occupation, and Income*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Industry/Field</th>
<th>Income from Formal Sources*</th>
<th>Income from Informal Sources*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>some high school</td>
<td>not currently employed</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completed high school</td>
<td>part-time, seeking opportunities</td>
<td>grocery clerk</td>
<td>retail</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completed high school</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>cosmetics consultant/caregiver</td>
<td>healthcare</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completed high school</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>cultural artist</td>
<td>art/art history</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completed high school</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>factory floor worker</td>
<td>automotive/farm equipment</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Industry/Field</th>
<th>Income from Formal Sources*</th>
<th>Income from Informal Sources*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>completed high school</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>machinist apprentice</td>
<td>manufacturing</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>seeking opportunities/ not currently employed</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>seeking opportunities</td>
<td>full-time college student</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>not currently employed</td>
<td>full-time college student</td>
<td>natural resources/ forestry</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>seeking opportunities/ not currently employed</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>technology/software development</td>
<td>$50,000-$100,000</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>salesclerk</td>
<td>retail sales</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>cashier</td>
<td>retail</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>construction inspection</td>
<td>civil engineering/construction</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>quality inspection</td>
<td>automotive</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>kennel worker</td>
<td>animal care</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>cook/tarot reader/metaphysical services/lightworker</td>
<td>Hospitality/culinary arts/spirituality</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>administrative aid</td>
<td>public library</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>hospital storeroom clerk</td>
<td>medical and warehouse work</td>
<td>$50,000-$100,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>associate’s degree</td>
<td>not currently employed</td>
<td>stay at home mom</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>associate’s degree</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>sales associate</td>
<td>retail</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td>Employment Status</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Industry/Field</td>
<td>Income from Formal Sources*</td>
<td>Income from Informal Sources*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>associate’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>medical coder/biller</td>
<td>healthcare</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>seeking opportunities/ not currently employed</td>
<td>Freelance character designer</td>
<td>animation industry</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>not currently employed</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>theater/retail</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>seeking opportunities</td>
<td>food delivery</td>
<td>Director of Trans Queens of Color, nonprofit</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>clinical researcher/COVID response worker</td>
<td>healthcare</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>city planner</td>
<td>local government</td>
<td>$50,000-$100,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>high school teacher</td>
<td>education</td>
<td>$50,000-$100,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>IT support</td>
<td>aviation</td>
<td>$50,000-$100,000</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s degree</td>
<td>seeking opportunities/ not currently employed</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>assistive technology</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s degree</td>
<td>seeking opportunities/ not currently employed</td>
<td>applying as a mental health therapist</td>
<td>mental health</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>sex worker</td>
<td>sex work</td>
<td>$25,001-$50,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>mental health/social worker</td>
<td>mental health</td>
<td>$50,000-$100,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>licensed professional counselor</td>
<td>behavioral health</td>
<td>$50,000-$100,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s degree</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>public health</td>
<td>$100,000-$200,000</td>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based upon the data in Table 2, all but one (2.9%) of the participants completed their high school education. Five (14.7%) participants indicated that their highest level of education completed was finishing high school, twelve (35.3%) had completed some college course work, and three (8.8%) had earned their associate’s degrees. In addition, seven (20.6%) participants had acquired a bachelor’s degree, and the remaining six (17.6%) held their master’s degrees. It should be noted that the prevalence of being unemployed or employed part time was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lock-downs and closures that were still in place throughout the entirety of my data collection process. Although the body of literature indicated that a large proportion of trans-gender and gender nonconforming people work in the service sector, my participants’ occupations and employment sector data suggests that in addition to service work, they have also found additional opportunities that may be mediated by educational attainment.

When considering their annual net income from formal sources, 15 (44.2%) of my participants earned less than $25,000. Eight (23.5%) of them earned $25,001-$50,000, seven (20.6%) of them earned $50,001-$100,000, and one earned $100,000-$200,000. Given that so many of the participants earned less than $25,000 from formal employment, it is not surprising that 22 (64.7%) of them engaged in informal economies for additional income. Of those, 20 (58.8%) earned less than $25,000 in this way, and two earned $25,001-$50,000. According to the Social Security Administration, the average annual net income in the United States in 2019 was $51,916.27. Based upon that statistic, at least 20 (58.8%) of my participants fell below that income level, accounting for both formal and informal sources of income. While this does not suggest that each of these participants were living in poverty, it does provide foundational insights for the discussion of economic instability experienced by many of the participants.
Methods – Decidedly Qualitative

As previously mentioned, because my work focused on the experiences of a severely marginalized population, I chose to conduct this research using an intersectional theoretical framework paired with a transfeminist emancipatory methodology. These choices paired with my research questions called for the use of qualitative methods. As noted, the empirical literature and notable scholars in this field contend that the data available about trans-gender people’s experiences with marginalization, precarity, and representation is limited. The annual National Institute of Health Survey (NIHS) and the 2016 U.S. Transgender Survey have quantified the fact that trans-gender and gender nonconforming individuals experience proportionately higher levels of intersectional marginalization than other segments of the LGBTQ+ community as well as the population at large.

These rare quantitative findings are an extremely important starting point, but to move beyond confirming that marginalization exists, social science must endeavor to determine how and why these varied forms of marginalization are constructed through qualitative inquiry. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) have aptly observed, “the province of qualitative research, accordingly, is the world of lived experience for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture” (p. 2). The qualitative findings discussed in Chapter 2 also provide promising guidance in the importance of using qualitative methods. As Creswell and Poth (2018) aptly observed, “we conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored […] when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize power relationships” (p. 45). Qualitative methods are inherently designed to focus on research participants’ diverse perspectives and meanings.
While qualitative researchers do not focus their attention on large scale, quantifying research endeavors, we are nonetheless building a body of knowledge about the lived daily experiences of a diverse array of individuals as they engage with various contexts and institutions within society. By engaging reflexively and ethically in well-designed research, generating credible findings, and then engaging in transparent reporting practices, qualitative researchers not only introduce knowledges that had been previously under-represented but also provide opportunities for the development of further knowledge. Leavy and Harris (2019) contended that by sharing research findings, particularly within academic communities, we “build a repository of knowledge” about important topics (p. 125). While qualitative researchers are not concerned about generalizability, sharing our findings within and outside of our respective research communities can build the body of knowledge to expose some of the more insidious processes that construct our daily lives in profound ways.

While quantitative methods can deductively confirm the existence and magnitude of phenomena, qualitative methods make the distinctive contribution of allowing us to inductively study processes, facilitating our ability to answer the questions of how and why phenomena occur (Miles et al., 2014; Reinharz, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). It is the inductive nature of this work that points to the significant contribution of developing substantive theories that are firmly rooted in the data. While quantitative methods are practiced under the presumption that the researcher already possesses knowledge of the problem as well as the appropriate categories of data analysis to confirm existing theories, qualitative methods are the most opportune approach for researchers to explore new and under-studied phenomena through people’s experiences, accessing new knowledge and formulating new theories (Charmaz, 2006/2014; Reinharz, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Soss, 2006). Finally, qualitative methods that focus on the lived
experiences of different people as they navigate in their world have opened an empirical space for the possibility of studying previously inaccessible knowledges as well as the existence of multiple truths and multiple realities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Reinharz, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rather than silencing differences or exceptions in the data to arrive at unified conclusions, Hesse-Biber (2007) and Reinharz (1992) suggested that differences should be fully explored and reported to accurately depict the diversity of experience and meaning.

**Data Collection**

Interviewing has long been a staple in the methods toolbox of social scientific research. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) contend that interviews are used in most qualitative research because they allow researchers to gain insights into people’s detailed, subjective knowledge and interpretations that would otherwise be inaccessible by other methods of data collection. There are however, based upon one’s epistemological standpoint, an array of methodological approaches to implementing this method. Soss (2006) observed that “the interpretive/positivist distinction, in this usage, is a matter of practice rather than identity or worldview. It is a matter of what we assume, require, and do for the sake of a particular inquiry rather than an aspect of who we are or a fixed description of what we believe in general” (p. 131). Rubin and Rubin (2012) and Hesse-Biber (2007) also remind us that the decision of what type of interviews to conduct, whether they be highly structured and controlled or unstructured and open-ended, should be based on our research goals as well as our theoretical and epistemological standpoint. Considering my feminist and emancipatory stance as well as the phenomenological nature of research goals, I focus my discussion on the distinct features and practices associated with an interpretive, responsive form of in-depth interviewing. As Seidman (2013) so astutely asserted,
“at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9).

This approach to interviewing generally employs a semi-structured or unstructured interview protocol in which the interviewer limits her/his/their own level of control of the process by posing a limited number of open-ended questions. This can empower interview participants to lead the flow of the interview, putting their knowledge, voices, and experiences at the center of the inquiry, as well as providing opportunities for clarification and elaboration (Charmaz, 2006/2014; Reinharz, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Soss, 2006). I used a semi-structured interview protocol to guide discussions toward my research questions while still allowing for a flexible form of exchange. What distinguishes in-depth interviewing from other methods is that it is often one of the most effective means for researchers to delve deeply into specific aspects of an individual’s lived experience, particularly when trying to gain access to subjugated knowledges of marginalized groups (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

In-depth interviewing, perhaps more than any other method of data collection, facilitates an exceptional level of flexibility in acquiring the participants’ knowledge, through a process of clarification, responsiveness, and elaboration. “The essence of responsive interviewing is picking people to talk to who are knowledgeable, listening to what they have to say, and asking new questions based on the answers they provide” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 5). This methodological approach to interviewing tends to be highly inductive, iterative, and dialectical as most practitioners engage in a cyclic and responsive process of data collection, transcription, memo writing, verification, clarification, coding, purposeful question revision, and information selection (Charmaz, 2006/2014; Hesse-Biber, 2007, Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Soss, 2006). This approach to interviewing is also closely aligned with a grounded theory approach to inductive

Because this method of data collection is inherently a collaborative endeavor, researchers should make a concerted effort to utilize language that is familiar to their participants, both in the data collection as well as interpretive phases of the process (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Reinharz, 1992; Soss, 2006). Engaging in skilled and intensive listening is essential for both honoring the experiences of the participants as well as accessing the richest data (Charmaz, 2006/2014; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Reinharz, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Siedman, 2013; Soss, 2006). Most interviewers will record the interviews and transcribe them verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants’ knowledge and experiences in their own words, while simultaneously engaging in a process of memoing, carefully documenting their process, interpretations, observations, learning, and methodological decisions (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Siedman, 2013). In this way, the researcher may work to maintain perspective and engage in an ongoing exercise of reflexivity to be mindful of the inherent complexity of accounting for her/his/their own subjectivity and staying focused on the participant-centered research goals.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I primarily conducted my data collection remotely, for the safety of my participants as well as my own. Rood et al. (2017) found that using audio and video technology to conduct interviews was also an effective way to limit the burdens placed upon participants, allowing them to engage with the research process from the comfort of their homes or another safe location. To ensure access for all, I did, however, request and receive permission for exceptions in case a participant preferred in-person interviewing. As previously indicated, potential participants first engaged with the demographic survey (Appendix A) and encountered the IRB-approved informed consent verbiage. Potential participants were required
to read and agree to continued participation before any data was subsequently collected. Once consent had been granted, the survey consisted of a combination of closed- and open-ended questions to facilitate ease in answering and elaborating when appropriate.

For transparency, participants were also notified of the nominal thank-you gift of a $15 gift card, from the vendor of their choice, which they received shortly after their interviews were completed. To address the possibility that participants might feel compelled to participate beyond their comfort threshold out of financial need, an assurance was provided that their time and emotional labor would still be valued and if an individual chose to conclude the interview early, a gift card in the amount of $10 would have been provided. It should be noted that none of the participants who began an interview chose to end their interview before all the questions had been discussed.

To ensure cultural sensitivity and competence, I worked with a trans-gender scholar to refine my survey questions. It was anticipated that the demographic information would be instrumental in several ways. First, it was expected to provide important background information that might be helpful in establishing initial rapport during the interview process. It was also expected that the information could prove valuable for clarifying perceived inconsistencies, in situations when a participant might share something during the interview that may not seem to align with what is shared in the survey. In addition, it was hoped that notable differences in the participants’ experiences and narratives might be related to their respective backgrounds and social locations. To ensure participants’ privacy, the demographic data has been protected within a password protected file, stored on an exterior digital storage drive to prevent the possibility of pairing the information with subsequent interview transcripts.
Over the course of six weeks, I had 42 potential participants complete the demographics survey and consent to participating in the research. Once a potential participant granted consent, I contacted each via their preferred method of email, text, or phone call to schedule an interview time. Once a time and date were agreed upon, I sent a confirmation and password protected link to access the interview for the agreed upon time. To best prepare for these interviews and ensure cultural sensitivity and competence in my interview protocol, I consulted with members of the trans-gender community as well as several colleagues with experience in this field (Johnson, 2015). Ultimately, I was able to successfully schedule and conduct 34 interviews that averaged approximately 90 minutes, with a few lasting little more than one hour to as much as three hours, with one participant requesting a follow up discussion about something that she had thought of after the initial interview. In the cases of those individuals who initially expressed interest in participating and then subsequently decided not to participate, I made several attempts to establish contact and exercise flexibility, but was unable to secure those interviews.

Of the 34 participants interviewed, all but two agreed to use WebEx, the IRB approved digital platform for this work. Jasmine and Riley, a local couple, preferred an in-person interview and requested that they do the interview together. Although their request was unusual and required some logistical planning because of the pandemic, I agreed to meet with them at a local park, to conduct the interview in a safe, socially-distanced manner. To be respectful of participants’ lives and stories, I made every effort to accommodate their schedules and provide as much time as they needed to share their experiences. This entailed making various adjustments for time-zone and limited the number of interviews that I would schedule on any given day. From later July through mid-September of 2020, I conducted and recorded the 34 interviews. While the pace was overwhelming at times, I did not want to jeopardize the
momentum and level of trust that my participants were granting me in this process. No matter how tiring, it was admittedly energizing to hear every story and I was often in awe of the graciousness of every participant I spoke with.

The interview process always began with a bit of “meet and greet” dialogue and a reiteration of the purpose of the work as well as reminder that their participation was completely voluntary and that my utmost concerns was maintaining their confidentiality. Before posing any interview questions, verbal consent was granted by each participant, and I provided details about the interview being recorded, transcribed, protected, and ultimately destroyed. I also confirmed each participant’s pronouns and pseudonym. In several cases, I noticed that they had given their actual name, and I reiterated my concern for protecting their privacy and asked if they wished to make any changes. While several participants were quite comfortable with having their names associated with the research, I pursued this a bit further in hopes of getting them to at least agree to a nickname or initial, and they agreed to that compromise.

Once those preliminary measures were settled, I provided a general overview of the planned direction and scope that the interview would likely take, and I assured each participant that I wanted their knowledge and experiences to be at the center of our discussion. I did this by telling them that I planned to give them the time and space to share their experiences while I listened. I also told each participant that I realized that revisiting these experiences could cause emotional responses and if they needed to pause or stop at any time I understood and did not want them to feel pressured. Initial rapport in place, I then asked participants to define the concept of a ‘trans-gender’ identity. In cases when a participant had additional identity labels, I asked them to define those labels and consider if and how they differentiated their own identity
labels from the ‘trans-gender’ identity. Having established those foundational definitions, we then moved through the central components of the interview.

My semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) was designed to seek understanding and insights that would answer the primary research question as well as the four sub-questions. This interview protocol consisted of phenomenologically focused questions designed to provide guidance for the direction of the interviews while encouraging participants to share in-depth accounts of their experiences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Reinharz, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Siedman, 2013). On a few occasions, I had participants who became emotional when recalling times they had been marginalized or found their psychological or physical safety threatened. In response, I focused on being empathetic and asked if they needed a moment and reiterating how deeply I appreciated their willingness to share such difficult experiences. In every case, my participants chose to continue their interview despite what they were feeling.

During the interview process, I recorded the discussion, engaged in intensive listening, and tried to exercise reflexivity by briefly making note of my thoughts or reactions during the process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Siedman, 2013). Recognizing the risk of shifting the focus to indulge in my own impressions and concerns rather than those of my participants during this process, intensive listening and empathy were my top priorities. As each interview progressed, I would verify my impressions with my participants by asking clarifying questions and framing my understanding with phrases such as:

“‘What I think I hear you saying is….., but it is not my place to speak for you so can you say more?”

“I do not wish to speak for you, so can you tell me more about…..”

“I cannot speak to your experience, so can you explain your understanding of….”

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As a trained educator, I knew it was critical to discipline myself not to speak for my participants and to allow them to elaborate and guide the discussion as much as was feasible, given the time constraints and my research goals.

To further empower my participants and respect their time, I set a timer at the beginning of the interview process and made them aware that I would notify them when the timer had expired. At which time, I asked them if they would be willing to continue. In all cases, the participants wished to continue through the remaining questions. Near the end of the interview protocol in the context of navigating distorted representations about trans* identities, I asked participants to tell me how they would like to see these identities represented and the messaging that they felt would be constructive in confronting the way that mainstream society treats them. As my participants formulated these ideas, I felt excited by what I would characterize as their resilience and hope. In drawing the interview process to a close, I then asked each participant if there was anything else that they wanted to share that they felt was important for me to know and was not addressed in previous questions. This practice was intended to align with Sandoval’s (2000) and Schostak and Schostak’s (2008) concept of creating democracy within the research process. Empowering my participants to control the flow of the interview and making a space for their diverse knowledges provided the opportunity for multiple truths to be equally valuable and valid. I also anticipated that this would create a space for potential recommendations for further research as well as possible solutions to some of the issues raised in the context of this study.

At the conclusion of the interview process, I also offered additional informational resources to each participant as it seemed appropriate, based upon what they shared with me. In many cases, participants declined the offer, but I was able to provide a range of information and support to several participants. In a few cases, the assistance was in the form of links and
information from the Trans Lifeline organization about microgrants to assist with the expenses of name changes and hormone therapy among other things. This advocacy group also offers a peer supported national hotline that was of interest. In a few other cases, I was able to offer more targeted assistance by researching resources and support networks in the participants’ specific geographic location. This primarily tended to be focused on access to affordable mental health care. For one participant, the assistance involved getting information about the educational opportunities in his area along with access to potential funding. Ultimately, I was glad to provide some form of assistance to nine of my participants. Once I had addressed the necessary closing protocols for the interview process, I confirmed where I should be sending their gift card, reiterated the measures I would be taking to protect their confidentiality, and thanked them for speaking with me. Once the interview was concluded, I ensured that the recording was securely stored as a password protected files on a separate exterior digital drive from the demographic survey data.

**Ethical Considerations**

Because most qualitative methods directly involve interactions between the researcher and the ‘researched,’ there are some significant ethical concerns that arise and must be addressed effectively. In the true interest of putting our participants’ experiences and knowledge at the center of our work, it is our utmost responsibility that we do no harm. That harm can take numerous forms that may predominantly avoided if we are vigilant in our practice. One of the worst ethical concerns is the pervasive power imbalance that exists between the researcher and her participant. Siedman (2013) observed “at a deeper level, there is a more basic question of research for whom, by whom, and to what end […] It is a constant struggle to make the research
process equitable, especially in the United States where a good deal of our social structure is inequitable” (p. 12).

As a socially-privileged researcher who is interested in people’s experiences relevant to social justice issues, it is critical that I acknowledge that many of the people that I wanted to engage in my research were inherently at some form of social or economic disadvantage to my own positionality. There are several ways that the researcher can actively work toward a more equitable and respectful dynamic that honors their participants’ importance to the research. Hesse-Biber (2007), Leavy and Harris (2019), and Reinharz (1992) all contended that we must attend to our relational responsibilities for building and maintaining rapport by demonstrating cultural sensitivity and considering what about the research makes it worthwhile for participants.

The researcher must also place a premium on her/ his/ their participants’ confidentiality. Siedman (2013) suggested that the research dynamic can be made more equitable by planning the time and location of interviews to intentionally recognize the complexity of our participants’ lives. We can also preemptively convey, in clear terms, how the data will be collected, analyzed, interpreted, and shared before gaining their consent to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leavy & Harris, 2019; Miles et al., 2014). Unfortunately, the risk of exploitation in this work can be exceptionally high and not entirely avoidable. Leavy and Harris (2019) observed that feminist researchers often engage in advocacy to ‘compensate’ for engaging in potential deceit or intrusion in the process of the research. When the research process has ended, the researcher should exercise empathy and sensitivity when representing her participants, and the findings should be shared with the participants (Leavy & Harris, 2019). Whenever possible the researcher should not only provide participants the opportunity to offer feedback and reflection, but also
demonstrate her gratitude for their investment of time (Leavy & Harris, 2019; Reinharz, 1992; Siedman, 2013).

Cognizant of the various ethics concerns in working so closely with members of a significantly marginalized group, I worked to address the power inequality in several ways (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Leavy & Harris, 2019, Reinharz ,1992; Siedman, 2013). As indicated above, I have ensured that participants’ voices are authentically present in my findings whenever possible. Close adherence to Vincent’s (2018) previous recommendations about how to ethically conduct research with trans-gender participants was a priority in this work. I also worked to exercise reflexivity in my reporting by noting my own observations to ensure that my trans-gender participants’ experiences are at the center of my findings. When arranging interviews, I made every effort to schedule these meetings at times that were most advantageous for my participants, to honor their investment in the research. While I have not yet provided an opportunity for feedback and reflection, I anticipate that I will undertake further work with my participants to provide those opportunities in the future. I also intend to share these findings with any of the participants who expressed an interest in receiving them. Most importantly, I have done everything in my power to do no harm and avoid putting the safety and well-being of my participants at any risk.

**Data Analysis**  

For data analysis, I had initially planned to follow a constructed grounded theory approach and engage in data collection and analysis simultaneously and iteratively. This would have required immediate transcription of each recorded interview so that the process of coding might serve to inform additional sampling or question formulation (Charmaz, 2006/2014; Miles et al., 2014; Siedman, 2013). Due to the sheer volume of interviews and time constraints that
quickly emerged during my recruitment, I was forced to alter my approach to the data. Immediate transcription was not possible, so rather than a formal round of coding, I utilized a preliminary memoing approach during and immediately after interviews and made slight adjustments to the wording of my questions based upon the experiences that my initial interviews were bringing to light. As the importance of certain ideas or experiences emerged from participants, I made note of patterns that seemed to be occurring within particular segments of the sample, and when possible, prioritized recruiting and interviewing participants that I suspected would most likely develop those themes further. This process continued until all my interviews were completed.

My first formal round of coding included transcripts from every participant and consisted of a systematic approach of initial coding, axial coding, and memoing (Charmaz, 2006/2014; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). In my initial coding phase of this round, I combined structural coding and in-vivo coding. Structural coding allowed me to identify chunks of text within each transcript that coincided with my research questions, and in-vivo coding involved taking the actual words of my participants to assign a brief descriptor to chunks of the interview data. In this way, I was able to capture the language that my participants were using to characterize their understanding and experiences with marginalization, precarity, and representation as well as the strategies they engage in to make sense of and navigate those experiences (Saldaña, 2016). I also looked for aspects of social context that impacted their experiences, understanding, and actions. Simultaneously, I created memos about emergent patterns that I observed to inform the process of axial coding in my secondary phase of analysis. While some of the empirical literature suggested that an initial set of codes should be created using just a few interview transcripts and then coding the remainder with that set of codes, this practice was utilized with larger samples
than I worked with (Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock et al., 2017). While I am sure that this could have streamlined the initial coding process, I was concerned that this approach would lead to premature consolidation of ideas. Instead, I remained in the initial coding phase until all transcripts had been coded.

Once I had identified sections of text in the interview transcripts to develop my initial codes, I acquired access to the MAXQDA 2020 platform to organize and manage the large amount of data generated from the interviews. Using my initial codes and memos, I commenced the process of constructing axial codes to express more abstract and encompassing ideas regarding experiences, understandings, and navigation of marginalization, precarity, and representation. In addition, codes concerned with the implications of ‘passing,’ masculinity, and white supremacy emerged. During this round of data analysis, transcripts from all the participants were analyzed together to determine commonalities across their experiences, regardless of their particular gender identities. Once this first data analysis cycle was completed, I was able to develop several themes related to each of the axial codes that emerged. While these axial codes were compelling, I anticipated that they would not be sufficient to address my concerns about intersectionality creating a space for under-represented experiences. Out of concern for the credibility and verifiability of my findings, my research design included a second round of data analysis and coding. As I progressed through the first analysis, I determined that to maintain my focus on the essential significance of studying my participants through the lens of intersectionality, the second analysis should be conducted by creating cohorts of participants, based upon intersectional differences, and coding those cohorts separately to determine if there were notable differences in experience, understanding, and navigation of marginalization,
Concerns about ‘Validity’ and ‘Reliability’

While positivistic conceptions of reliability and validity often emerge in discussions of research quality, they are more suitable for quantitative studies, conducted under those epistemological assumptions. In contrast, researchers who work within other, more interpretive paradigms merit evaluative standards that align more properly with the fundamental aspects of qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). While qualitative researchers have a variety of descriptors for this purpose, most are focused on the quality or strength of the data as well as the accuracy or authenticity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). An essential aspect of meeting these evaluative standards is qualitative researchers’ emphasis on consistency, clarity, and transparency throughout their entire research process. The conscientious exercise of reflexivity regarding researcher subjectivity is paramount in accounting for any potential distortion that might be attributed to the research interaction. In the context of in-depth interviews, Reinharz (1992) suggests that the interviewer build ‘reality’ checks into the process to give participants an opportunity to reflect on what they have said. I put this technique into practice by building brief pauses into my interview process that allowed me to ask clarifying questions and check my understanding with my participants’ meaning. It provided an opportunity for my participants to consider what they had said and served as a ‘check’ of my interpretations.

More broadly, there are several key strategies that qualitative researchers may use throughout their research process to ensure the strength and quality of their data. Researchers can clearly and explicitly document the entire research process, accounting for subjectivity and risk
for potential bias, distortion, and limitations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2015; Siedman, 2013). As previously indicated, I engaged in a consistent process of reflexivity and assessed my practices throughout my data collection and analysis to expose any potential influence that my subjectivity might have had on my interpretations. This often took the form of re-checking my abstract themes against multiple examples taken directly from interview transcripts and being mindful of my ability to support language that might be perceived as ‘loaded’ if not substantiated with verbatim participant responses.

To ensure the strength of qualitative data, Miles et al. (2014) contended that the researcher should focus on gathering information on ordinary experiences and phenomena that occur in authentic settings. The emphasis on in-depth, highly detailed description also has an enhanced likelihood of exposing the complexity of the phenomena being studied and making findings believable to the reader (Miles et al., 2014). Furthermore, Miles et al. asserted that because qualitative methods focus on everyday lived experiences of individuals, the data generated is inherently well-suited for exposing how people make meaning of the world in which they live. Miles et al.’s assertions certainly affirm my methodological choices to take a phenomenological approach to this work and focus on daily experiences that have significant and meaningful impact on the lives of my participants. The inherent complexity of how different trans-gender people encounter marginalization, precarity, and representation in their lives can only authentically be described by those who are living these experiences.

Once quality data has been collected, analysis and interpretation are two stages of the process in which qualitative researchers can engage in an intensive process of checking and verifying their coding, themes, and interpretations. One means of verification is for the researcher to clarify understandings as well as share interpretations with participants to
determine if there are any gaps in understanding (Rubin & Rubin, 2014; Siedman, 2013). As previously indicated, my decision to clarify my understanding and observations during each interview allowed for gaps to be identified and discussed. As previously discussed, many qualitative researchers follow a protocol based upon some form of a grounded theory approach to data analysis. While the exact process may vary between researchers, the process often entails an inductive regime of initial coding, code cross-checking across data sources as well as coders, consensus building discussions, axial coding, categorizing, and theming of the data (Charmaz, 2006/2014; Miles et al., 2014). Because the qualitative researcher’s interpretations of their data are essentially translations, no matter how meticulously arrived at, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) contended that it is imperative for researchers to exercise absolute transparency in all aspects of their work. Having considered an array of concerns that a qualitative researcher must attend to in the interest of ensuring the quality and credibility of their findings, I now consider how my research can add to empirical knowledge by ensuring consistency, clarity, and transparency.

Admittedly, I did not have the benefit of a full research team to facilitate a process of cross-verification and clarification of codes and interpretations as well as consensus building about the meaning of the codes and emergent themes. Thus, I decided that I could best establish consistency in my coding by conducting a second, full coding cycle for my transcripts to compare my first and second analysis findings (Charmaz, 2006/2014; Miles et al., 2014). As I progressed through the first analysis and engaged in an inductive process of sorting and grouping my participants’ experiences, I constructed an extensive series of large outlines to capture, in a structural representation, what my participants’ experiences of marginalization and precarity meant to them as well as how they navigated those experiences. Once I had constructed my axial
codes using this process, I then studied the outlines, axial codes, and lines of data to determine if there were any axial codes that might be consolidated into more robust codes as well as to eliminate any redundancies.

While it appeared that there was some consistency among participants in many areas, I determined that to maintain my focus on the essential significance of studying my participants through the lens of intersectionality and ensure that diverse experiences were not flattened or silenced, my second analysis would be conducted by first creating cohorts of participants, based upon gender identity as well as race and ethnicity, and coding those cohorts separately to determine if there were notable differences between them in experience, understanding, and navigation of marginalization, precarity, and representation across those cohorts. After commencing with category consolidation to isolate the most emergent themes in the data for the second time, I found that while the same axial codes and themes emerged, the participants’ intersectional social identities did seem to have an impact on their experiences with marginalization, precarity, and representation. I discuss those impacts in the context of my findings in Chapters 4 and 5. To further ensure the likelihood that I have high quality data and my findings are credible, I have also made every effort to acknowledge my subjectivity throughout this research process, demonstrated reflexivity by documenting my intellectual and methodological process, and exercising transparency with my participants during the process as well as in the reporting of my findings.

While it is always important to address the question of when it is appropriate to stop collecting data, it can often be a difficult call to make. Many scholars contend that this process is supposed to continue until no further new information is gained from the additional data, and the researcher has met what is characterized as a state of data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967;
Miles et al., 2014). With that said, the concept of data saturation is highly contentious and often leads to problematic findings based on premature foreclosure of ideas (Charmaz, 2006/2014). Instead, many qualitative researchers argue for a threshold of data sufficiency. Siedman (2013) suggests that he has achieved a level of sufficiency in the data when it has “sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in it” (Siedman, 2013, p. 58).

This assertion provides some insight, but I believe the threshold of sufficiency had to be determined in the context of how many participants I was able to include in this study. I was truly fortunate to recruit more participants than I had originally intended, and there were several more volunteers who expressed interest. However, I had to take several factors into account as I determined whether further data from these individuals would likely bring any new or compelling information beyond what I already had. While I am sure that their experiences would have further confirmed the codes and ideas that were emerging at an informal level for me, I had at that point accumulated a significant amount of data about the experiences of White transgender experiences. Thus, sufficiency had likely been reached for that contingent of my sample. My ultimate decision to stop collecting data was guided by my ongoing consultation with my advisor. While I would have liked to have been able to secure interviews with a few more transgender people of color, I believe that I was able to create a depth of representation in the sample that I had not found in my review of the literature in this field.

Given the pervasive and damaging effects of marginalization and precarity that transgender people have already endured, I have taken this work very seriously and view it as critical undertaking on the path to achieving the social justice that these people so dearly deserve. We must understand what their experiences have been from their diverse perspectives rather than
colonizing those experiences through the distorted lens of cis-centric, heteronormativity that has dominated the current body of literature about the lives of trans-gender people (Johnson, 2015; Vincent, 2018). With that said, I recognize that any participation in this type of work could potentially put them at risk for great harm. Having worked with trans-gender adolescents, I am very cognizant of how dangerous their lives can be.

As I have discussed in this chapter, I went to great lengths to protect their confidentiality by solely using pseudonyms, instituting strict password protection protocols for all documentation, storing all data on external digital drives from my work computer, and destroying all digital recordings after transcription. Ultimately, I intend for this research to be a valuable contribution to developing a more authentic understanding of the uniquely difficult social and economic circumstances and dynamics that trans-gender people endure. Silenced and invisible in a large portion of the knowledge we have about marginalization and precarity in the LGBTQ+ community, work like this is important in confronting the social structures that have created and maintained trans-precarity that has negatively impacted the daily lives of more than a million trans-gender people.
CHAPTER 4
TRANS-GENDER UNDERSTANDING OF EXPERIENCES WITH MARGINALIZATION AND PRECARITY

Given the grim findings about overt stigmatization and policies that target trans-gender and gender nonconforming people, as discussed in Chapter 1, research that centers and makes visible the pervasive and insidious level of marginalization and precarity of trans-gender people is critical. As participants have shared, they often face a daily gauntlet of derision, delegitimization, and erasure that most certainly threatens their social and economic stability and at times, even their lives. Considering the gravity of how trans-gender people, particularly those of color, are so profoundly marginalized in society, I used a line of inquiry to authentically capture their situated knowledges and create visibility for their intersectionally complex experiences with marginalization and precarity.

In this chapter, I address potential answers to my primary research question of How do trans-gender people experience, make sense of, and navigate marginalization in their daily lives? Specifically, I focus on the sub-question of How do transgender people’s marginalizing experiences and understanding of those experiences impact their socio-economic stability? I begin by discussing how participants defined various relevant gender identities. Then, detailed findings regarding what they shared about their experiences with marginalization and precarity are presented.
Defining Key Identity Terms

Trans-gender

Because identity is fundamentally a subjective construct, I began each interview by asking participants to provide their definition for the concept of trans-gender. In doing so, this also provided me with the understanding of why so many nonbinary and genderqueer people responded to my recruitment ad. Some participants also provided additional information and elaboration on how to differentiate their respective gender identities, such as transsexual, bi-gender, and genderqueer. I begin with what my participants said about their perspectives on the primary characteristics of having a trans-gender identity. This is not, however, to suggest that everyone agreed upon a standard definition.

One element that the vast majority included in their definition was a sense of discomfort or misalignment between their gender identity and their genitalia and/or chromosomes. In many cases, participants also included the idea of ‘being off” or ‘feeling odd’ in relationship to the gender they had been assigned at birth (Ares Nero, Barnell, Belinda, Betty, Colt, Crow, Darren, Dawn, Elliott, Gene, Jasmine, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Maxwell, Mish, Morrow, Null, Riley, Rose, Ryan, Sally, N., Yarrow). Many referred to being AMAB (assigned male at birth) or AFAB (assigned female at birth). Although not all trans-gender folx are afflicted with dysphoria, most also spoke about their gender dysphoria, which has been defined as:

[T]he feeling of discomfort or distress that might occur in people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth or sex-related physical characteristics [and] is a diagnosis listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a manual published by the American Psychiatric Association to diagnose mental conditions. (Mayo Clinic, n.d., para. 3)

Another characteristic that many participants included in their definitions was the idea of movement or transition (Aod, Betty, Crow, Gene, Harper, Lady in Pink, Luke, Mike, P.). There
were varying ideas of what that change might entail, but all were clear that it required the trans-gender person to actively change something about how they enact gender, whether it be social or medical. Barnell, Jessie, and Nin all used the word “journey” in their definition, while Moshe said that he perceived his trans-gender identity as something that is “transitory” because he once was more easily identifiable as someone in transition, but now he looks like and is perceived to be a male by mainstream society. Furthermore, he views himself as male. In many cases, the words used to define trans-gender were more intentionally widely encompassing, such as “umbrella” (Belinda, E., Gene, Lady in P., Pink, Maxwell, Rose), “all inclusive” (Sally), or “spectrum” (Dawn). Aod, who is both trans-gender and two-spirit, provided some natural imagery to illustrate his perspective by suggesting,

I don’t think about a start-stop point; I think of sunrise and sunset, things that are blended, or I think of smoke. I think of things that are transitioning, like the weasels in the summertime, they’re brown, and the wintertime, they’re white, and there’s this in between when they’re brown and white.

In having the discussion about defining trans-gender, a few participants provided additional elaboration to delineate their respective gender identities. Belinda explained that she/they is AMAB but is specifically bi-gender, “fused male and female.” Although she/they enacts gender more femininely and has taken a feminine name, if Belinda could literally draw a line down the center of her/their body, one side would be masculine and the other feminine. Gabriel described themselves as trans-masculine genderqueer. They explained that for their entire life “gender has been a really complex thing.” Although they were assigned female at birth, they have preferred being more masculine and are perceived by others as male. They have medically transitioned in that direction, but they still feel that part of them is female and “slides in and out of that” (Gabriel). Aod also provided more depth to this definition by differentiating his two-spirit identity from his trans-gender identity. He explained that as a two-spirit, he still
embraces both of his “beings.” Although Aod has engaged in medically transitioning to appear masculine, he does not consider his female gender identity “dead.” He explained that there are many trans-gender people who refer to the “dead name,” and they reject their former identity and all things that were associated with that identity, such as Christmas stockings from childhood and so forth. He said he does not have a “dead name” because his birth name is still a part of him. He likened the two-spirit identity to being a bit closer to the idea of nonbinary, in that way.

**Nonbinary and Genderqueer**

During my recruitment process, I received many responses from potential participants who believed they fit under the trans-gender ‘umbrella,’ but more specifically had adopted the labels of nonbinary or genderqueer at some point as well (AIS, Belinda, E., Elliott, Gabriel, Gene, Harper, N., Null, P., Rose, Yarrow). Because the silencing and erasure of gender nonconforming experiences is a primary concern in this intersectional transfeminist research, I felt it was important to hear these stories to determine how they might enrich the results of this work. In defining the experience of being nonbinary or genderqueer, these participants’ ideas were very similar to how many defined trans-gender. Null said that it feels like an “unresolvable tension with the gender you're assigned at birth.” Similarly, E. said that, for them, they describe it as being, “AFAB, assigned female at birth. I was told, I was a girl, but I've always felt more masculine in my gender identity, but I don't identify as a man.” Yarrow also indicated that they tend to present themselves in a more masculine way with clothing and hairstyle, so although they consider themselves nonbinary, they use the term trans-masculine to help others understand how they are identifying. With that said, Yarrow did not intend to take hormones or the permanent step of surgery at this point.
Harper characterized his masculine persona as “Cave Boy” and his feminine side as “Cave Girl.” He went on to explain how these personas function as visible enactments of a “left brain – right brain split” dividing the more logical or practical domain from the more emotional or empathic domain of Harper’s daily life. Gene also spoke about the idea of being out of step with the gender that they had been assigned at birth, and they felt that genderqueer better captured the fluidity of traversing across gender norms and expectations. Gene, a person of Filipino descent, also spoke about the imperialist undertones of a strict gender binary, and as a form of cultural defiance, they have rejected those societal constraints.

Despite the similarities of concepts and language, an important distinction seems to be that nonbinary and genderqueer folx did not express the desire to divorce themselves entirely from the gender they were assigned at birth. AIS provided some specific clarification, having first viewed himself nonbinary before transitioning to a trans-man. Viewing himself as a bit of a gatekeeper, AIS said that he does not think someone can consider themselves trans-gender unless they have taken formal steps, socially or medically, to move away from the gender assigned at birth. From his perspective, those steps tell the world that you are serious about who you are, so much so that you are willing to take the big risks of being stigmatized to live your truth.

