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# Transgressing Gender Normativity through Gender Identity Development: Exploring Transgender, Non-Conforming, and Non-Binary Identities of College Students

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Transgressing Gender Normativity through Gender Identity Development:  
Exploring Transgender, Non-Conforming, and Non-Binary Identities of College Students

by

Enrique Tejada III

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Stephanie Bondi

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2016

TRANSGRESSING GENDER NORMATIVITY THROUGH GENDER IDENTITY  
DEVELOPMENT: EXPLORING TRANSGENDER, NON-CONFORMING, AND NON-  
BINARY IDENTITIES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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University of Nebraska, 2016

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This study situates current gender social constructions as harmful, inhibitive, and problematic, especially for those that transgress gender boundaries and do not align with their gender assigned at birth. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically challenge and deconstruct the social construct of gender and its norms both within and outside of a college campus. This study works to achieve this purpose and answer research questions through careful analysis of the different gender journeys of three separate gender-diverse individuals. These participants' stories are shared in a case-study format to recognize how each individual uniquely and personally formed their own gender. Additionally, this study works to challenge generalized ideas of a transgender identity, especially the idea that gender only exists within a binary construction. Specifically, this study explores and offers up experiences within Non-Binary, Gender Fluid, and Non-Conforming identities. Lastly, readers are offered ideas and questions that seek to help them examine their own internalized concepts of gender and deconstruct particular notions of gender that might be harmful or inhibitive to supporting gender transgressors that operate within and outside binary constructions of gender.

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This study is dedicated to my four participants.

It is your journey and experiences that carries this work forward.

You made me a better researcher and through this work,  
challenged my views, and impacted my gender journey.

I appreciate you and your experiences.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Gender and how it has operated within society is something that has a history of evolving based on the culture that is it constructed within (Stryker, 2008). This study is a critical examination of how gender, as it is currently constructed and operated, can be inhibitive for personal and individual development of it. Transgender authors Susan Stryker (2008) and Kate Bornstein (1994) situate gender as a social construct that enforces a system of oppressive power that privileges for those that conform to its constricting norms and expectations. To better understand how gender normativity can be inhibitive, it is my belief that I must first explore the experiences of those who transgress normative gender boundaries and expectations.

Specifically, I will focus on how those that transgress gender navigate and develop their own personal conceptions of and identity around gender. For context, these gender transgressors are currently and commonly grouped and identified under the label of transgender. For purposes of this study, these gender transgressors are identified as those who move beyond or around the gender assigned at birth, to include Transgender, but also Gender Non-Conforming, Non-Binary, Genderqueer, Gender Fluid, or Agender identities.

As a student affairs professional who works within a higher education environment, I have an investment in understanding how the college environment may impact the experiences of students who transgress gender. Although student affairs professionals work to be supportive and inclusive of their students and their identities (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009), there exist practices, services, and policies that are structured in ways that reinforce and perpetuate this inhibitive gender system which can negatively impact how student navigate their own gender (Beemyn, 2005; Bilodeau 2005). Student affairs professionals must then recognize that these practices that perpetuate this gender system can lead to "psychological distress, ...maladaptive,

[and/or] suicidal behaviors" (Devor, 2004, p. 46). It stands to reason that student affairs practitioners and educators should work to understand the cultural norms that create the social practices and environments that lead to these negative outcomes. After doing this, it is possible that we can then critically challenge these cultural norms and notions, insomuch that we are able to better support the individuals that these norms greatly negatively impact.

As stated before, it is my belief that in order to understand the cultural normativity that perpetuate negative gender expectations, I must explore the experiences of those who do not conform to them. It is my intention to explore these experiences through examination of the process that gender transgressors utilize to develop their own gender identity outside of norms and expectations. Although some literature describes identity development for binary transgender individuals (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), Bilodeau (2005) recognized that those who sit outside of binary constructions of gender (e.g. non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, non-conforming, or agender) are often overlooked in development literature and asserted that these populations need to be researched. This study utilized ideas presented within these models to explore how those within the binary (transman or transwoman) but also outside of it (non-binary, genderqueer, non-conforming, and so forth) can navigate and construct their own gender. In doing so, this study hopes to explicitly recognize social practices, norms, and expectations that seek to set up boundaries that inhibit personal and individual development of gender or gender identity.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to deconstruct and critically challenge gender, as it is currently socially constructed and situated, in so much as it inhibits genuine and individual development of gender identity. To better understand how gender can be inhibitive and policing

within its norms, I am analyzing the experiences of those who do not conform but rather transgress gender and how they navigate and develop their own gender. In exploring this, the research questions are as follows: How do transgender or gender-diverse individuals explore or make meaning of their gender identity when they do not conform to gender assignments and expectations? How do they move beyond gender normativity to create their own unique identities? In what ways is this personalized process of gender identity development influenced or impacted by a college environment?