Because this represents some very contentious ground, I have taken the following approach in reporting the resulting data in this and subsequent chapters. As previously indicated, when speaking collectively about participants’ experiences that reflect common themes, I use the abbreviated term trans* to indicate more inclusivity of the spectrum of trans-gender identities, including nonbinary, genderqueer, and bi-gender participants when appropriate (Seelman, 2016; Stryker, 2017; Wagner et al., 2016). Trans* will also be used when participants have used the abbreviated form of the word in their responses. I also interchange the term folx for people
throughout as an inclusive alternative. The word *folx* has become more widely used in the last few years on social media to convey intentional inclusion of all marginalized groups (Lindsay, n.d.). Because this research is expressly concerned with the intersectionally complex nature of marginalization and precarity, I feel it is an important tool to keep my purpose in focus. When reporting findings about the experiences of specific participants who have engaged in social or physical transitioning toward a gender that does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth and that fact is relevant to their experiences, I am using the terms *trans-feminine* and *trans-masculine*. The use of trans-woman or trans-man will only be used if the participants have used this language in talking about themselves or their experiences or if I am speaking to their individual experiences. When there is an inconsistency of experiences between trans-masculine, trans-feminine, nonbinary, and genderqueer participants in a particular area, those results will be reported using these identifiers so that the inconsistencies are made clear.

**Experiences of Marginalization**

Although not every participant was able to provide a definition of what the word marginalization means, once provided with a definition, all indicated they had experienced marginalization connected with their respective gender identity at varying degrees. Of the participants who were able to articulate a definition, the most prevalent language that accompanied their definitions included words such as ‘intentional inequity,’ ‘invalidation,’ and ‘dehumanizing.’ Many also indicated that their first awareness of being marginalized for their gendered behavior occurred at young ages in response to having defied gendered norms in some manner, whether it be behavior, manner of dress, or preferences for activities, perceived to be gendered in some way.
Among the participants who felt comfortable articulating a definition, several spoke in terms of being “othered” (Belinda, Mike) or separated from mainstream society (AIS, Belinda). Several others described their understanding of marginalization having both personal or ‘micro’ and systemic or ‘macro’ levels of oppression (Gene, Luke, Maxwell, Mike, P., Sally). Belinda, Gene, Maxwell, Mike, Rose, and Ryan also included in their definition the ideas of denial of or inequitable access to rights and privileges that are afforded to members of mainstream society, specifically because of one’s social identity, such as being trans-gender. Moshe aptly characterized it as “an intentional type of making sure the fence is always taller and making sure that certain people aren’t looking over it […] An intentional, keeping you out or keeping unaware.” Aod also tied marginalization to the idea of representation in his observation “It’s where you don’t see yourself outside of your own body, you know, like represented.” In essence, if one is not visible, then one is more easily erased or denied. Similarly, Gabriel explained that “marginalized people are so far out of the picture, that they were never in the picture.”

Analysis of the participants’ responses about their experiences and understanding yielded several compelling contexts in which they encountered marginalization. These included marginalization for one’s trans-gender identity on a personal level and on a systemic level. These areas became the axial codes for developing subsequent themes from this data.

**Marginalization on a Personal Level and Subsequent Precarity**

The themes that surfaced among participants’ experiences were their initial sense of misalignment with their assigned gender, challenges with maintaining personal relationships, and negative encounters while seeking new relationships.
Self-Awareness of Gender Disparity

In talking with participants, many indicated that they often experienced marginalization during their most formative years for deviating from gender performance norms. Many folk felt at an early age that they did not ‘fit’ with the expectations of what to wear, what to play with, what to look like, or how to behave for their assigned gender (Ares Nero, Belinda, Darren, Elliott, Gabriel, Jasmine, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Luke, Maxwell, Mike, N., Nin, Ryan, Yarrow). Often, the marginalization would come in the form of reprimands from adults or surveillance from peers. Jessie played with dolls and wore a “Laura Ingalls’s” style night gown as a child, but her father was clear about not allowing her to behave “girlie.” Jasmine observed that even the language she used was controlled by her father. On one occasion, she was helping her father with some outside work, and they had worked up a sweat. When she pointed out to him that they were “glistening,” her father firmly corrected, “Men don’t glisten. We’re men. We sweat.” Lady in Pink reflected that growing up in her conservative household, anyone who was assigned male at birth but dressed in women’s clothing was characterized with slurs such as “lady-boys or tranny.” Despite these shameful characterizations, Lady in Pink said, “I always envied my sisters because they always got a new dress for Easter, I was stuck with boys’ stuff.” When ten years old, Belinda attempted to come out but was made fun of and humiliated, prompting her/them to reverse course and remain closeted for several more decades.

Harper and Null, both nonbinary, said that when they were younger, they had also received the message that engaging with their feminine side was not acceptable. When Null behaved more effeminately, their second-grade peers responded with a barrage of slurs such as “queer” and “faggot.” Fearing further bullying, they quickly learned to self-isolate. In Harper’s case, he enjoyed dressing in women’s clothing for as long as he could remember, but when his
mom caught him “cross dressing,” she hugged him, told him she loved him, and then they never spoke about it again. Harper suspected that his step-father had a similar fetish, and he witnessed his mother “chastise and heckle” his step-father “all the time about it.” Consequently, Harper got the message that dressing in women’s clothing was something he was supposed to be embarrassed about.

Several trans-masculine participants shared that as young children, they were not aware that they had been assigned female at birth, and in fact, perceived themselves to be boys (Luke, Mike). Ryan, Kim, and Colt all characterized themselves at a younger age as being “tomboyish.” Ares Nero and Maxwell both indicated they both felt they always had noticeable masculine traits. “I was always the girl who looked like a boy” (Maxwell). Elliott shared that “I knew I was trans- at like seven or eight; … I knew I wasn’t female.” Others shared that as children they only had friends who were boys, and they wanted to run around outside and play like boys (Aod, Luke, Mike, N.). Several others said that they had wanted to wear boys’ clothes and cut their hair short (Nin, Maxwell, Mike, Yarrow). “I always wanted to wear boys’ clothes. I wanted to have short hair. I wanted to look like a boy. I wanted to do all the boy things. You know, I liked dragons and swords” (Maxwell).

Most also indicated that they experienced push back from the adults in their lives, some in the form of steering them toward more feminine clothing, as Nin describes, “I couldn’t wear the boys’ shirts with the cool graphics or cargo shorts,… had to be a light color, it couldn’t be a dark navy or khaki.” N. said that as a child he had experienced punishment for not behaving “lady-like.” While Luke and Gabriel did not remember receiving much push back of this kind, when their secondary sex characteristics emerged during puberty, they experienced anxiety and confusion about developing breasts. Gabriel said, “I wanted to hide them or make them stop
growing. I thought I had something really deeply wrong with me, so I never changed in locker rooms. I put clothes over clothes, and I never walked through my own house without layers of clothes on.” For Yarrow, they attribute some of their realization of gender disparity to childhood trauma, but they indicated that when they did not feel tied to being a girl or a boy, they found more comfort.

**Personal and Intimate Relationships**

When participants discussed their experiences with marginalization in the context of their most personal or intimate relationships, the focal points of those discussions were families of origin, spouses or partners, and friends. In the context of these relationships, many folx shared that they often encountered negativity, and many spoke of abandonment or rejection, grief, and loss. It should be noted, though, that almost half of the participants said their relationships with members of their families of origin were not reliable sources of support or comfort prior to their decision to come out and transition (Colton, Darren, Dawn, Elliott, Jasmine, Jessie, Kim, Lady in Pink, Mish, Morrow, Moshe, N., Riley, Ryan, Sally, Yarrow).

**Families of Origin.** In many cases, participants indicated that at least one or both of their parents were not supportive of their decision to transition. Siblings and extended family members were also a point of conversation in this area and while some responses were positive and accepting, many more reflected varying levels of rejection or dismissal.

Just as they were coming to their own realization about their gender identities, Ares Nero, Maxwell, and Ryan experienced rejection of the idea of being trans*. When he was still a sophomore in high school, Maxwell confided to his mother that he liked girls. Although she accepted that revelation, she went on to say, “Just don't be like A****,” who was trans* and Maxwell’s best friend.
At that point, I was already pretty sure that I was trans*, and I was like, you know, trying to decide on a name, … so that was pretty hurtful of her to say to me. He was my best friend at that point, and she was also rejecting me, she just didn’t know it.

Similarly, when I spoke with Ares Nero, he had not begun his transition or come out to his parents because they spoke negatively about the LGTBQ+ community, so he feared being kicked out of his home. When Ryan tried to confide in his mom, “Sometimes I felt like I was a dude trapped in a chick's body, and she told me that she didn't want to hear anything like that out of my mouth ever again.” In each case, these young trans-masculine folx received the message that their trans-ness was not acceptable from the people who were, theoretically, supposed to love and accept them at the most essential levels. Receiving these messages of rejection were likely the first of many that would come after, but it left a clear impression on each of them as they began navigating the marginalization, they now knew they would face.

When they came out to their family members, participants recounted experiences that ranged from more subtle forms of dismissal to more overt forms of rejection. For some, familial marginalization was the continued use of their dead names and failing to use the appropriate pronouns, despite respectful requests and in many cases obvious physical transitions. Mike said that even though his dad is supportive, he continues to use female pronouns and his old name. His mom has not been as supportive but tries to use the correct name and pronouns although she has essentially outing or revealed Mike’s trans* identity without his permission on several occasions. E. and Luke experienced similar problems with their grandparents. “They still call me by my dead name and use female pronouns even though I am clearly not feminine, and I've transitioned. They would rather perceive me as a lesbian than as a trans-man” (Luke). Darren also felt that his family often shows their disregard for his identity during family game nights, when they will regularly put him on the girls’ team to even out the number of players. “You’re
an honorary girl tonight,’ kind of thing, and it’s always me that is subjected to that which makes it really uncomfortable especially because of my trans* identity.”

Maxwell’s father has responded to his trans* identity with direct rejection. “He’s very much been: ‘You are my daughter. You’ll always be my daughter. You're never gonna be a boy.’” His father has also attempted to use science to dismiss Maxwell’s identity by making the argument that chromosomes are the only indicator of one’s gender identity, conflating biological sex with gender. Yarrow said that their family often questions them about their more masculine presentation, pressing them to appear and behave more femininely to adhere to their family’s more traditional Latinx expectations of gender. For P., when they came out to their sister as nonbinary, the sister hung up on them and then “passive aggressively tagged” P. in a “beautiful women” post on social media the following day.

For some folx, their families responded by pathologizing or shaming their trans-ness. Belinda’s mother attributed her/their gender identity to a traumatic childhood, causing Belinda to see herself/themselves as a victim until she/they became educated about her/their identity. Similarly, Maxwell’s father had attributed his trans-gender identity to unprocessed trauma from a fire that destroyed their home although Maxwell suspects that his father is the one that has not moved on from that loss. In speaking about how her family members responded to her transition, Riley said that her brother was “not okay” with her trans-ness and has blamed it on her difficult childhood with their mother. When Moshe decided to come out, his parents put him through conversion therapy to ‘fix’ him. While he said the experience was short-lived and the so-called therapists relied on scare tactics, this made it clear that his parents would not support him. “From the time I came out – I think eighteen – when I started hormones, we didn’t talk.” Some familial marginalization was expressed through various forms of embarrassment or shaming. Both
Belinda and Mike said that they had sisters that have regularly outed them as trans*. “My sister has a tendency to out me at every turn” (Mike). When Belinda came out to her/their younger sister at the age of 14, the sister weaponized the information to gain favor with their father and to blackmail Belinda. Lady in Pink’s mother said, “she was very disappointed,” when she came out. On top of that, her sisters, both adoptive and biological, have also reacted negatively, accusing her of “playing dress up” and refusing to use her new name.

**Precognity Associated with Familial Issues.** Participants’ stories of marginalization illustrated how their multiple experiences with oppression often caused ripples across the various domains of their daily lives, impacting their economic and social well-being. In many cases, participants shared stories about how the marginalization they experienced had cascading effects on the level of precarity they subsequently had to endure. The axial codes that emerged during data analysis in this area included experiences with economic instability that often led to housing instability. While most folx were not familiar with the term precarity, most associated it with word precarious, and we discussed how precarity is often viewed as the material impact that people encounter when they are marginalized. After parsing out these ideas, most provided experiences that reflected various instabilities or vulnerabilities that they attributed to, at least in part, their trans* identities.

Based on their accounts, several participants had experienced economic instability that they could trace back to coming out to their families of origin. In several cases, they indicated that their experiences with financial instability were at least partially due to a premature withdrawal of familial financial support at a young age (Barnell, Betty, Darren, Elliott, Maxwell, Mike, Sally). Maxwell indicated that he had no doubt that the reason his parents did not provide the financial support they had promised while he was in college was because he wasn’t willing to
be their “perfect girl.” Going beyond his parents to his wealthy brother, Maxwell posited “if my brother didn't hate me, because I was trans*, he'd probably help me find a place to live or help me finance getting a place to live.” Mike also shared that when he moved to a large urban area to attend college, he was “running rapidly from my family of origin” because his mother could not accept his emerging issues with gender identity. Twenty-three years old and feeling isolated, Mike fled with essentially nothing, taking out multiple loans so he could live in the dorms, albeit without a meal plan. He admitted he ate a lot of eggs because that is all he could afford, and he told no one how much he was struggling. Similarly, until they were eighteen years old, Elliott lived with their mother, but the family became homeless. When their mom found a new place, she invited the rest of the family to stay with her, but Elliott was not invited because of their gender identity. Similarly, Betty recalled, “When I was jobless, my aunt wasn’t willing to let me stay at her place while I looked for a job even though she helped my brother out when he was in the same situation.”

**Spouses.** Beyond families of origin, two participants experienced the end of their long-term marital relationships. Interestingly, Dawn and Lady in Pink expressed strong empathy for their former partners despite the rejection, and said that their divorces were the direct result of their transitions. Lady in Pink said, “I was married for twenty-one years, and my wife divorced me. … My gender identity was the entire reason for the divorce.” She believed that her ex-wife could not come to terms with Lady in Pink’s gender identity nor continue the marriage because of what it would imply about the ex-wife’s own sexuality. Having been raised in a conservative community, she could not accept that “if she continues to love me that she could be a lesbian.” Having met in college in the 1980s. Dawn said her ex-wife was fully aware of her desire to dress as a woman; she could accept it if it stayed hidden. After many years, Dawn’s dysphoria began
to escalate, and she wanted to go out in public dressed as a woman. Her ex-wife “just could not deal with the idea that our friends and neighbors, and so on, would see me in this condition of being trans*.” As with Lady in Pink’s experience, Dawn’s ex-wife ultimately could not accept the implications of Dawn’s trans* identity and sought to end the marriage.

While I did not choose to focus attention on the role of religion in this research, I thought it important to acknowledge how many folx mentioned their family’s religious beliefs and practices in the context of how they were treated (Ares Nero, Belinda, Colton, Dawn, Lady in Pink, Luke, Maxwell, Moshe, Nin, Ryan). Colton, Moshe, and Ryan spoke about how the Mormon Church views and treats trans-gender people and described how they felt that framed their parents’ inability to accept their identities. “Once you even mention you might be going down that path, you’re essentially excommunicated, cut off” (Moshe). Luke spoke about his family’s membership in the Church of Christ in a southern state, which prompted his decision to move north before his transition. Catholicism emerged in my discussions with Maxwell, Nin, Dawn, and Gene. Maxwell believed that his mother struggled to accept his trans* identity because she was raised in the Catholic Church, and Dawn also believed that because her ex-wife was a “Cradle Catholic,” she could not accept Dawn’s identity becoming public. Belinda spoke about her/their extensive background in the readings of the Evangelical Church and has already had several exchanges with church members about why trans-gender people are not “abominations or defying the will of God.” Across these discussions, the overarching theme about the role of religion that emerged was that it often provided justification for invalidating and delegitimizing participants’ identities and their experiences.

**Friends.** In the context of discussing close personal relationships, several folx said that they also lost friends because of their transitions. Jessie shared that some of her friends and
acquaintances treated her “like I had killed him” or “I came and stepped in that person’s place. It was like I died, and they didn’t know who this person was.” She also shared that she did not realize how much she would lose when she transitioned. While her hairstylist had been the only “constant,” as soon as she started transitioning, many of her friends “disappeared and scattered.” Dawn also shared that some of her longtime friends were no longer friends, once she began to transition. Jasmine, having a similar experience, observed that some people are “supportive in name only” but when she began transitioning, they stepped back and weren’t supportive when she needed them most. In Belinda’s case, she/they had to end a life-long friendship because the person was “spewing” homophobic and transphobic ideas on Facebook at the time that she/they were transitioning. E. also explained that they had lost friends while trying to “figure out” their gender identity because those friends were “worn out” by E.’s uncertainty. While E. said that they understood some of the frustration, it also hurt that their friends did not try harder to empathize.

**Seeking New Relationships**

When asked about the marginalizing experiences in the context of seeking and developing relationships, participants’ stories seemed to settle into several themes: objectification, rejection, hyper-sexualization or fetishization, and isolation. Speaking about trying to develop new relationships, most participants indicated that their gender identity had presented challenges in finding partners. As Lady in Pink aptly observed, “It’s a very, very narrow tight rope that someone who’s trans* walks.” In the era of all things digital, it was not surprising to hear numerous stories of online dating apps, such as Tinder, but it was difficult to hear how often participants faced intrusive questions and outright rejection.
Often, when they were open about their trans-gender identities in their dating profiles, participants were objectified or essentialized down to their genitalia and often rejected. For example, Dawn said “They’re very interested in whether I’m fully functioning, whether or not I’ve had the operation. I run into guys, in particular, who say, ‘You’re a chick with a dick, right?’” She indicated that these types of experiences really felt “dehumanizing” and made her question whether she will be able to find an accepting romantic partner. In many cases, participants said they often encounter both subversive and overt transphobia. “When people find out that I’m trans*, or they missed it on my profile, and they message me and then find out I’m trans*, I usually just get ghosted a lot of the time or just straight up rejected” (Aod). AIS said many people neglect to read his profile which clearly says that he is trans*. When he clarifies, the person will either say something negative or block him altogether. AIS expressed frustration about people not reading the profile and then reacting in a way that suggests that he is at fault for being trans*. Colt said that men often contact him to question the legitimacy of his identity, arguing that he will always be female and then asking for confirmation that he has “female body parts.” These negative experiences are what have caused some folx to be very wary in their daily personal interactions.

In contrast, the other phenomena that emerged in the context of this part of our discussions were the experiences of being fetishized or hypersexualized, specifically for being trans-gender (Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mish). Both Mish and Jessie shared that they had received a substantial amount of unsolicited, sexually explicit content and communication through social media. Mish indicated that because trans-women tend to be fetishized, men send pictures of their genitals, or “dick pics” as she characterized them. Not only did she find this “disgusting,” when asked how this unwanted attention made her feel, Mish said that for a long
time it felt “degrading” and “dehumanizing.” Jessie shared that she had also received video feeds of strangers’ genitals from a wide array of foreign countries, including Dubai, Turkey, and parts of South Africa at 3 a.m. She theorized that maybe they were doing this because trans* folx are even more stigmatized in those places. Dawn also shared that she was extremely cautious in engaging with people online because of the potential for being treated like a fetish. She said that she had been approached by strange men about meeting in hotel rooms. Lady in Pink suggested that people operate on the false narrative promoted by the pornography industry about most trans-women being sex workers or sex objects. As a result, many people approach trans-women as “their own dirty little secret” (Lady in Pink).

Given what they had shared with me about the difficulties of online as well as in-person dating, it wasn’t surprising that several participants also talked about their experiences with various forms of isolation. In some cases, they spoke about how their ‘pool’ of eligible partners shrunk dramatically because of their gender identity as well as facing the possibility of being alone, indefinitely. Sally admitted, “I was pretty convinced. I was like, I’m gonna be alone.” While being alone is not an absolute certainty, Aod’s admission that he had not been on a date in eight years and has been single for thirteen years gives some credence to Sally’s realization. “When everyone else has stripes and you’re a spot -- you’re looking for another spot across a big pond full of stripes. The odds of being able to see through all the stripe fish to get to one another are a lot lower” (Aod).

In many cases, these folx offered very logical explanations for why they may have to resign themselves to being alone. Several perceived their physicality to be an obstacle to finding a partner. Crow, Darren, Gabriel, and Maxwell all spoke about the challenges of finding a partner when their bodies did not align with their masculine identities. Similarly, Dawn said that
finding a romantic partner has been “very difficult” because of her age, her trans* identity, and her inability to pass, or simply be perceived as a cis-gender female. Also concerned with passing, Crow shared that his dysphoria made him very self-conscious, and he doubted that anyone will ever see him as “an actual man, and so, why would they even be attracted to me?”
The significance of the shapes of their bodies in the context of finding partners emerged as a compelling concern for many folx.

**Marginalization on a Systemic Level and Subsequent Precarity**

When considering the types of interactions and environments that trans* folx must engage with and navigate at a systemic level, it is undeniable that they must live with the constant, incessant threat of being involuntarily outed. Participants’ stories reflected an overarching sense that our society is rife with systemic transphobia that is enacted to identify, confront, and then subsequently silence or erase gender nonconformity. Jessie shared that the interactions she has had in public settings are often “dehumanizing,” and she felt like she was “always being punished” for who she is. Jessie, Lady in Pink, and Sally all used the word “targeted” when speaking about the ways they are viewed and treated in the public domain. They also said that trans-women are often viewed as “suspect” because of the false narratives that vilify them and their existence. Jasmine described her feelings about interacting in public settings and with institutions as “isolating.” These stories outline both the systemic as well as the individual enactments of transphobia they have experienced in navigating their daily lives. Among the areas that emerged as sites of systemic oppression were infrastructure, institutional practices, public policy, healthcare, and employment.
**Systems Embolden Hatred**

Considering the complex web of intersecting sites of daily oppression that participants described, I was not surprised but nonetheless saddened and angered by their stories of being harassed and attacked by complete strangers in public settings. Because our culture has worked so actively to marginalize trans* folx at every level, many people feel emboldened to engage in verbal and physical aggression toward them. The derision that many described came in the form of sneers, smirks, or ‘dirty looks’ (Belinda, Crow, Darren, Dawn, E., Jessie, Mish, Mike). For some this also took the form of ignoring requests to use preferred names or pronouns in multiple contexts, despite polite reminders (AIS, Jessie, Luke, Mike, N., Null, Rose, P.). While microaggressions are inexcusable, they were some of the milder forms of aggression described by participants. On one occasion, Belinda was approached by a stranger who told her/them that she/they were a “walking abomination.” Similarly, Lady in Pink said that a man she did not know followed her around a store, taking pictures of her and laughing with his friends. Early in her transition, Betty described a time when she was on the metro train and a man started harassing and outing her by using the slur ‘tranny’ in front of the other riders.

Similarly, Mike and his partner were riding the metro train when they were confronted by a stranger who put himself between Mike and his partner, saying “You can’t handle her. You need to share her.” Although Mike was out as trans*, he still presented more femininely, so this stranger was not only targeting him, but his partner, and their relationship. On a separate occasion, Mike said he was leaving a night class with a group of classmates when he heard a group of men saying “What is it? Look at it.” He could hear the conversation among the men growing louder. Mike’s classmates quickly dispersed and left him standing alone. “Nothing physically happened, but I can't even describe the level of fear that I had, and as I got older, that
kind of stuff just continued.” When asked what he thought was behind this type of transphobic behavior, Mike posited “decades of just ingrained hatred and ignorance, … but I don’t know what the response might be about other than fear that people like me are somehow, automatically a threat.”

While experiences with strangers are jarring and difficult to navigate, sometimes trans* folx encounter transphobia when they are customers in places of business. Barnell, Dawn, and Kim all shared that they were challenged by complete strangers about using the bathroom in either large retail stores or other public venues, such as movie theaters. Yarrow described an experience that they had while staying at a resort while they were attending a “business thing.” Although they were nicely dressed in a starched collar, shined shoes, and dress watch, the woman behind the counter in the gift shop made them wait and then scoffed at them several times during their exchange. Yarrow indicated that this was during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, so the woman’s failure to wear a mask was part of the bristled conversation, but Yarrow felt that it was primarily due to their masculine presentation. When the employee finally decided to speak to them, she said “What can I get you … um, [pronounced pause] ma’am?” Because the clerk had been so rude, Yarrow told the woman she could not be of help and left the gift shop.

When Crow and a friend went to eat in a restaurant, their waiter refused to return to the table after their initial introduction. While nothing was said to him about why the waiter would not return, Crow was convinced it was because of his trans-ness. Jessie also had a negative and frightening experience with restaurant staff. After initial contact with the wait-staff, the waiter was whispering to other staff members and looking back at their table. Then, a new staff member was assigned to their table. Already feeling self-conscious at that point, during the meal, her
friend began to choke, frightening Jessie and prompting her to begin yelling “Help her! Somebody, please help her!” Despite her obvious distress, neither the patrons nor the staff assisted her friend. In a panic, her friend ran to the bathroom to try and dislodge whatever was caught in her throat. Fortunately, her friend was successful, but this experience left a lasting impression on Jessie’s awareness of the inherent risks to her safety as a trans-woman.

Institutional Barriers in Infrastructure

It would be difficult to find an American who is not familiar with the ongoing battle over where trans-gender individuals should conduct one of the most essential of human activities, going to the bathroom. While that was not a primary focus of my research questions, it surfaced numerous times in my interviews. Many trans-gender participants who have transitioned in some way spoke about how our society’s heteronormative infrastructure makes their lives difficult and isolates them. For some, the frustration centered around not only bathrooms but also locker rooms.

Both Lady in Pink and Dawn contended that many anti-trans bathroom bills are based soundly on the conflation of trans-feminine identities with pedophilia and sexual predation. Lady in Pink went on to share that she had attended a church where, when they found out that she was a trans-woman, they decided that she could no longer use the women’s restroom. While the pastor assured her that the congregation had no problem with her attending the church, they planned to place an outhouse or portable ‘potty’ behind the church for her. Even though she presented a logical case for why there was no risk of anything unseemly occurring in the bathroom, the pastor insisted that separate accommodations were necessary, forcing her to stop attending the church. Dawn also shared that when she was early in her transition, she would not even try to access women’s restrooms for fear of being confronted. She also shared that she
recently had to show a security guard her state ID with her gender marker to use a women’s restroom.

Trans-masculine folx have also experienced significant challenges with bathroom access (Barnell, Kim). Kim explained that even before he realized his trans* identity, he had been confronted on several occasions for trying to use the women’s restroom because of his masculine appearance. Barnell also recounted his ongoing dilemma with trying to access both women’s and men’s restrooms. When he lived in the southern region of the United States, he was barred from using the men’s restroom at a restaurant, and the police were called. He notified the police and the establishment that he was a trans-man, but he was given the options to either use the women’s restroom or “they would have to escort me out.” To complicate matters further, Barnell said that since moving north, he has been denied access to the women’s restroom at several locations of a national retail chain because he was viewed as too masculine. When he has been able to access the women’s restroom, Barnell said female patrons were interpreting his masculine appearance as some form of deviance and lodged complaints that he was “looking at their kids” while using the restroom. As with the stories shared by trans-feminine folx, Barnell’s transgender identity was being viewed as a sign of perversion or pedophilia rather than gender nonconformity.

Mike also shared the significant challenges that he and his family experience in accessing restrooms safely. Mike, a White trans-man, has a Black child who was assigned male at birth but is gender nonconforming and prefers to dress and present in a feminine manner. Mike shared his concerns and fears for the safety of his child as well as himself in doing something as basic as using the restroom.

I worry even more about safety now. He definitely doesn’t pass, but then here I am, a trans* parent, taking my, obviously, gender nonconforming African American child to
the men’s room as my son’s dressing femininely. That is a big 'no, no.' And here I am taking him into the men's bathroom, and that's where we start to struggle as a family - more around him than me.

While the rhetoric surrounding bathroom access for trans-gender people is fraught with images of deviant sexual predators, these stories reflect the realities of what they face. The threat of derision, surveillance, policing, and potential violence is ever-present when they are simply trying to perform the most basic of human functions, while actively trying to evade being involuntarily outing.

The nonbinary and genderqueer participants who had not altered their gendered appearance in a significant way did not express the same concerns about accessing bathrooms. However, P. did speak about their frustration when they attempted to address the lack of a gender-neutral bathroom while they were enrolled in a graduate program at a public university.

The building that housed the department and program that P. was enrolled in did not have any such facility, so they had to walk across campus to access one. While infrastructure admittedly takes time to alter, particularly in institutions such as college campuses, P. said the bigger frustration was how college faculty responded to their attempts to address the issue. Rather than listening to P.’s concerns, several became verbally aggressive and dismissive, shutting down the discussion entirely. P. ultimately decided to leave their doctoral program because of the erasure they experienced.

Keeping with the domain of college campuses, the topic of the gendered nature of college dorms also emerged in a few conversations, but I was encouraged that participants did not have any negative stories to share in this regard (Kim, Luke, Maxwell). In fact, Maxwell shared that the college he attends specifically advertised trans-gender housing options on its website. “They allow us to live pretty much wherever we want, wherever we're comfortable, [and] they've now
made one of the halls also, a gender-neutral hall, and the bathrooms are gender neutral.” While participants offered a mixture of infrastructure barriers or obstacles in varying settings, most did not indicate that they had encountered substantial issues in college settings.

Comfortably using locker rooms and athletic facilities also presented challenges for several folx (Aod, Lady in Pink, Maxwell). Aod said that the men’s locker room at his gym was a problem for him because there is no privacy. To avoid being detected, he either must wear his swim trunks to the gym or change in the bathroom stalls. I could clearly see his frustration when he shared, “There’s no door on the shower stalls; … it makes it harder, like daily life, every fucking day, I just have to do something three times as hard.” Maxwell had a similar challenge in high school. Bathrooms as well as locker rooms in most, if not all, public high schools are specifically designed to be gendered. In the case of locker rooms, the facilities are generally open-bay and students are not afforded much privacy to change their clothing. Maxwell said that although he had not come out as trans* to most people, he was still perceived to be more masculine, so the girls who shared the locker room were as uncomfortable as he was. While Lady in Pink has used the women’s locker room at her fitness center, she is careful to keep her genitalia covered to prevent unwanted attention and to be respectful of other gym patrons who may have children in the locker room. Because of the challenges of accessing locker rooms in this context, many trans-gender people are likely to avoid these types of situations and subsequently may not go to fitness centers or gyms. In other cases, they may find themselves barred from accessing these facilities in some way.

Another site of problematically gendered infrastructure that came up in several of the interviews was that of jails and prisons. During the summer of 2020, in the societal context of racial justice protests and interventions by law enforcement, two participants described their
experiences with law enforcement officers (Maxwell, P.). In both cases they indicated that officers were unprepared to deal with their gender identities. Following his arrest, Maxwell said that he notified the officers he was a trans-gender man when he was going through the intake process at the jail. While the officers were not disrespectful, they also did not appear to have any type of protocol or facilities in place to ensure his safety while he was detained. P. recounted a similar experience and observed “jails are super gendered every step of the way into like female or male. There's no in-between, and it really matters which one you are. They just didn’t know what to do with me.” P. observed that once it was decided that they were designated a female at birth, P. was at the mercy of where the system decided they should be.

**Institutional Barriers in Institutional Practices**

Marginalization in this context surfaced often in participants’ experiences, and emerged several different contexts. The data seems to suggest that trans* folx are often subject to the invisible whims and ideologies that serve as the foundation for so many of our institutions and organizations. Our ability to conduct our lives productively is moderated and often restricted by the implied legitimacy of a certified identity that is visibly verifiable. Institutional practices, from the time we are born and granted a birth certificate to our engagements with state, federal, and commercial organizations, gender us, and these practices also serve to provide or deny social power. Most of us live our lives without having to think about how gendered our various forms of communication, documentation, rituals, and processes are; however, these often serve to cast trans-gender folx as suspect or illegitimate.

Many mentioned how our electronic footprint is often gendered. Most institutions, such as colleges, schools, and corporations use our legal names as a central element of naming conventions for email addresses or even formal documentation. In many cases, these same
institutions or organizations may have barriers to making alterations to that information, often dependent upon organizational or state policy. Trans-gender folx who are transitioning are often put at great risk of being involuntarily outed to instructors or classmates (Crow, Darren, Morrow). At best, this can cause social discomfort, and at worst, could create dangerous circumstances if the institutional culture is intolerant. In speaking with Crow and Morrow, they both said that their dead names are still the names on record at their respective educational institutions. While their instructors have mostly been receptive to using their chosen name when interacting in class, it was still a source of frustration. Morrow also pointed out that anyone who sends him an email can see his birth name, which he said, “can out me in situations that make me feel uncomfortable.”

When speaking with nonbinary participants, their concerns in these contexts were a bit different as they seemed more a matter of respect rather than creating dangerous circumstances. Rose, for instance ran into resistance from a professor when they asked to be addressed by their chosen name and appropriate pronouns. The professor insisted on using the name that Rose was enrolled under despite Rose’s repeated attempts to correct the practice. In response, the professor indicated, via a lengthy email, that she was “very old-fashioned” and couldn’t “be expected to remember everyone’s gender preferences.” Rose pointed out that the true irony of the situation was that the professor was a faculty member of a gender and women’s studies program.

Another aspect of this type of marginalization is embedded in the processes by which colleges make decisions about admissions. Gabriel talked about his frustration in trying to apply to a graduate program because of the requirement for recommendation letters from people who have previously had supervisory relationships with them. The problem is that they have been self-employed for a while and the people that they would ordinarily ask for these references are
not aware of Gabriel’s transition. If these people did know, they may not respond favorably. Gabriel was irritated by the fact that the people writing these letters may sound like they don’t know Gabriel very well, particularly if their dead name or she/her pronouns are used. Given that applying to graduate school tends to be a competitive process, they worried that the disparity would raise issues, putting Gabriel in an awkward position to “explain the whole situation” while trying to make the best impression.

When considering the pervasive nature of gendered documentation and bureaucratic processes, the far-reaching consequences for trans-gender folx cannot be over-stated. This can be as fundamental as encounters with online forms that operate on the presumption of a rigid gender binary, while failing to acknowledge the existence of gender nonconformity (Gabriel, Gene, Lady in Pink, Moshe). Gabriel spoke about the frustration they experience when trying to simply fill out an online form when they are attempting to access support services from the Commission for the Blind. They pointed out that many digital forms only list male or female and sometimes ‘other,’ which they found irritating. “You know, I want to say, uh, I don't know what you want, so I don't know how to answer this.”

The fact that all our legal documentation is strewn with gendered ‘legitimacy’ came up in several interviews. Lady in Pink spoke about the fear and vulnerability that trans-people must live with when there is disparity between their various forms of identification (driver’s license, passports, insurance coverage, car registration) or if their appearance does not match the gender marker on their ID. When we consider that our state-issued identification or driver’s license, our credit history, our birth certificates, our passports, our social security numbers, and many more forms of documentation all include a designation of male or female, we can only begin to appreciate the veritable minefield that trans-gender folx face in navigating their daily lives (Colt,
Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Sally). Unfortunately, the pathway to transitioning and changing the ever-important gender marker varies from state to state. In some states, a trans-gender person can change their name and gender marker after having socially transitioned and lived as that gender for a designated period. However, in others, the gender marker cannot be changed until various physical transitions have occurred, such as hormones or surgeries. This variation can cause a great deal of disparity for trans* folx, depending on the state they live in.

Another institutional process that has proven particularly problematic for trans-feminine people are airport security screening protocols. Sally shared that she was planning a flight to see her girlfriend, and she was mentally preparing for being treated as “suspicious” during her T.S.A. screening process. Although her gender mark on her ID reflects her female gender, she was prepared to be flagged once she went through the body scanner because her genitalia does not match her gender marker. Preparing for the worst, Sally intended to ask for both a female and a male agent if she had to be searched. Lady in Pink also shared that while she had not been subjected to such treatment in the airport, she knew another trans-woman who had been flagged. The agents forced her to show them her genitals before they would allow her to board, which was, understandably, a humiliating and degrading experience.

Financial entities were also cited as creating marginalizing situations for trans* folx. Jessie and Jasmine both talked about how they were marginalized by the banking industry after they began their transitions. In Jessie’s case, when she applied for a car loan, she learned that the credit rating she had built in her former life was no longer accessible. “I had an 800 something […] I went down to zero and had to start over” (Jessie). Her social security number had not changed, and she provided legal documentation from the judge who oversaw her name change, but she was denied credit. When she spoke with a credit advisor at her local credit union, he was
also surprised to learn about this practice but agreed to advise her about quickly building her credit rating. Jasmine also experienced something similar amid her divorce from her ex-wife. In the process of re-financing her home and mortgage, Jasmine was not permitted to change the name on her existing mortgage, despite her legal documentation. Instead, the bank required her to apply for a new mortgage with the bank, while incurring additional fees. Adding to her frustration, a representative from the bank told Jasmine that if her state had laws requiring the banking industry to be more inclusive, it would not be a problem, but because her state had no such laws, the bank would not accommodate her.

For some participants, the gendered rituals associated with schooling or organizational engagement proved to be marginalizing. For example, Maxwell expressed his frustration about not being allowed to wear the ‘men’s’ band uniform in high school despite his requests to do so. In addition, because his high school traditionally separated the boys and girls into gendered groups for graduation, he was forced to stand with the girls’ group even though he had begun his transition. Moshe also experienced marginalization in high school when he attempted to participate in the athletics program. At the time, he played tennis and had not begun his medical transition. Having socially transitioned, Moshe decided to try out for the men’s tennis team, but it resulted in “this super ridiculous school district battle.” The school contended that he would be at a “disadvantage” playing against the boys, even though he had already played and beaten everyone on the men’s team. In addition, they refused to allow him to play on the women’s team because they said he would have an advantage over female players. Ultimately, Moshe was banned from participating in sports, altogether.

For Aod, marginalization through engaging with an organization’s gendered practices occurred when he did not want to wear the traditional native sweat dress that is customarily worn
by Native American women when performing tribal dances. “I hated wearing the sweat dress, so I changed my body so that if my teacher put me in sweat dresses, it would look pretty silly.” He also expressed frustration about how organizations are centrally focused solely on the gender binary.

I can’t be a daughter of the American Revolution, and I can’t be a son of the American Revolution, but I have ancestors that won the Revolutionary War with documentation that goes with all of that. … Everything is split into two things that I’m not viewed as part of.

He went on to say, “Why do we have Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America? Why didn’t we just have Scouting of America and not emphasize bonding on the basis of sex?” It should be noted that in 2018 the Boy Scouts of America organization did change their name to Scouts, BSA and opened their ranks for girls to join although boys and girls are still segregated into separate troops (Domonoske, 2018).

**Institutional Barriers in Public Policy**

The weight of personal damage and fear incurred by public policy also emerged from many of the participants’ stories. Some of the issues seemed the results of a lack of policy, often evident in the preservation of gendered rituals and practices as well as failures to acknowledge and enact progressive changes to infrastructure and cultural practices. More insidiously, though, are the explicitly transphobic policies that several reflected upon. While I initiated no discourse about the political landscape, many participants explicitly discussed the current president in office (Donald J. Trump held the office at the time this data was collected) and the “right wing, conservative” agenda that had brutally targeted trans-gender people from the state and federal level (Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mish).

A prime example was offered by Lady in Pink who pointed out that the United States Census, administered every ten years to determine how public funds will be allocated for
citizens, does not acknowledge the existence of more than two genders, men and women. Which people get counted in an official capacity speaks volumes about the systemic practices of erasure and silencing that emanate throughout our society. In some cases, state level policy regarding access to public resources for trans-gender folx was mentioned. While I previously discussed the matter of marginalizing infrastructure, I also think it is important to acknowledge the role that policy plays in preserving and justifying the limitations of existing infrastructure.

**Precarity Associated with Public Policy.** Both Sally and Jessie specifically mentioned the memo from the Trump Administration’s Office of Housing and Urban Development that sought to prevent trans-feminine people from accessing homeless shelters. This memo cited and weaponized a set of stereotypes about trans-gender women with the expressed goal of identifying and outing them. This policy certainly laid the groundwork for the complex cascading effects of precarity. Participants indicated that they had been expressly barred from homeless shelters (Jessie) or that homeless shelters did not provide a safe space for them (Betty, Sally). In 2018, Jessie had to move eight times and was experiencing a lot of instability, but when she contacted a local homeless shelter, they told her that trans* people were not permitted to stay at the shelter because it “disrupts the peace.” Consequently, she was forced to stay in several “expensive” and “dangerous” short-stay motels.

In talking about homelessness, Sally spoke about being involuntarily outed because of how shelters define gender, and having to take the risk of being housed in the men’s section of the shelter. While struggling to find a job in the IT field, Betty was able to find a shelter that housed people under the age of 25 which tended to be safer than the family shelter. However, both Sally and Betty said that they had been harassed by other shelter recipients and that the shelter staff would not help or support against the harassment. Sally reached a point when she
decided that she could no longer stay at homeless shelters, having been subjected to trans-phobic slurs and robbed, so she opted to camp and find shelter outside.

The two contexts where systemic marginalization was most often discussed were in the realms of healthcare and employment. More so than any other contexts, participants encountered both subversive and overt transphobia in their working lives and in seeking help from healthcare professionals. Others were extremely concerned about what could be characterized as the most dangerous transphobic exclusionary federal policy that expressly permitted healthcare workers to deny care to trans-gender people (AIS, Aod, Barnell, Colt, Dawn, Elliott, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mish, Sally).

**Institutional Barriers in Healthcare Systems**

While healthcare is viewed as a hallmark of civilized nations, this institution also stands as one of the central sites of systemic transphobia. Empowered by federal policy that allows healthcare workers to withhold care from trans-gender people solely based upon their personal beliefs, it can also be viewed as one of the places that the basest of human biases can be laid bare. Denying lifesaving care to someone because their identity offends you in some way is the antithesis of enacting mercy to those in need. When discussing their encounters with our systems of healthcare, participants offered some very insightful observations that centered around heteronormative assumptions, interactions with healthcare workers, insurance coverage, trans-medical care, and issues of access. As Ryan so astutely observed, “Healthcare is where our intersecting system of oppression are on full display.”

Like the challenges of dealing with bureaucracy and governmental entities, several folx spoke about how the processes of the healthcare system are designed to only acknowledge the life dynamics associated with a heteronormative gender binary. Gene, a sex worker and therapist
in training, talked about how intake forms only acknowledge cis-gender men and women. This is the first step of encounters between the system and the patient, and the paperwork sets the parameters for a narrow and rigid frame of engagement between the patients and healthcare workers. When discussing interactions with healthcare workers, several participants suggested that many lacked training for how to interact respectfully and effectively with trans* patients (Gene, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Luke, Mike, P., Rose, Sally). Sally shared an experience she had with general practitioners who were clearly not versed in how to interact with members of the LGBTQ+ community. “It was like they were playing some kind of guessing game” as they took her medical history. Seemingly rooted in heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality, they collected her history by posing questions, like “Heterosexual?” or “Female?” rather than simply asking Sally what her gender identity and sexuality were. P. and Rose also spoke about awkward interactions they had with healthcare providers who made assumptions about their gender and sexuality. P. expressed aggravation that their gynecologist did not ask inclusive questions about their sexual history, but rather assumed them to be heterosexual and at greater risk of unplanned pregnancy.

Just not a good healthcare provider like, not just specific to trans* stuff but like, lecturing me on monogamy. Like, every time I went there, my gender and my sexuality were assumed. She asked, like, how many partners I'd had, and I said, ‘like, I don't know, five or six,’ and she was like, well… ‘pregnancy this, pregnancy that’ and I was like, ‘zero cis-men, like no penis, like, I don't know why you would assume that about me right, but pregnancy is actually not something I'm at all worried about.’ (P.)

This type of subverted delegitimization is often accompanied by more overt forms of transphobia. Jessie recalled an experience she had at the doctor’s office when the receptionist kept mis-gendering her even after Jessie verbally corrected her and presented specific documentation of her gender identity. She also shared that on more than one occasion, healthcare workers have looked at her like she was “mental” because of her trans* identity. N. and Nin also
shared stories of being dead-named and misgendered while seeking general medical care even though their medical charts had been altered to reflect their trans-gender identity.

I wanted to just get a general checkup…. I presented masculine, and they were looking at my chart and still kept using female pronouns. While the nurse was referring to me as ‘he,’ the doctor still kept saying ‘she.’ (Nin)

Even more concerning were some of the participants’ accounts of having been denied care. Elliott shared that “A lot of the doctors have refused to treat me because I'm trans*. Like just for regular treatment, not for trans* stuff.” In one instance, Elliott said that they sought treatment for a vaginal yeast infection but was turned away because their medical chart indicated they were male. Clarifying they were a trans-gender male, Elliott was told that they were not eligible for treatment of the condition. “They just, like, look at you like you have two heads. People will just look at you like you don't belong, and, like, you're not supposed to be there. It's pretty hard - I don't feel like I'm treated fairly” (Elliott).

In a similar situation, Mike told me about when he had a kidney stone and likely a urinary tract infection. While his primary care physician had been “amazing,” he was unable to get to his PCP during his scheduled break at work. He decided to access a quick care clinic, affiliated with the same company that his PCP is part of. Upon arriving at the clinic, he informed them of his condition, and they told him they do not treat males for kidney stones. Mike told them that his PCP had referred him to their clinic and that they should check his medical chart to review the documentation concerning his female anatomy. Not only did the clinic personnel force him to out himself in the waiting room in front of other patients, but the healthcare worker also refused to review his chart to verify what Mike was saying.

There I am, giving this person, who should have a working knowledge of anatomy, an anatomical definition and explaining to him that I do need medical care, and I do fall under the guidelines of this practice to treat the condition that I have […] and he refused care (Mike).
While Mike’s issues were ultimately addressed, it could have more easily been prevented if systemic change became the goal for our healthcare institutions. Thankfully, none of the participants had experienced denial of care during a life-threatening medical emergency, but many spoke about their concerns and fears about the statutes that allowed medical staff as well as emergency responders to refuse care to trans-gender people (Dawn, Elliott, Jasmine, Jessie, Maxwell, Mish, N., Nin, Riley, Sally). I would like to note that since the time of these interviews, the newly elected Biden Administration reversed this Trump era health care policy. While this is an important step back toward progress, it also highlights the fragile nature of that progress that could easily be destroyed by future administrations.

Beyond general health care, concerns about accessing competent trans-medical care (care specifically gaged toward transitioning) surfaced quite often. The challenges discussed included not only the limited number of physicians who understand and will administer trans-medical care, but also the difficulty in accessing that care. In many cases, participants indicated that when they first began their trans* medical journey, they encountered healthcare professionals who had no experience in this area. Maxwell noted, “There's not a ton of doctors who are comfortable working with trans-gender health, because they just don't know about it.” Rose indicated that they had considered some form of gender affirming surgery, but because they feared that their primary care physician would not know anything about trans-specific medicine and the potential for experiencing stigmatization, they decided against it. “I didn't want to put myself in a situation where I'm just gonna be misgendered and discriminated against” (Rose).

Jessie said that when she wanted to begin transitioning, her primary care physician discouraged her from taking hormones because he believed they would negatively affect her health. Consequently, she had to navigate and advocate her way through the process of finding
doctors who would provide that care. This involved seeing multiple doctors as well as therapists and acquiring letters from her healthcare providers to condone the use of hormones as well as surgeries for her transition. Jasmine, who receives her care through the Veterans Health Administration, shared that when she first sought out medical care for her transition, her physicians were not sure “where to even start.” Consequently, she has also had to self-advocate and self-educate to ensure the appropriate and safest hormone balances for her body. When Belinda first sought trans-specific care, she/they were still having to present as male in her/their workplace, so her/their doctor would not assist Belinda to transition because she/they were not viewed to be “trans* enough.” This incident occurred at a Catholic hospital, and in hindsight, Belinda realized that she/they were not going to receive the care that was needed. E. experienced something similar when they wanted to begin taking testosterone. “I saw a therapist and I got a testosterone letter written, and when I went to my doctor, she told me she was uncomfortable” with providing that care. E. was forced to find another provider who would attend to their medical transition.

One of the biggest challenges that emerged in this area of discussion was a significant shortage of physicians who have been trained and are currently providing trans-medical care, particularly surgeries (AIS, Lady in Pink, Maxwell, N., Ryan). For some, location was one of the biggest obstacles to accessing competent, trans-medical care. Maxwell said,

Especially living in a very rural area, […] there's not really a ton of people around who are willing to write referrals to endocrinologists who will prescribe hormones, […] if you get into the surgery side of it, there's not a lot of people who are qualified to perform those surgeries, and they're usually hundreds of miles away.

Similarly, N. shared that most of the trans-masculine people he has talked to about surgery have indicated that Fort Lauderdale and Texas seem to be the “hotspots” for getting competent top surgery done, rather than in the southern metropolitan area where he lives. In talking to AIS
about the challenges of finding competent trans-medical care, he said that some of his friends have been frustrated with having to travel out of state to have their surgeries performed. Ryan also spoke about the challenges of location when we discussed his plans for top surgery. Because his surgeon is in another state and specializes in plastic surgery for breast cancer survivors, Ryan’s procedure has been delayed and given a lower priority than other patients in need of mastectomies and breast reconstruction. Lady in Pink shared that while she has successfully assembled a team of female doctors, there is only one doctor that performs trans-specific surgeries in her state. She was hoping to go out of state to receive care from a more experienced surgeon, who is also a trans-woman and can better empathize with Lady in Pink’s experience.

The other unavoidable challenge that emerged from participants’ stories about their experiences with healthcare institutions was the systemic marginalization they experienced in dealing with health insurance companies. The regime of care is often extensive and very expensive. Many folx discussed the tendency of insurance companies to refuse coverage for many trans-medical procedures, deeming them cosmetic or not medically necessary (Aod, Barnell, Belinda, Colt, Darren, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Luke, Maxwell, Moshe, N., Ryan, Sally). When I spoke with Luke, he was in the process of trying to get a hysterectomy which he has wanted for a long time. “I’ve been trying to get one for twenty years. Like, literally I've asked every doctor I've been to since I was twelve, and I had it scheduled.” Unfortunately, that surgery ended up being postponed because his insurance had initially agreed to cover it, but then came back and demanded that he see two more therapists before they would grant final approval. Given the overwhelming amount of rejection and marginalization that trans* folx experience in their daily lives, I found Luke’s ability to be resolute and maintain a sense of humor in grappling with his insurance company compelling. Darren also ran into obstacles with his insurance
company when he wanted to begin hormone therapy. His doctor conducted blood tests and verified that it was safe for him to start testosterone treatments. However, Darren’s insurance company not only refused to cover the expense of hormone therapy but also threatened to drop coverage for his other medications if he proceeded with hormone treatment. Not in a financial position to pay for his medications as well as testosterone out of pocket, Darren had to postpone his medical transition for the foreseeable future.

The first medical expenses that trans-masculine and trans-feminine folx who decide to transition usually incur is paying for hormone treatments and regular lab tests to ensure that their endocrine systems remain healthy. Both represent a lifelong expense, but are vital for transitioning and then maintaining results (AIS, Belinda, Betty, Jasmine, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Moshe, Riley, Sally). Belinda told me that her/their quarterly labs usually cost $500 each time. Not surprisingly, AIS said he has struggled to pay for his labs and endocrinologist appointments. “A $200 charge for bloodwork, and you get it done every six months. Then, my endo was $400 a visit, so I had to put it off and make promises to pay when I could.” Consequently, his credit history has been damaged by medical debt.

In addition to labs and hormone treatments, many spoke about the expense of having surgical procedures performed as part of their transition process. The cost of ‘top’ surgery, whether it be for a mastectomy or augmentation, varied dramatically. Even with insurance coverage, participants who had top surgery indicated that they all incurred some expense. Jessie shared that her recent augmentation cost her $6,100 and none of the cost was covered by her insurance. Aod shared that his surgery cost him $10,000 and his insurance company would not provide coverage. His anger was palpable as he told me that the insurance company has since started providing partial coverage for this procedure, but he has no recourse for recouping that
money. Aod confided that it was difficult for him to think about the financial toll that his transition has taken on him.

Given exposure to correct hormones at the right age, I wouldn't even be going through this process. So, it's really upsetting. Literally, I have to pretend the money never existed because that was a whole year salary. It took me five years to save for that. There comes a point when you get blocked in financially. And you can't think about or process it, it’s too much. (Aod)

Morrow said that his procedure was also “pretty expensive” with a price tag of $13,000, and AIS said that he went looking for an informed consent doctor to limit the pre- and post-operative follow-up care they would require, limiting his expense to $5,900. When I spoke with Ryan and N., they were both navigating the process of determining how and when they would be able to have their top surgeries done. Because his surgeon was out of his insurance network, Ryan was anticipating his out-of-pocket cost to be about $4,000. In N.’s case, he does not have health insurance, so he anticipated spending approximately $25,000 to go out of state for his surgical procedure.

In addition to top surgery, several participants spoke about the even greater expense of getting their ‘bottom’ or gender re-assignment procedure done. Notably, only one participant indicated that they had undergone this painful, complicated, and expensive procedure. The exact expense varied dramatically, dependent upon the state and presumably the expertise of the surgeon, from $50,000 to over $100,000 (Aod, Belinda, Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Maxwell, Moshe, N., Ryan, Sally). While ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ surgery are the most recognized surgeries associated with medically transitioning, Belinda, Sally, and Lady in Pink also spoke about the fact that there is also facial feminization surgery that many trans-feminine folx consider as a step in their physical transformation. Moshe also spoke about a hip-narrowing procedure that he considered having done that involved splitting the pelvis, shaving some width, and fusing the
bones back together. He went on to say that he decided against it because it would cost approximately $200,000 and require a lengthy recovery period.

As if the expense of all these steps was not enough, there are additional expenses that trans* folx are likely to incur as ‘collateral damage’ of these procedures. As previously discussed, there are very few healthcare professionals who are trained and qualified to provide these types of surgeries. Consequently, participants spoke about the additional expense involved in traveling and staying away from home for extended periods of time to receive pre- and post-operative care from their surgeons (AIS, N., Lady in Pink, Ryan). In addition, several indicated that the recovery process for some of these surgeries were sometimes a year or more which could require extended time out of work, leading to lost wages (Dawn, Jessie, Moshe, Lady in Pink, Ryan). Given the mounting costs, Sally observed “Many of these procedures put them out of reach for poor people. … I know as a poor person that these are pretty outside the limits of what I can do.” Participants also indicated that the expense of transitioning was a real obstacle that has slowed the progress of their transition (AIS, Ares Nero, Barnell, Darren, Kim, Lady in Pink, Maxwell, Sally). Several participants also indicated that the expense of medically transition forces them to make difficult financial choices. “If I didn’t have to spend $10,000 on top surgery, I could’ve put that toward my accounts, my retirement” (Aod). Similarly, N. said,

From a financial perspective, I'm thinking, I shouldn't have to pay $100,000 dollars to make my body look the way I want. But the fact is we have to choose – we're not buying a house if we want our bodies to match our brains.

**Precarity Associated with Healthcare Issues.** An inability to access adequate general as well as trans-specific medical care heightens the likelihood that a trans* person will continue to experience an endless cycle of marginalization and subsequent precarity in various domains of their daily lives. The physical safety of trans* folx is made tenuous when they choose to avoid
healthcare or treatment to avoid hostility (Barnell, Elliott, Jessie, N., Nin), or they encountered health risks because of their transition (AIS, Colt, Elliott, Lady in Pink, Moshe). Elliott said, “I refuse to go to the urgent care now because I don't wanna have to deal with that again.” Jessie and Nin both shared that they try to stay healthy and are “very careful” because they do not want to deal with the hassle of having to explain themselves and their identities to healthcare professionals. In both cases, they expressed the frustration of having to tolerate medical staff who are not competent in providing even general health care to trans* folx.

Some of the participants also spoke about the complications that can occur as part of their transition process. Both AIS and Colt spoke about a dangerous, painful, and potentially debilitating condition that affected the tissue in his genital area, resulting from taking testosterone and subsequent declining estrogen levels. In Colt’s case, his condition was causing difficulty for him in his job performance and his employer was not tolerant of his medical condition, viewing it as something he chose to do to himself. Even more dangerous, Morrow said that while he was undergoing top surgery, he had a heart attack and required lifesaving measures. Moshe also spoke about the complications he experienced after top surgery that required him to go to the emergency room.

Faced with the monumental expenses of transitioning, physical safety is sometimes put at risk when trans* folx take dangerous risks to transition more quickly and less expensively. AIS shared that some people, unable to afford hormone therapy, desperately buy “dangerous” hormones online without knowing what’s in them and who is selling them. In some cases, trans* folx are overwhelmed by the cost and time associated with transitioning, and they undergo multiple surgeries at once. Lady in Pink said that she knew a trans-woman who died while she was undergoing back-to-back surgeries. This physical danger can also occur when trans-feminine
folx are enticed into accessing dangerous, black-market transition procedures that put their lives at risk. Jessie shared that because many trans-women do not feel they can afford the transition surgeries and treatments that will get them closer to passing, they engage in ‘pump’ parties where someone will inject their breasts, thighs, and buttocks with silicone. The person administering this procedure is often not a healthcare professional and the silicone is construction grade. In essence, these women are subjecting themselves to toxic chemicals, often more than once. She knew of several people who had died from engaging in this practice. Taking such significant risks speaks volumes about the role that passing plays in a trans* person’s ability to navigate in society, while trying to reduce the likelihood of marginalization and precarity. The dynamics of passing will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

**Institutional Barriers in Employment Sectors**

In speaking with participants, the recursive nature of marginalization and precarity was placing many of them in a relentless and unforgiving cycle of social and economic instability. Several indicated that they remained in jobs and employment sectors that paid less, often to avoid scrutiny. However, these lower wage jobs also represent an obstacle to obtaining trans-medical care that might facilitate one’s ability to pass and thereby pursue jobs in more lucrative employment sectors. (AIS, Aod, E., Sally). While some folx were not necessarily focused on passing, the fact remains that access to many employment sectors is moderated by an individual’s adherence to heterosexist gender norms.

Many participants shared stories about the challenges they faced in not only seeking employment but also in maintain employment. Several also said that while they could not prove it, they believed that their job search was longer and more challenging because of their trans-gender identity (Aod, Betty, E., Lady in Pink, Mike, Sally). E. said that their workplace was “the
main place” where they experienced discrimination, sharing that although he could not prove it, he was pretty certain that he was “denied jobs” because of his trans* identity. Both Betty and Belinda work in the IT field and faced several challenges securing employment in that field. Betty said that she spent months searching for a job. As for Belinda, she/they said that while IT tends to be a male-dominated field and hiring women is desirable for developing diversity in the workforce, when employers learn you are a trans-woman, you are “no longer a good candidate for the position.” Job searching and applying put trans* folx at risk for being involuntarily outed to potential new employers.

In some cases, the documentation that accompanies this process often exposes disparities or incongruities (Aod, AIS, Gabriel, Lady in Pink). Lady in Pink expressed frustration about the challenges she faced finding a job when she moved to a new town and suggested that the disparity across employment documentation (resumes, letters of reference, background checks, credit reports, etc.) and gender presentation created “red flags” for potential employers. Gabriel also worried about potential employers’ perceptions of letters of reference that would likely use the wrong name and pronouns. Even worse, they wondered “What if they actually call people and in checking my references, my name and pronouns are off? So, I have to make sure to hide behind my other gender-neutral name and just let them be confused” (Gabriel).

Mike, who earned his master’s degree in social work in 2015, found it particularly challenging to find a job after graduate school. Despite his education, it was “very hard” to even get an interview. At the time, he had socially transitioned but had only begun taking testosterone the previous year and was “not passing at a hundred percent.” He said that because social workers must work with a wide array of clients and agencies, his trans-gender identity was under heavy scrutiny from many stakeholders. More recently, Mike applied for another position.
Knowing that mental health clients or patients are very perceptive, he broached the topic of his trans-gender identity in his interview. He said “They're likely gonna ask and they may not want to work with me. How, as an agency are you going to respond?” The interviewer replied, “Well, we are a Catholic agency.” Mike said they “back pedaled” after that remark and attempted to assure him that they would not allow clients to dictate such aspects of their care and support, but he did not find their answer particularly reassuring.

When talking about employment challenges, Aod said he took a five-year hiatus from his job, to avoid the risk of being recognized by former customers after his transition. When he was ready to return to his previous employer, he applied for a position with his former supervisor because she knew he was trans-gender and was the only one who would hire him back. Despite his previous employment, it took an additional half hour to hire him because of his name change, and he expressed frustration that he is still identified in the payroll system as a female. The company told him “HR can't change it. It has to go from HR to the store director, back to HR back down to me. Why does it take so many people to change gender at a grocery store?… This is a minimum wage job, and I have to go through this with my gender.” Ultimately, Aod pointed out that beyond the frustration of fighting to be recognized appropriately, is the danger of being outed again and again in the process. In telling his story, I noticed how frustrated Aod was by the process and the inflexibility he experienced.

Participants’ stories reflected a sense of being cast as ‘suspect’ because their identities were not consistently verifiable across their documentation. In the context of employment that could be wrongfully interpreted as a measure of their trustworthiness or legitimacy. There are, however, significant hurdles to eliminating some of these disparities. A common complaint was that the process for legally changing one’s name is overly complicated, time consuming, and
expensive. (Ares Nero, Belinda, Colt, Jasmine, Lady in Pink, Luke, Maxwell, Riley). “If anything in this world needs to change, … that process needs to change and be simplified” (Belinda). A person may spend between $170 to over $300 and expend a substantial amount of their time on this process. Jasmine also pointed that the current process leaves a public paper trail that potential harassers could easily use to track down trans* people, without their knowledge, leaving them vulnerable to potential harassment or violence.

Unfortunately, finding and getting the job was only the beginning for many trans* participants. Once hired, they still faced the likelihood that they may be denied opportunities or be fired. When Yarrow was hired to work in an upscale hotel and coffee shop, they encountered a heavily gendered dress code, but because they needed the money, they did their best to adhere while still maintaining their masculine identity. Sally shared that in her current job she had established a solid work record, but there had been no mention of promotions or raises, despite her co-workers already being offered those opportunities. She also said that in her previous job she felt that she had experienced the “glass cliff” under which she was hired but was not provided with the resources or training necessary to be successful, setting her up to fail and appear inadequate. Belinda had a job in her field and was anticipating a move into a new project, but when she became open about her transition, the move never happened, leaving her without viable employment. Despite her long-term service as a high school teacher “in a very rural school in a very Republican area,” Dawn said she fully expected to lose her job because of a “morals clause in our teacher’s contract.” Fortunately, she was not fired, but her anticipation of that possibility for simply being trans-gender was echoed by many participants. Although Rose had not undergone a transition, they suspected that they were fired because of their association with the queer community and being nonbinary. Rose said they could not prove it, but after
outing themselves in the previous shift, they were abruptly fired. Although they had never had any previous issues, their boss was “very conservative” and he “seemed very uncomfortable” when he was around Rose.

Many used the word fear when speaking about their employment situation and a general sense of having no recourse if they were to beouted and fired. Some of the work settings described by participants could be characterized as either intolerant or hostile. In some cases, participants were subjected to what they described as ‘microaggressions,’ such as using incorrect pronouns or mis-gendering (AIS, Aod, Crow, Darren, E., Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mish, Mike, Sally, Yarrow). In other cases, this hostility was demonstrated in heightened surveillance of behavior (Barnell, Lady in Pink). Lady in Pink described a time when she was hired as a temporary worker by a construction company, but was recognized by a supervisor who knew her before her transition. He called her into his office for a closed-door meeting and asked intrusive questions about her use of the women’s bathroom and her surgical history. She shared that she felt “violated” during this incident, and it made her cry. As she logically pointed out to me, her use of the women’s bathroom does not violate anyone’s privacy because there are stalls and locks on doors. “It’s not like it’s open” (Lady in Pink). In Barnell’s experience, he worked for a national retail chain, and they designated a specific bathroom for trans-gender employees, located at the back of the warehouse and poorly maintained. Barnell was noticeably upset as he described having to use the filthy bathroom as “humiliating” and “disgusting.” He went on to share that he felt having to use that bathroom put a “target” on his back and outed him to anyone who might see him using it.

In addition, folx told stories of how their co-workers had demonstrated transphobia in their interactions (AIS, Aod, E., Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mike, Moshe, Sally, Yarrow). When
working as a night desk clerk at a hotel, Lady in Pink’s co-worker outed her as a trans-woman, making her feel very vulnerable, and Aod described a similar experience when a co-worker outed him to a customer in his grocery checkout line. He immediately confronted the co-worker and made it clear that revealing his gender identity represented a significant threat to his safety.

As Lady in Pink observed,

We are already targets, and then when you think about the fact that anyone could come into the lobby and kill me in the middle of the night, and no one would find me until the morning- It’s very dangerous, and some people don’t get that.

Coming from a blue-collar background and working in food-service when she was younger, Sally personally witnessed the rampant homophobia and transphobia that people feel comfortable expressing in those environments. She said that the slur ‘tranny’ was used regularly, and she found most people really don’t understand trans-ness, often equating it to homosexuality as well as pedophilia. Yarrow recounted that in one of their jobs, co-workers “launched into a story of how that got one of the trans* servers to quit.” At that point, Yarrow said that they knew they were not safe to disclose their gender identity in that environment. Also working in food service, AIS talked about when he was in the process of socially transitioning, and was open about being trans*, but only one of his co-workers would respect his pronouns. He tried to approach another co-worker to ask for help in using male pronouns so that others would follow his lead, but the co-worker responded, “I can't do that for you, man” (AIS). AIS sounded disappointed and was convinced that if he had gotten one of “those dude bros” to help him, the culture would have become more accepting toward him. E. had a similar experience when they worked at a grocery store. They said that their co-workers refused to use E.’s new name and made jokes about their identity. When E. tried to address the issues with their team leaders, the co-workers were not corrected, and the team leaders showed favoritism toward them.
Most concerning of all, were stories that demonstrated ongoing and escalating threats of violation and violence. Jessie offered one of the most compelling stories about working in an extremely hostile work environment. Early in her transition, Jessie decided to move from her small town to a more urban area for a fresh start. She had decided to work in a manufacturing plant for one of the top auto manufacturers because the pay was good, but she described her experience working there as “a minefield or a tightrope.” From the beginning of her employment, she was sexually harassed by three different men and threatened with being beaten, raped, and even killed. While several of her male co-workers told her that she did not belong there, one man told her that she was a “monster,” and proceeded to follow her around trying to trip her while she was doing her quality assurance job.

Although she was very scared and knew that she could be “fired for no reason,” she did try to address the harassment through formal channels because the company promoted itself as LGBTQ+ friendly. Unfortunately, the company’s solution was to make both Jessie and the harassing co-worker sign a confidentiality agreement, and Jessie was moved to another area of the plant. She said that even though there were 20 men that worked on the line and saw this harassment, none of them spoke up for her. She then learned that the management in her new department had called a meeting and encouraged her co-workers to “make it hard on her” to make her quit. One of Jessie’s co-workers told her about this meeting, and she tried to stay and grind it out, but after three weeks of pressure, she finally gave up and quit. She learned later that the man who had been so hostile and threatening to her eventually admitted everything after she left the company.

**Precarity Associated with Employment Issues.** Trans-ness was also cited as a reason for participants working in lower wage jobs, which illustrates why many trans* folx face
economic instability. When speaking about income, Aod commented that when he initially filled out the demographics survey to participate in this research, there was not an option for an income of $10,000 or less, which applied to his situation. Aod also shared that he felt there was a long-term financial consequence for his trans* identity. After returning to the job, he is only making 85 cents more per hour than he was when he resigned seven years ago. Meanwhile, his co-workers have received substantially higher pay increases. Aod commented that trans-folx are often relegated to jobs that do not interact with the general public because employers want to avoid the potential for negative responses from customers or clients. Thus, trans* folx are often “behind closed doors … so people can’t see us,” performing sales calls, technical support, or customer service because employers do not want to take deal with uniform issues or changing policies to be inclusive (Aod). E. shared that his gender identity has definitely led to having to settle for service work. I’ve always worked more in the service industry of working in a restaurant, or in retail, things like that. I don’t think, like in a lot of places – I don’t feel I would be able to get hired being trans. There are some places that you would just feel like there’s just no way if I apply there that they would accept me. I don’t feel like I would fit in well or even get hired into an office type setting.

Unfortunately, continued economic instability, often associated with employment issues, is one of the many effects that flow from being marginalized in various domains of daily life. Relevant to this economic instability, what stood out to me was how many participants had experienced living in either substandard housing, subsidized housing, or had become homeless because of financial instability or lack of familial support (Aod, Barnell, Elliott, Jessie, Maxwell, Misha, Peat, Sally). Aod related the stark financial challenges faced by many trans* folx to the likelihood of housing instability in his assertion that “The average income listed in the 2016 Trans-gender Survey was less than ten thousand dollars, so that means that we are on couches or couch surfing.”
Often immersed in relentlessly marginalizing circumstances and economic instability, many trans* folx find themselves more vulnerable to being surveilled or policed for their trans-ness. In some cases, this was the result of the police being called because a trans-feminine or trans-masculine person attempted to access a bathroom that aligned with their gender identity (Barnell, Dawn, Kim). In other cases, trans-gender folx are often surveilled by the general public for simply conducting their daily lives. This may be as simple as walking down the sidewalk, driving a car, or attempting to go through airport security to board a plane (Aod, Barnell, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Sally). Lady in Pink also observed that when trans* folx cannot afford to take steps to transition, they are automatically vulnerable to policing when their gender presentation does not match their documentation. “They will put us in the male side, which is dangerous, you know, if I went to prison right now, they would put me in with the males.” She went on to point out that would put her at risk of being raped, beaten, or even killed (Lady in Pink).

As a Black trans-man who has experienced heightened policing by law enforcement for his racial identity, Barnell also spoke about similar concerns he had about being imprisoned according to the gender he was assigned at birth. “If I put up my hands to defend myself, I know I’m the one that’s going to be taken away in cuffs. Problem is I'm not gonna be assigned to the men’s prison, I'm gonna be assigned to the women’s [prison].” In many cases, unwarranted encounters with law enforcement seemed to occur because of stereotyping, particularly when trans-feminine folx were incorrectly perceived as sex workers or pedophiles (Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mish, Sally). Sally said that the way trans-women are “fucked with and harassed and abused is very concerning – it’s terrifying.” She went on to say that she did not think that police need a reason because they have made up excuses to stop her when she was simply walking to work.
The experiences with marginalization and precarity often reflected a vicious cycle that often endangered the physical safety of participants. When an individual is systemically marginalized in significant domains of their daily lives, they are unable to earn enough money to sustain themselves and secure sufficient and safe housing. This inherently creates the need for engaging in alternative economies without the protection of reliable shelter, thereby increasing the likelihood of being surveilled and policed. All these economic and social vulnerabilities concentrate further experiences of marginalization and subsequent precarity, which inherently threatens the physical safety of many trans-gender people.

Several participants indicated that they had experienced either threats of or actual encounters with physical violence (Betty, Elliott, Jessie, Mike, Sally). Jasmine observed, “There’s people out there that because they hate you because you’re trans*, they will stalk you and are willing to hurt you.” This physical danger is heightened by the fact that trans* folx have also experienced a limited level of support or protection from bystanders or even law enforcement when they need help (AIS, Barnell, Elliott, Jessie, Mike, Sally). As previously discussed, Jessie was subjected to daily threats of physical violence in her workplace from her co-workers, ranging from rape to murder, but none of her co-workers would speak up for her. Then, as previously discussed, when her friend was choking in the restaurant, no one would respond to her pleas for help. Similarly, when speaking with Elliott, they said that a man that lives in their subsidized apartment building does not like them because they are trans* and Black, so the man threatened to kill Elliott if he ever found them alone. When I asked if anyone witnessed the incident and was willing to help them, Elliott said that because they live in subsidized housing, people are afraid they could lose their housing if they get involved. As with Jessie’s experience in the restaurant and Mike’s experience after his night class, bystanders will
often avoid getting involved and may even sometimes walk away from an incident. Elliott went on to say that he reported the man’s threats to police, but he felt helpless because the police told him that they could not do anything unless the man tried to harm him.

Suffering actual violence, Sally shared that she had been robbed on two separate occasions. While she thought that one attack was simply a gang of kids who wanted to rob her, the other was transphobically motivated as she was called “tranny” several times during the attack. Although Lady in Pink said that she had not been the victim of violence, herself, she said that it is a constant source of fear for her. She spoke of the perpetual danger of being targeted not only conducting daily life, like going to the grocery store or the bank, but also the risk of intimate violence. She said that even when she attempts to develop intimate relationships, she is always alert to the fact that she is in danger of being harmed by someone for her trans-ness, particularly in the context of sexual encounters if she is perceived to be trying to ‘deceive’ someone. The fears of physical violence that so many trans* folx experience seem warranted, given that 38 states still allow the ‘gay panic’ defense in cases when someone has murdered a member of the LGBTQ+ community, most often during an intimate interaction.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented some compelling findings about the ways these trans* folx have experienced and understood marginalization in both the personal and public domains of their lives. In addition, I have discussed the various ways that their marginalizing experiences have negatively impacted their economic and social stability. Having laid out these foundational findings for their experiences of marginalization and precarity, in Chapter 5 I present more nuanced findings concerning the complexity of the intersectional experiences of marginalization that some participants described. In addition, I discuss the fundamental role that the concept of
‘passing’ has played in this context. Then, in Chapter 6, findings about how these trans* folx have experienced and understood representations of trans-gender identities in the public domain are explored. I also delve into the various strategies that participants have used to navigate experiences of marginalization, precarity, and representation.
CHAPTER 5
INTERSECTIONALLY COMPLEX EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZATION

In this chapter I present the participants’ beliefs about how their intersectionally complex identities have factored into their experiences of marginalization. Their stories provide some compelling insights to my research question, how does one’s intersectional identity, particularly regarding race and/or ethnicity, impact a trans-gender person’s marginalizing experiences and understanding of those experiences? I first discuss what they had to say about the role that race and ethnicity have played in those experiences. Often, they explained that they could not always easily separate experiences with their trans-gender identities from their racial identities. I assured them they should not feel obligated to make those distinctions if they were unsure, but that I wanted them to simply share their stories as they experienced them. Next, I present the themes that emerged from the interviews about the challenges they encountered with disability, sexuality, and gender. Last, I discuss the participants’ perspectives on the concept of ‘passing.’ The body politics associated with those complex dynamics will also be explored.

This research is premised on the essential importance of studying the experiences of trans* folx through the lens of intersectionality and acknowledging the complexity of experiences that emerge from intersecting sites of oppression. Thus, my interviews included several questions that focused on how those complexities might emerge when the sites of oppression overlap and intertwine. Gene’s observations about her own experiences provide a strong illustration to begin this discussion.
It's like a 'yes, and….' I carry multiple identities, so they kind of compound one another. I'm also a sex worker, and also a person of color. I'm also first generation, and also read and assumed to be female. So, there are a lot of things that compound each other. There's this idea that there's a type or way you have to look in order to pass as gender nonconforming, but often that translates to androgynous and Whiteness and I'm like, ‘No, that's not how that goes.’ So, it's a lot of things like these when we talk about gender. For me, it can't be totally removed from these other ‘values’ of identity that I carry.

**Implications of Race**

I first discuss what the Black and Brown participants shared, before delving into what White participants had to say regarding the implications of their racial identity to provide a comparison and illustrate the disparity between experiences. In discussing race, Black participants were able to share numerous experiences and examples of ways in which they have encountered racial marginalization. Several themes emerged from these interviews: destructive stereotypes, relentless surveillance and harassment, and frustration.

**Experiences of Black Folx**

**Destructive Stereotypes**

Both trans-women and trans-men of color spoke about demeaning and destructive stereotypes related to race. For example, both Mish and Jessie said that they are constantly subjected to the stereotypes that Black trans-women are all sex workers or are selling narcotics and have experienced over policing because of those stereotypes. Both were quick to point out that they respect that people “do what they have to do,” but resented the implications of being stereotyped in this way. Jessie said, “we are always put in a category of being ghetto and sex-workers. We don’t have our own brain. We don’t have no college education and all we do is have sex for money, … low income, not smart at all.” Jessie also said that she had been approached to perform in pornographic movies. From Jessie’s tone of voice, it was clear to me that she felt demeaned, saying, “I just know I get disrespect. I don’t get no respect and people
talk to me any kind of way, and it doesn’t happen to the other trans* girls, the White ones, at least.” With that said, it should be noted that trans-feminine participants also acknowledged that many Black trans-women are at much greater risk of resorting to sex work and narcotics sales because of the difficulty they experience in trying to achieve economic and social stability (Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mish, Sally). Once again, we can see the cascading effects of precarity that are generated from various domains of systemic marginalization. These stereotypes about Black trans-women are then propagated in the way that mainstream society represents their identities and the lives they lead. This will be examined further in my discussion of mainstream representations of trans-gender identities in Chapter 6.

Black trans-masculine participants also experienced pervasive stereotypes, but their stereotypes served to map a sense of danger or a threat over identities associated with Black men. In speaking with Ares Nero, Barnell, Elliott, and Moshe about the idea of being perceived as Black men in America, they shared some very compelling observations about the societal role of Black masculinity. Moshe characterized his experiences with being marginalized as a Black man as “constant.” He said that if he is simply walking somewhere and he passes someone on the sidewalk or street, usually a White woman, she will “either, like, move or get rigid a little bit, and kind of grasp her purse.” When asked what he believed was behind that reaction, he theorized that these women have essentially been told by society to view him as a threat or that as a Black man, he is “out to get” them, so they “react” in anticipation. Barnell also spoke about the perception of Black men being dangerous in the context of his attempt to use men’s restrooms. In putting himself in the mindset of the White people who have confronted him, he believes that they were fearful of him because Black men have been historically characterized as “rapists, raping our children and women.” Ares Nero also described the stereotypes in
considering how his life will change when he begins to medically transition and pass as a Black male. He observed that “people are far more aggressive and far more defensive with you when you’re a Black male. … So, I have to mentally prepare myself for being ready for people to look at me and just be like, ‘Oh, that’s a thug.’” He acknowledged that he is going to need to prepare for the time when he is perceived as a Black male and will have to become more aware of his surroundings than he has had to be, thus far.

Another element of this discussion involved experiences with being fetishized or hypersexualized, due at least in part, to one’s racial identity. Moshe, a Black trans-man, had also been fetishized by cis-White women and gay White men that he characterized as predominantly over the age of 50. Rather than being fetishized for his trans-ness, Moshe said “there’s a kind of like, strange mentality, like, racist mentality that they have of, ‘You're like a Black guy and here's what I'm like expecting from you.’” The implication from Moshe’s perspective is that these people were operating on the stereotypes and tropes surrounding Black masculinity. When Moshe inevitably tells these people that he is trans*, the reaction is most often negative, involving responses such as “You're disgusting!” or “You tricked me!” Moshe went on to say that the people who interact with him seem to be seeking the same “fetish” and when he has disclosed his trans* identity, he believes their reaction has been motivated by their anger at the notion that he “took something away” from them that they wanted. When Jessie explained how she was approached by a co-worker who asked her if she was a ‘special lady’ which she explained is code for a trans-woman in the Black community. “We are looked at as just a sex thing, a taboo, a forbidden fruit. It’s sad that we’re not one that they look at and say, ‘that’s somebody we want to have a relationship or get to know.’… They want you to mess with them, have sex with them, but don’t tell anyone.” Jessie’s experience provides a prime example of
being marginalized not only for her racial identity, or her trans-gender identity, but for the intricacies of both those identities. Further, it was clear to me that Moshe and Jessie had been essentialized down to particular elements of their social identities. They were no longer being viewed as human beings but as objects to be used and victimized by others because of their racialized gender identities.