### **Notes for Readers**

In order to help the reader better understand certain terminology or stylistic choices being made, this next section contains notes that are intended to help the reader better understand the study. Rationale for these choices is also provided.

#### **Gender**

It is important and useful to explicitly describe what I mean when I use the term gender. How I conceive gender, and how it is described throughout this thesis, is informed from years of reading numerous articles and personal accounts of individuals navigating gender. I have also spent five years within student affairs giving presentations on sexual orientation or attraction and gender identity for the purpose of creating inclusive spaces. For purposes of this study, it is important to state that the gender definition used is informed and crafted by ideas presented by Bornstein (1994) and Stryker (2008). Specifically within this study, I understand gender (or gender identity, used interchangeably) to be: an internal sense of self (male, masculine, female, feminine, outside of or not fitting within the binary, between the binary, agender) *and* external presentation of gender through traditional or non-traditional societal expressions (masculine, feminine, androgynous, or any other expression beyond binary expectations). Gender is a

complicated concept and one that is very individual and personal, as argued later within this study. However, I present gender (or gender identity) as both (a) the internal sense of self *and* (b) how one presents it or expresses it. Readers may commonly find in various resources or presentations the separation of gender identity (internal sense of self) and gender expression (presentation of gender). It is my belief that gender is in fact a combination and interaction between these two aspects.

### **Using Singular *They***

It is my intention to respect the gender of the authors of referenced articles and not assume personal pronoun usage. Therefore, I will be utilizing the gender-neutral singular *they* (or them or theirs), in reference to authors. Additionally, I will utilize the singular *they* in referencing my participants, if either the participant utilizes they/them/theirs pronouns or have no preference. If the participants specified their pronouns to be used, I will use those. The singular *they* is currently contested within APA format, however, has become increasingly more popular in its use outside of APA. Singular usage of *they* was incorporated into the Washington Post's style guide in 2015 and was voted as the Word of the Year by the linguists in attendance at the American Dialect Society's annual meeting early in 2016 (Guo, 2016). I find it important to note that I, the author, currently utilize and align with the personal pronouns: they, them, and theirs.

### **Using Transgender/Trans\* or Other Moniker**

Although transgender is a common moniker or term used widely, it is my current belief that the transgender or trans\* moniker can still potentially be “othering” and potentially non-inclusive to the entirety of the gender-diverse gamut. Within the literature, there were two different terms or monikers that stuck with me: *to transgress gender* or *gender transgressor* (Bornstein, 1994; Bilodeau, 2005; Marine, 2011) and *gender-diverse* (“Map of gender-diverse

cultures”, 2015). The former describes the very political and activist act of subverting inhibitive popular beliefs and cultural norms, and the latter can encompass the gamut of gender identities. The first term comes from some of the voices of the individuals who live the experiences described in this study, and the second, in my opinion, has the capacity to encapsulate the richness of this gender experience.

I intend to use both terms in the scope of this study, in addition to using terms like *the participants* and sparingly *these students* or *these individuals* - as to not other the individuals described throughout this study. Stryker (2008), who identifies within this population of individuals I am discussing, recognizes the usefulness of a single moniker or term for this wide gamut of gender-diverse individuals, but reminds their readers that no one term can respectfully encompass the range of genders. Although I may use both of these terms, they are not yet widely accepted or recognized terms and may not align with specific gender identities held by individuals.

### **Capitalizing Aspects of Identity**

It is my belief and understanding that the experiences of gender-diverse individuals are not only still socially taboo, but also considered non-normative and potentially *unnatural* (Stryker, 2008) by portions of society. One of the purposes of this study is to bring light to the experiences of gender transgressors to recognize the challenges they face for merely trying to exist genuinely as their true self. Therefore, there will be times, when discussing personal identities of participants that I will capitalize these gender identity labels. I do this to bring attention to and honor these identities beyond the scope of inhibitive normative practice. As discussed within queer theory in chapter two, normative practice has the tendency to reinforce and perpetuate power and privileged systems. My personal choice to capitalize these identities,



when referencing a participants or author's identity, is to bring attention to them in a way that stands up against inhibitive social norms. I do this in spite of the guidelines of accepted writing styles and the term "proper nouns" as I believe that accepted practices can be inhibitive for marginalized populations.