**Relentless Surveillance and Harassment**

The theme of relentless surveillance and harassment was informed by stories involving heightened surveillance, unwarranted and excessive policing, a sense of being the ‘target’ or having a ‘bullseye’ on one’s back, and the constant presence of fear, anxiety, and anger because of incessant danger. The stereotypes described above have been used to bolster mainstream society’s insistence upon subjecting people of color to a relentless regime of surveillance and harassment from law enforcement as well as individual people. As Mish so aptly stated “I am Black Lives Matter all the time, … so that’s marginalization every day.” Barnell, Jessie, Mish, and Moshe also spoke about interactions with police officers and the understanding that they were at great risk of being arrested and harmed because of that interaction. Jessie shared that she had been pulled over eight times for suspected traffic infractions, one of which was for a supposed tint on the license plate that was nothing more than a thick film of dirt. Once stopped, the police officers claimed she had an expired tag which Jessie said was untrue. Moshe shared that he had previously lived in the same precinct in Minneapolis where George Floyd was killed by police officers, and had “issues with those very same officers.” While he lived in that area, he experienced nine traffic stops. On one occasion, Moshe was pulled over for not being “at speed” before reaching the speed limit sign. The officer then started shining his light in Moshe’s backseat and caught sight of a glass water bottle that had the word “agua” imprinted on it. The
officer asked him if it was alcohol, and of course Moshe pointed out that it said “water” on the bottle. Then the officer asked if he had a gun in the back seat. Moshe replied “No, I don't like guns. So why would I have a gun?” Fortunately, the police officer relented with his roadside interrogation and issued a ticket before allowing Moshe to pull away.

Although this experience was intrusive and potentially unwarranted, it was ultimately peaceful. While Moshe seemed relieved that the experience was peaceful, the greater importance of this experience is that he was painfully aware of the possibility of being the victim of police brutality. Mainstream society has become all too familiar with Black men and women being hurt or killed at the hands of law enforcement, but hearing Moshe’s perspective demonstrates the profound personal toll and fear that he is forced to live with as a result. In addition, Moshe’s relief illustrates the lens through which, he as a Black man, must view each encounter with law enforcement, regardless of the nature of the proposed infraction. While society sees numerous senseless deaths and can become almost numb to it, Moshe must never forget that his death is a real possibility in his daily life.

Mish talked about her awareness of how people of color often lose their lives in interactions with police or in their custody. “I feel that when cops show up, even if called by a Black person, the Black person always ends up in the back of the cop car. … It’s absolutely relentless.” Whenever she drives her car, she keeps all her paperwork on the seat rather than the glove box so that if she is stopped by police, she won’t be shot trying to retrieve the paperwork. Mish’s observation that people of color have a reason to fear police was reiterated by Barnell, “I have to determine ‘Is this the day that I’m gonna live or is this the day that I’m gonna die?’ And even though my hands are on the dash, visible and able to be seen, I'm scared to say the wrong thing.” Consequently, he will not drive at night and has his White fiancé drive because he does
not want to run the risk. He observed, “My fiancé can ask questions and not have to fear for her life that she's gonna die one day at the hands of an officer.” Of course, this type of surveillance and harassment is not isolated to driving. Barnell said that one of his neighbors called the police on him for standing in his own yard. Even though he had his physical address listed on his driver’s license as well as mail to prove that he lived at the home, the officers directed him to go inside to put the neighbors at ease.

**Frustration**

When faced with continued surveillance and the sense of being in persistent jeopardy, several participants expressed frustration. Understandably, Barnell was angry as he shared this experience, observing “I'm considered too dangerous to be walking around my own property that I pay rent for, … so to protect the White minority and to protect the people of non-color, I have to now go inside.” In speaking about the challenges of trying to find a potential partner, Moshe expressed some frustration about the challenges he faces as a Black trans-man. He reflected,

> When you’re, like, two things that are not popular with majority of people, … you can't get them cause you're like trans*, and you also can't get them cause you're Black. … The fact that I'm both kind of sets me up for failure on all fronts.

Given this dilemma and the potential for outright rejection and derision for his intersectional identity, it is understandable that Moshe has struggled with whether and how to disclose his gender identity when navigating the realm of dating.

One of the areas that both Barnell and Elliott seemed to feel frustrated about was how they were treated when they were attempting to get medical care. Their stories reflected feelings of having their medical concerns dismissed or ignored. When Elliott went to urgent care for a sinus infection, they were accused of pretending and seeking prescription painkillers, “the really addictive kind” although they said they are usually hesitant to even take Tylenol. On another
occasion, Elliott said that the nurses refused to provide instruction about how to self-administer hormone shots. Consequently, they incurred clotting injuries in their legs because they were unable to self-administer the shots safely. In this case, they felt the nurses may have acted this way both because of their trans* identity and racial identity. When I asked how they felt about being treated in these ways by healthcare professionals, Elliott said that it made them feel “terrible.” Elliott also shared that having their health concerns dismissed as fake or unimportant scared them because of a chart that has been circulating around the trans-community about the life expectancy for trans* folx. On this chart, Elliott noted that “a Black trans-person like me, I’m looking at 30 years old, and I’m 24.” When I probed further to ask where this chart came from, they were unable to tell me. I have been unable to find this chart, but undoubtedly, messages like this, suggesting that Black trans* folx may experience dramatically lower life expectancies than White trans* folx, seem extremely demoralizing and overwhelming.

Barnell also recounted a recent experience at an emergency room when he felt that his health concerns were not taken seriously because of his racial identity. Due to complications from anesthesia, he sought emergency medical attention for nausea and labored breathing. He was assigned a bay in the emergency room and administered IV fluids and oxygen, but while he was awaiting lab results, Barnell said that two other patients, both of whom were White, were brought in. He was moved into the hallway, and one of the White patients was moved into the bay. While it is difficult to know the details of what transpired and the reasoning behind this move, Barnell believed that the condition of those incoming patients was no more serious than his own, and he was “kicked out” into the hallway to await his labs. Although these circumstances cannot definitively be attributed to Barnell’s identity as a Black trans-man, his experiences with racial discrimination have undoubtedly shaped his understanding about how he
can expect to be treated in society. In addition to having his medical concerns seemingly dismissed, there were many times during Barnell’s interview when his frustration was palpable.

Adopted at a young age, he was 19 years old and a sophomore in college, when he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. He was not eligible for assistance under the Affordable Care Act or for sufficient financial aid to remain in college because his parents had claimed him as a dependent on their taxes. Barnell explained that they would not allow him to stay on their medical insurance because of the expense of insuring Barnell’s six siblings but in using him for a tax credit they had disqualified him from accessing financial help that he desperately needed.

I could not qualify for the Obamacare, and I couldn't qualify for a privatized insurance as a person of color. … So, I did what I had to do, and I had to try to get my own healthcare. I couldn't do both, so I had to drop out of school. (Barnell)

Barnell believed that his financial limitations, his medical conditions, and his race created barriers to affordable healthcare. He commented that he believed his health premiums were much higher than those of his White counterparts and so he could not pay for adequate coverage. Despite his best efforts, he continued to struggle financially and medically. “I had to decide which day I was really going to take my medication and which days I was gonna go without.” When he became too sick, he was forced to seek care in emergency rooms which resulted in “more debt and more debt upon the crippling ceiling that I was already drowning under.” Barnell said that he lived in his car for a long time and dug through trash cans for food because his parents would not accept his trans-gender identity.

I'm trying to tell people – it’s like I’m in quicksand. You are sinking literally to the bottom, barely gasping for air and there is no hope, a rope or vine, to pull yourself out because there's not enough resources for people of color. (Barnell)

When considering Barnell’s circumstances, there are numerous sites of intersectional oppression that have become concentrated, shaping a great deal of how he experiences the world.
His adoptive parents’ choice to exploit the tax system by claiming him as dependent while simultaneously abandoning him financially and psychologically has likely played a critical role. Once placed in that precarious situation, Barnell has had to navigate his life from an intersectionally complex social location as a Black trans-man who struggles with poverty and physical as well as psychological disabilities. While race is not the only site of his oppression, Barnell’s experiences of fear and frustration reflect a lot of similarities to those shared by other Black participants. The fact remains that he perceived his oppression to be in large part attributable to his racial identity.

**Experiences of Brown Folx**

While Black participants’ experiences seemed to focus more on their experiences with institutions and White mainstream society, Brown participants’ accounts reflected something a bit different. Aod talked about the marginalization he has experienced because he does not fit solely in any one distinct race, culture, or gender. “I’m never gonna be one hundred percent anything. I’m a mix of Native and Scottish, a mix of male and female. I’m, mixed cultures, mixed everything.” In Aod’s case, the marginalization he spoke about came from within the Native American community. He shared that there are some people who have told him that because he is lighter-skinned he should not be able to identify himself as Native American because he is not exposed to the same oppression and marginalization that darker skinned Native Americans experience, even though his tribe voted in 2012 to dispel “that kind of thinking. All of us are native and that’s it” (Aod). For Yarrow, being of mixed racial and ethnic identity (Columbian, Latinx, and Irish) has been problematic regarding their gender identity because of a staunch patriarchal cultural tradition. Taking on a masculine gender presentation has resulted in
Yarrow’s family confronting them for abandoning their feminine cultural obligations to cook, clean, nurture, mother, and serve elders and patriarchs.

Gene also spoke about the stereotypes that they have encountered as a person who was assigned female at birth and is of Asian descent. They indicated that mainstream society sees them as an Asian, cis-gender woman, and they consequently experience being fetishized for that racialized gender identity, not only in their experiences as a sex worker and a performer in the adult film industry but also when they are walking in public. Gene recounted being followed by unfamiliar men who engaged in sexual harassment with racial overtones. While they did not provide specific examples, it was clear that Gene specifically interpreted the men’s behavior as “fetishization.” Gene’s and Aod’s experiences illustrate their own intersectionally complex encounters with marginalization although they seemed to have different implications from those experienced by Black participants. Based on what was shared, it seemed that Black participants experienced more overt and intense racial marginalization in more contexts when compared to Brown participants.

**Awareness of White Privilege**

When I asked White participants how they believed their race impacted their experiences of being a trans-gender person, all but one indicated an overt sense of protection or privilege in comparison to Black and Brown trans* folx. An overarching theme that emerged from these discussions was an awareness of privilege and subsequent safety because of that privilege. In speaking about the implications of race, they spoke in terms of understanding that they did not feel a heightened vulnerability to violence or policing, while simultaneously acknowledging their awareness of the dangers to trans-feminine people of color, in particular (Belinda, Betty, Crow, Darren, Dawn, E., Kim, Lady in Pink, Maxwell, Ryan, Sally). Sally observed that even though
she is poor, a trans-woman, struggles with mental illness, and has been a sex-worker and homeless, “the only thing that I can point to that is keeping me alive is my Whiteness.” Crow also said, “I think I've had such an easy transition because in part, at least, because I'm White and I have that privilege.”

Other participants indicated that they felt fortunate for having access to appropriate healthcare and education and that their interactions had been predominantly positive (Dawn, E., Lady in Pink, Morrow, Ryan). “Literally, there is that bias against people of African American descent, whereas people just tend to believe people like me, just because of the color of my skin” (Morrow). Similarly, Ryan observed that his Whiteness has likely shielded him from some discrimination around his trans-ness, and he suspected that “Doctors haven’t tried to talk me out of any of my medical procedures, like, I've never had to explain why I wanna do X Y, Z, or had to explain how I'm going to get the funds to do X, Y, Z, in ways that my friends who are Black or Brown have had to do.” While none of this is particularly surprising, it was encouraging that these White participants acknowledged the disparity between their own experiences and security and the lack thereof for Black trans* folx. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that so many of these folx recognize their privilege, which is not the case for a large contingent of White mainstream society. It seemed to prompt further consideration of how their experiences of being marginalized for their trans-gender identity might have provided opportunities to develop an awareness of the greater implications of intersectionality for others who do not have the same social and economic advantages as they do.

In talking about the implications of race on experiences of trans-ness, a few trans-masculine folx reflected on their understanding of acquired White male privilege and the implications of that privilege (AIS, Crow, N.). Crow observed that he has been lucky during his
transition, “I'm just a White guy, you know, and like, that's basically the easiest thing in America to be.” AIS made a similar observation when he said, “a White male is probably the easiest way to live life, so I probably have it a lot easier than other people.” Adding credence to this awareness, Aod observed that the only reason he was able to buy his home was because he has a lighter shade of skin and can pass as White. Earning $20,000 a year at his full-time job, he was certain that he was able to get a bank loan because the bank believed he was a White person.

N. also discussed his concerns about racial and gender dynamics that will occur when he gets to a point of passing as a man. In trying to find an accepting venue for his current gender identity, he shared that the Black male leather community, a group of like-minded gay Black men who engage in sexual practices such as kink and BDSM (bondage, discipline, submission/sadomasochism) (Hennen, 2008), has been incredibly supportive and receptive to him. N. did not explicitly indicate that he was accepted as a member of this community, but he said that he has interacted in those community spaces and has had to learn to avoid centering himself as the White person in that setting. With that said, when I asked him if he had thought about White male privilege, he said that he had thought about it “Every fucking day, every day … because the world doesn't need another fucking, White guy. And here I am becoming a White guy.” He went on to say that it is critical to him that he learns from the poor examples of male behavior he has encountered in his own life so that he can avoid engaging in those behaviors.

When speaking with nonbinary and genderqueer folx about the implications of race, Null observed that there tends to be an assumption of ‘Whiteness’ because it is often viewed by mainstream society as an indulgence that generally only White people have the social space to occupy. “As long as capitalism has been around, especially the more overt forms of queerness are considered to be, at best, frivolous and worst, counter revolutionary. But it's all always
expected to be mapped onto White bodies.” Rose also observed that being White has meant they will encounter fewer obstacles as they navigate the potential of being marginalized for their gender identity. Rose indicated that having the privilege of access to good schools and going to college were responsible for their realization of being nonbinary, which they observed would not have been as likely if they had been born a person of color. P. also observed that being White has “saved my life and saved my wellbeing, like, so many times.” Although P. has been without predictable and stable housing on many occasions, they believe that they were able to gain access to showers and “under the table” housing arrangements because “people would trust me to pay cause I’m White.”

**Drawing Connections Between Transphobia and White Supremacy**

Going beyond the acknowledgement of White privilege, several participants drew stark parallels between mainstream society’s construction of transphobia and White supremacy.

Barnell asserted that it,

felt like oppression and back towards segregation again because you can identify as a trans-gender, but you have to go to ‘your’ bathroom because it's safer for society, as a whole. Like, I feel like I'm back in 1965 -- not able to use the restrooms up front. I have to basically go to the single use bathroom that's specifically been assigned for trans-gender people.

Kim also offered some thought-provoking context about ‘bathroom bill’ policies.

Especially with laws about bathroom use, the message seems to focus on trans-women more than anyone else. It really goes back to the Jim Crow laws when Black men were considered dangerous or suspicious and we had to so-called protect women, especially White women, from being harmed. So – that has now carried over to focusing on trans-women as if they are just men in dresses, threatening women.

I found these comments particularly interesting because both Barnell, a Black trans-man, and Kim, a White trans-man, had lived in southern states where Jim Crow laws were in place and
enforced from the 1870s until 1965, thereby codifying the marginalization of generations of people of color.

Echoing these thoughts, Sally spoke more broadly about the connections she saw between these systemically sanctioned forms of oppression. “I would really like there to be a lot more messaging about white supremacy and how it ties in with transphobia … Our concept of only two genders in the world is intrinsically just a very white idea and we have cultures and civilizations all over the globe that have had various third genders.” Sally suggested that if trans* identities become more widely represented and normalized, then it might be possible to create the social space to expose and problematize the underlying connection that she believes exists between white supremacy and transphobia. These discussion of intersecting racial and gender identity-based oppression are extremely provocative and expose the complex and destructive structures that continue to preserve the privilege of specific groups while simultaneously preserving the marginalization and precarity of others.

**Implications of Disability**

Another factor of marginalization that can often be overlooked is that of living with disabilities. Gabriel, who is blind, applied to participate, explicitly because they noticed there was no mention of disability in the introductory information and wanted to provide some representation for trans* folx who live with disabilities. Aptly proving Gabriel’s point, another participant, Aod, specifically expressed the desire to hear from a blind trans* person because “we never hear about the perspectives and experiences of blind trans* people.” There were several participants who specifically indicated that they live with at least one “disability” (Barnell, Elliott, Gabriel, Kim, Ryan). With that said, many participants described debilitating physical and psychological challenges.
Physical Disability

Gabriel provided the most targeted insights about the complex experiences of marginalization associated with also living with a disability. Unfortunately, Gabriel’s interview occurred near the end of my data collection process, so I was unable to collect further data surrounding the specific challenges of disability in the context of this study. While Gabriel indicated that they have experienced some marginalization from family and systemic institutions, regarding their trans-masculine identity, they said that they have experienced far more related to their disability than their gender identity because, “Anything that deals with disability assumes you're very straight.” In speaking with Gabriel, it became blatantly clear that a great deal of the marginalization that occurred around their blindness was systemic in nature.

When trying to engage with the healthcare system or support services, Gabriel spoke about pervasive issues with accessibility. “Dealing with the healthcare system from a blindness perspective has been shitty.” Gabriel said that they are entitled to a lot of assistance and services, but many times the forms are not accessible, and rather than address the problems, bureaucrats place the onus on Gabriel to work through third parties, so the assistance and services are often delayed. In many cases, Gabriel said that they must force people to do their jobs, and it is a big source of frustration and anxiety. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, they have had a great deal of difficulty applying for housing subsidies and food assistance through their city and state’s online portals because these systems are not accessible even though they are legally required to be. Consequently, they have really struggled during all the pandemic lock-down measures because they live in an urban area that has a high cost of living. The other frustration Gabriel spoke about was that to gain access to the aid and services they could benefit from, “You have to be open to have more people mucking around in your life. And so, you have many more
opportunities for somebody to have a problem with the way you are living your life.” They have gone without many things they are entitled to because they do not want to be at the mercy of a system that is essentially set up to invalidate their identity.

When talking about their blindness in connection with their trans-masculine identity, Gabriel said that when they were in the process of planning top surgery, they experienced condescension when the first surgeon they consulted spoke as if Gabriel “didn’t know the implications of having surgery and how to take care of [themselves].” Gabriel was offended and angered by the assumption that they were not competent, given the fact that they were over 50 years old and more than capable of doing so. At that point, they decided to find another surgeon but were also faced with the challenge of not being able to view photographs of surgeons’ results. They had to find someone who could help by viewing pictures of surgeons’ results, so that they could make an informed decision.

I was trying so hard to find anybody who would just look at photos for me, I guess, and describe the differences, and nobody would do it. It was such a big responsibility, and I just want someone’s subjective opinion. I just want something to go by and finally, I had a friend who was willing to do it. (Gabriel)

It became clear that Gabriel faced many obstacles when navigating daily life because systems and institutions that are supposed to support independence and self-advocacy take ability and ease of access for granted.

In addition to Gabriel’s experiences, I was able to learn more about the immense challenges Barnell had experienced because of several serious conditions that require medication. To qualify for healthcare assistance and have his medications paid for, Barnell is restricted to earning a gross income of no more than $12,068.00 a year. Although he had tried to work full time and earn enough to support himself and afford insurance, he was unable to do so under the guidelines and limits of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). With no financial support
from his family and strict limitations on his earning capacity, Barnell expressed his feelings of
overwhelming frustration and oppression throughout our conversation. His candor about the
severe marginalization and precarity he had endured because of his intersectional identity was
extremely compelling and heartbreaking.

I have the, you know, bipolar disorder type 2, where you have like the maniac depression.
On top of that, I have anger explosive disorder, which I have just bouts of anger that just
comes out of nowhere, and I have to do therapy for that. I have anxiety, PTSD from a lot
of what I’ve told you about my life - the, the, the, the things are endless. … I don't have
the results, but I'm also being tested for being on the spectrum of Asperger’s because my
doctor thinks that I have Asperger’s. So, I might even be on the spectrum with some type
of autism. Everything else that I'm doing, and just to get the insurance premium, just to
say that I have insurance so I wouldn't be charged over $6,000 for tax season for the
insurance was totally out of reach for me.

Barnell’s debilitating physical as well as mental health conditions also remind us that many folx
struggle with disabilities that are often overlooked because they are psychological in nature.

Mental Health

Many folx expressed feelings of fear, exhaustion, isolation, sleeplessness, and suicidal
ideation. Most also spoke about the mental health challenges they grappled with because of the
consequences of their gender identity in addition to other conditions that compound the threats to
their psychological safety (Aod, Ares Nero, Barnell, Belinda, Darren, Dawn, Darren, E., Elliott,
Jasmine, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Maxwell, Mike, Null, Rose). As previously discussed, most trans-
masculine and trans-feminine participants suffered from dysphoria in varying degrees. Maxwell
shared, “I have a lot of hatred about my body. I don't like my body and so I don't take care of it
like, I should.” He went on to say that he had gained about a hundred pounds since high school
because of this hatred.

Ares Nero, who had not yet come out to his parents as trans*, spoke about how difficult it
was for him to mentally brace himself to be ‘dead named’ and about the “anxiety rollercoaster,”
he was on as he thought about when to come out to his parents. Jessie indicated that she often feels “exhausted” and “fearful,” and she has difficulties sleeping and struggles with going into bigger stores because she is “terrified” of being detected as trans*. While she says that friends tell her she needs to enjoy the ride now that she has come out and begun transitioning, she said that she feels like she is on a “roller coaster,” and that it is hard to enjoy life because she is always worried. E. said that the transphobia they experienced in the workplace was “definitely difficult to handle. It definitely wore at me for quite a while. … I definitely think that the negative treatment made my other health problems worse because of the stress.”

A few nonbinary participants indicated that their emotional well-being had also been negatively impacted by their gender identities. Null shared that when they were younger and struggling with identity, they began to pick aggressively at their hair and skin to prevent the growth of body hair, resulting in scarring. They also experienced bouts of deep isolation and depression because they struggled to socialize, fearing stigmatization for any gender incongruity. Rose also said that they have struggled with issues of trust and anger about being delegitimized and invalidated by their family as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

There's still that thing in the back of my head because other people tell me ‘You're not trans* enough to be trans*.’ It just feels bad. It just makes me like, it makes me angry, makes me frustrated, makes me sad. So, it takes a toll.

The topic of suicide also came up quite often during the interviews. Barnell, Dawn, Belinda, Sally, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Morrow, and Moshe all spoke about struggles with suicidal ideation and in some cases multiple attempts on their own lives. For some, the ideation was placed in the context of being closeted and unable to live their true identities (Belinda, Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Moshe). In these cases, the participants gave me the sense that despite the
challenges and stigma they face, they felt that they were better off than before they transitioned. With that said, Sally soberly observed that “Suicide is rampant in the trans-community.”

When talking about the psychological toll of being a trans-woman, Lady in Pink talked about how it is not surprising that the suicide rate is so high for trans* folx, given that the Trump-era policies allowed healthcare professionals to prejudicially deny medical care to transgender people. She explained that for many trans* folx, gender dysphoria can be very overwhelming and when they are denied access to resources and care to transition, many have engaged in traumatic self-mutilation and struggle with suicidal ideation. Barnell, who attempted suicide on three occasions, spoke about the anger and hopelessness he felt when he was unable to support his family and take care of himself because he had so much holding him back and keeping him from going back to school. “You’re either constantly angry or you're constantly feeling helpless and overwhelmed because you can't get out of the quicksand … and so, then you just -- you feel oppressed” (Barnell).

Despite what is known about the negative psychological impact of gender dysphoria and the high suicide rates among trans* folx, they face similar challenges in finding appropriate mental health care. While she shared that she was currently satisfied with the medical care she was receiving, Lady in Pink wanted to emphasize that not only is there a shortage of competent trans-medical physicians, but there is also a grave shortage of trans-competent therapists. She shared that her therapist was not prepared to help her navigate the challenges of her transition, and she believed that most therapists are not trained to help their patients deal with their dysphoria. Rose also spoke about the need for mental health professionals who are trained to support people who are struggling with and navigating around issues with gender identity.

Being misgendered and being discriminated against and having this additional barrier, takes a toll on your mental health, but I felt like I was never able to address that within
that specific context, because they never offered. What is your gender identity? They never asked about. So, I was never really acknowledged as a person. (Rose)

Implications Within the LGBTQ+ Community

As an advocate and ally for trans-gender folx, the area of marginalization that I found so disheartening was the level of marginalization that some participants experienced in the context of interacting within the LGBTQ+ community. While this was not the case for every participant, it seemed ironic and senseless to me that a community, rooted in the premise of inclusivity and acceptance, would engage in overt exclusionary behavior and discourses. Their stories seemed to demonstrate two overarching themes – body politics and respectability politics.

Body Politics

Evidence of body politics was demonstrated in several ways. In speaking about his experiences within the LGBTQ+ community, Ares Nero said that in his Facebook groups, specifically for people of color, there is a lot of discussion about how the gay community is “Whitewashed.” When asked if he agreed, he said he did because he had often seen posts on Grinder from White gay men, and they will specify “White only” or “no Black or Hispanic.” Although I discussed racial marginalization previously in this chapter, I thought it was important to place Ares Nero’s thoughts here, in the context of his interactions with the LGBTQ+ community because it best emphasizes the heightened complexity of some folx’ experiences of intersectional marginalization. Ares Nero observed that as someone who is racially mixed, he is not viewed as White and “a lot of White gays in the community are still racist, or to a degree, inherently racist because again, White privilege is still a big thing. Even if you’re gay, if you’re White, you can make it farther in society than someone that is not.” Admittedly, Ares Nero was the only participant of color that spoke directly about racism in the context of the LGBTQ+
community, but the interview protocol did not place particular emphasis on racism within this community, so further research would be needed to comment further on this aspect of marginalization.

Body politics also came out of several interviews when folx discussed the rejection they encountered from gay men and lesbian or queer women, both online and in person. Not only were many marginalized by cis-gender heterosexual people in their efforts to find romantic and intimate partners, but they also have had to endure it from members of the LGBTQ+ community. These stories also revealed an emphasis on genitalia as well as a fear of ostracism from gay and lesbian communities. Several participants suggested it was as if they would be viewed as not being ‘gay enough,’ if they were to have a relationship with a trans* man or woman, essentially equating a person’s gender solely with their genitalia (Aod, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Luke, Maxwell, Moshe, Nin, Ryan, Sally). Maxwell shared that on one occasion he had been interested in pursuing a relationship with a gay acquaintance, but the man said that he could not go any farther in exploring the relationship because “he felt like if he had sex with someone who had a female body then he would be ostracized by other gay men because you know, he’d be seen as not really being gay.”

Moshe also recalled an experience when he had been communicating with a man on Tinder for approximately seven months, and as they were planning their first meeting, the man wanted to clarify if this would be a “date” or just “hanging out.” Moshe responded that it would depend on how he answered the question ‘What are your thoughts on me being trans?’ Unfortunately, the response did not come until four hours later in a lengthy response, saying the man was not sexually attracted to vaginas and, “I know I'm making a lot of assumptions about, like, surgery that you've had, or, like, may not have had but, like, I'm just not really feelin' it.”
This response clearly demonstrated an unvarnished focus on genitalia to determine partner suitability. Nin also shared that despite his openness about being trans* in his online bio, some men only looked at his profile picture and when they realized he didn’t have a penis, they would get defensive, accusing him of lying or being a “fake guy.”

When talking with trans-feminine participants about the difficult experiences they have had with lesbian and queer women, Jessie said, “I know people are all fired up about trans* lesbians because they’re saying, ‘You’re just changing gender just to get with women.’” Jessie was irritated by these types of claims because it wrongfully equates anatomy with gender identity and once again suggests a type of deception. Lady in Pink also described her challenges of finding a relationship in which she would be viewed as a lesbian and running into explicit phobias about her current genital condition. “The problem I have with finding a girlfriend is most lesbians will say ‘You’re pretty, but you have a penis,’ and they want nothing to do with a penis even if I have no intention of using it.” Not only do these stories demonstrate a primary focus on genitalia, but many of them also provide examples of the perception that trans* folx engage in intentional deception or trickery.

Another theme relevant to body politics within the LGBTQ+ community emerged in the way some trans-folx are treated by other trans* folx who have undergone extensive medical transitions. Quite a few participants expressed a concern about being “not enough” because some folx in the trans* community serve as gatekeepers, equating the lengths that one is willing to go in medically transitioning with one’s level of commitment to fully transitioning (Belinda, Lady in Pink, Maxwell, Mish, Moshe, Ryan, Sally). “Often, you're told you're not enough. …The whole discourse within the trans community is about being trans* enough” (Maxwell). Several
participants discussed how the trans-medicalist\textsuperscript{4} faction of the trans* community often engages in aggressive gatekeeping about who can and, more pointedly, who cannot be considered trans-gender. Both Sally and Belinda discussed how these gatekeepers actively delegitimize trans* folx who have not undergone some of the most invasive surgeries associated with transitioning toward the most binary forms of gender presentation. Sally contended that it is a bit surprising that this sub-group even emerged as such a vocal faction because there have always been trans* folx who fall at different points on the gender spectrum with a great deal of biological diversity. Belinda suggested that the problem is perhaps one involving terminology, as trans-medicalists have abandoned the term transsexual and have instead distorted the definition of trans-gender to fit their own purposes, simultaneously delegitimitizing those trans* folx who have not, for a host of reasons, engaged in an aggressively medical transition.

An example of this was offered when Mish shared her experience about the negative feedback she received from other trans-women of color on social media when she posted a picture early in her transition. She was shocked, demoralized, and “devastated” by their insults, saying that behavior like this “invalidates your experience, and you’re not enough”. Lady in Pink also indicated that there tends to be “animosity” between trans-women because the transition to being “pretty” is longer and harder for some, particularly if a trans-woman starts her transition earlier and tends to have more feminine features and body chemistry. This form of gatekeeping understandably seemed to have a negative impact on several of the participants’ senses of self and identity. Equating surgery to legitimacy and commitment smacks of privilege and emphasizes the pivotal role that the concept of passing has been given in the interaction between

\textsuperscript{4} This term refers to someone who believes that to be trans-gender a person must experience gender dysphoria and engage in medical treatment as part of their transition. (Zhang, 2019). In the context of these interviews, the participants’ emphasis was placed on the requirement of surgical treatment.
trans* marginalization and precarity. The significance of passing, a trans* person’s ability to avoid detection for being trans-gender by convincingly enacting the gender they associate with, is discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

**Respectability Politics**

In addition to body politics, many trans* folx were also victimized by the complex dynamics of respectability politics. The emphasis on the shape of bodies, as I have just discussed, feeds into the idea that those who do not assimilate to the acceptable gender enactments threaten the ‘progress’ of not only trans* folx but also the broader LGBTQ+ community. Ryan shared that in his dealings with some trans-medicalists, he has found that they are “angry” because they believe, “people who aren’t really a trans-man or trans-woman come in and essentially undo all of the committed trans* people's hard work because they've done all this work to push for better access to surgeries.” In essence, the treatment they received from others in the trans* community gave many participants reason to believe that their perceived inability to pass was being interpreted as jeopardizing the capacity of trans* folx to assimilate into mainstream society (Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mish, Ryan, Sally).

Beyond the ability to pass, some participants shared that they felt like their concerns were not recognized by the broader LGBTQ+ community. Often, winning the legal protection for same-sex partners to marry and adopt children seems to be the end of the discussion for equitable access, and trans* folx are viewed as a threat to the larger community’s political progress (Jessie, Luke, Maxwell, Moshe). Luke said he thought that gay and lesbian members of the community often believe that they have done enough fighting for things like marriage equality. Further, they seem to resent trans* folx tagging on their gender identity issues to take advantage of the work that’s already been done. “I think that there is still just a lot of perception that it is a fetish, or it's
a phase, [and] I think that there's just kind of a lack of understanding” (Luke). Perhaps it is that lack of understanding that has led some trans* folx to feel forgotten or dismissed, such as Jessie who aptly observed “We get skipped over, the LGB, -T, all the other letters really are kind of protected, but Ts are silenced, for some reason.”

Jessie, Luke, Mike, Null, and Sally spoke about the push back they have either experienced or witnessed coming from some lesbians and queer women within the community. Luke and Null both said that they had observed lesbians aggressively arguing against including trans-women in lesbian spaces, placing an emphasis on genitalia being determinant of being ‘real’ women. Sally also described the issues she has had with women she characterized as T.E.R.F.s, an acronym for trans-gender excluding radical feminists, who openly oppose recognizing or accepting trans-gender women as women. She indicated that this faction of the queer women’s community has actively sought to invalidate and delegitimize trans-women. Sally also talked about an annual event that is often cited among the trans* community, the now defunct Michigan Womyn’s Music Fest, that queer women often attended. According to Sally, the event had previously held workshops that were specifically targeted toward topics such as “how to get trans* people fired” in the workplace. When she made her concerns known to her local LGBTQ+ organization about their support and promotion of these events, she was criticized for being “too harsh” (Sally). Mike also spoke about the Michigan Womyn’s Music Fest, and said that he attended the year before he transitioned and experienced this transphobia for himself. He said that this discourse argued that transitioning delegitimized the significance of the identity of the ‘butch’ woman. Mike agreed that this identity is “absolutely valid,” but he said that any physical transition away from the female body was viewed as a betrayal or abandonment. Mike noticed that once he transitioned,
The lesbian people that I was friends with faded away. Some of them told me, ‘You're ridiculous. Why would you do this? Society has told you the female is bad, and this is all because of the evil men.’ And then, somehow becoming a traitor was the sentiment that was coming across, and I was taking the easy way out. (Mike)

Nonbinary and genderqueer participants also seemed to be affected by concerns about respectability politics. More often their experiences reflected themes of confusion or invalidation. E. and Rose both talked about being told they do not exist or that they “are not real.” Despite the challenges of being excluded by some factions within the community, trans-gender folx are more often perceived to be adhering to some aspect of the gender binary and thus are generally recognized as existing within the community. Because nonbinary and genderqueer folx engage in less binary gender dynamics, many people dismiss their gender identity because they cannot conceive of “where they fit,” and so they “don’t quite know what to do” with them (Luke). Yarrow observed, “I’m just not enough because of whatever standards are set.”

E. observed that when he came out as nonbinary he was viewed as an attention seeker. “I feel like nonbinary folks really get pushed into this unfair gray area. It definitely sucks that a lot of society feels that way and still doesn't think that I'm valid or my identity is real” (E.) When asked where they think this dismissive discourse comes from, Rose suggested that some view the idea of a nonbinary gender identity as “undermining” the identity of binary trans* folx who have medicalized their transitions. “Even from straight, White trans* people, it's like 'You're too complicated; you're muddying our message of what it means to be trans*’” (Rose). The rhetoric faced by nonbinary folx is very similar to what is experienced by so many trans* folx who cannot or do not engage in more of the comprehensive programs of medical transitioning. While trans* folx are “not enough,” nonbinary folx “do not exist.”
A Vivid Illustration of Intersectionally Complex Marginalization

One of the most compelling stories I heard was from Mike. He is not only trans-gender but is also having to navigating parenthood with a gender nonconforming child who struggles with a host of challenges beyond gender identity. Mike’s situation serves as a crucial illustration of how he and his wife are focused on preparing their child for how the world will likely make every attempt to marginalize him. When I asked him about this, Mike responded with stark honesty, indicating that he had “no clue” and was struggling. He told me that his adopted child is living an “intersectional life to the nth degree” because he is a child of color, has a low IQ, has suffered trauma, has mental health issues, all in addition to his gender nonconformity. Because his child is not mentally strong and cannot understand the consequences of committing to labels and identities, Mike has been hesitant to move in that direction. Instead, he and his wife have approached the situation by introducing the idea of safe spaces with their child in the context of his desire to wear girls’ clothing. While they do not discourage him from dressing the way he prefers, Mike and his wife are building clear lines of communication with their child so that he understands that while they would like to ensure his safety in all places, they cannot always protect him from experiencing negative issues at school even from his own siblings. With that said, they have been fortunate to have supportive adults in his child’s school, and he knows he can go to those safe adults if he feels unsafe while at school.

The other issue, not surprisingly, Mike and his wife have had to navigate and prepare their child for is the challenges of accessing bathrooms. Mike said that he has really emphasized being open with all their children about his own trans* identity, so they are aware of the safety concerns that he must always keep in mind. Faced with his child’s desire to use the women’s restroom, Mike said they have introduced him to gender neutral bathrooms and explained that
“those are what Dad feels safest using.” Even so, Mike still fears for his child’s safety particularly because he and his siblings are getting older and need a little more independence. In response, Mike and his wife have instituted a buddy system for their children, so no one goes into a public restroom alone. Mike said,

I cannot safely send him to the bathroom by himself. He has already been hurt. He has already been traumatized. I cannot send my child to the bathroom. I can't, and I'm scared. I think about all of my experiences. I've been privileged because of my race, or because I’m FtM, not MtF. There’s also privilege in that.

I could hear the deep concern in his voice as he expressed his genuine fears about not being able to keep his child safe from the marginalization that he will most assuredly experience. Despite Mike’s admitted uncertainty about how to navigate the significant challenges of preparing his child for the maze of intersecting sites of oppression that await him, it was truly clear to me that Mike and his wife were trying to take control to hopefully shield their child from some of the most significant marginalization and precarity that could threaten their child’s safety and well-being.

**Implications of Passing – Conduit or Obstacle?**

I will now discuss a pivotal element of this research that provided some significant insight about how experiences of marginalization and precarity for some trans* folx are constructed and reinforced. I lay out the findings about the concept of passing and what participants had to share about the role it has played in their daily lives. Although the concept of passing was not specifically addressed in my primary research questions, I decided to include a question in the interview protocol in case it may be a significant point of discussion. After just a few interviews, it became very apparent to me that the idea of passing is a critical element to acknowledge and problematize in the context of discussing the implications of intersectionally complex identities.
Whether someone passes or not is focused squarely on a trans* person’s ability to successfully convince mainstream society that they are a cis-gender man or woman by their appearance and behaviors. Perceived assimilation and conformity to the body politics of the gender binary are at the heart of what it means for someone to achieve a state of passing. Discussion and comments surrounding the concept of passing fell into three themes: the consequences of not passing, obstacles to passing, and the social impacts of successfully passing. Aod reflected, “It’s literally like you try and stereotype yourself as much as possible so that you’re perpetuating gender stereotypes. … It’s a rock and a hard place because either you’re perpetuating stereotypes, or you’re not recognized as you.” With this standard in place, a trans* person’s inability to pass as the targeted gender makes them vulnerable.

When speaking with Jessie and Mish, both Black trans-women, they began this conversation with the premise that the concept of passing is highly controversial for trans* folx, emphasizing that everyone’s identity is “legitimate and valid.” Jessie explained that the reason for the controversy is that some people have easier and earlier transitions, helping them to pass more effectively; however, it is drastically different for folx who transition later in life, often struggling with the hormonal effects of puberty. “If your bones are already fused, if you haven’t caught it before or during the time you’re going through puberty, you can’t change that” (Jessie). In these conversations I found myself thinking that the idea of passing has essentially been weaponized against trans* folx if they are visible, forcing mainstream society to acknowledge their existence.

Consequences of Not Passing

When participants discussed the consequence of not passing, many expressed the feeling of being invalidated or dehumanized (Aod, Barnell, Dawn, Jessie, Kim, Maxwell, Mike, Mish,
Ryan, Sally). Both Kim and Elliott described the visceral effect of not passing and consequently being misgendered as a “gut punch.” Jessie observed that when someone passes, they can expect to be “treated like a human being. … People don’t like talking about passing, but I know deep down inside, I believe everybody wants to pass because it is so hard.” Moshe, who is not out as trans* at his job in the healthcare sector, recounted a time when he witnessed his co-workers talking disrespectfully about a trans* patient. Fortunately, Moshe was there to witness the misgendering of this patient and confronted the behavior by insisting that his co-workers respect her pronouns. With that said, Moshe reflected that “people who don't pass, definitely get more crap from everyone.”

Several participants shared that when they felt they were not passing and were detectable, they had to prepare themselves for the likelihood of experiencing negative interactions or the potential for violence (Aod, Elliott, Jessie, Mike, Sally). “When I’m not passing and they can’t quite tell, I am seventy five percent more likely to have a negative interaction” (Aod). Jessie and Moshe both spoke about a sense of being constantly cautious about controlling how closely they would allow someone to look at them for fear of being detected. “It's just like one slip up or someone looking a little too closely. And then it's like all downhill” (Moshe). Jessie observed that she always feels as if she has a “target” on her back and when she is in public, she is extremely aware of when someone is “continually staring, … trying to figure you out.” As previously discussed, Mish experienced severe backlash on social media for posting a picture of herself early in her transition when she was not yet passing. She said that other trans-women of color “tore that thing to shreds [telling me] ‘you’re not a woman, … you’re out here, making it more difficult for the rest of us.’” The impact of such harsh scrutiny was “devastating” and “invalidating” for her.
Obstacles to Passing

Considering the negative consequences of not passing, it is understandable that the idea of passing offers a welcome reprieve from having to be perpetually self-conscious and prepared for negative encounters. Unfortunately, the pathway toward passing is neither straightforward nor feasible for everyone. Many participants shared the extensive lengths that many trans* folx will go to pass, many of which were detailed in my discussion of precarity, regarding the economic and health ramifications of transitioning. As discussed, these lengths include but are by no means limited to a litany of hormone treatments, painful surgeries, and voice exercises (AIS, Aod, Belinda, Betty, Crow, Dawn, Jasmine, Jessie, Maxwell, Moshe, Lady in Pink, N., Riley, Ryan, Sally). That is, of course, if they even have the financial resources to pursue such a course. Let’s not forget Jessie’s story of being approached to perform in fetish porn or of the trans-feminine folx who engage in dangerous black market ‘pump parties’ to feminize their bodies less expensively. “You don’t want to stand out in a crowd, so you try your best to fill out your features” (Jessie). While I have already discussed these experiences in Chapter 4, I mention them here to illustrate the very real financial obstacles that so many trans* folx face in trying to change their physical appearance to match their gender identity.

Even if a trans-gender person is willing to undergo these procedures and treatments, there are still limitations and obstacles that can often be insurmountable. The reality is that even if they can afford and access trans-medical care, not every trans* person will be able to achieve the desired effect because of the personal physical limitations. Lady in Pink observed “It depends on how your body reads those hormones. … It depends on your genetics.” Aptly, Moshe also observed, it’s “Like land mines, you're kind of running through. … Once you start hormone or surgery, it's kind of up in the air, how you will turn out because you are you, and who knows

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what these will do to you?” Sometimes, it can be a matter of mixed surgical results (Morrow, Moshe). Moshe’s surgeon had never performed top surgery for someone with his skin color and tone, so he had to accept that there was not a lot of certainty about how his scars would heal. Morrow also spoke about the unpredictability of surgery and how he was disappointed with how his scars had healed. Unfortunately, Morrow said that his chest looks “kind of gross”, but his surgeon has been unwilling to discuss fixing the appearance of his scar tissue. In other cases, passing may not be possible even after having extensive surgery and treatment due to the irreversible effects of puberty (Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink). Dawn characterized her limitations to passing as having been a victim of testosterone poisoning as a teenager, and those effects are irreparable, despite all the surgeries and hormones.

Despite mainstream society’s emphasis on the importance of passing, several participants shared how they have come to terms with the fact that ‘passing’ may not be possible or always necessary for them. Sally observed “I think passing is an idea that for most trans-women, for a long time, they just don’t think is ever going to happen. That’s just not in the cards for them.” For Dawn, this meant adopting the mindset that she was not going to pass, and that people would need to accept that she is a trans-woman. “Basically, because I went through puberty as a male, I’ve got the male build and I know that even though I am female, I know that I may look male to people.” Belinda said ‘bottom’ surgery was not an avenue she wanted or needed to take, observing, “I think too many trans* people get hung up on wanting to or needing to look like the male or female box, and I think that it is almost a hundred percent driven by society.” Sally also shared that she struggles with importance of having various procedures or surgeries since she has found a loving and supportive partner who is not focused on the state of her genitalia. When speaking with Riley, she characterized herself as “unapologetically trans” and shared that
although she fully expects to be able to pass, she wants “to be a hundred percent passing and walk into a crowd of people and be able to say ‘Yeah!’” [in a deep masculine voice]. Based upon participants’ observations, the process of coming to terms with being recognized as trans* is an exceptionally personal journey.

Social Impacts of Successfully Passing

Interestingly, throughout the data collection and coding phase of this research, it became apparent that the ability to pass seems to represent something different for trans-masculine and trans-feminine folx. Many trans-masculine participants indicated that passing would allow them to blend in and be ‘invisible’ to mainstream society; whereas, for trans-feminine participants who are often detectible to some degree because of their physical stature, passing seemed to signify a level of recognition for all their efforts to successfully enact a set of feminine gender norms.

Crow, Maxwell, Moshe, and Morrow said that passing offers the freedom and comfort to live their lives in peace and with confidence. As Mike aptly characterized it, “we can simply blend into the background.” For Maxwell and Morrow, passing meant accessing male privilege because they anticipate being accepted and respected within their respective, male-dominated career fields. Luke and Ryan also spoke about the level of safety that passing represented for them, particularly in comparison to the threats that trans-feminine folx face. “Just being a trans-man is different than what trans-feminine people or nonbinary will experience because most people don’t know that trans-men exist. We honestly just kinda fly under the radar” (Luke). Luke went on to reflect that passing improves his personal safety while navigating daily life, but he acknowledged that it is “bad as far as representation goes.” (I delve further into the idea of representation of trans* identities in Chapter 6.)
While the idea of achieving invisibility as being trans* seemed like a positive thing for most trans-masculine participants, Mike offered a remarkably interesting perspective on that ‘invisibility.’ Rather than freedom, Mike said that he actually became more fearful when he was able to ‘disappear.’ When Mike was first transitioning, his gender identity was at the forefront and he was visibly trans*, but when he began to pass 100% of the time, he realized it was “like going back into the closet.” Now, with a young family, Mike appears to be an ordinary “straight White man.” He worries about someone finding out he is trans* in a way that threatens his and his family’s safety if he is outed while navigating everyday life, such as using a bathroom or showing his unchanged ID.

The lack of representation for trans-masculine identities that Luke described was a particular point of contention during many of the interviews. Several trans-feminine participants believed that trans-masculine people pass more often and more easily than trans-feminine people, so they tend to blend into society rather than create validation and representation for the trans* community (Dawn, Jessie, Mish, Lady in Pink, Belinda, Sally). “It’s easier for a male to pass … than it is for somebody going to female that still has the masculine features -- still hasn’t quite learned how to do makeup right, hasn’t learned how to match outfits” (Lady in Pink). Because so many trans-feminine people find it difficult to pass consistently and because of the prevalence of harassment and violence they face, many feel responsible for creating visibility and positive representation so that trans* folx know they are not alone (Belinda, Dawn, Jessie, Mish, Sally).

The issue of gendered privilege also emerged in the context of passing. While several of trans-masculine participants indicated that passing meant gaining male privilege (AIS, Crow, Maxwell, Morrow, N., Ryan), trans-feminine participants shared that they ran into situations
where they were acutely aware of having lost their male privilege. Belinda said that a male employee in a home improvement store seemed to perceive a question that she/they asked as something ‘dumb’ that a woman would ask. “In digesting that experience, it was the first time where my male privilege had been stripped from me, and I was treated like a woman by a man” (Belinda). Similarly, Jasmine and Riley both spoke about how they had been condescended to on the phone while conducting personal business, but when they dropped their voices an octave, the tone of the conversation became noticeably more respectful. For Sally and Betty, they ironically realized that they were successfully passing when they were subjected to street harassment and cat-calling from men.

This negative behavior seems to be a symptom of a larger dynamic at work between tropes of traditional White masculinity and trans-feminine marginalization. For instance, when Jessie and Jasmine spoke about their strained relationships with their fathers, the rejection they experienced was rooted in their father’s apparent anger about their perceived abandonment of their manhood. Jessie shared that her father, whom she describes as “military hardcore, works on trucks, guns,” told people in her hometown he wanted to kill her. Like Jessie, Jasmine also faced shaming from her father. When Jasmine’s father was hospitalized for a medical emergency, she went to see him, but her father had not seen her since she began transitioning. Rather than being glad to see her, he began asking her when she planned to “cut it off,” referring to her genitalia. As we discussed this experience, I could see how upset and frustrated Jasmine was by her father’s insensitivity and intrusive questions. Unfortunately, she was not surprised by his behavior, given the nature of their relationship prior to her transition. Dawn and Lady in Pink also spoke about their beliefs about the role that male privilege plays in the tendency for men to respond so negatively toward trans-women. Dawn observed that men understand why trans-men
want access to male privilege, but they cannot accept or understand why trans-women would want to abandon their privilege as “the most powerful gender.” Dawn’s observation raises an interesting point that several trans-feminine participants also raised about the foundational role that masculinity plays in how trans-feminine people are marginalized and represented. I further consider the dangerous dynamics at play between traditional White masculinity and trans-feminine identities in Chapter 7.

Ultimately, what seemed to emerge was the underlying truth that passing really represented mainstream society’s gauntlet for anyone who defies gender norms in a visible way. This is not to say that changing one’s body to align with one’s mind is unnecessary, but that passing is the proverbial test to avoiding intense experiences of trans* related marginalization and precarity. Several participants expressed their frustration with the idea that trans* folx are expected to reify the gender binary in the name of safety (N., Nin, Null, Rose, Sally). “I wish we lived in a world where it didn’t matter, where we get to accept the fact that this person’s trans* and that’s okay” (Sally). N., similarly, said that he wished that the world believed him when he says who he is, regardless of what his body looks like and how he chooses to enact his masculinity. Nin also reflected,

We shouldn’t need to please other people. Like that is not the point of why we transition, but I’ve done a lot of things because other people told me that’s what you need to do in order to survive and that’s like a sad thing to think - that passing is a survival thing.

For the trans-masculine and trans-feminine participants who had engaged in transitioning away from their gender assigned at birth toward the other gender within the binary, passing represented a uniquely trans* element to the discussion about intersectionally complex marginalization.
When speaking with the nonbinary and gender folx about passing, Null shared that although he had once been concerned with passing in a more feminine capacity, nonbinary folx tend to have a “hostile whimsy” toward the idea of passing and “the general attitude is almost like punked. Like, we compare ourselves to like monsters because there's a pride in sort of rejecting the tradition.” Rose also said that no one should be expected to pass, and that “it's kinda messed up that, like, you, you need to be a certain amount of masculine or feminine to, like, to be safe and to be accepted in our society.” When asked about the role that passing plays in their life, Yarrow said “I’m just not passing for anything and that’s fine. I’m living my life, but that also means that I have to be aware of the danger that represents, so I already don’t like going to stores at night alone, and there’s certain parts of town that I just will not go.” For nonbinary or genderqueer folx, there are still concerns about passing as they face safety risks if they encounter someone who is uncomfortable with their presentation. However, if they have not altered their gendered appearance and behavior in more overt and detectable ways, they may be able to avoid the most intense experiences of derision and confrontation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have delved into the profound effects that the intersectional identities of participants have had on their experiences with marginalization. While being trans* creates a host of vulnerabilities, the added complication of having intersecting social identities has had undeniable consequences for many of the participants. At times, one’s racial or ethnic identity as well as one’s medical and psychological challenges have caused oppression that overshadowed the participants’ struggles with their gender identities. At other times, they served to compound and intensify their gender related marginalization. In addition, the trans* experiences within the LGBTQ+ community provided some important insights about the complex body and
respectability politics that foster and preserve marginalization of trans-gender, nonbinary, and genderqueer identities. Finally, I presented findings about participants’ experiences and understanding of the concept of passing and the underlying implications of traditional masculinity and body politics. I now move to Chapter 6 to present my final chapter of findings about how participants experienced the ways trans* identities are represented in society, as well as how they understood and subsequently navigated those representations.
CHAPTER 6
CONFRONTING NEGATIVE TRANS* REPRESENTATION AND NAVIGATIONAL STRATEGIES

In Chapter 4, I discussed many compelling stories about how these trans* folx experienced marginalization and precarity as well as how they navigated those experiences. Then, in Chapter 5, the findings spoke loudly about participants’ nuanced experiences of marginalization, viewed through the lens of their intersectionally complex identities. In this chapter, I focus on my last two research questions, how do trans-gender people experience and make sense of the way trans-gender identities are represented in the public domain? and how do trans-gender people navigate experiences of marginalization, socio-economic instability, and trans-gender representations? While a great deal of the representation has been negative and damaging, I felt that it was essential to provide balance by also discussing positive representations and stories of resilience. I also did not want to engage in producing what Luke’s partner so aptly characterized as “tragedy porn” about trans* and gender nonconforming lives. To avoid doing so, I focused on findings about how participants have often navigated these distorted and destructive representations. While many of these trans* folx have successfully navigated marginalization and precarity, it was their strategies for navigating representation that seemed to reflect a pronounced capacity for agency and resilience.

Trans-gender Representations

In coding the data from the structural code of experiences and understanding representation, the following axial codes emerged: negative portrayals, messaging, and
problematic practices; disparity between trans-feminine, trans-masculine, and nonbinary representations; and promising positive representations.

**Negative Portrayals and Messaging**

When asked to consider what types of portrayals and messaging they experience from mainstream society, all participants indicated that the messaging has been generally negative or dismissive with a few positive examples mixed in. Both Nin and AIS expressed frustration because they feel like they have been portrayed as “another species.” This alienation would likely explain the various representations of trans* identities that span a range that includes but is not limited to incompetent, entertaining, dangerous, and deserving of tragedy.

Belinda, Betty, and Lady in Pink observed that trans-gender people are often portrayed as confused or incompetent. “Somebody that doesn’t know what they are or doesn’t know what their mind is” (Lady in Pink). For Crow, E., Luke, and Ryan, the messaging they have encountered is that trans* folx like them are never going to be the “protagonist” (Ryan) or “hero” (Crow) of any story. Some suggested that in many cases, trans-gender identities are used as the ‘punchline’ to the joke or a ‘gag’ to make people laugh or feel uncomfortable (Barnell, Betty, Dawn, Lady in Pink). For instance, Nin recalled a childhood show from the Philippines that his parents watched, which showed men who dressed as women. When he asked his parents about it, they explained that it was like a ‘gag’ and that it was not unusual for some men to dress up as women in the Philippines. Another example of this was offered by both Jessie and Jasmine about how a trans-woman’s identity was handled in the movie *Ace Ventura* when the female police chief is stripped and humiliated by the exposure of her camouflaged genitalia. Jessie expressed frustration, saying “We’re not like that, but we’re always having to defend ourselves, and it sucks. I mean, you’re scared, but you got to defend yourself.” Another example that was offered
was an old episode of *The Jeffersons* when one of George’s former classmates comes out as a trans-woman and her character serves as a source of derisive humor (Jessie). Dawn also cited an episode of the sit-com *Cheers* as well as an episode of drama series *NCIS* in which trans-feminine identities were used as a ‘gag’ to humiliate the characters. Further, Luke talked about the tone with which the media often writes about trans-gender identities such as Chaz Bono and Caitlyn Jenner, in “a very tabloid light. Like, ‘Oh, look at these freaks doing these things.’” Luke, Nin, and Rose all spoke about the destructive messaging that comes from the mainstream media falsely representing trans-women as simply “men in dresses” just to “get a laugh.”

While being portrayed as incompetent or the butt of jokes is delegitimizing and dismissive, the portrayals of trans* folx as dangerous and someone to be feared is even more destructive and a threat to their safety. Luke suggested that most cis-gender, heterosexual people in mainstream society do not understand what trans-gender identities really are, and they conflate these identities with the act of dressing and performing in ‘drag’ or with some type of perversion or kink.

You're not doing drag just for performance and then you take off the makeup and you're back to being a cis-man or a cis-woman. I think they just really don't realize how fundamental that identity is, but also how dangerous it is to be trans*.

Ryan also observed how this essential lack of understanding seems to foster fear of trans* folx, “We’re not the scary monster that, you know, people have made us out to be.” When I asked Ryan if he felt that fear is what motivates a lot of the transphobia, he said he thought it did. It is likely this same fear that has led to trans* identities being mapped onto villains that we encounter in popular media, such as the serial killer in *Silence of the Lambs* (Aod, Darren, E., Kim). Darren made a similar observation,
In horror movies, trans* people will end up being the murderer. … Their being trans* has nothing to do with the story, but they use the trans* to signal that they’re crazy and the trans-ness is an explanation for their role as the murderer.

The fear and suspicion created by villainizing trans* identities also seemed to be used to justify the harassment and violence they are so often exposed to. As some participants suggested, the messaging seems to be that trans-ness is some type of problem (AIS, Barnell, Dawn, Elliott, Maxwell, Nin, Ryan), and as Ryan characterized it, trans-folx are “not worthy” of what everyone else has access to. Folx also said that trans-gender folx do not get happy endings and worse yet, they are deserving victims of whatever terrible outcome might befall them (Aod, Elliott, Lady in Pink, Mike, Mish, Moshe). “There's still a lot of emotional porn, like stories and plotlines that still kind of smack of ‘looking at the plight of the poor trans* and see how noble they are in their suffering’” (Null). Mish also offered the example of the movie Boys Don’t Cry, which tells the true story of how Brandon Teena, a trans-man who lived in Nebraska, was raped and murdered in 1993 when it was discovered that he was trans*. Jessie recalled that the very first time she was made aware of trans-ness was when in an episode of All in the Family, Edith’s character has a nervous breakdown because she had a friend who was a trans-gender woman and had been murdered. While the show reflected a level of compassion and humanized the murdered trans-woman, the message was clear that she was an expected victim of violence. Morrow said that these types of negative representations serve as a reminder for him of “All the people that might want to harm people like me and we aren't being seen or respected as the human beings that we are.”

**Problematic Practices**

There are some problematic practices used by mainstream media that have effectively served as obstacles to improving the negative tone of trans-gender representation. These
practices include engaging in erasure or silencing of legitimate trans* identities, commercial exploitation of trans* identities, and poor attempts to create positive representations. When asked about how they believe mainstream media has handled the representation of trans-gender identities, many mentioned their frustration with the erasure and silencing of trans-gender diversity, such as when cis-gender actors are cast in trans-gender roles (Aod, Colt, Betty, Jessie, Maxwell, Moshe, Rose, Ryan). In addition, there was a general sense that the trans* experience tends to be tokenized or treated like a novelty, used as the story line in many cases rather than just made part of a characters’ holistic life experience (Aod, Dawn, Elliott, Luke, Mike, Moshe, Rose). “We are often ‘used as a unicorn’ to serve some other purpose such as getting ratings rather than just to be part of the narrative” (Dawn). Elliott observed, “It feels like we don't fit, like I'm just a fictional character. We only exist when they want us.”

Similarly, Ares Nero shared that he found it “disheartening” when trans-ness is used or exploited. “I spent all this time being afraid of who I was, and then I see companies and media using it – it seems almost mocking” (Ares Nero). He went on to discuss the prevalence of corporate exploitation that he sees when corporations claim allyship with members of the LGBTQ+ community, but then monetize their proposed allyship to sell products while not actually providing support to those who need support and advocacy. “I feel that companies don’t put that education in. They’re all just rainbow flags next to their company logo without doing the real work” (Ares Nero). AIS also addressed this in his comment that “Some people are making so much money, right now, marketing to trans* people.”

In speaking about a few unsuccessful attempts of mainstream media to create more positive representations, Ares Nero and Nin both spoke about two efforts that were poorly executed. Ares Nero spoke about Marvel Comic’s attempt to introduce two nonbinary characters,
naming them Snowflake and Safespace. He felt this was very poorly done and critics echoed his sentiments, describing the twins as a ‘tone deaf’ and an insulting attempt to be inclusive. Nin spoke about an Asian trans-masculine character, named Lev, in the new *Last of Us* video game. Unfortunately, Nin said that the character was tokenized and operated on stereotypes. He went on to explain that the video game creators “purposely dead-named” the character to convey that he is trans*. The narrative and interactions between characters sends the message that this character is a ‘heretic’ and deserves to die. Nin said that while they seemed to be trying do the right thing “[They’re] fueling the fire for people that are transphobic because when you look at the demographic of the sorts of people who play these types of apocalyptic zombie games or war games, they tend to be transphobic.” Despite the effort to include a character such as Lev, Nin felt that the game creators did not do the necessary work to make this representation successful and productive.

**Disparate Trans-feminine, Trans-masculine, Nonbinary, and Genderqueer Representations**

When asked about how they felt trans-gender identities have been represented in mainstream society, there was a distinct differentiation between how most participants perceived trans-masculine, trans-feminine, nonbinary, and genderqueer folx being represented. My discussion in Chapter 5 about the implications of marginalized intersecting identities provides substantial insights into how and why different trans* identities are represented as they are. After all, representation is an enormously powerful tool used by society to effectively manipulate behavior and identities that are sanctioned as well as delegitimize those that are undesirable. Thus, we can see the findings about intersectionally complex marginalization played out in the way trans* identities are consequently represented.
Most participants indicated that they believed that trans-men or trans-masculine identities had limited representation, at best (Aod, Ares Nero, Belinda, Colt, Darren, Elliott, Kim, Maxwell, Mike, Moshe, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Morrow Ryan, Sally). Several even observed that it is as if trans-men “don’t exist” (Aod, Elliott, Kim, Maxwell, Ryan). Mike also said that most trans-men or trans-masculine folx tend to “fall into the backdrop.” Several trans-women or trans-feminine participants spoke specifically about why they felt trans-men are not broadly represented or visible when compared to the visibility of trans-women. Belinda, Dawn, and Jessie all spoke about how trans-men “blend in.” Jessie expressed some frustration about their tendency to avoid standing up and being visible because she felt that it leaves trans-women with the burden of creating better trans* representation. Belinda said that she believes that the reason trans-men tend to blend in is because when they are growing up, “they are socialized to be passive and generally not take up space or stand out, so they are not eager to create representation.”

Of the limited representation of trans-men and trans-masculine identities, the overarching imagery talked about was infused with distinct body politics, stipulating White, fit, fully-transitioned, passing, able-bodied bodies (Aod, Elliott, Moshe, Rose) that are as Elliott described “skinny and perfect.” They went on to observe that “You don’t see bigger trans* people like me” (Elliott). Gabriel, a trans-masculine participant who is blind, observed that “In fiction, and then, and in fictitious film and TV and stuff like, you don't find people like me.” Similarly, Aod commented “I have yet to see a trans-gender male who is Native American and two-spirit in a movie as a normal character.” Darren observed “If you're a trans-man, unless you look like a man, there's not a lot of representation. So not someone who is partway through transition. Always full transition - they have to look perfect.” In addition, Luke, Moshe, and Barnell all
suggested that the mainstream does not tend to take trans-men very seriously because they are often viewed as very “butch lesbians” or “tomboys.” Ares Nero and Luke observed that there seems to be a level of confusion in mainstream society about what it means to be a trans-man, the general perception of trans-gender being narrowly understood as men transitioning to women and not the other way around.

In stark contrast to limited and narrow representations discussed about trans-men and trans-masculine people, there seemed to be a great deal of agreement among participants that trans-gender women were represented to a much greater degree, but that the heightened representation was riddled with damaging or negative imagery (Dawn, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Luke, Maxwell, Mike, Mish, Moshe, Sally). When represented in a positive light, several talked about the body politics of representing trans-women as perfect, beautiful, and fully transitioned. “If you're seeing a trans-woman, they're always on point, beautiful dressed up. And if you don't see them that way, then it's because you're watching, like, Law and Order and they're like dead” (Moshe). Unfortunately, these narrow aesthetic expectations of trans-women then lead to representations that are either over-sexualized or deviant and perverse if they are unable to meet those expectations (Luke, Mike, Moshe, Ryan).

Both representations create a destructive and dangerous dehumanizing effect. Ryan offered the example of the movie entitled The Crying Game in which the trans-female character is over-sexualized and tokenized for the disparity between her male genitalia and her gender identity, serving as the ‘twist’ in the movie’s plot. All these representations that serve so effectively to dehumanize trans-feminine folx, whether they are perfectly passing or not, also serve to create a space for pervasive violence to be committed against them. Many indicated that while there is some positive representation that I discuss later in this chapter, a large proportion
of the representation of trans-female and trans-feminine identities is that of victims (Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mike, Mish, Moshe, Morrow, Null, Ryan, Sally). As previously discussed, Moshe observed that trans-women are either supposed to be entirely passing and perfect or they are the expected murder victim in an episode of a TV crime drama, because “that’s just how those lives go.” Similarly, Luke observed,

So much of the representation you see, is like, ‘look at this poor homeless trans* sex worker and oh, she got murdered and chopped into thirty pieces by a serial killer.’ So, that’s the only representation you see, as a crime victim and that's kind of the narrative that people see. Like, I think that there's, especially towards trans-women, there's this fear of ‘Oh, my God! I'm gonna, like, fall in love with a girl who's gorgeous and then get home and discover she has a penis! And so, I should guard myself, by acting in an aggressive and violent way toward this person.’

When I spoke to nonbinary and genderqueer participants about representation of their gender identity, they overwhelmingly contended that there were very few examples they could offer. It was not a matter of negative representation, but rather a lack of representation. E. indicated that “It definitely hurts” to not be represented in the world as a nonbinary trans-masculine person. Null said that the lack of representation as a nonbinary genderqueer person felt “alienating” because he did not see himself “reflected anywhere.” They did offer the character Todd from the sitcom Scrubs as an example of representation, but added that Todd was depicted as a serial sexual harasser which Null observed was not helpful, given how little representation exists. Unfortunately, the messaging that does exist regarding nonbinary folx can also tend to be dismissive. Yarrow observed, “Mainstream media sends out the message that me as a nonbinary person, I’m offended all the time. I can never be happy. I’m going to yell at you if you get my pronouns wrong. I’m picky. I’m obnoxious.” Yarrow’s comment suggested to me that mainstream society can use this type of representation to paint nonbinary folx as overly privileged and demanding, thus justifying their social dismissal for being confused or frivolous.
P. also spoke about a pervasive tendency of erasure for gender nonconforming people. “Our stories just don't exist.” P. went on to say that they believe that mainstream society feels the need to silence people who rebel against the concept of gender because most people are heavily invested in the “comfort” of their “scripts” regardless of how restraining and controlling those scripts are. P. contended that they were grateful for their trans* identity because they did not feel compelled to engage in gender in a way that seems to make people, like their sister, miserable.

**Positive Representations**

Despite all the negative imagery and messaging, many participants were also able to provide examples of affirming and positive representation of trans-gender identities. I found this part of every interview to be uplifting and a testament to their abilities to be hopeful and seek out the positive experiences when they can find them. Several cited the FX series *Pose* which provides an unprecedented and humanized glimpse into New York’s underground drag ball culture of the 1980s amidst the height of the AIDS epidemic. Drag ball culture refers to a subculture of young Black and Latinx members of the American LGBTQ+ community who, starting as early as the end of the 19th century, held glamorous events where various groups of folx, known as houses, would compete or “walk” and perform mixes of modeling, dancing, and lip-syncing in drag to win both prizes and bragging rights (Stryker, 2017). *Pose* features the largest assembled cast of trans-gender actors in leading roles as well as the largest cast of LGBTQ+ actors with recurring roles for a scripted series. For many, *Pose* was empowering, affirming, and inspiring and gave them courage to continue their transitional journey despite all the challenges (Betty, Jasmine, Jessie, Mish, Riley, Ryan, Sally). Jessie also spoke about the Netflix docuseries *Disclosure* that delves into the perspectives of prominent trans-men and trans-
women on the history of Hollywood’s role in shaping representation and visibility of trans-
gender identities.

Barnell, Belinda, Colt, Jasmine, Jessie, Maxwell, and Nin also named Laverne Cox as a
strong and empowering representation for trans-women of color. Her character in the series
*Orange is the New Black* is viewed as a potential example for affirming trans* identities, but
Jasmine did point out that there are some issues with the accuracy of her experiences given that
she was housed in a women’s prison when it is more likely that the character would have been
sent to a men’s prison. Nin also commented that the fact that Cox’s trans-woman of color
character is cast in the stereotypical setting of prison was not necessarily the most productive
way to create positive and normalizing representation. Ryan offered the example of the character
Nia Nal a.k.a. Dreamer on the CW Network’s show, *Super Girl*. Not only is her trans identity
part of the character’s origin story, but the role is played by a trans-female actor as well. Ryan
observed,

> We've got this great representation from somebody who has talked a lot about her
> backgrounds and a lot about what she's gone through. And then you've got this
> educational aspect that, as she's talking to other characters, people who might not realize
> what transness is before watching how she is not only a person but capable of being
> heroic.

Barnell and Moshe both spoke about a trans-male character who had been part of the story line in
a series on the ABC Family channel called *The Fosters*. While both said that they were glad to
see a representation of trans-masculinity, it was still a polished White representation. Moshe also
suggested that the character, Cole’s trans-ness was tokenized rather than normalized and placed a
lot of emphasis on his transition and surgery which can cause unintended consequences of
further marginalizing trans-folx who cannot or don’t want to undergo those surgeries.
Several participants also gave examples beyond movies and televisions shows. Ares Nero said he had seen a Gillette razor commercial during the 2019 Super Bowl where a father was helping his trans* son shave for the first time. In a similar vein, Crow talked about the Thinx period underwear sales campaign, “I know there was some kind of controversy over a commercial that talked about people who get periods, instead of, like, women who get periods. And, like, I thought that was interesting because they had trans* guy in their commercial.” Some also spoke about affirming representations of trans* identities they have observed in the context of online communities. Colt shared that he found a website called Trans Bucket that has become a resource for thousands of trans* folx who are considering a surgical transition. He said this online community posts their post-surgical pictures for both top and bottom surgeries, for FtM and MtF, so that other trans* folx can see how results can vary and are better informed when talking to their doctors. Colt said that having this online community has been very “informational,” and he was very appreciative of people being willing to help each other in this way. Crow also spoke about his experiences in online communities where he has seen people create avatars that convey what he believes are likely their trans* identities.

I see, like, a male character, and, like, oh, he only wears a tank top at the beach. Maybe he's wearing a binder and, like, maybe he's actually a closet trans*, and they don't want to tell us. It makes me read more into certain things in shows and TV, but I think it's just because like they are projecting this because they are wanting to curate this type of representation.

Jessie named public figures such as Janet Mock and Indya Moore who she felt provided positive and inspiring representations and visibility. Interestingly, Mish also said that Caitlynn Jenner’s public ponderance of “Am I gonna wait another 60 years to do this?” helped her to make the final leap to transition. Several of the trans-feminine participants felt it was important to acknowledge that Caitlynn Jenner demonstrated great courage in making her transition public.
They also felt her elitist privilege combined with her staunch support of the Republican party and of Donald Trump has continued to be a problem for trans* folx in embracing the representation that she has provided, given the transphobic rhetoric and policies that have made their lives so much more difficult to navigate (Belinda, Dawn, Jasmine, Jessie, Mish).

Participants were also able to offer some promising representations of nonbinary or genderqueer identities. Darren, Harper, Maxwell, and Nin all mentioned the animated series *Steven Universe* as a positive and normalizing representation of nonbinary gender identities. About the nonbinary characters Stevonnie and Smoky Quartz, Nin observed, “They’re not necessarily like identifying that they are nonbinary, it’s kinda subverted. I like that because it’s just like they’re existing rather than having to be waving the flag and making that the whole point of the narrative.” Harper also said, “Garnet being a relationship in and of herself was freaking mind blowing.” Yarrow also talked about an animated character, known as ‘Him’ on the popular animated series, *Power Puff Girls*. Him wore feminine clothing and had a higher pitched voice, but also exercised a lot of power and confidence. Although Him was technically cast in the role of villain, Yarrow observed that the character was endearing, fun, and a sassy being who was confident in his identity.

In thinking about positive nonbinary representations, Null offered “video game culture” as a space where a lot of queer gender identities are represented in authentic and normalized ways. “It's done in a way that it is not presented as the joke - they're allowed to be a fact, and it's not even remarked on. You don't get a well-meaning liberal, ‘Oh, and see how this person is just like us.’ It's just allowed to be. It's something that you can recognize” (Null). He also spoke about a web comic called *El Goonish Shive* that depicted a character who had a device that allowed them to transform their physical body from one sex to the other - back and forth.
Further, Null shared that when they were in Middle School, they discovered the Japanese Manga series *Ranma ½*, which is a romantic comedy series about someone who has a fountain that can transform a woman into a man with the splash of its water. Null explained that in reading the Manga series and the web comic, they began to realize what they were feeling about their gender identity was real and not some sort of flaw that they were alone in dealing with. They also said that they remember feeling both envious and fearful in that realization, wanting to read it again and again while simultaneously wondering if they should never read it again. “In that comic format, it was very nice - if only there had been more. And more, matter of fact, about, like, gender fluid experiences, and that would be something that I think a lot of kids could make use of” (Null).

**Navigational Strategies**

Prior to conducting this study, I was already familiar with the prevalence of trans* folx being represented as perpetual victims who live tragic lives. While it is true that many of the participants’ experiences have been heartrending, to ensure that this work did not engage in creating more of the same, I made a conscious decision to create a space in which they would not simply be cast as stereotypical victims, but rather agents of their own change. To accomplish this, I incorporated the idea of navigation into my research questions so that participants would be encouraged to also share their experiences of navigating the challenges that marginalization and precarity create in their daily lives.

**Navigating Marginalization and Precarity**

In considering the data I collected in this area, the two axial codes that emerged were laying low and taking control. The laying low codes were informed by themes of having engaged in denial, avoidance, or sometimes ‘going along to get along.’ When taking control,
participants recounted experiences when they redefined relationships, focused on preparedness, engaged in self-care, embraced hope, and practiced spirituality.

_Laying Low_

Several participants characterized times when they were laying low in response to marginalization as developing a “thicker skin” (Ares Nero, Colt, Crow, Maxwell, N.). Folx indicated that to navigate the initial realization that they were trans*, they attempted to ignore their trans-ness by reifying the gender they were assigned at birth (Ares Nero, Colt, Dawn, Lady in Pink, Luke, Morrow, Riley, Ryan). When speaking with trans-feminine participants, several shared stories of trying to prove their masculinity. Riley shared that before she accepted her own trans-ness, she intentionally behaved in an ultra-masculine fashion, even attempting to join the Marines. Lady in Pink also said that she tried to be the “best male” she could be by demonstrating ultra-masculine behavior. Furthermore, she confided, “I pulled out the person that I thought was the roughest one, … always angry, always upset, always miserable, and I tended to make everyone else miserable.” In Dawn’s case, she tried to prove her masculinity by participating with the Boy Scouts of America organization and a church mission trip, taking only masculine clothes and forcing herself to be “male” for the entire trip. “It was a lot of work, a lot of stress. It was a lot of crushing anxiety, a lot of dysphoria.”

_Denial._ This tendency to deny trans-ness was not unique to trans-feminine participants, though. Ryan said that when he realized he was trans*, he already knew he could not expect support at home. Consequently, he relegated his trans-gender identity “to the back burner and did things that were actually pretty hyper femme. Grew my hair out long again, and doing the heavy chick thing almost to pressure myself into kind of accepting my gender assigned at birth” (Ryan). Having grown up in a small, conservative community, Luke said that because he did not have the
language and concepts to name what he was experiencing with his gender identity, he tried to “fit into the boundaries” of being a woman, to best of his ability. However, Luke found it difficult to ever really be “particularly feminine.” For Morrow, his struggle was during his first trimester attending community college. He said that tried to put off thinking about his growing dysphoria and awareness of his trans* identity and just try to pass as a female, but he said that it was really “unpleasant” and “hard” to keep up the front.

Avoidance. Beyond the denial of trans-ness, a few folx talked about how they navigated circumstances, when they faced being stigmatized and marginalized, by avoiding the topic of their trans-ness. For many this meant staying closeted in one or more domains of their daily lives (Ares Nero, Belinda, Colt, Crow, Darren, Maxwell, Luke, Moshe). In some cases, participants shared that the fear of losing parental financial support was the reasons that they delayed coming out and transitioning until they felt able to support themselves (Ares Nero, Luke, Maxwell, Nin). Maxwell recounted, “I was thinking - If she finds out, like, what's she going to do? Is she gonna kick me out? What am I going to do about this? That was, that was a big part of what kept me from coming out.” Because his mother is “very Christian,” and his father has made homophobic comments in the past, Ares Nero has stayed closeted to financially prepare for his parents’ anticipated rejection. “I wouldn’t be shocked if she would get mad, kick me out, try conversion therapy, or be like, you need to go to church” (Ares Nero). Looking back, Luke reflected on his decision to stay closeted.

I thought to myself - I would love to be able to express myself, but if that means that I'm going to get kicked out, sexually assaulted, or murdered, like, I'm just not gonna do it. I'll just pretend to be cis- until it is safe for me to come out, and that's exactly what I did. So, yeah, I think I haven't really been in any precarious situations because I've been particularly careful to avoid them.
Armed with the knowledge that coming out as trans* could result in becoming homeless, several trans-masculine participants said that they focused on becoming financially independent before coming out. Nin, a first generation Filipino American and child of immigrants, was raised to be prepared for hardships. When he learned about how many trans* adolescents are kicked out after coming out, he focused on becoming financially stable before coming out to his parents. Nin acknowledged the cultural implications of his parents’ experiences as immigrants, but he also indicated that he felt more confident about his future when he knew that he could avoid some of the common experiences of instability that so many trans* folx have.

Because of the potential for negativity or rejection from someone they do not even know, several folx said that they have decided not to disclose their identity on their dating profiles. Sally described her experience on Tinder when she decided not to identify herself as a queer trans-woman because she thought she would have “people who are going to swipe right, wanting a match only with the intention of sending horrible things…because, like I get horrible things in general. And so, I think by putting that identity on there, I think it was just upping the chances of that happening.” Lady in Pink also does not tell people that she is trans* unless the relationship progresses, and it becomes relevant. When communicating with a couple who was looking for a female partner for the wife, Lady in Pink encountered questions about her penis. She went on to explain that when a couple is seeking to form a triad, they often have what is referred to as an O.P.P. (one penis policy) in their relationship. “If you have not had surgery, they get very phobic about that – whether or not it works or not because I think if they find it attractive that must make them gay.”

Unfortunately, waiting to disclose this information also has its own repercussions. In several cases, participants shared that when they wait to disclose until they have exchanged a few
messages, they are met with suspicion. The theme of ‘trickery’ or deception emerged across several of the interviews (Jessie, Lady in Pink, Nin, Moshe, Sally). Although participants’ hesitancy to needlessly disclose their trans* identity to strangers was out of caution and self-preservation, many of the strangers they encountered viewed their initial decision to not disclose their trans-gender identity as dishonest or suspect.

Beyond personal relationship concerns, several participants spoke about laying low in the context of engaging in more public domains. Some of the participants navigated the potential for marginalization or confrontation by restricting their own behavior for self-preservation (Barnell, Betty, Darren, Dawn, Elliott, Jessie, Kim, Mish, Moshe, Nin, Ryan, Sally). Jessie spoke about the efforts that she invests into avoiding negative attention. “I just try to be quiet. I camouflage stuff to make sure my mannerisms are right, but going over and beyond is tiring, trying to make sure you’re not upsetting somebody else for just being yourself” (Jessie). Ares Nero shared that because he was not yet out to his parents, he has avoided them by working much longer hours, staying in his room, and staying away from home as much as possible. Dawn, Elliott, and Nin all said they had “self-marginalized” at times, by avoiding social situations and the potential for abuse or stigma. “[Being threatened] makes me feel less legitimate. It makes me want to lash out or just hide” (Elliott).

While many of the experiences that fall under the laying low seem to reflect a strategy for self-protection and engaging in stealth tactics, there were also some participants who shared that they have tried to ‘tune-out’ (Crow, Ryan) negativity and ignore the stigma that they encounter in their daily lives in hopes of developing a “thicker skin” (Crow, N., Ryan). “I have been pretty good at tuning people out … ignore it, move on” (Ryan). Despite the potential for stigma, Crow said that he is open about being trans* for his own well-being, and he is willing to accept the
consequences. He shared that when he goes to a restaurant, he is simply prepared for the possibility that the waitstaff might be transphobic and takes it in stride. “Typically, I try not to let something that is abrasive or aggressive get to me too much” (Crow).

Crow, Darren, and Moshe said they had each decided not to disclose their trans-ness to their employers to avoid negative ramifications. Being open at work “doesn't make me a better worker, this has no bearing on my job at all, and I'm probably not gonna be in this particular job with this particular clinic for a long time. So, I really don't need to get that personal with you” (Moshe). At times, participants shared that they chose not to raise the issue or confront being misgendered or dead named because the situation did not seem worth it to them, as with short-term employment or a one-time encounter with a doctor (Crow, Darren, E., Moshe, N., Nin). “I'm not able to stop it. So, it's not even worth it. I did my best, and I hate to say it, suck it up because it was either that, or don't work there anymore, and I really couldn't afford to not have a job” (E.). AIS shared that even before he had gotten his job, he decided to be “sneaky” during the interview process and applied using his birth name, knowing that they would require his social security and government ID. He simply did not address his trans-ness during the process, and once he was hired, he asked for a name tag with his chosen name and revealed his trans* identity. He admitted that he was taking a big risk, and they were initially caught off guard, but fortunately it worked in his favor.

In many cases, the issue of accessing bathrooms emerged again in the context of this part of the interviews (Barnell, Darren, Dawn, Nin, Sally). Darren and Nin both shared that despite the fact they knew they could likely use men’s restroom they chose not to, to avoid any confrontation as well as the possibility of making someone else uncomfortable. When I asked Darren why he was willing to do that, he shared that he would rather be uncomfortable than
make someone else feel uncomfortable. Because of all the trauma that Barnell had encountered around trying to use bathrooms, particularly given that he lives with Type 2 Diabetes, he explained that he had gone as far as wearing adult diapers and always having an extra change of clothes with him. I feel that it is important to acknowledge the anger that Barnell was feeling while recounting these experiences, and he said he felt “humiliated and embarrassed” that he had to live this way. Similarly, Dawn said that during her transition, she sometimes chose to pee herself rather than run the risk of being confronted for using a women’s bathroom. She then began carrying empty bottles in her truck in case of an emergency.

Going Along to Get Along. Several participants also talked about “playing along” with mainstream society’s expectations by leaning into stereotypes to accomplish a greater goal. N. said that to claim respectability and credibility at work, there were times that he was told if he did not wear a dress, he would not be invited to critical meetings at the state capital with the state health board. “If they were dictating that I had to wear a dress to get into a room of policy makers or decision makers, then skippy I did it, because otherwise I couldn't get access to that opportunity” (N.). Interestingly, Aod indicated that he had also, on occasion, leaned into stereotypes. For him it was that of white maleness to make a claim of legitimacy and recognition.

I go down to the state house, and I do a lot of legislative work, and in those cases, you only have about twenty seconds to make a first impression. Then, you have a minute or two to get your point across. So, when I go down there, I have to take all my earrings out, I have to be as much as possible and play that White passing straight male, so I can get them to listen every fucking time. (Aod)

Nonbinary Non-Disclosure. In speaking with nonbinary participants who had not undergone any significant social or physical transition process, navigation of potential stigma and marginalization primarily reflected themes of denial, avoidance, and going along to get along. Most of these participants indicated that they had chosen to lay low and were not out to
their families because they believed that their family could either not ‘handle’ the information or there would be consequences (Gene, Harper, Null, P., Rose). Gene and Rose both spoke about the fact that it is just easier to allow most people to read them as the gender they were assigned at birth than to create circumstances where people are confused or will react negatively, such as with family, at work, or with health care professionals.

Unfortunately, Rose shared that staying closeted has caused them to feel “removed” from their family because it is so difficult to have productive and honest conversations with their mother about the activism that they are involved with in the queer community. At best, Rose said that their mother would not understand their identity, but at worst their mother might “disown” them. Rose went on to say that they have, at least for the time being, decided not to move forward with any sort of medical transition because that would require explanations and “it would put [their] safety in jeopardy.” Safety was also a concern for Gene when they spoke about suppressing their nonbinary gender when doing sex work. Although performing as a cis-female represents a risk for encountering misogynistic violence, Gene observed that it is safer for them to “work on their operating assumption” and create the client’s “specific type of fantasy.”

Null also spoke about the consequences they face if they were to come out to their family. They work for their family’s business, and they have been made aware that if it were come down to letting staff go, Null would go before their co-workers. Knowing this, Null said “I have come to accept that in terms of being able to really express myself, I’m in a holding pattern. Because as far as the world is concerned, I am a straight white guy.” Although Null said that this dynamic creates a great deal of anxiety for them, staying mostly closeted provides a protective layer against economic and social precarity. Harper, too, spoke about being primarily closeted to family, friends, and at work. Having been “very closeted since a very young age,” he has
expend a lot of energy to avoid stigma, marginalization, and subsequent precarity. Harper said that he does not feel shame about wearing women’s clothing or watching cartoons like *My Little Pony* that are perceived to be more effeminate, but he also does not want to have conversations about these activities with people who are not open-minded. Harper said that because many people in his family are “the worst examples of small-minded, small-town, prejudiced folk,” he would rather not be open about his gender identity. Instead, he said he would be “perfectly okay” with his mom “just having a son” to avoid the stigma of coming out. He also expressed the concern that if he were to come out to his mother, she would likely exploit the information to garner undeserved favor and attention on social media.

It would be all over Facebook that she's a supporter of the community, even though she's definitely not right now, and I feel like that's not something I wanna put into the world, for some reason. I don't completely understand my thoughts on that one because, like, I mean, if that's all, it takes to switch a person over to like, a more open-minded side of things then I should. But at the same time, it's like, it's gonna put a bad taste in my mouth.

(Harper)

**Taking Control**

While laying low was a common navigational strategy for many participants who were, perhaps, buying time and not quite ready to confront some of the likely discrimination they might face, a great deal of agency also surfaced. I formulated the axial code of taking control to capture the navigational strategies that reflected themes of redefining relationships, focusing on preparedness, demonstrating resourcefulness, engaging in self-care, embracing hope, practicing mindfulness and spirituality. Many shared stories of how they redefined their post-transition relationships to navigate the marginalization they experienced in their personal encounters.

**Redefining Relationships.** For some, this meant creating boundaries or standing their ground with the people in their lives. Moshe shared that he decided to set boundaries with his unsupportive parents when he made the decision to have top surgery. Rather than include them in
his plans, he told his parents the night before his surgery so that they would not try to talk him out of it or stop him in some way. Maxwell talked about having to stand up to his father about his identity, also communicating clear expectations of what would be necessary for their relationship to continue. After five years of his father refusing to acknowledge his son’s trans* identity, Maxwell set the condition that he would not come home to visit unless his father would use his correct name in public. “I was tired of his bullshit because it is as simple as if you're not gonna respect me as a human and for who I am, you don't get to be my dad.” Maxwell’s father ultimately agreed to use his chosen name although they agreed that he would refrain from using pronouns as a compromise, for the time being. In navigating the marginalization that Dawn faced, she took a stand when her ex-wife expressed concerns about what their neighbors might think about Dawn’s transition. Rather than back down, Dawn told her “I don’t care what they think!”

In addition to setting up boundaries and standing their ground in their relationships, sometimes the same was true with online interactions. Jessie said that she actively worked to block unwanted electronic communication that exposed her to harassment, fetishization, or hyper-sexualization, making her ‘blocked’ list quite long at this point. Similarly, Moshe shared that when someone became intrusive and homophobic, he messaged him back to say that it was “pretty terrible” of this man “to require that people like spend thousands of dollars for a surgery and potentially, like, die under the knife for a date. So maybe you should rethink your … everything!” In many ways, these trans* folx set boundaries and expectations with the people in their lives to both protect themselves and push back against transphobia.

Boundaries were created by several participants by making geographic moves. Rather than face marginalization in their personal lives, several participants moved “away” to literally
give themselves space and distance so they could transition (Colt, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Luke). Lady in Pink re-defined her boundaries by moving away from her ex-wife and the people who knew ‘him,’ so that anyone that she met after her transition would know “nothing else, but me as a woman.” Seeking to escape a similar scrutiny from his parents and grandparents, Luke moved from his home state of Arkansas to Wisconsin when he was ready for his transition. “I didn't wanna answer questions or deal with all of that. So, I lived down there for three years, even though I knew I was trans* and wanted to transition, but knew that would not be happening as long as I lived there” (Luke). Similarly, Colt and Jessie both explained that they felt it was important to have a fresh start in a new place as they transitioned, to start their new lives without having to deal with people who knew them before their transitions.

Another theme that developed in the context of taking control was the act of establishing and maintaining clear lines of communication with people in their lives. Darren said that he grew more confident in his identity. So, when his father does not demonstrate respect about Darren’s trans-gender identity, he has corrected his father and placed an emphasis on being open and honest about his life in their conversations. Darren went on to say that placing an emphasis on clear communication has made their relationship “a lot better.” In navigating her/their transition, Belinda has worked hard to keep the lines of communication open with her/their wife. Despite the numerous challenges that Belinda’s gender identity has presented in some of the most intimate aspects of their relationship, they are continuing to be open and honest with one another. In speaking with Dawn about the impact of her trans* identity on her relationship with her adult children, she also mentioned communication in navigating the estrangement she was experiencing with her son. Since her transition began, their relationship has been strained, but she has tried to keep the lines of communication open with him for when or if he is ready to talk
more. She sends him messages via social media to tell him “I’m still here, still loving and caring about [you]” (Dawn). While these folx made no claims that this communication was easy, I got the sense that it made them feel hopeful about preserving and perhaps improving their relationships as time goes on.

Perhaps one of the most common navigational strategies that participants’ stories revealed was creating their own ‘found families’ to re-invent a more nurturing and supportive network of family and friends (Darren, E., Elliott, Luke, Maxwell, Mish, Morrow, Null, P., Rose, Ryan). Often, these ‘found families’ include other gender nonconforming folx. As Darren shared,

If I do find someone that is also like trans-gender or non-gender conforming, I will immediately try to friend them just because we have like, one thing in common. And it's nice to have friends with the same kind of thing. I'm kind of trying to make my own kind of found family. So, getting people or friends that I really, really trust, and I know will be there for me.

For Maxwell, he found his “people,” mostly at college and through his participation in the Dagorhir battle games community. Having found common ground and acceptance, Maxwell observed, “Most of my friends from college are part of the community, so that was kind of what brought us all together there. And then, I'm also a part of Dagorhir, which is a huge community with people from all walks of life, and I've been really lucky there.” Similarly, several participants spoke about intentionally creating their support networks to include other members of the LGBTQ+ community (E., Null, P., Rose, Ryan, Sally).

Null shared that many of the people in their social circle are “very queer,” so they can dress and behave more femininely around their home with their friends without any concern for their safety. Similarly, P. explained, “I have like, a really vibrant, wonderful queer community. And so, if I am not at work, I am surrounded by other queer, mostly trans* people, and it's
normal and not a big deal. I have a huge, I have so many friends and like, really care and invest deeply in my friendships.” Embedded in these stories, I heard themes of resilience and resourcefulness as they sought and found their respective tribes and created safe places for themselves as well as others.

Within their cultivated social circles, some of the participants also shared that their current partners were either trans-gender, nonbinary, or queer and that this also made their lives better and safer (Ares Nero, Darren, Jasmine, Luke, Null, Riley, Ryan, Rose). In speaking about developing relationships after transitioning, Aod observed, “The people I see that are in relationships are primarily both trans-gender.” Sally spoke about the fact that many trans* folx tend to find partners that are trans* because this arrangement seems to provide a built-in support system, but she also sheepishly observed that this safe harbor approach also “skips a few steps in the journey to self-acceptance.” Jasmine and Riley, the only couple that I interviewed in this research, shared that because they had been transitioning together, they have enjoyed having a built-in support system. With that said, they shared that they still experienced some relationship challenges because their respective sexualities have caused some conflict.

Ares Nero, Darren, and Rose all offered comments about the fact that their partners were very accepting of their gender identities and that they find comfort in having partners who understand their struggles. “They definitely understand it. So, they kind of hold my hand and they'll tell me that it's gonna be okay and that we're going to work through it” (Darren). Similarly, Ryan, who has two partners who are trans*, said that when he is struggling with dysphoria and “spiraling,” his partners can help him work through those days more constructively. Luke also indicated that he feels “fortunate” to have his trans-feminine partner,
“Because we're kind of like, you know, we understand what being trans* really means. We don't have to explain things to each other. So that that has been great right off the bat.”

**Focusing on Preparedness.** When considering the theme of preparedness, this encompasses a sense of pro-active anticipation of how to deal with or avoid pitfalls of marginalization and precarity. For some participants this was demonstrated by a focus on exercising caution to maintain safety and security from illness, harassment, policing, and violence. When I was speaking with several participants about marginalization in the context of healthcare, they said that they tend to exercise a lot of caution in their daily lives so that they can avoid the possibility of being denied care (Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mike, Mish, Nin). Jessie said that she is “very careful” about her own personal safety because she believes that she cannot afford to get hurt and run the risk of being refused care at the scene of an accident. Lady in Pink and Mish shared similar concerns and indicated that they try to take good care of their health and avoid taking any risks. Nin also said, “I do my best to stay healthy, so that way, I don’t have to go to hospitals and risk being denied care.” As previously discussed, since these interviews were conducted, some of the most transphobic governmental policies have been rolled back in the wake of the 2020 presidential election and a significant regime change. With that said, it bears repeating that these positive changes are not nearly enough to address the systemic transphobia that still exists, and as we have certainly seen, progress is often fragile and transient.

In addition to avoiding illness and accidental injury, participants also spoke about how they prepare to limit or avoid harassment and policing. When speaking about the dangers of being a trans-female, Jasmine said that to protect herself from unwanted attacks through social media, she “wiped out” her former presence on social media so that her former identity and dead name could not be used against her. Jessie shared that to avoid being over-policed because of
discrepancies in documentation, she “carried [her] paperwork for more than six months after [her] name change” (Jessie). Being prepared for her daily trek to work, Sally said that she has a safety plan in mind to avoid harassment. She often varies her route to work because she walks.

She pays attention to her surroundings, identifying houses with visible rainbow flags whose residents would likely help her if she felt endangered, even in the case of police harassment. To avoid being targeted as a ‘predator,’ Aod shared that he made the conscious decision to avoid children. Although he built an art studio to teach classes, he has decided not to hold classes for younger people because of the negative rhetoric surrounding trans* identities. He went on to say that he also will not communicate with trans-gender youth who are seeking help and information without written consent from their parents because he feared being falsely accused of wrongdoing.

Many participants also spoke about the different preparatory strategies they use to navigate the likely risk of experiencing rejection or violence. In Aod’s case, he said that he is always alert to the dangers in his environment. While he had not experienced any violence, he attributed some of that good fortune to being “extremely safe.” He clarified, “when I say safe, I park where there are well-lit spaces, scanning the parking lot, and when customers ask what time I get off work, I’ll tell them three hours later than the actual time.” To be prepared, Lady in Pink downloaded a safety app on her Smartphone called ‘Noonlight’ that combines geo-location and a panic-type button. If she feels threatened, she can place her thumb on the blue dot and if released for any reason, the police are notified.

One behavior that emerged in these discussions about navigating the potential for violence was something I would characterize as ‘precautionary outness.’ Several participants explained that they pre-emptively disclose their trans-gender identity to prevent violence later,
specifically in the context of developing romantic or sexual relationships (AIS, Colt, Dawn, Jessie, Luke, Nin). Jessie indicated that the decision to be open about one’s trans-ness online is “very touchy for people,” because of the potential for negative attention. AIS said that he would rather be upfront about his identity, particularly if he is pursuing a sexual encounter. “In a case where someone decides to have a random hookup, like, let's say, in a scenario, I go on Grinder. Why would I go to someone's house without them knowing that I’m trans*? Because that's just gonna get me killed.” Both Colt and Luke acknowledged that disclosing their trans* identity can open the possibility for being fetishized, but it also eliminates the possibility of someone claiming they were ‘tricked.’ Ultimately, Colt indicated that trans-gender people “Don't want to be somebody that gets killed because of a penis, or the lack of, while trying to explain who they are.” In addition to being vigilant and prepared to avoid violence, Jasmine and Mish also spoke about carrying weapons for protection against attackers. Jasmine said that she carries a blade for self-protection, while Mish planned to acquire a concealed weapons permit so that she could carry a handgun for protection.

**Demonstrating Resourcefulness.** Another area of taking control that I found particularly compelling were participants’ stories that reflected resourcefulness. Being profoundly marginalized, several participants shared stories of great resourcefulness in carving their way through precarious circumstances. Knowing that gender nonconformity and transitioning from one gender to another represented a significant risk to the most intimate of relationships, Belinda prioritized knowledge and research in her/their transition process. To figure out her/their own identity, she/they created a secondary Facebook account that was solely focused on LGBTQ+ issues, ‘friended’ numerous “cross-dressers, drag queens, and trans-women,” and joined multiple groups to learn about the experiences, feelings, and struggles that all these folx were having. “As
I went through their stories and their struggle, I started looking at my life, and I started understanding some of the pitfalls that they kept running into, especially the married ones” (Belinda). Rather than step into the process and hope for the best, Belinda took control and tapped into the available resources with the hope of navigating the challenges that her/their gender identity posed to her/their marriage. Faced with the challenges of the financial burden that transitioning costs and the potential for severe economic instability that impacts many trans-folx, both Ryan and Ares Nero leveraged their social networks to raise money. Ares Nero shared that he is an artist, so he was accepting commissions and selling his art to raise the funds necessary to become financially independent and begin his transition. Knowing how expensive his impending surgery would be, Ryan also took to the internet and started a GoFundMe campaign to raise at least some of the money he would need to cover his expenses.

To avoid homelessness and untenable homeless shelter stays, Sally used her skills to camp for a while before making the decision to “ride the rails” for several years. During that time, Sally found a collective, anarchist group in the southern states where she was able to help others by building homes and helping impoverished people.

I worked during Hurricane Katrina, down in New Orleans, and I was working with an organization called Common Ground that was non-hierarchically organized and they said ‘Look, we have food and place for you to sleep if you’re willing to just help people.’ So, I worked there, and it felt really invigorating.

P. also found their place within an anarchist community when they were in a precarious economic situation. They said that their community only eats food they find in dumpsters. P. went on to say, “If you're gonna live out of the dumpster, then you gotta have a food distribution network. So, there's a ton of people that come to the house all the time – queer and trans* people that get food.” Refusing to engage in the mainstream food supply chain, P. explained how they and their network of trans* and queer folx have navigated around the threat of economic and
physical precarity by accessing viable resources, often stigmatized by our capitalistic mainstream society. Finally, N. shared how he chose to make his own path and find his own purpose by becoming the type of therapist that he had been unable to find for himself. Rather than continuing to work for an insurance company in an unfulfilling job, N. quit that job and worked toward opening a therapy practice that caters to people who are struggling with issues around their gender and sexuality. He saw the opportunity to find fulfillment as well as provide much needed support to queer and trans* folx.

**Engaging in Self-Care.** In addition to focusing on being prepared and resourceful, many folx shared their practice of self-care through mental health therapy. Therapy was one of the common ways that participants cared for themselves in an intentional manner (Belinda, Crow, E., Gene, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Ryan, Yarrow). Jessie found therapy essential in helping her to let go of her anxiety and fear and to cope with all the challenges in her life. “You gotta go to therapy no matter what, you need therapy because you need to let loose of some of that – day-to day-things that it’s hard to cope with” (Jessie). Belinda found her/their therapist helpful as she navigated the emotions that she had not had as much experience with, prior to taking estrogen. Her/their therapist helped with learning to normalize crying, which Belinda had been socially conditioned to avoid, growing up as a male. Ryan described his relationship with his therapist as a type of collaboration and explained that they have created a series of “self-care lists” to help navigate difficult days that are related to his gender identity. Similarly, E. explained that they collaborated with their therapist to develop “self-care routines” to help them deal with distress.

**Embracing Hope.** Several folx spoke in terms of progress and hopefulness. Despite the numerous challenges in their lives, some participants indicated that their lives are so much better than they were before transitioning (Colt, Dawn, Jasmine, Lady in Pink, Mish, Morrow, N.,
Riley). Mish spoke a lot about how fortunate she had been and emanated a sense of hope, positivity, and humor. “I’ve never felt as good as I do right now” (Mish). Jasmine and Riley also indicated that their outlooks were much better, now that they were in the process of transitioning. Riley said, “This is the happiest I’ve ever been in my whole life,” and Jasmine also indicated that she now had a “better view of life and a lot brighter. I can see some sort of future now.” This same sentiment was echoed by Lady in Pink in her observation that she was happier than she ever was as ‘him’ and she talked about how she had made peace with her former self, seeing him as a type of guardian who protected her until she was ready to emerge. “I transitioned to save the part of myself that I love” (Lady in Pink). Although Gene, as a genderqueer person, had not experienced a physical transition, they also found a great deal of joy and celebration when they found language and an understanding about their gender identity.

Dawn said that despite all the challenges that she faced every day, she remained hopeful for her future, whatever that may bring. “I always keep hoping that one of these days, somebody is willing to be with me for me and not who they perceive me to be” (Dawn). Despite the frustration and challenges that they spoke about throughout their interviews, both Barnell and Maxwell also spoke about having hope that things will get better. When asked how he manages to navigate so much oppression, fear, and anger, Barnell shared, “I pray, I hope, and I keep looking at the small victories.” Darren also spoke about the idea of those victories in his observation, “It's good to remember that many groups have only recently gotten fundamental rights. You know, we're still definitely in the midst of trying to get all of this stuff to actually work for people to actually be accepted.”

**Engaging in Mindfulness and Spirituality.** A few participants also spoke about engaging in mindfulness and spirituality to navigate the marginalization they have encountered
from mainstream society (Dawn, Lady in Pink, Sally, Yarrow). Lady in Pink, Dawn, and Sally spoke about their desires to have trans-ness viewed in a more spiritually reverent, transcendent way as it was in different historical contexts. Lady in Pink and Dawn, both of partial indigenous descent, specifically referenced the Native American shamanistic perspective of 2-spirited people in the context of this discussion. “From ancient Babylon to Native Americans, the Native Americans revered us as ‘2-nature’ because we can walk in both worlds, from both sides of the spectrum and so they consider them touched by the Gods” (Lady in Pink). Yarrow identified themselves as an “eclectic spiritual empath” and shared that they focused on staying centered and engaging in the emotions and experiences that help to maintain “higher vibrational levels,” such as “love, joy, happiness, peace, and forgiveness.”

When speaking with Sally, she shared that she had found an incredibly supportive spiritual online community which had been therapeutic for her. She went on to say that in her study of spiritualism and the historically transcendent nature of trans-gender identities, she learned about some texts that describe several ancient figures who had experienced various phases of gendered existence. In one instance she learned about an ancient goddess, Sibyl, who had a class of priests that had castrated themselves and wore women’s clothing. She theorized that this sounded like an entire class of trans-women in the context of an ancient civilization. There was also a story about a man who worshipped at the goddess’s temple and castrated himself in homage, and because of his devotion he ascended to godhood. As we talked about these stories, Sally said that she found these ideas exciting and thought provoking.

Participants’ descriptions of how they responded to and coped with their experiences with marginalization and precarity clearly demonstrated a diverse navigational skill set. At times, denial, avoidance, and going along to get along were the best tactic for avoiding overt
discrimination as well as social and economic instability. At other times, redefined relationships, focusing on preparedness, demonstrating resourcefulness, engaging in self-care, embracing hope, and practicing spirituality were more effective strategies. Whether laying low or taking control, their stories illustrate fortitude in the face of adversity. The same can be said about how these folx chose to navigate mainstream society’s distorted representation of their identities.

**Navigating Distorted Representations of Trans* Identities**

Powerful stories of agency and resilience emerged from participants’ discussions about how they have responded to distorted mainstream representations of their identities. In the context of navigating representations, their experiences were strong illustrations of trans* folx using a variety of conscious strategies to take control. Conversations in this area were strewn with themes of gatekeeping, envisioning more positive and constructive representations, and creating and cultivating authentic representation through action and advocacy.

**Taking Control**

Gatekeeping. For a few, navigating negative representations in mainstream society involved a combination of avoiding those representations as well as aggressively gatekeeping to limit exposure to negative representations (Dawn, Luke, Maxwell, Morrow, Null, P., Ryan). When thinking about mainstream media, Morrow said, “This is where I go into my heavy gatekeeper mode. So, I like, only surround myself with pro-LGBTQ and pro-trans* agenda type material. I do not engage with popular media, but rather, I curate all of the material I come across.” Ryan also tended to “cultivate” his social media consumption so that he encounters pro trans* material most often. Rather than “watch the news every night,” Luke said he “self-selects” and has followed intentionally “transparent” and “accepting” social media accounts of fellow trans* folx who are sharing their stories online.
When I asked about their perspective of why mainstream media has portrayed trans* identities in a primarily negative way, participants offered what I would characterize as gracious observations. When asked why she thought the messaging about trans-ness seemed to suggest that it is a problem or negative, Jasmine noted, “in a lot of ways we’re being looked at like the gay and lesbian community was being looked at in the eighties, as like not being part of society, and that’s where we are now. It may take another twenty or thirty years before people are fully accepting of us.” When I pressed a bit further on this timeline perspective, she posited that it is hard for people to change and to accept change, so it is going to take quite a while before trans* folx would be seen as “just like everyone else.” For Ryan, the negativity and shallow depictions are more a matter of who is or is not producing that media.

It’s very clear that a lot of news stories and a lot of policies are being written by people who don’t understand trans-ness. They’re being written by the middle to upper class, white, cis-gender, heterosexual, able males who probably had to look up what trans* meant in a dictionary.

Ryan’s observations provided clear support for the argument that trans* folx need authentic representation in all sectors of society to initiate, create, and cultivate more positive representation.

**Envisioning More Positive and Constructive Representation.** To engage in collaborative navigation of representation, I asked participants to tell me what types of representation of trans* identities they wanted to see in mainstream society. The demeanor of participants seemed to lighten noticeably when asked this question, and they offered a wide range of opportunities to change the public discourse surrounding trans* and gender nonconforming identities.

Quite a few participants spoke about representations that would include depictions of authentic lives, eliminating the tokenization of trans-ness and gender nonconformity as
something problematic, exotic, or threatening (Crow, Dawn, E. Jessie, Kim, Luke, Maxwell, Mike, Morrow, Null, Ryan, Rose, Yarrow). They wanted to see trans-gender, nonbinary, and genderqueer characters in TV and movies who were “normal people,” with the fact of their trans-ness not being the focus of the narrative (E., Luke, Maxwell, Mike, Morrow, Ryan, Yarrow). While E. wanted to see a trans-masculine nonbinary superhero to empower trans* folx, they also thought it was important to have TV shows that convey the message that “every day, you know, I'm a person. I have a life. I go to work. I have a dog, and I have friends.” They went on to say that having “real” representations

would help a lot more trans* people, specifically nonbinary people feel more welcome and empowered to see themselves on the screen and actually be excited to think, ‘Wow, it's possible for me to have a life and be somebody and, you know, have a future’” (E.). Instead of being viewed as “weird” or “freaks,” Kim and Morrow also expressed desires to see empowering representations of trans-gender people that emphasize their humanity. Elliott pointed out, “I'm more than just my trans-gender identity.” Similarly, Ryan reflected, “There are a bajillion things that have happened in my life for better or worse that are weird or good but have nothing to do with the fact that I'm trans*.”

When discussing potential venues for more constructive representation, Null said that he would start in movies with characters that are “radically nonconforming, but although you can see their difference, it is not remarked on. They are simply who they are.” Similarly, Mike also suggested that what society gets wrong is the focus on the differences that separate entire segments of humanity rather than embracing what we all share. He went on to say that he would like to see trans-gender people in TV sitcoms where they are dealing with daily life in humorous ways. While Mike acknowledged that documentaries and dramas are still valid contexts for trans* representation, he suggested that when characters are three dimensional in the context of
sitcoms that often present “light-hearted themes,” people can relate to the challenges they face regardless of their gender identity. Like Mike’s emphasis on approaching positive representation with a more “light-hearted” approach, Crow said he loved the idea of all-inclusive kids’ shows.

TV shows or cartoons where, all of the characters have, like, different skin color and like, they all have their own identities, and it's fine and normal. They treat it, like, it's not something taboo or strange. There's not just like one kinda token character. I think it's important to get that kind of representation to young kids.

Belinda expressed a desire to see more visibility of trans* producers, film-makers, and newscasters because so many Americans consume movies and television. AIS spoke about the desire to see more trans* actors and writers like one of the actors who appeared on the popular comedy series *Shameless*. While the story line did address his trans-ness and some of the narrative focused on shaming another character’s transphobia, AIS said that he appreciated that the actor had “not marketed himself on that. He just is who he is.”

In addition to being seen on the TV or movie screen, participants wanted to see a lot more representation of trans* and gender nonconforming folx as content creators in multiple sectors, such as music, art, film, video game creation, fan fiction, journalism, and literature (Belinda, Betty, Dawn, Jasmine, Jessie, Nin, Null, Ryan, Sally). Ryan also spoke about the importance of having members of the trans* community being part of telling trans* stories so that the representations are informed by authentic experiences. “If there's gonna be a trans* character on the show, hire a trans* writer to be a part of that discussion and preferably hire a trans* actor or make sure that the representation isn't just wholly focused on their trans-ness.” Nin contended that to create effective and affirming forms of trans* representations, such as in the gaming community, trans* folx need be creating the trans*characters to avoid unintended but damaging representations. Jasmine also wanted to see more trans* people represented and normalized in a wide array of settings such as politics and athletics. Both Betty and Sally spoke about their
desires to see more members of the trans* community represented in content creation that not only captures the experiences of trans* folx in diverse and creative ways but also demonstrates the depth of talent that is not yet recognized. Dawn and Jessie both talked about wanting trans* folx to be visible and normalized in all professions and in all facets of society.

Relevant to the prevalence of intersectionally complex experiences with marginalization, participants also desired more inclusive and affirming representations of all trans* identities (trans-feminine, trans-masculine, nonbinary, genderqueer, etc.) that would include different skin-tones, stages of transition, body sizes, and body shapes (Crow, Dawn, Darren, Elliott, Morrow, Moshe). Darren said, “It'd be nice to get the idea that you don't have to be, you know, you don't have to be perfectly passing to be trans*, and you shouldn't have to be perfectly passing to be accepted into the community and regular life.” As previously discussed, trans* folx who often gain the most positive attention are most closely aligned with the stereotypes of appearance and presentation dictated by the restrictive gender binary. While many spoke about visual depictions in movies and TV, Moshe spoke about a more practical context where he would like to see this change.

Instead of representing trans-masculine identities as primarily smaller white bodies, he would like to see all shapes and sizes, from the depiction of surgical results to diversity in sizing and cuts from the clothing industry. He said that as a trans-man he has struggled to find appropriate and well-fitted clothing because he does not have narrow hips and a completely flat chest. Moshe posited that if depictions are broadened and become more inclusive, trans* folx would experience a lot less marginalization in the more mundane aspects of their lives, like finding clothes to wear. If, for instance, clothing manufacturers began acknowledging that their customers, regardless of gender, come in all shapes and sizes, then many people who have
struggled to find clothing that makes them feel comfortable and confident would feel like they are being taken seriously. In addition to having mainstream entities and companies become more inclusive, a few participants indicated that they would like to see the normalization of trans* specific products being sold commercially in mainstream venues, rather than in backrooms, sex-shops, or exclusively online (Ares Nero, Colt, Darren). “I’ve never seen a store, a brick-and-mortar store, that sells binders, gender-neutral clothing, or packers” (Ares Nero). Ares Nero theorized that if mainstream society saw these products more often, then the idea of trans-ness would gradually move toward becoming a part of daily life.

In addition to imagining a list of desirable representations, participants indicated that they sought out and would like to see even greater representation in the ‘real world’ rather than in mainstream media, whether it be in schools, communal settings, or finding role models. For many this was in the context of engaging with a wider community, either locally or through social media channels and networks. The idea of acknowledging trans* and nonbinary identities in school curriculums, such as in discussion of history and social engagement, was discussed by a few folx. The express goal of normalizing trans-ness and gender nonconformity in a way that it is not associated with some sort of social deviance was offered as a way to change common misrepresentations at a time when kids are impressionable and more likely to develop appreciation for and acceptance of diversity (Ares Nero, Crow, Darren, Moshe).

Barnell spoke about finding trans* representation in communal settings, such as support groups. In his own support group, he was fortunate to experience community, discussing the historical and cultural contributions of trans* folx. For Barnell, this positive and intentional practice of coming together and celebrating the progress of trans-gender people was a critical step in affirming trans* identities. Gene and N. both contended that gender nonconforming folx
can benefit from being open-minded about finding role models. Because N. began transitioning at a later age, he needed to reimagine the concept of ‘elder.’ He explained that some of his role models are younger than he is because “a lot of them are doing a better job. They're identifying and seeking out knowledge about themselves and in ways that, you know, people who are over the age of 35 or 40 didn’t have a space to do. That was not tolerated.” He suggested that trans* people need to be open to following and emulating people who are creating positive representations of trans* identities, regardless of their age or social status.

Speaking about finding and developing ‘real world’ trans* representations, several participants talked about localized forms of visibility. Kim said he felt fortunate and well-represented on his college campus because there is a trans-gender professor who transitioned openly.

It is really important and reassuring for me being trans* and not having made some of the bigger changes, yet. It made me feel safer to be on campus and to be myself. Our student gender and sexuality group on campus is also mostly made up of trans* people and supported by trans* professors. (Kim)

N. said he found encouragement from following the social media feeds of a local civic activist, a prominent trans-woman of color who has specifically worked to improve visibility of trans* folx. N. described her work as “beautiful” and “amazing.” Both Kim and N.’s experiences reflected a more accessible form of visibility that could be developed and nurtured outside of the grasp of mainstream media.

A few participants had also engaged in creating representation with their own authentic experiences to encourage other trans* folx through action and advocacy (Barnell, Dawn, Jessie, Mish, Nin). Jessie said she has shared her journey on social media and has posted pictures on ‘Throwback Thursdays’ because she waited into her thirties to transition and wanted “others to see [her] and realize that it’s never too late.” She felt it was especially important for others to
know they are not alone, which is why she has been open about being trans-gender despite the safety risks. Mish, in speaking about her work to create visibility and positive representation, contended that “education and awareness” about trans* experiences had not been enough to stop the violence against trans-women of color. Her solution was to start a non-profit organization that provides support to struggling trans-gender women. Although she had not gotten it “off the ground” at the time of our conversation, she said that she will continue to talk about it to keep that goal alive because, “There was a time I wasn’t visible either,” and she contended that, “If you don’t have trans* people sitting at the table, how are you going to have a correct account of the situation?”

Dawn, frustrated with being characterized as a pedophile or criminal and being fetishized, had also taken action to create visibility. Not satisfied with just avoiding negative representations, Dawn has participated in informational panels at a nearby university. She to do so because it was,

helpful for the general society to see us like that. And that’s one of the reasons that even though I don’t pass, I do put myself out there. So, the general community can see that I’m normal and I’m really not any different from them.

In addition, Dawn helped people in her trans* support group that she affectionately referred to as the “baby trans*,” who are at an earlier stage of their transition. Knowing that she does not pass as a cis-female, she felt it was important to create visibility and normalize all types of trans-ness in the broader community as well as in the trans* community. Sally had several examples to offer about advocacy and creating visibility. Not only did she advocate for her fellow gender nonconforming co-workers, but as a White trans-woman she felt adamant about her responsibility to support and hold trans-women of color up and be an ally so that they are not forgotten, and the tide of violence against them does not go unmarked.
AIS, E., Crow, and Luke all spoke about their willingness to be visible and open about their trans-ness with people who may not understand what that means and are afraid to ask. They all indicated that they have had to tolerate a range of negative feedback, but they try to view those experiences as opportunities to educate while working to normalize trans-masculine identities, making them more recognizable. E. indicated that they had also been involved in LGBTQ+ advocacy by taking part in ‘Speak Up’ panels or in-class presentations at a local university to create authentic representations while also fielding questions from those who may not have accurate understandings of his identity or experiences. AIS observed that when he is open and honest with people, he has found that it makes them feel better knowing that there's probably plenty of other people like me. So, once they become comfortable around that idea, it opens them up to realize that maybe those negative thoughts they had shouldn't be there anymore.

Nin indicated that he was “working on creating a movie, focusing on what a trans-man is thinking and dealing with day-to-day and really poking at the whole passing lens and how for a lot of trans-men, it's very important.” Although so many trans-masculine folx tend to lay low out of fear of violence, Nin observed that it is critical for trans-men like him to add their voices to the current body of media. He hoped to create positive representations for trans-men that people recognize and to “break down that fear, or at least be the person who could pull you in to help make it not so scary anymore.”

Similarly, Barnell felt it was important to tell relatable stories about what it means to be a trans-gender man of color. Because he had struggled with so many aspects of his intersectionally complex identity, he felt he had to share his experiences.

I know it's not just me. I know there are other people like me that are trans-gender people of color that are in this world, and they are just waiting for someone to just listen to their story and listen to how they kept going. And the only way I'm keeping going is because I am finally able to reach where I need to be. I represent the future trans-genders. They'll
be reading this story for years to come, and they're gonna be like, ‘I can relate to Barnell.’ As a person of color, and as a person who is trans-gender and struggling to just get out from under the ceiling that is so short for a person of color. (Barnell)

The desire to help others through action and advocacy emerged quite often during these interviews. N. indicated that through his new career path as a gender and sexuality therapist, he has been able to create some of the most meaningful representations for himself as well as his clients. Because he is undergoing his transition while caring for clients with similar concerns, he has provided critical visibility at a “very micro level” that has been a “blessing” for him as well as his clients. The example he offered was that his clients can see his physical changes, and he was able to authentically relate to the overwhelming social, emotional, and financial impacts of transitioning. He said the experience has been both “stressful” and “beautiful.”

In some cases, although the opportunity to create representation had not yet arrived, participants still aspired to activism by creating safe spaces for queer folx in the future. Although Null had not publicly come out as nonbinary or genderqueer, they and their partner have a dream of ultimately creating a self-sustaining queer artists’ colony. Concerned with the “crushing” level of stigmatization and the high suicide rate among queer folx, particularly trans* youth, Null has held onto that dream because the colony would provide a safe place for Null, their partner, and a host of other struggling queer folx. Similarly, Luke shared that when he and his girlfriend purchased their house, they were operating with the understanding that they needed enough space to provide people a place to “crash” in the event of a crisis.

Because so many people are in that situation, and I have a couple of friends that are dealing with that now where the parents are not really accepting, and I'm like, you can literally always crash on my couch, like, call me at three in the morning. I don't care. So, I'm just kind of trying to make the world a little better. (Luke)

The self-initiated activism and openness demonstrated by many folx provided a host of promising opportunities for real world representations, offering the potential to drown out a lot
of the negative representations that have been perpetuated. The agency and resilience evident in so many of the participants’ stories fuel the potential for average cis-gender heterosexual people to begin to understand what it means to be trans-gender, nonbinary, genderqueer, or simply gender nonconforming. In addition, what these trans* folx shared with me in their interviews might be leveraged toward progress and improving their experiences, through normalization, inclusion, and acceptance in our collective daily lives. Quite a few viewed their participation in this research as a means of creating representation by making their under-represented stories and experiences visible (AIS, Barnell, Betty, Belinda, Crow, E., Elliott, Gene, Harper, Jasmine, Jessie, Lady in Pink, Mish, Moshe, N., Nin, Null, P., Riley, Rose, Ryan, Sally).

Several indicated they were also researchers, or aspired to be, and because they understood the importance of creating valid and authentic representations through research, they chose to participate (Harper, Morrow, Moshe, Nin, Ryan). For a few, their participation was more generalized to the experience of being trans-gender, such as Elliott who said, “I just know that trans* people are really, like getting more kicked out of the LGB community, and they don’t give us a voice. We don’t have a voice.” By participating, they felt their voice could be heard. Feeling essentially invisible as a trans-man, Ares Nero felt that participating in this research was a way to create representation and contribute to the community even though he had not yet been able to come out and transition. Despite his own limitations, he felt it was important to let other trans* folx know that they are not alone, regardless of their circumstances.

While many participants were thinking more generally about trans* visibility, there were others who were more specifically trying to find a space to voice their personal intersectionally complex, under-represented experiences. For Barnell, being a trans-gender man of color had been flooded with so many experiences that he felt had been ignored and silenced.
Our voices are not usually heard. They’re not usually expressed, and a lot of the surveys are usually done with Caucasians. I feel like, if more people of colors’ voices are heard, then people can see that it is not just only one-sided. It affects, you know, people in all walks of life.

Gabriel, who is blind, participated because the demographics survey did not ask questions about disabilities. “I'm blind, and I find that blind people are never included. So, I like to volunteer for stuff.” Their insights about how their blindness and gender identity act as mechanisms in shaping their experiences with marginalization were compelling.

When asked about their reason for participation, Jasmine and Riley believed that being interviewed together would create visibility as a trans-feminine couple, trying to navigate the challenges related to their conflicting sexualities (Jasmine being polysexual and polyamorous and Riley being monogamous). Nonbinary and genderqueer participants observed that nonbinary and genderqueer experiences are often characterized as even less legitimate than those of trans* folx. “As a nonbinary person, I sort of fall into an even further under-represented segment of a broader brand of discourse, so this was a good opportunity to kind of put that out there when it's not usually seen much” (Null). Gene, as a “gender nonconforming therapist in training” and sex worker, felt it was important to participate because studies are a critical method for influencing funding and obtaining vital access to services. They characterized it as, “just trying to do my part.”

**Conclusion**

In this final chapter of findings, I have presented what my participants shared about how they experienced and understood representations of trans* identities. In addition, their various navigational tactics for responding to marginalization, precarity, and distorted representations, encompassed by the codes laying low and taking control, were explored. Dependent on contexts, participants explained how they had demonstrated a capacity for agency and resilience when
faced with substantial adversity. When considering the various distorted representations and messages that the mainstream media and society at large has propagated about trans* identities, folx once again demonstrated agency and a capacity for resilience in proposing and creating positive and authentic representations of their identities and lives. Despite all the negativity encountered, they offered a host of viable strategies for altering the public rhetoric about who they are and the lives they lead. Having completed the presentation of findings, I now move to Chapter 7 to discuss the most compelling ideas that emerged from this research and to note the limitations of this work, proposing the need for additional inquiry in this field.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Mindful of the profound marginalization and precarity that many trans* folx, particularly those of color, have experienced, the purpose of this research was to confront how these underrepresented experiences have been silenced and made invisible. While the concept of queer precarity has been used to encompass how trans* folx have been made vulnerable to an array of economic and social instabilities, I proposed that it was not sufficient to adequately capture the intersectionally complex social and economic circumstances and dynamics that trans* folx have endured because of cisnormativity and homonormativity. This dissertation represents a salient foundational step in authentically illuminating the experiences and situated knowledges of trans* individuals to develop a substantive theory of trans-precarity. Specifically, I explored the experiences of 34 trans* folx from across the country, ranging in age from 20-55 years of age, through qualitative semi-structured interviews that occurred between July and September of 2020. The research was guided by a single overarching question, and four sub-questions. I have organized the summary and discussion of findings according to the guiding focus of the four sub-questions.

**S.R.Q. 1 – Socio-Economic Impact of How Trans* Folx Experience and Understand Marginalization**

Findings associated with my overarching research question of *how do trans-gender people experience, make sense of, and navigate marginalization in their daily lives?* as well as my first sub question of *how do transgender people’s marginalizing experiences and...*
...understanding of those experiences impact their socio-economic stability? were primarily discussed in Chapter 4. Because of the inherent interplay between marginalization and precarity, findings are summarized and analyzed in an integrated manner. Participants shared that they often experienced a gauntlet of derision, delegitimization, and erasure that most certainly threatened their social and economic stability as well as their health and safety. Chapter 4 began with an important discussion of how participants defined the concept of trans-gender as well as any additional relevant gender identities to which they ascribed. Consistent with Stryker (2017) and Vincent’s (2018) assertions about the importance of this self-determining language and the evolving understanding of identity, I centered each participant’s understandings from the beginning of their interview.

There was some commonality in participants’ definitions, including a sense of disparity between gender identities and the genders they were assigned at birth, as well as the perception that trans* identity served as an inclusive “umbrella” for a host of more specific sub-identities. However, there were also a few who contended that visibly transitioning, socially or medically, away from their gender assigned at birth was a critical aspect of committing publicly to being trans*. While not held by all, this perception is an important distinction when considering how visibly trans* participants experienced marginalization in contrast to those who were not detectible as trans*. This is consistent with Kcomt et al.’s (2020) finding that individuals who are visibly trans-gender or make their identity known are likely to encounter increased marginalization.

An essential point that must be acknowledged is that every participant had experienced some form of marginalization that they attributed to their trans* identities. These experiences occurred at both a personal (micro) as well as a systemic (macro) level. At a personal level, they
experienced dismissal, shaming, rejection, pathologizing, and abandonment. For most, the first encounters with marginalization occurred with their families of origin, spouses, and friends. These experiences ranged from misgendering and dead naming to overt refusals to accept gender identities. Beyond families of origin, two participants saw their marriages end because they transitioned. The dismissal and rejection of participants’ gender identities as moral failings or mental illness aligns with Mathers et al.’s (2015) participants’ tendency to view trans-gender identities as unnatural or immoral. What should also be acknowledged is that although I did not solicit responses about the role of religion in their experiences, eleven participants indicated that it had been an important factor in why their families of origin and spouses could or would not accept their trans-gender identities. This perception is consistent with Rood et al.’s (2017) finding that religious ideologies are understood to be one of the primary sources of negative social messaging about trans-gender identities.

Most participants related the challenges they had in seeking new relationships. Many described being objectified and asked intrusive questions about their genitalia and their trans-medical history. These folx also faced overt rejection and transphobia when they were honest about their trans* identities. In online interactions, the reaction was often “straight up reject[ion]” or being “ghosted” (Aod). Several trans-feminine participants also experienced being hypersexualized and fetishized while online. As Mathers et al. (2015) found, the insensitive and mean-spirited behavior of these strangers reflected the tendency of cis-gender people to treat trans* folx in a dehumanizing manner because they feel emboldened by systemic transphobia. Of particular significance is that while trans-masculine participants tended to be rejected for being trans*, trans-feminine participants were hypersexualized and fetishized for their trans-ness. While both experiences are negative and dehumanizing, the objectification of trans-feminine
bodies described is consistent with Serano’s (2007/2016) examination of transmisogyny, wherein trans-feminine folx are oppressed by societal misogyny as well as transphobia. The prevalence of rejection encountered in some of their most intimate interactions provided important context for participants’ commonly expressed feelings of isolation in relation to finding loving and accepting relationships. When discussing systemic transphobia across various contexts, this sense of isolation was a common theme in the literature (Dispenza et al., 2012; McKinney, 2005; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018; Seelman, 2016).

Regarding systemic marginalization and participants’ encounters with transphobia, a shared concern was the persistent threat of being involuntarily ‘outed.’ Their worries about being exposed as trans* in the context of the workplace (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018) and healthcare settings (Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016) were reflected in the empirical literature. Many felt that this threat made them vulnerable to social and economic instability as well as policing, harassment, and violence. The most common sites of systemic marginalization were in encounters with infrastructure, institutional practices, public policy, and engagement in healthcare and employment settings. In addition, several participants spoke about transphobic confrontations they had with strangers in public settings. These occurrences involved behaviors such as sneers and verbal aggression in a variety of settings, like metro trains, city sidewalks, movie theaters, restaurants, and stores. Trans-feminine participants, more so than others, talked about being subjected to more vitriolic slurs and name calling, such as “monster” (Jessie) or a “walking abomination” (Belinda). Reasons for heightened marginalization may be a combination of factors, including that they were recognizably trans* (Kcomt et al., 2020) and male aggressors were acting out of transmisogyny
(Serano, 2007/2016) as well as public discourse that cast trans-feminine identities as particularly ‘suspect’ (Wilchins, 2014).

The issue of institutional barriers inherent to infrastructure emerged as a significant concern for participants. More specifically, they spoke about the gendered implications of bathrooms, locker rooms, jails, and prisons. Of these, the most discussed experiences involved being confronted while accessing bathrooms, often while being suspected of deviant or predatory behavior. Notably, infrastructure issues were rarely raised by nonbinary or genderqueer participants who had not visibly transitioned from their genders assigned at birth. Once again, Kcomt et al.’s (2020) findings about the significance of being visibly or recognizably trans* seem to be critical in understanding who is experiencing marginalization most profoundly and in what contexts it occurs. Also of note, while McKinney (2008) and Seelman (2016) found that trans-gender college students had difficulty accessing trans-gender appropriate dorm accommodations, several of my participants indicated they had not met similar obstacles and were encouraged with the inclusivity they experienced while attending. Although further inquiry would be necessary to determine if this is an indication of more widespread institutional progress, it does seem like a promising development.

Institutional practices and public policy were also commonly discussed in the context of systemic marginalization. As with infrastructure, participants expressed concerns about having their trans* identities involuntarily exposed or outing because of transphobic practices and policies. Most often they spoke about the dangers of disparity between their gender presentation and various forms of formal documentation, such as driver’s licenses, birth certificates, car registrations, and passports. Depending on the context, these disparities raised ‘red flags,’ making trans* folk vulnerable to harassment and over-policing. With many states denying legal
protections to trans* folx, participants’ concerns and fears about these disparities are warranted. As Mizock and Hopwood (2018) asserted, it is critical for trans-gender or gender diverse (TGD) folx to acquire specifically gendered legal documents just to navigate critical domains of daily life.

Although I did not initiate political discourse, participants expressed frustration and worry about the explicitly transphobic public policies that emerged during the Trump presidency and from “right-wing conservatives.” Most often discussed were the H.U.D. memo intended to bar trans-feminine individuals from accessing homeless shelters and the policy that permitted healthcare workers to deny care to trans* folx. For many participants, these policies posed serious threats to their social and economic stability as well as their physical safety. Even when able to access shelters, several participants said they often felt unsupported and unsafe, with staff providing no protection against harassment or violence from other shelter clients. The systemic transphobia experienced from infrastructure, institutional practices, and public policies are reflective of Perry’s (2003) analysis of how the state and mainstream media other and vilify marginalized groups. As is evident in these findings, negative discourses about trans* identities and lives are leveraged to limit the lives of trans* folx with institutional barriers.

Regarding healthcare systems, participants’ experiences reflected themes of negative or frustrating encounters with ill-prepared or intolerant healthcare workers, shortages of trans-specific physicians, and denial of insurance coverage for trans-medical care. Several participants felt that their safety had been put at risk when medical workers ‘outed’ them in front of other patients during the intake process or refused to provide adequate medical care. This is consistent with Vermeir et al.’s (2018) finding trans-gender folx are often frustrated by interpersonal barriers such as healthcare providers who lack knowledge and sensitivity to provide them with
trans-competent medical care. Particularly concerning is that participants said they have avoided seeking medical care to avoid being marginalized, putting them at greater risk for more serious illnesses (Boe et al., 2020; Bauer et al., 2009; Grant et al., 2011; Kcomt et al., 2020; Puckett et al., 2017; Vermeir et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). One of the most significant challenges mentioned was the shortage of physicians who provide competent trans-medical care.

Participants’ difficulties with accessing general and trans-specific healthcare are consistent with Dispenza et al. (2012) and Mizock and Hopwood’s (2018) findings. Dispenza et al. (2012) found that career trajectories are often negatively impacted when trans* folx do not have access to trans-medical care. Many also spoke about their insurance providers refusing coverage for care associated with medically transitioning, often characterizing such services as elective or cosmetic.

As with healthcare, experiences with employment and the workplace were also a primary site for pervasive marginalization, and once again the ever-present threat of being outing loomed. Disparity between formal documentation (resumes, state-issued IDs, background checks, etc.) and gender presentation were also problematic. Several participants believed they were denied employment because of their gender identity. Even when they were able to secure employment, many used the word “fear” to describe their experiences in the workplace, acknowledging that they could be fired and have no recourse. Individuals often have few options when it comes to taking any type of legal action given the lack of protection provided by many states (Mizock & Hopwood, 2018). When employed in hostile work environments, participants experienced a range of marginalization. While some were subjected to actions such as dead naming or misgendering, others experienced outright harassment and threats of violence. Jessie recounted some of the most egregious experiences, having been subjected to constant sexual harassment.
and threats of violence until she ultimately felt forced to quit her job. The complexities of how systemic transphobia was experienced by these participants are highly relevant to previous empirical findings in the literature about the types of transphobia experienced in the workplace as well as the negative impacts of those experiences (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Mizock et al., 2018).

All this systemic marginalization and transphobia in the primary domains of daily life had a concentrating impact on many of the participants’ financial and social stability. In the context of trans-medical care, they expressed anxiety and frustration about having to pay for the exorbitant expenses without adequate insurance coverage. Although “[g]ender affirming care is often necessary for the emotional wellbeing and physical safety of TDG individuals,” many insurance plans neither acknowledge nor accommodate trans-specific healthcare needs (Mizock & Hopwood, 2018, p. 66). Lacking access inherently made participants more vulnerable to continued marginalization and precarity because they were detectable as trans*. Several spoke about working in lower wage jobs because of their trans* identities. One trans-feminine participant said she had been subjected to the “glass cliff,” being deprived of critical resources so that when she was unable to perform her job effectively, she could be deemed incompetent. Working in lower wage jobs combined with a greater likelihood of lost familial financial support led to some folx living in substandard or subsidized housing as well as being homeless. These experiences are in line with Mizock and Hopwood’s (2018) findings that TGD people often occupy lower wage jobs, are more likely under-employed or unemployed, and are more vulnerable to economic downturns when working in the blue-collar sector.

Participants also spoke about their heightened risk of being policed because of issues with infrastructure, institutional practices, and public policy, and disparate documentation.
Another concentrating effect of such pervasive systemic marginalization for many participants was the understanding that they were at much greater risk of physical violence with limited hope of bystanders, witnesses, or even law enforcement intervening or assisting them. This lack of social support in relation to heightened vulnerability was also found to be a concern raised in McKinney (2005), Seelman (2016), Dispenza et al. (2012), Mizock et al. (2018), and Mizock and Hopwood’s (2018) work.

These findings clearly confirm that trans-gender people experience marginalization in both their personal and public lives. Participants in this study understood the systemic nature of the transphobia they experienced. They also understood that they had little recourse because their gender identities have been othered and marginalized by mainstream society. Consequently, many felt isolated in the contexts of their daily lives and perpetually fearful that they might be ‘outed’ as trans*. Poverty, housing instability, and threats to their health and safety were also understood to often be the consequence of how their gender identities have been stigmatized and demonized in society. Most specifically, participants who were visibly trans* tended to recognize that their visibility was a determining factor in how negative their experiences with transphobia were, and spoke about the precarity they had experienced more often than participants who were not visibly trans*.

**S.R.Q. 2 – Intersectional Complexities of Trans-gender Experiences of Marginalization**

Chapter 5 primarily addressed my second research sub-question of *How does one’s intersectional identity, particularly regarding race and/or ethnicity, impact a trans-gender person’s marginalizing experiences and understanding of those experiences?* The findings regarding the racial and ethnic implications of trans* marginalization have been arranged to first emphasize voices that have been relatively under-represented in the empirical literature. The
stories and observations from Black trans* folx primarily focused on interactions with institutions and White mainstream society. The dominant themes in this area included encounters with destructive stereotypes, relentless surveillance and harassment, and feelings of profound frustration.

Black trans-feminine participants associated a great deal of their marginalization with false and demeaning stereotypes of Black trans-women as sex workers and drug dealers. Black trans-masculine participants suggested that they were often victimized by societal messages that cast Black men as threatening or dangerous. Destructive stereotypes were also associated with being fetishized for various aspects of their racialized gender identities. These participants’ stories were also infused with themes of relentless surveillance and harassment. They described being targeted and feeling frustrated with the racialized marginalization they experienced, such as being excessively stopped by law enforcement for reasons they viewed as questionable. It must be recognized that a lot of these experiences can likely be attributed to the systemic racism that persists in mainstream American society. Beyond that, though, the implications of their intersecting marginalized identities must also be addressed. These participants’ experiences were glaring illustrations of how intersectionally complex encounters with marginalization can be, particularly as they stand in starkest contrast to the experiences described by White participants. These folx had clearly been impacted by the gendered, raced, and classed implications of homonormativity (Bell & Binnie, 2004; DeFilippis, 2016; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Knee, 2019; Rosenberg, 2017; Vogler, 2016), and Black trans-feminine participants also seemed to have been impacted by transmisogyny (Serano, 2007/2016, 2013).
Under the incessant pressures of being surveilled and treated unfairly, Black participants were understandably frustrated. Two participants believed their race played a significant part in how their health concerns were dismissed and delegitimized when they sought care. While race may not have been the only reason for their negative encounters, the fact remains that they understood it as such and were frustrated. Barnell’s understanding of these experiences provided a strong illustration for how the compounding and concentrating effects of intersectionally complex marginalization can dramatically shape the lens through which we view the world. As a Black trans-man who had struggled with financial instability, housing instability, and physical and psychological health concerns, he had suffered under long-term cascading effects of cyclic marginalization and precarity. Through his various interactions with individuals and institutions, Barnell developed an understanding that his racialized identity had been a significant factor in the oppression he endured.

Brown participants generally expressed fewer concerns about racialized marginalization, and were not as focused on White mainstream institutions. Instead, their accounts involved interactions with individuals. Aod talked about the challenges of his intersectional identity in his observation, “I’m never going to be one hundred percent anything.” To illustrate the point, he described how a fellow tribe member marginalized him, suggesting that his skin was too light for him to call himself Native American. Another participant described how their family’s strict patriarchal expectations of gender roles had often been the source of their marginalizing experiences with family members. Speaking about mainstream White society’s false assumptions about their identity as a presumed cis-gender Asian female, Gene had been fetishized for that identity and experienced racialized sexual harassment in public. What is most notable about what Black and Brown participants shared is that their racialized marginalization seemed to be
experienced very differently. The literature suggests that trans* folx of color are more vulnerable to a greater marginalization and social instability (Bell & Binnie, 2004; Ferguson, 2005; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Knee, 2019; Rood et al., 2017; Rosenberg, 2017; Seelman, 2016), but no explicit discussion or exploration of how Black and Brown trans* folx’ experiences might differ were evident. This seems to suggest the vital importance of recognizing diversity within racial and ethnic groups and avoiding the temptation to generalize about the impact of those identities on a person’s level of marginalization.

When addressing the significance of race with White participants, it was most notable that all but one acknowledged their own racial privilege. Several explicitly observed that their whiteness had shielded them from violence as well as assured greater access to education and competent healthcare. One participant observed that having experienced poverty, homelessness, mental illness, and being a sex worker, she believed her whiteness had kept her alive. Nonbinary and genderqueer participants also indicated that their whiteness served as a buffer against more intense forms of marginalization and precarity. The acknowledgement of White privilege among these folx is particularly significant as it stands in contrast to the behavior of White mainstream society. This awareness of racial privilege among trans* folx does not appear to be widely discussed in current literature. Several trans-masculine folx also acknowledged the implications of acquiring White male privilege, indicating that when people viewed them as cis-gender White males they experienced added ease to their lives. This seems particularly salient when thinking about the immense social power associated with demonstrating traditional forms of masculinity. As suspected, Dispenza et al.’s (2012) contention that trans-masculine individuals would likely experience greater social consequences for enacting masculinity and challenging the patriarchy were not supported by these findings.
There were also a few participants who drew thought-provoking connections between White supremacy and transphobia, drawing parallels between Jim Crow Laws and various legal restrictions and barriers that have been instituted to restrict trans* lives. Further, one participant posited that when diverse trans* identities become normalized in society, the opportunity to problematize and expose the connections between transphobia and White supremacy will emerge. While I did not encounter any explicit discussion in the literature that connected these ideologies, pointed discussions about the impact of race, class, and gender nonconformity in the context of homonormativity and symbolic boundaries provide strong justification for further inquiry in this area (Bell & Binnie, 2004; DeFilippis, 2016; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Knee, 2019; Rosenberg, 2017; Vogler, 2016).

Another significant element of intersectionally complex marginalization that arose in the findings was participants’ understanding of their experiences with disability. While many participants struggled with physical and psychological challenges, only five specifically used the word “disability.” Of those, Gabriel provided the most focused insights about how they had been marginalized far more because of their blindness than their gender identity. In attempting to access services and care, Gabriel experienced numerous bureaucratic obstacles that often prevented them from receiving vital money and services, placing them at greater risk for precarity. Although participants did not speak about mental health concerns in terms of ‘disability,’ many described their personal struggles with fear, exhaustion, isolation, sleeplessness, trauma, and suicidal ideation.

Although the intersectional implications of disability were not a primary focus for this research, McKinney (2005) and Seelman (2016) did address how trans-gender folx’ mental health was negatively impacted by the institutional barriers they faced in college settings. More
specifically, Seelman (2016) found that suicidality rates were higher among trans-gender people who were denied access to appropriate bathrooms and dorms. Similarly, participants in this research indicated that the dysphoria they experienced while still closeted was so debilitating that they either thought about or attempted suicide. Interestingly, several said that despite all the marginalization they have experienced for being trans*, they were much better off since beginning their transitions. Most relevant in these findings is that the impact of having disabilities, either physical or psychological, is not widely discussed in the literature about trans* experiences with marginalization, suggesting the necessity for further inquiry.

When talking about marginalization from within the LGBTQ+ community, themes of body and respectability politics were common. While racialized exclusionary rhetoric was raised as a body politics issue, there seemed to be a greater concern about the marginalization and trans-exclusionary rhetoric experienced by trans* folx. Several observed that in the context of seeking romantic or sexual partners, many gay men and lesbian or queer women emphasized trans* folx’ genitalia and surgical status. That same emphasis was generated by trans-medicalists who have contended that those who do not engage in extensive medical transitions are not “trans* enough” and pose a threat to the progress made in the context of transitional surgery (Lady in Pink, Maxwell, Mish, Ryan). Nonbinary and genderqueer participants also spoke about marginalization and respectability politics, but instead of ‘not enough,’ they experienced the dismissive rhetoric of ‘don’t exist.’ Because their identities could not be defined in terms of the gender binary, they felt they were not taken seriously. The validity of nonbinary and genderqueer folx has been questioned because their identities are viewed as “muddying the message” about what being trans* means (Rose).
These findings illustrate how Lamont and Molnár’s (2002) symbolic boundaries are effectively used within the LGBTQ+ community to silence and erase ‘non respectable’ identities, by emphasizing what is being defined as ‘real.’ Consistent with the literature reviewed for this project, many participants encountered homonormative discourses that mandate assimilation of body politics, equating anatomy with identity and legitimacy (Knee, 2019; Rosenberg, 2017; Vogler, 2016). These findings demonstrate the necessity to examine the experiences of trans* folx with an intersectional lens. What I find most interesting is that while nonbinary and genderqueer folx did not encounter as much overt marginalization in mainstream society, there was significantly more discrimination within the LGBTQ+ and trans* communities. Although the experiences of nonbinary and genderqueer individuals were not a primary focus in this research, these findings suggest that further intersectional inquiry of their unique experiences with this type of marginalization is warranted.

The final area discussed by participants in the context of intersectionally complex marginalization was the contentious and controversial ability to convincingly pass as a cis-gender man or woman. The themes that emerged in these conversations focused on the consequences of being unable to pass, the obstacles to passing, and the social impact of successfully passing in mainstream society. Participants indicated that trans* “people who don't pass definitely get more crap from everyone” (Moshe), and they spoke about feeling dehumanized and invalidated by these interactions. Commonly discussed obstacles to passing were the often-insurmountable expense of extensive trans-medical care as well as the physical limitations a person’s unique biology, genetics, and anatomy presented. Trans-masculine folx tended to associate the ability to pass with an added sense of safety when they were able to “blend into the background” (Mike). In contrast, trans-feminine folx noted that their stature, bone
structure, and adolescent exposure to testosterone made it much more difficult to consistently pass. Many of the trans-feminine participants viewed the ability to pass as an opportunity to create representation and support for those who may be unable to pass. Mizock et al. (2017) and Mizock et al.’s (2018) brief acknowledgments that ‘passing privilege’ and ‘gender privilege’ should be studied further prompted me to include a question in my protocol about what passing meant to my participants. Having considered the social power associated with traditional masculinity, I was also interested in whether Dispenza et al.’s (2012) assertions about trans-gender men facing higher levels of scrutiny associated with their challenges to the patriarchy would be supported.

In stark contrast to Dispenza et al.’s findings, most participants believed that trans-feminine folx have a much harder time passing and are much more vulnerable to scrutiny, harassment, and precarity. Folx also associated those instabilities with being policed and potentially harmed. Although incorrect about the gendered implications, I do appreciate Dispenza et al.’s observations about the complex interplay between a trans* person’s access to trans-medical care and ability to pass and the overall stability of their daily lives. Consistent with their assertions, participants’ experiences demonstrated that passing is a dangerously double-edged sword. While it often ensures greater access to social privilege and escape from some of the worst forms of marginalization and precarity, passing has also been weaponized to marginalize those who are visibly trans*. These findings suggest the need for further research to determine the intersectional complexities and their consequences of passing to determine both short and long-term solutions. These findings clearly confirm that intersecting marginalized identities had differentiated impacts on what types marginalizing experiences they had as well as how they understood those experiences. Understandably, participants with multiple marginalized identities
understood and explained their marginalizing experiences through their uniquely constructed intersectional lenses.

**S.R.Q. 3 – Recognizing Negativity and Disparity in Representation of Trans* Identities and Countering with Positive Alternatives**

Findings regarding my third research sub-question of *how do trans-gender people experience and make sense of the way trans-gender identities are represented in the public domain?* were presented in Chapter 6. Participants’ encounters with representations of trans-gender identities were understood most often as negative or distorted portrayals. This is consistent with what current literature has found regarding trans-gender depictions (McLaren et al., 2021). Rood et al. (2017) similarly found that one of the primary social messages received by their trans-gender participants was that mainstream society views trans-gender identities negatively. Many participants described feeling alienated or dehumanized by these types of portrayals and messages. Often, they talked about trans* identities being used to get cheap laughs. An example of this was the distorted depictions of trans-feminine people as “men in dresses” (Dawn, Luke). Portrayals of trans* identities as dangerous, fear-inducing villains were also discussed. The representations and associated messaging discussed, as with many of the findings in this project, seemed to demonstrate several forces at work.

As Wilchins (2014) observed, trans-gender and gender nonconforming identities are “suspect” populations. More specifically, society has delegitimized trans-feminine identities by casting them as “imitations” or not “real women” through demeaning representations (p. 68). Furthermore, using destructive discourses (Foucault, 1978) and distorted representations, mainstream society has framed the behavior of trans* folx as a problem rather than problematizing the discourses (Wilchins, 2014). Consistent with Barbara Perry’s (2003) concept of “permission to hate,” the state and mainstream media replicate and distribute these
marginalizing discourses through public policy, news reports, and popular entertainment. Interestingly, participants cited corporate exploitation and mainstream media’s erasure, silencing, and tokenization of trans* identities and lives as significant elements of how their identities have been distorted and misunderstood.

Folx also noted significant disparities in how trans-masculine, trans-feminine, nonbinary, and genderqueer folx have been portrayed in mainstream society. These different representations seemed to align with the social implications of having intersectionally complex identities. Most participants said that trans-men or trans-masculine identities had very limited and narrow representation, which reflected rigid body politics. In contrast, they observed that trans-feminine representations were far more prevalent, but have been predominantly negative. Either they are portrayed as fully transitioned, “always on point, beautiful, dressed up,” (Moshe) or they are likely victims of tragedy. Participants noted that the hyper-sexualization and tokenization of trans-feminine identities has been dehumanizing and has increased the likelihood that they will be victims of violence. Regarding nonbinary and genderqueer representation, most participants indicated that it was even more limited than that of trans-masculine identities. “Our stories just don’t exist” (P.). Nonbinary and genderqueer participants indicated that the messaging that does exist can also tend to be dismissive, portraying these identities as over-privileged and frivolous. I did not encounter any examination of the significance of these differentiated depictions in the literature, but given the variation in messaging associated with different trans* identities, further inquiry seems warranted.

Despite the substantial volume of negative representations, participants were also able to offer examples of positive social messages and representations about trans* identities. Many folx cited several shows, *Pose*, *The Fosters*, and *Orange is the New Black*, as sources of
empowerment, affirmation, and inspiration. Laverne Cox was specifically mentioned for creating strong representation for trans-feminine folx of color. Participants were able to give several more examples of positive trans* representation in commercials and online forums. Public figures, primarily politicians and social activists, that have provided empowering and inspiration representation for trans* folx were also discussed. Positive representations of nonbinary and genderqueer identities in popular animated series, web comics, Japanese manga and anime stories, and video games were cited as well. It should also be noted that the demeanor of participants overwhelmingly became lighter during this part of the interview. What was most promising about these findings was that every participant demonstrated a capacity for resilience in offering examples of positive and competent representation of diverse trans* identities to contradict the negative representations they had encountered. Fortunately, McLaren et al.’s (2021) findings about more progressive and positive representations emerging in popular shows suggest that society may see increasingly nuanced and affirming portrayals of trans* lives in the future if this trend continues.

**S.R.Q.4 – Navigating Diverse Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation**

Last, Chapter 6 also included findings regarding my fourth research sub-question of *how do trans-gender people navigate experiences of marginalization, socio-economic instability, and trans-gender representations?* Regarding navigating marginalization and precarity, participants described tactics I categorized as either laying low or taking control. When laying low, their strategies involved denial, avoidance, or ‘going along to get along.’ Several common strategies for avoiding stigma were to deny their gender identities to themselves, to keep their trans* identities closeted from family and friends, and to withhold information about their trans-ness from strangers. Some folx said they had also tried to “tune-out” (Crow, Ryan) negativity and
develop a “thicker skin” (Crow, N., Ryan). Selective closeting in the context of accessing healthcare or in employment situations was also discussed as a means of shield themselves from systemic transphobia.

Generally, nonbinary and genderqueer participants who had not undergone visible transition indicated they have intentionally allowed people, including their families, to view them as the gender they were assigned at birth to avoid stigma. Choosing to go along with presumptions of gender identity was also a matter of safety. For example, Rose chose not to undergo trans-medical care and Gene opted to play to cisnormative stereotypes in her role as a sex worker to avoid detection and potential violence. Although successful, several participants said that using these tactics has made them feel cut off from their family members. These feelings of isolation are reflective of findings previously discussed regarding trans* folx’ marginalization. Laying low and avoiding their trans* identity to avoid marginalization has symbolically separated them from the emotional and social support that families are traditionally expected to provide.

When taking control, participants demonstrated agency and resilience in response to marginalizing situations they encountered. They discussed strategies of redefining relationships, focusing on preparedness, demonstrating resourcefulness, engaging in self-care, embracing hope, and practicing spirituality. Many shared stories about creating boundaries and standing their ground in marginalizing situations. Several indicated that they established physical boundaries by making geographical moves away from family members and people who knew them. Another common tactic was to create “found families” to provide critical support networks and safe spaces. In addition to redefining their relationships, participants also described being pro-active and preparing for potential marginalization and subsequent precarity. To limit potential
harassment, policing, and violence, some used a variety of tactics from scrubbing their former 
social media presences (Jasmine) to devising safety plans for how they would walk to work 
(Sally). To evade violent situations, several folx said they focused on being tuned into the 
dangers in their environments and planned for potential threats. It warrants mentioning that these 
interviews were conducted in the political context of a vast array of explicitly transphobic federal 
policies, many of which have since been reversed. That said, the participants’ experiences 
provided raw illustrations of the damage that those policies inflicted in their lives. It is essential 
to be mindful of how fragile and transient social progress can be. Further, the mental toll of 
wondering and worrying about what future administrations and policies might bring to the 
forefront for trans* folx must be acknowledged.

In addition to redefining relationships and being prepared, participants described 
practices of self-care through mental health therapy and resourcefulness. They were able to 
engage in self-care more purposefully and effectively through collaboration with their mental 
health care providers. Two said that with the help of their therapists they had created self-care 
checklists and protocols to prioritize their mental health. When faced with the threat of economic 
instability, participants demonstrated resourcefulness in several ways. Concerned with the 
exorbitant cost of transitioning, several explored crowdfunding to accumulate sufficient financial 
resources. In response to food insecurity and housing instability, two participants became 
members of anarchist communities. They actively contributed to informal economies and 
networks that enabled them to secure food, housing, and social supports while also supporting 
the needs of other members of the communities.

Capacity for resilience was demonstrated by participants’ decisions to focus on progress 
and hopefulness and, in some cases, practice mindfulness or spirituality. Despite being
marginalized for trans-ness in most facets of their daily lives, several folx indicated that their lives were much better after they began transitioning. This is particularly noteworthy, given the emphasis that is often placed on all the negative experiences that are associated with being visibly trans*. Barnell’s observation, “I pray, I hope, and I keep looking at the small victories” clearly reflected is capacity for resilience that he has developed while coping with intersectionally complex marginalization and precarity. Mindfulness and spirituality also emerged when participants talked about their developing understanding of trans-ness through the lens of ancient and indigenous cultures that historically revered these gender identities. Several also indicated that their practices in spirituality had helped them to stay centered while navigating challenges in their daily lives.

As with many of the ways they strategically navigated marginalization and precarity, these trans* folx also demonstrated agency and resilience in how they responded to distorted trans* representations. Experiencing negative mainstream representations of trans* identities, participants used a variety of tactics, such as gatekeeping, envisioning more positive and affirming representation, and cultivating authentic representation through action and advocacy. Participants had a wide range of ideas about how the public discourse about trans* and gender nonconforming identities could be fundamentally improved. Many argued that the tokenization of trans-ness as problematic, exotic, or threatening needed to be replaced with affirming portrayals of authentic and diverse trans* lives. Participants contended that in addition to mainstream media, trans* and gender nonconforming folx must be visible as content creators in a wide variety of mainstream sectors, such as music, art, film, video game creation, fan fiction, journalism, newscasting, and literature. Consistent with findings about intersectionally complex marginalization in Chapter 5, many participants emphasized the necessity to see diversity in
different skin-tones, abilities, stages of transition, body sizes, and body shapes. They also spoke about finding trans* mentors and role models who were creating authentic and strong trans* representations.

Particularly compelling were the participants who had taken action and engaged in advocacy to represent their own identities and experiences to affirm others. Several participants spoke about being open about their trans-ness in both informal and formal ways with the intent of educating, including, and normalizing all trans* identities. Several indicated that they had created representation and provided support to other trans* folx by engaging in social media as well as taking part in informational panel discussions. Participants hoped to normalize a wide range of trans* identities and experiences, making them seem “less scary” (Nin) to people who don’t really understand trans* identities.

Several findings regarding navigation are consistent with Dispenza et al. (2012), Wagner et al. (2016), and Mizock et al.’s (2017) work. In thinking about themes associated with laying low, Wagner et al. found that in healthcare settings, trans* folx engaged in avoidance of healthcare settings to prevent being exposed to systemic transphobia in those environments. Similarly, Mizock et al. found that trans* individuals avoided exposure to transphobia in the workplace by concealing and emotionally disengaging from their gender identities. When considering navigational strategies associated with taking control, Mizock et al. (2017) and Dispenza et al. indicated that some participants demonstrated resourcefulness by accessing tools or social supports to help them cope. Dispenza et al. also found that several participants chose to cope by using counseling services, participating in “avocational interests,” and engaging in “proactive resistance” (p. 75). Although these empirical findings focused specifically on
institutional interactions, given some of the commonalities, there is good reason to suspect that these strategies might be useful beyond those contexts.

Participants demonstrated their agency and capacity for resilience as they navigated an array of challenging experiences with marginalization, precarity, and negative representation. When presented with the opportunity, they confronted and challenged negative encounters with alternative narratives and constructive solutions. These findings demonstrate the crucial significance of centering under-represented voices and experiences in normalizing trans* identities. Their stories fuel the potential for more people to develop an understanding of what it means to be trans-gender, nonbinary, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming. In addition, what these trans* folx graciously shared in their interviews might be leveraged to progressively improve their experiences, through normalization, inclusion, and acceptance in our collective daily lives.

**Contributions of This Work**

Overall, this research allowed me to explore many aspects of the lives of a diverse group of trans* people who were willing to share their experiences with marginalization, precarity, and representation as well as how they had navigated them. Considering the entirety of this research, there are four primary themes worth emphasizing. The first is the significance of being visibly trans* and the implications of that visibility. The second is the importance of recognizing opportunities for dismantling institutional barriers. The third is the importance of continuing to explore trans* experiences with an intersectional lens. The final theme of note is the significance of centering trans* voices and the capacity for resilience in research endeavors in this field.
Significance of Being Visibly Trans*

An essential theme that emerged in this work is that regardless of the labels or identities, participants who were visible as a trans* persons were most negatively impacted with marginalization and precarity. As discussed, gender nonconformity has been constructed as social transgression and deviance through language, discourses, rhetoric, and representations generated in mainstream society (Derrida, 1982; Foucault, 1978; Perry, 2003; Wittig, 1992; Wilchins, 2014). Societal ideologies, such as cisnormativity (Bauer et al., 2009; Dowers, White, Kingsley, & Swenson, 2019; Hudson, 2019; Vermeir et al., 2018), and homonormativity (Brown, 2012; DeFilippis, 2016; Dispenza et al., 2012; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Knee, 2019; Mathers et al., 2018; McKinney, 2008; Seelman, 2016; Vogler, 2016; Ward, 2008) have subsequently leveraged these tools to other and marginalize gender minorities, denying them access to social power and privilege as well as silencing and making their experiences with marginalization and precarity invisible as social justice issues.

Participants who were recognizably trans* tended to encounter more transphobic slurs, more social confrontation from strangers, and more systemic transphobia in multiple contexts of their daily lives. This is, of course consistent with Kcomt et al.’s (2020) finding that when trans* folx become visible, they are subjected to heightened marginalization and precarity. These participants seemed to be the focal point for privileged citizens and institutions to enact what Perry (2003) characterized as “permission to hate” on this marginalized group.

A critical implication of being visibly trans* is that the ability to pass must be viewed as a public health and safety issue. Foundationally, of course, passing is a binary standard of gender appearance and presentation. Mandated by cisnormative mainstream society, it works as a simultaneous conduit and barrier to social power and privilege. In other words, the ability to pass
and be undetectable as trans* buffers a person from the marginalizing impacts of systemic transphobia. As discussed, an inability to pass made trans* folx inherently more vulnerable to stigma and discrimination, putting their health and safety at risk. In the short term, public policies and institutional practices must recognize that access to trans-medical care is vital to the health and safety of trans* folx. Based upon the disparity that exists across state policies regarding the rights and protections of gender minorities, federal policy is needed. Such policies would require healthcare systems and insurance companies to provide accessible and affordable trans-medical care that is deemed an essential service rather than elective or cosmetic. This would be a significant step toward the pragmatic implications of providing visibly trans* folx an accessible way to avoid living in a concentrated cycle of marginalization and precarity.

While passing was important for many of these trans* folx, it is critical to point out that facilitating access to trans-medical is only one facet of a much greater issue. Passing is contentious and problematic because it is part of a bigger power structure that legitimizes and reproduces binary forms of gender presentation. As several participants indicated, they wished they lived in a world that recognized trans* identities and accepted them as they are, rather than what they are not. This would, of course, require a significant integrated institutional shift toward inclusivity and normalization of diverse trans* identities. That is not to say that it is impossible, but it would require a systemic coordination of policy makers, institutional leaders, mainstream media outlets, and corporate entities to recognize trans* folx as a socially vulnerable population. They would then need to work to dismantle power structures and the institutional barriers that currently limit and threaten trans* lives.
Recognizing Opportunities for Dismantling Institutional Barriers

While power structures are rarely acknowledged or abandoned, there are some practical ways that several institutional barriers might be dismantled. Two of the most cited contexts that put trans* folx at risk of being marginalized and policed were in using the bathroom and having inconsistencies in their formal documentation. Several participants offered practical and straightforward solutions to the barriers that currently exist. First, they suggested that making more single use, unisex bathroom facilities available in all public spaces would eliminate the gendered nature of essential infrastructure, providing inclusive access for everyone. While this would require some time and resources, it could be facilitated through public policy and funding. As Seelman (2016) suggested, this would likely have a positive impact on the mental health of trans* folx.

The second suggestion involved streamlining and integrating the bureaucratic systems and policies involving formal documentation. Many participants expressed frustration about how difficult and expensive it was to have their name and gender marker changed, and it varied dramatically from state to state. One idea was to eliminate the gendering of most formal documentation that currently exposes so many trans* folx to harassment and over-policing. Several participants also contended that federal policy could be an effective way to set guidelines and establish consistency in how name and gender changes may be legally administered and documented. Admittedly, institutional barriers are the mechanisms through which systemic transphobia is propagated. However, placing an emphasis on inclusivity has the potential to benefit many people in addition to trans* folx and serve as a foundation for potential paradigm shifts.
Another opportunity for dismantling institutional barriers for trans* folx is in exposing individuals to ideas of equity, diversity, and inclusion relative to gender nonconformity through institutional interactions. Public universities could integrate these ideas by required students to attend at least one undergraduate course that fosters an understanding of social power as well as the need to ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion for marginalized groups, such as gender minorities. While this is not a panacea, it would still be a positive step toward challenging the general public to recognize their role in power hierarchies and their ability to shift perspective. In addition, a more focused emphasis of these ideas needs to be integrated into the preparation and continued professional development of both medical and psychiatric professionals to develop sustainable trans-friendly healthcare environments as well as competent trans-medical care.

The National Institute of Health (NIH) has already designated sexuality and gender minority populations as “health disparity populations” and have allocated research funding to develop a better understanding of what factors impact the health and well-being of many LGBTQ+ people (Sexuality & Gender Minority Research Office, 2017). As part of this effort, additional funding should be allocated to recruit and prepare a highly-skilled and culturally-competent workforce of physicians and mental health professionals to meet the complex healthcare needs of trans* folx. This strategy is supported by Wagner et al.’s (2016) finding that when participants were asked about potential trans* healthcare reform, most suggested a stronger emphasis on improving and increasing education and training for healthcare providers. Finally, public and corporate entities should commit to fostering an authentic and sustainable culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion among their workforces. While this would undoubtedly be a labor and resource intensive undertaking, it could be facilitated by instituting and providing ongoing professional development, communicating clear expectations, and enforcing accountability.
Admittedly, these various strategies of exposing individuals to the concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion are not an all-inclusive solution to overcoming the entirety of systemic transphobia that currently persists. I also recognize that these are ambitious assertions given the significant commitment, funding, and time that such structural changes would require in our public and private institutions. However, if the public and political will could be developed and financial incentives made available to institute these momentous cultural changes, then I suspect that systemic transphobia could be effectively dismantled in many contexts. The long-term implications of such changes would most assuredly be that trans* folx would experience far less marginalization and precarity in their daily lives.

**Critical Importance of Continuing to Explore Trans* Experiences with an Intersectional Lens**

There is substantial support in the literature for using an intersectionality framework to study the experiences of trans-gender people, particularly given the role that race and other marginalized identities played in their heightened vulnerability to various forms of marginalization and precarity (Badgett et al., 2018; Boe et al., 2020; Collier & Daniel, 2018; Dispenza et al., 2012; Kcomt et al., 2020; McKinney, 2005; Mizock et al., 2017; Mizock et al., 2018; Mizock & Hopwood, 2018; Pyne, 2011; Rood et al., 2017; Rudin et al., 2014; Seelman, 2016; Wagner et al., 2016). These trans* folx’ stories certainly confirmed how salient this framework is for exploring the nuanced complexities of how multiple marginalized identities often impact how trans* folx understand their marginalizing experiences. In using an intersectional framework to explore participants’ experiences, I learned that Black and Brown trans* folx had different understandings of how their racial and ethnic identities impacted their experiences with marginalization. In addition, the commonly overlooked experience of having a disability was revealed as a significant factor in marginalization for at least one participant.
Furthermore, the participants’ sexuality, gender identity, gender nonconformity, and ability to pass were particularly critical elements of their intersectionally complex identities. An example of this was in the way that nonbinary and genderqueer participants were able to avoid a great deal of marginalization in mainstream society, but faced significant marginalization within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly by trans* folx.

Another essential aspect of using an intersectional lens in studying trans-gender marginalization is that it facilitates more critical inquiry into why trans-feminine participants often experienced the most aggressive forms of systemic transphobia. Using the intersectional framework allowed me to problematize gender binary and traditional masculinity power hierarchies that punish gender nonconformity and relegate females and femininity to a derivate gender status. In this way, trans-feminine participants’ experiences of marginalization could be understood as a constructed rejection of female identities (Chu, 2019) and the enactment of transmisogyny (Serano, 2007/2016, 2013).

A particularly promising outcome of this research was the ability of almost all the White participants to recognize their own social privilege as well as the intersectional implications of less socially privileged trans* identities. As I noted earlier, this is not the case for most of White mainstream society. Phillips and Lowery (2015) found that while White participants acknowledged that White people as a group were privileged, they avoided recognizing their own social privilege, making claims of personal hardship that deprived them of that privilege. Perhaps, White trans* folx in my study were more willing to recognize their own racial privilege because they had experienced a loss of privilege associated with their trans-gender identity. Further, they may have understood how different marginalized identities could have similar implications.
When thinking about the negative impact of homonormativity on marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+ community, I suggest that this recognition of privilege should be promoted and reproduced among the more privileged factions of the community. A unified and committed effort to do so has the potential to eliminate the symbolic boundaries that have delegitimized many ‘not respectable’ identities. Unfortunately, the likelihood of such an effort is very limited given the social power that is at stake and the significant ideological divisions that persist within the LGBTQ+ community (DeFilippis, 2016; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Knee, 2019; Rosenberg, 2017; Vogler, 2016; Ward, 2008). Instead, I argue that the work to problematize homonormativity and the power hierarchies that delegitimize intersectionally complex experiences of marginalization and precarity must continue. What was particularly illustrated in these findings is that generalizations about any marginalized identity should be avoided and actively contested to prevent erasure or silencing of voices. Continued efforts to build the body of knowledge about the intersectionally complex experiences of trans* folx must be a top priority for researchers in this field.

**Significance of Centering Trans* Voices and the Capacity for Resilience**

The last theme of critical significance is the necessity to center trans* voices in seeking to understand their lives as well as their capacity for resilience. While this was an important element in delving into how these folx had been affected by their marginalizing experiences, it was essential in understanding how they navigated the challenges they faced. Of greatest interest, was their ability to demonstrate agency and resilience when subjected to rejection, delegitimization, and the constant threat of personal harm. While a few of their strategies were not entirely effective or constructive, many folx were able to pro-actively respond to extremely difficult circumstances by being resourceful and consciously prioritizing self-care, positivity,
hope, and spirituality. Their explanations of why those chose to act and engage in advocacy for themselves and other trans* folx were prime illustrations of a capacity to confront the power hierarchies that have marginalized their trans* identities.

Most poignantly, participants’ ideas about centering trans* voices and normalizing diverse trans* identities demonstrated their understanding of how mainstream narratives might be replaced with authentic representations of their lives. They envisioned a progressive societal shift of attitudes and understandings that they could contribute to by pushing for more trans* affirming representations. They spoke about taking calculated risks in creating visibility through discussion panels, mentoring, nonprofit organization, and cultivation of social media presence. Several observed that trans* folx of all types must see their diverse identities represented and affirmed somewhere to realize that they are not alone. In centering their voices in this discussion about what is needed to alter the narrative, I could understand what mattered most to them in constructing positive and affirming representations that would also improve society’s understanding of trans* lives.

Being familiar with the prevalence of negative encounters that trans* folx are subjected to, I wanted to create a space to consider their potential agency in responding to these circumstances. This prompted my decision to include the concept of navigation in this work, but I was not certain that themes of resilience would emerge. Although the literature I reviewed regarding navigating systemic transphobia gave some indication of how trans* folx coped with marginalizing experiences in healthcare settings (Wagner et al., 2016) and workplace (Dispenza et al., 2012; Mizock et al., 2017), there was limited discussion of resilience. A greater emphasis on centering trans* voices and exploring how trans* folx develop and exercise resilience in
response to their marginalizing experiences is necessary. This is a critical step to problematizing and counteracting the shallow and limited representations of ‘tragic’ trans* lives.

**Limitations**

As with all research endeavors, this study has several limitations. The first of these is that participants self-selected to share their experiences with marginalization, precarity, and representation, which means there may be selection bias. At the beginning of each interview, I asked each participant why they had decided to participate and most indicated that they felt their experiences had been under-represented. In addition, several contended that they wanted to do their part in creating visibility and representation for trans* identities. By asking about motives for participating, I was able to better determine if participants shared key characteristics with the greater population of trans* folx. Thus, I had greater confidence that the likelihood of selection bias was reduced, and my findings and conclusions were more reflective of authentic trans* experiences.

Another limitation was in recruiting trans-feminine folx of color. Overall, my sample was racially diverse, but I was only able to successfully recruit two Black trans-feminine participants. Although I invested a great deal of energy into finding more, several declined because they were emotionally drained from their involvement in the Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. In addition, they indicated that the recent murders of several Black trans-women that happened while I was conducting interviews had taken an emotional toll. That said, the Black trans-feminine participants I was able to recruit provided extremely compelling insights about their intersectionally complex experiences with marginalization. A third limitation of this work was that the marginalizing implications of having disabilities were not fully explored because they were only discussed in-depth by one participant. Unfortunately, this
interview was conducted near the end of the data collection process, and there were no further opportunities to explore these implications with other participants. As indicated, I had not planned to focus on the significance of disability in this work, but future research may benefit from focusing more specifically the impacts of a trans* person’s disability.

Finally, as with all qualitative research, these findings are not generalizable to other populations. That said, most of the experiences explored in this research have also been discussed in other research, which provides some foundational validity. In addition, the traditionally under-represented voices and stories of trans* folx have been centered and presented in their own words in this work. Thus, I am optimistic that the themes that emerged will be reflective of the experiences of other trans* folx. Further, the experiences in this work illuminate the diverse lived experiences of trans* folx across the country who have struggled with and navigated systemic transphobia, marginalization, precarity, and distorted representations of trans* identities in different ways. It is hoped that these stories create positive visibility and affirmation for not only their struggles but also their capacity for resilience in the face of adversity. Emphasizing diversity in my sample and centering trans* voices and experiences generated valuable qualities in these findings that are beyond the concerns of traditional generalizability.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite limitations, this work represents an important contribution to developing a more authentic understanding of trans* experiences with marginalization, precarity, and distorted representation. Using an intersectional lens provided the foundation for recruiting a diverse sample of participants who had encountered the impact of multiple marginalized identities in very different ways. Although diverse trans* experiences of marginalization and precarity have
been under-represented in the literature, the use of transfeminist emancipatory methodology and constructed grounded theory analysis provided the unique opportunity to center trans* voices. Designing this research to be inclusive of “all the viewpoints of the multitude of individuals and thus accept diversity” (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, pp. 34-35), the participants’ understanding, ideas, and words defined their experiences. Following Sandoval’s (2000) and Schostak and Schostak’s (2008) methodological perspectives of democratic inquiry, participants determined necessary systemic changes as well as how their identities should be represented. As hoped, encouraging participants to deconstruct negative portrayals of trans* identities and then formulate more authentic and trans* affirming ones, created an opportunity for what Sandoval described as psychic emancipation.

Considering the prevalence of anti-trans* policy and rhetoric that was being promoted while this research was being conducted, these findings are particularly compelling. Further, although some of the worst public policies have been overturned, there has been significant push back in many states that have sought to institute state-level anti-trans* policy. The issues addressed in this work are far from resolved. Seeking to understand the diverse and difficult experiences of trans-gender marginalization and precarity, this research represents a significant contribution to building a substantive theory of trans-precarity. Work like this is a vital tool for confronting and dismantling transphobic institutional barriers and for enacting systemic change in public policy, institutional practices, and corporate sectors.


https://www.huffpost.com/entry/transgender-or-transgendered

https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/age-trans-individuals-us/


https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-014-0226-2

https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796015599414

https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2013.803346

https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2017.1412768


Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn (pp. 127-149). M.E. Sharpe.


Appendix A

Trans-Gender Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation Informed Consent Statement and Demographic Survey (Online Implementation)
Trans-Gender Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation Informed Consent Statement and Demographic Survey (Online Implementation)

Purpose of Study:

Experiences of trans-gender people are often not represented in research that is conducted with members of the LGBTQ+ community. When research does focus on trans-gender experiences, the participants tend to be more socially-privileged. The purpose of this research is to challenge that trend and create the opportunity for under-represented trans-gender experiences to be shared and heard.

Informed Consent of Participation:

This informational survey is designed to provide the researcher, Christine Strayer, with important background information to better prepare for your interview. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and the highest priority of this research is to keep your identity and information confidential.

Before providing any information, please read the following ‘Informed Consent Statement’ in its entirety:

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Western Michigan University
Sociology Department

Principal Investigator: Dr. Angela Moe
Student Investigator: Christine Strayer
Title of Study: Centering Trans-gender Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation: Developing a Theory of Trans-Precarity

You are invited to participate in this research project titled "Centering Trans-gender Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation"

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study, and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Experiences of trans-gender people are often not represented in research that is done with members of the LGBTQ+ community. When research does focus on trans-gender experiences, the participants tend to be more privileged in some way. The purpose of this research is to challenge that trend and create the opportunity for more trans-gender experiences to be shared and heard.

This study will also serve as Christine Strayer’s dissertation for the requirements of earning a doctoral degree. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to take an initial survey that asks you to share some of your background information as well as participate in an online, video
interview. Your time in the study will take approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey and approximately 70-80 minutes to participate in the interview. Possible risks and costs to you for taking part in the study may be discomfort from sharing personal experiences that you may perceive as sensitive or traumatic, the inconvenience of time required to participate in taking the survey and speaking in the interview, and the remote possibility that your identity may be disclosed. The potential benefits of taking part may be that your experiences as a trans-gender person are given the highest priority and your concerns will be heard. In addition, you can anticipate a small gift to thank you for your time and emotional labor because your contribution is deeply appreciated. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is to not take part in it.

The following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to confirm that you have read this information and that you still wish to participate.

**What are we trying to find out in this study?**
The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences that trans-gender people have with social injustice, social and economic challenges, and distorted representation of trans-identities. Although many previous studies in this field have been limited by a lack of racial and economic diversity, this research is focused on developing knowledge from more diverse perspectives about how trans-gender individuals make sense of and navigate their experiences. Because many trans-gender experiences have been made essentially silent or invisible, it is hoped that this work will develop a more authentic understanding of these experiences.

**Who can participate in this study?**
Self-identifying trans-gender people, between the ages of 18-35 years of age who have access to an internet connection are eligible to participate in this study. As previously indicated, the researcher is particularly interested in speaking with individuals from diverse backgrounds. If you are over the age of 35 and would still like to participate, please contact Christine Strayer to discuss the matter further.

**Where will this study take place?**
All parts of this study and data collection will be conducted online. If you wish to make arrangements for an alternative interview format by phone or in-person, please discuss your concerns with Christine Strayer when you are contacted to schedule the interview. If possible, reasonable accommodations will be made.

**What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**
To participate in this study, you should expect a time commitment of approximately two hours. The initial survey will require about 10 minutes to complete. In addition, the interview is expected to take approximately 70-80 minutes, dependent upon what you choose to share. That
timeframe will only be exceeded if you knowingly choose to continue talking about your experiences, beyond that limit.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
As a participant, you will be asked to complete a survey that will ask you to give information about how the researcher should interact with you as well as some valuable background information. After completing the survey, you will be contacted to schedule a time that is convenient for you to participate in the interview. At the agreed upon time for the interview, you will be asked to speak with the researcher about your experiences.

What information is being measured during the study?
The information being measured during this study, if you choose to participate, will be how your experiences with social injustice, social and economic challenges, and distorted representation of trans-identities may be similar to or different from the experiences of other trans-gender people. The researcher will also be considering how experiences may be unique, because of how your different identities (gender, racial, ethnic, economic, etc.) interact and intersect.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
Participation in this study has the potential to cause you emotional discomfort because of the personal nature of some of the experiences you will be asked to talk about. To lessen the impact of this discomfort, the researcher will serve as a supportive listener and the interview questions are intentionally open-ended to give you greater control over what and how you wish to share your experiences. The researcher will also have additional resources available to you, should you wish to access additional support.

It is also possible that participation has the potential risk of inconvenience because of the time required for the survey and interview as well as the technology required. To reduce this inconvenience, the researcher will be flexible in scheduling interviews to accommodate your schedule and be respectful of your time. There will also be flexibility with communication methods as well as which video app is used, based upon your familiarity and access, whenever possible.

Because trans-gender people are at much greater risk for harassment and violence, your participation in this study presents a potential for personal harm if your identities were to be disclosed. This is a profoundly serious concern, so it is the researcher’s highest priority to protect your confidentiality throughout this process. To do so, several measures will be taken. First, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym at the beginning of the research process, during your survey. This name will be used throughout your interactions to code your data. Next, the information from your survey will be saved in a password protected file and stored on an exterior digital storage drive. For keeping interview data confidential, audio recordings will be transcribed to text files. Your interview transcript will also be password protected and stored on a separate exterior digital drive from your survey data. All audio recordings will be destroyed once the research process has ended.
What are the benefits of participating in this study?
There are no direct benefits to you for taking the survey and completing the interview. The potential benefits of participation in this study may be that your experiences as a trans-gender person are the central focus of this work, providing the opportunity for you to change the current narrative about trans-gender identity. You will be placed in a position of authority to define and interpret your own experiences and actions.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There will be no costs to you as a participant of this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
To express gratitude for your time and effort, if you complete both the survey and the interview process, you will receive a thank-you gift card valued at $15 from a vendor that you will select during the survey. If you complete the survey but choose to conclude the interview process early, a gift card valued at $10 will still be provided.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
Please be aware that while your confidentiality is the highest priority in this study, the information collected by Christine Strayer during this study will be accessible in its coded format by the researcher’s doctoral committee Dr. Angela Moe, Dr. David Hartmann, Dr. Zoann Snyder, and Dr. Melinda McCormick. It is also likely that information from this study will be presented at future conferences or published in journal articles. To protect your identity and confidentiality, any information that you share will always be coded to the pseudonym you provide before it is viewed or analyzed by anyone other than Christine Strayer.

What will happen to my information or biospecimens collected for this research project after the study is over?
After information that could identify you has been removed, de-identified information collected for this research may be used by or distributed to investigators for other research without obtaining additional informed consent from you.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice for your decision to stop your participation. The only personal consequence would be a slight reduction in the value of the thank you gift card as discussed above.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact Dr. Angela Moe at Western Michigan University at 269-387-5276 or angie.moe@wmich.edu or the Christine Strayer, at Western Michigan University at 269-352-6777 or christine.e.strayer@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.
This study was approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) on (approval date).

Participating in the online survey and the video interview indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply.
*This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB).*

After reading the entire ‘Informed Consent Statement,’ please select the ‘Yes’ option below to indicate that you have read and fully understand what you are consenting to and that you wish to continue participating in this research. If you do not wish to continue, please indicate ‘No’ and leave the survey.

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

1. What pseudonym will you be using for your interview?

2. What pronouns will you be using?

3. How can you be contacted to arrange a time and date for your interview? (Phone number and/or email address)

4. How would you prefer to be contacted?
   - [ ] Email
   - [ ] Text message
   - [ ] Phone call

5. Do you have experience using the following video chat platforms? (Please check all that apply)
   - [ ] Google Meet
   - [ ] Skype
   - [ ] Zoom
   - [ ] Microsoft Teams
   - [ ] WebEx

6. What is your age?

7. Please specify your race.
8. Please specify your ethnicity.

9. Please specify your nationality.

10. What gender do you identify as?

11. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
   A. Some High School
   B. High School
   C. Some College
   D. Bachelor's Degree
   E. Master's Degree
   F. Ph.D. or higher
   G. Trade School
   H. Prefer not to say

12. What is your current employment status?
   - Employed Full-Time
   - Employed Part-Time
   - Seeking opportunities
   - Not currently employed
   - Retired

13. What is/are your current occupation(s)?

14. In what industry(ies) do you currently work?

15. How would you describe your current relationship status?

16. Do you have any dependents living in your household? Please explain.

17. Do you have any dependents that live outside of your household? Please explain.

18. What is your annual net household income from formal sources (employers who deduct payroll taxes, etc.)?
   A. Less than $25,000
   B. $25,001 - $50,000
   C. $50,001 - $100,000
   D. $100,001 - $200,000
   E. More than $200,000
   F. Does not apply
19. What is your annual net household income from informal sources (helping friends, ‘side jobs,’ etc.)?

A. Less than $25,000  
B. $25,001 - $50,000  
C. $50,001 - $100,000  
D. $100,001 - $200,000  
E. More than $200,000  
F. Does not apply

20. In what state do you currently live?

21. In what state were you born?

22. Are you registered to vote?
   A. Yes  
   B. No  
   C. Prefer not to say

23. If applicable, please briefly describe your religious, faith, or spiritual beliefs.

24. As you know, after the interview portion of this research has been completed, you will be provided with a thank you gift worth $15.00 to express gratitude for your time and emotional labor. Your contribution is an essential part of this work. However, should you decide to end the interview portion of this research process earlier than planned, you will still be provided with a gift of a slightly lesser value of $10. Which of the following vendors would be of interest to you? Please type in your choice in the space provided.

- Grub Hub
- Door Dash
- Uber
- Lyft
- Amazon
- Google Play
  - iTunes
  - Walmart
  - Target
  - Starbucks
- Biggby
- Other – please specify
Appendix B

Trans-Gender Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol
Trans-Gender Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introductory Protocol:
As previously indicated at the beginning of your survey experience, the purpose of this research is to challenge the trends that currently exist regarding trans-gender marginalization and precarity. Instead, the goal of this work is to create the opportunity for under-represented trans-gender experiences to be heard. I believe that if these previously silenced experiences are heard, then opportunities to bring about greater social change may be created through advocacy and allyship.

Before conducting this interview, I would like to explain the procedures for our conversation today as well as how your confidentiality will be protected throughout this part of the research process. To help me preserve your ideas and words and then accurately transcribe notes from this interview, I will be recording our conversation today. After we have ended our conversation, I will complete notes for this conversation and only I will have access to this recording. Ultimately, I will destroy the recording to ensure the preservation of your confidentiality. I will only be using the pseudonym you provided in your survey information, to ensure that your legal name is not associated with this project in any form. To develop a better understanding of the experiences of trans-gender people, I will be looking for common themes that come out of what you and your fellow participants share in your interviews. I will also be using your previous survey responses to guide me during the interview process. When I have completed this process, findings from this research will represent an important part of my successful dissertation completion. In addition to that, I hope to use these findings to benefit the trans-gender community by conducting further research that works toward additional opportunities for advocacy and allyship.

I am going to ask you to provide verbal confirmation that you have read and previously consented to the terms of participating in this study before completing your survey by saying: “I, (state your name), am giving my informed consent to continue participating in this study.”

I have planned this interview to last between 70-80 minutes, dependent upon what you wish to share with me today. During this time, I hope to discuss several key areas of your experience. My questions are intended to provide you with the opportunity to share your experiences and knowledge in detail. If we are nearing the end of that window of time, I will make you aware, but I will defer to you to continue talking about your experiences, so that we can explore your knowledge about not only my research questions but also anything further that you believe is important.

Introduction to Research Focus:
You have agreed to having this conversation today because I believe that you are someone who likely has a great deal to share about how a trans-gender person experiences, makes sense of, and navigates social and economic marginalization or oppression in your daily life. My research is particularly concerned with the different ways that you believe that your gender identity, combined with other aspects of your racial or ethnic identity, impacts the different contexts of
your daily life as well as how you navigate or deal with these experiences. These contexts may include but are by no means limited to school, work, relationships, healthcare, public settings, etc. In addition, I am very interested in how you experience, make sense of, and respond to representations of trans-gender identities in your daily life.

**During our discussion, if I am trying to get a deeper understanding of your experiences, I will likely use one of the following cues:**

- Please describe a time when…..
- Can you give me an everyday, ‘for instance’?
- Please be as detailed as possible…
- Can you tell me more?
- Exactly what happened?
- How has this impacted you? What impact has this had on your life? (well-being, social, economic, other)

I would like to begin our interview with some preliminary ‘get to know you’ discussion -

- I prefer for people to call me Chris. In your survey information, you indicated that your chosen pseudonym is: _____________. Is that correct?
- My pronouns are she/her. In your survey you indicated that your pronouns are: _______. Is this still the case?
- The term: ‘trans-gender’ is defined differently by many people, even within the trans-community. Would you please tell me, in your own words, how you define this term?

- The term: ‘cis-gender’ has also taken on different meanings. As someone who self-identifies as trans-gender, would you share what this term means to you? What are your thoughts or feelings about how this term is used?

Okay, so now that we have some preliminaries down, I’d like to shift our focus to experiences with marginalization and how those experiences affect different parts of your life.

1. First – what is your understanding of the idea of marginalization? What does it mean to you?

2. Do you believe that you have experienced marginalization or oppression related to your trans-gender identity?
   - How many times would you estimate this has happened to you?
   - Do you remember the first time you experienced this?
   - Would you share the most recent experience you have had?
   - Do you have an experience that you would consider most memorable?
   - How do/did you make sense of this/these experiences? Why do you think your trans-gender identity was related to this experience?
• How do/did you respond to this/these experiences? Did you alter your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions in any way?

3. What are your thoughts about the topic of “passing”? What impact do you think the ability to “pass” has on a trans-gender person’s daily life? For instance, with employment, housing, healthcare, education, relationships, public interactions, etc.

• What is your most memorable experience you might share about how the idea of ‘passing’ has affected you?
• How do/did you make sense of this experience? How would describe the impact of this experience on your daily life?
• How do/did you respond to this experience? Did you alter your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions in any way?

4. One of the big ideas I am interested in learning in this study is the concept of ‘precarity.’ It is a term that is used to describe how marginalized and disenfranchised people are unequally exposed to problems with money, housing, access to help, policing, and violence among other things because of their social location or identity. What are your thoughts about that idea? What other words might you use or how might you add to / develop to this concept?

5. Do you believe that your quality of life or well-being has been impacted because of your trans-gender identity? If yes, in what ways? Specifically, I am wondering about how you feel, either emotionally or physically, in the different domains of your life, such as at home, at work, at school, in family or peer interactions, in public settings, when accessing healthcare, when interacting with other members of the LGBTQ+ community, etc.

• How do/did you make sense of this/these experiences? Why do you think your trans-gender identity was related to this experience?
• How do/did you respond to this/these experiences? Did you alter your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions in any way?

6. Do you believe that your financial situation has been impacted because of your trans-gender identity? If yes, in what ways?

• How do/did you make sense of this/these experiences? Why do you think your trans-gender identity was related to this experience?
• How do/did you respond to this/these experiences? Did you alter your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions in any way?

7. How would you describe your relationships or interactions with other members of the LGBTQ+ community who are not trans-gender?
- How do/did you make sense of these relationships/interactions?
- Have you altered your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions because of these relationships or interactions? If so, in what way?

8. Do you believe that you have experienced marginalization or oppression related to your racial or ethnic identity? OR?
   Do you believe that your racial/ethnic identity affects your experiences as a trans-gender person?
   - How many times would you estimate this has happened to you?
   - Do you remember the first time you experienced this?
   - Would you share the most recent experience you have had?
   - Do you have an experience that you would consider most memorable?
   - How do/did you make sense of this/these experiences? Why do you think your trans-gender identity was related to this experience?
   - How do/did you respond to this/these experiences? Did you alter your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions in any way?

Do you believe that your racial/ethnic identity combined with your trans-gender identity impact your sense of well-being or safety in your daily life? In what ways? (home, at work, at school, in family or peer interactions, in public settings, when accessing healthcare, etc.)
   - How many times would you estimate this has happened to you?
   - Do you remember the first time you experienced this?
   - Would you share the most recent experience you have had?
   - Do you have an experience that you would consider most memorable?
   - How do/did you make sense of this/these experiences? Why do you think your trans-gender identity was related to this experience?
   - How do/did you respond to this/these experiences? Did you alter your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions in any way?

Now, I’d like to ask you to talk about the messaging and representation that you experience about trans-gender identities in society.

9. What types of messages (images, language, etc.) do you experience about trans-gender identities? How do you experience these messages? Where do you experience them?
   - How do/did you make sense of this/these messages?
   - How do/did you respond to this/these messages? Do/did you alter your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions in any way in response to this/these messages?
   - Do you believe that your quality of life (work, school, relationships, public interactions, etc.) has been impacted because of this/these messages? If yes, in what ways?
• What are your impressions of these messages? What do believe is behind these messages? What do they accomplish?
• What type of messaging would you like to create?

10. How do you believe trans-gender identities are represented in society? How do you experience these representations? Where do you experience them?

• How do/did you make sense of this/these representations?
• How do/did you respond to this/these representations? Do/did you alter your daily perceptions, behavior, or actions in any way because of this/these representations?
• Do you believe that your quality of life (work, school, relationships, public interactions, etc.) has been impacted because of this/these representations? If yes, in what ways?
• What are your impressions of these representations? What do believe is behind them? What do they accomplish?
• How do you think trans-gender identities should be represented? What do you want to see?

Concluding Interview:
As we prepare to end our conversation, is there anything that you would like to share that I did not ask about, but you feel is important for me to know or understand?

Concluding Protocol:
I want to thank you, again, for your time and for your willingness to share your experiences and knowledge. I would like to close by assuring you again that all information will be held confidential. In the coming months, I will be reviewing our discussion along with others and reporting my findings in my dissertation. When I have completed this work, I will be happy to share those findings with you. In addition, I would like to express my appreciation by sending you a thank-you gift in the form of a gift card from the service of your choice. Please send an email to christine.e.strayer@wmich.edu or text to 269-352-6777 that provides information about where you would like this gift card sent. In addition, I will happily share the research findings that result from this study.
Appendix C

Recruitment Posting
Recruitment Posting

Seeking Participants for Research!

Do you identify as transgender?
Are you interested in talking about the different challenges you have faced?

My name is Christine Strayer, and I am a sociology graduate student at Western Michigan University. I am doing my dissertation research on the experiences of transgender people and am seeking out self-identified transgender individuals from different walks of life, between the ages of 18-35 years of age, to participate in my study in the months of July, August, and September 2020. If you are over the age of 35 and would like to contribute to this study, you may still be eligible to participate, so please contact the researcher to get further details.

Your participation in this study is highly valued because transgender experiences, particularly for transgender people of color, are often under-represented or invisible in research conducted with the LGBTQ+ community.

What will you be asked to do?

Scan the QR code provided here OR contact the researcher to send you a link for an informational survey: call or text Christine Strayer @ (269) 352-6777 or email Christine.e.strayer@wmich.edu.

Once you have completed the survey, you will be contacted to schedule an interview. Then, sit down for a one-on-one video interview about your experiences as a transgender person and how you have been affected by and dealt with transphobia. This interview will be conducted using a secure video app which can be accessed using any computer, tablet, or Smartphone. If you don’t have access to technology or would prefer a different format for our interview, I still want to hear about your experiences and will do my best to accommodate you.

An audio recording of the interview will be created so the researcher can convert the audio to a text document for future analysis. Interviews are expected to last approximately 70 to 80 minutes. Your identity will not be disclosed in the interview, transcript, analysis, or any published reports.

Interested in learning more about participating or know someone who would be?

Call or text Christine Strayer @ (269) 352-6777 or email Christine.e.strayer@wmich.edu

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. Your confidentiality is of utmost importance. Respondents to the survey will be contacted by your preferred method of communication (email, text, or phone) to schedule a date and time to conduct your interview.

IRB Approval Number: 20-07-02
Appendix D

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval
Date: July 8, 2020

To: Angela Moe, Principal Investigator
    Christine Strayer, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 20-07-02

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Centering Trans-gender Experiences of Marginalization, Precarity, and Representation: Developing a Theory of Trans-Precarity” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) July 7, 2021 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.

When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at https://wmich.edu/research/forms.

Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.
Appendix E

Significant Terminology
## Significant Terminology

| **AMAB/AFAB** | Respectively, these acronyms stand for ‘assigned male at birth’ and ‘assigned female at birth.’ “These terms point out that when we come into the world, somebody else tells us who they think we are” based upon our genitalia (Stryker, 2017, p. 12). |
| **Cisnormativity** | A term that refers to the cultural belief that every person’s sense of gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth and that they will engage in gender appearance and performance that is expected for all who are assigned that sex (Hudson, 2019; Stryker & Aizura, 2013). |
| **Dead name** | A term used by many trans* folx to refer to the name they were given at birth, but as part of their transition they have chosen a new name. |
| **Drag** | A subcultural term that refers to “clothing associated with a particular gender or activity, often worn in a parodic, self-conscious, or theatrical manner” (Stryker, 2017, p. 34) |
| **Folx** | A word that has become more widely used in the last few years on social media when speaking of more than one person to convey intentional inclusion of all marginalized groups (Lindsay, n.d.). |
| **FTM/MTF** | Respectively, these acronyms stand for ‘female to male’ and ‘male to female.’ These terms are intended to indicate the trajectory of a trans* person’s transition. |
| **Homonormativity** | An ideological framework that has developed within the LGBTQ+ community that emphasizes assimilation and normalization according to heteronormative standards for the sake of respectability. Implications of gender, race, class, and gender identity within this ideology have played a significant role in how homonormativity has served the dual purposes of preserving power for the privileged while intentionally marginalizing those who are viewed as ‘not respectable’ (Brown, 2012; DeFilippis, 2016; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015; Knee, 2019; Vogler, 2016; Ward, 2008). |
| **Out/Outed/Outing** | In the context of the LGBTQ+ community, this term refers to the act of disclosing a person’s sexuality or gender identity without their consent. There are significant implications of choice, privacy, and the potential for harm when a person is outed. |
| **Passing** | In the context of gender, passing is a contentious idea that refers to when someone who is trans* is perceived or interpreted as cis-gender rather than the sex they were assigned at birth (Serano, 2013). |
| **Transition** | In the context of gender, this term refers to a social or physical change that a person chooses to undergo to align their gendered presentation with their gender identity. |
| **Trans*** | An abbreviated form to indicate more inclusivity of the spectrum of trans-gender identities, including my nonbinary, gender queer, and bi-gender participants when appropriate (Seelman, 2016; Stryker, 2017; Wagner, et al., 2016) |
| **Trans-feminine** | A term associated with being a person who was assigned male at birth but whose gender identity is partially or fully feminine. This terminology has been used in this research to be more inclusive of not only trans-gender women but also non-binary and gender queer folx who also have feminine identities. |
| **Trans-masculine** | A term associated with being a person who was assigned female at birth but whose gender identity is partially or fully masculine. This terminology has been used in this research to be more inclusive of not only trans-gender men but also non-binary and gender queer folx who also have masculine identities. |
| Transphobia | Serano (2007/2016) defined this as “an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against people whose gendered identities, appearances, or behaviors deviate from societal norms” (p. 12). Going beyond this definition, Serano explained that transphobia, like homophobia, is rooted in a person’s fear of their own repressed tendency and insecurity that about one’s ability to conform to the rigid and oppressive “expectations, restrictions, assumptions, and privileges associated with the sex they were assigned at birth” (p. 12). |
Appendix F

Constructed Grounded Theory Analysis – Coding Structure
# Constructed Grounded Theory Analysis - Coding Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural code: MARGINALIZATION &amp; PRECARITY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emergent axial codes</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Marginalization for one’s trans-gender identity on a personal level</strong></td>
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<td>• challenges with maintaining personal relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>• negative encounters while seeking new relationships</td>
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<td>• precarity associated with personal marginalization – economic and social instability</td>
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<td><strong>Marginalization for one’s trans-gender identity on a systemic level</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>• experiences of Brown folx – focused on marginalization within their cultural groups</td>
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<td>• respectability politics</td>
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<td>• implications of passing – conduit or obstacle</td>
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<tr>
<td>- empowering and affirming depictions in other forms of popular media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Structural code: NAVIGATION

#### Emergent axial codes

#### Navigating marginalization and precarity

**themes:**

- laying low
  - denial of trans* identity
  - avoidance trans-ness to avoid stigma, marginalization, and precarity
  - going along to get along – developing a “thicker skin” or “gritting teeth” to avoid confrontation
- taking control – agency and resilience
  - redefining relationships and creating boundaries
  - focusing on preparedness
  - demonstrating resourcefulness
  - engaging in self-care
  - embracing hope
  - engaging in mindfulness and spirituality

#### Navigating distorted representations of trans* identities

**themes:**

- taking control – agency and resilience
  - gatekeeping
  - envisioning more positive and authentic representation for trans* identities and lives