## **Background and Definition**

### **History of Gender Diversity**

In talking about Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, Non-Binary, Genderqueer/fluid, or Agender individuals, there seems to be a recent upsurge in public and media conversation about this topic. With very public individuals like Caitlyn Jenner and her June 2015 Vanity Fair cover and Laverne Cox as an actress in *Orange is the New Black*, to name a few, the Transgender community have recently had some very visible and popular representation. Stryker (2008) recognizes that people might question if this rise of conversation around Transgender folks is representative of the "Internet age" (p. 25) of social media and ease of access to information. However, one should not assume this is a recent phenomenon. Gender-diverse individuals have existed in various cultures throughout history (Bornstein, 1994; "Map of gender-diverse cultures", 2015; Reicherzer, 2008; Stryker, 2008). Stryker (2008), in her historical recounting of Transgender issues, also notes that mainstream or mass media has been drawing attentions to transgender issues since "at least the 1950s" (p. 25). When trying to understand the history and scope of gender-diverse identities, it is important to understand that at least 35 global cultures ("Map of gender-diverse cultures", 2015) have had representations of gender-diverse individuals. Examples include: *hijra* in India, the Polynesian *mahu*, South American *travesti*, Native American "two-spirit", Navajo *nádleehí*, and the native Hawaiian *mahu*, to name a few of the genders identities that move beyond the gender binary of male and female ("Map of gender-

diverse cultures”, 2015; Stryker, 2008). Throughout history, these cultures sometimes revered and celebrated these individuals as shamans or oracles, and there is even a recorded instance of a dual-gender god being worshiped in Peru by the Incans (“Map of gender-diverse cultures”, 2015; Stryker, 2008). The question then becomes when did being gender-diverse (i.e. any gender beyond the binary of male and female) become taboo? I address this within a western cultural context later in my literature review in Chapter Two.

### **Exploring Transgender and Non-Binary Identities**

As discussed previously, there have been gender-diverse individuals within different cultures throughout history. As such, the names and labels socially given to these gender transgressors have changed as well. For the purposes of this study, I want to be able to discuss how I define and discuss the participants I am seeking. I align with Stryker’s (2008) assertion that this diverse and wide gamut of gender identities cannot be contained with a single label or moniker, as a single label has the capacity to be inhibitive or othering. I agree with Stryker who believes words are utilized to capture experiences and that these terms are still evolving, being constructed, and may not fit all individuals.

McKinney (2005) conducted one of the first studies, within the context of higher education, that explored students who expressed “that they [did] not fit into the sex assigned to them at birth, ...questioned whether they are male, female, or something else, and may [have felt] uneasy in their bodies” (p.64). Stryker (2008) used the term *transgender* to describe individuals who “move away from the gender they were assigned at birth” (p. 1) and clarified the *trans-* in transgender to mean, “[crossing] over the boundaries constructed by...culture to define and contain... gender” (p. 1). Lastly, to differentiate from transgender, the term *cisgender* is

used to describe individuals who do not question their gender identity or expression or who feel that they align with their gender assigned at birth (Marine & Catalano, 2014; Stryker, 2008).

To articulate my understanding of who might be included in the group of gender-diverse people in this study, I utilize Stryker's (2008) explanation:

Some people move away from their birth assigned gender because they feel strongly that they properly belong to another gender in which it would be better for them to live; others want to strike out toward some new location, some space not yet clearly defined or concretely occupied; still others simply feel the need to get away from the conventional expectations bound up with the gender that was initially put upon them. In any case, it is *the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place*—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition (emphasis in original; p. 1).

**Deconstructing transgender.** Stryker's statement above can begin to give readers a context for the participants within this study and also highlights the concept addressed in the notes for readers. This statement by Stryker aligns with concepts of queer theory, as discussed in Chapter Two. Queer theory argues that social constructions of identity should be disregarded as they can inhibit the individual's concept of self and their own journey (Abes, 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Brady, 2006; Smith, 2003). What I specifically want to draw readers' attention to is Stryker's last comment about "any particular destination or mode of transition" (Stryker, 2008, p. 1). I believe, as do some of my participants, that there is slowly evolving generalized narrative of transgender within mainstream society and mass media. This generalized narrative, for those who may not be familiar with this population, contains specific ideas of a transgender individual's experiences: ideas of medical transition, the phrase *being*

*born in the wrong body*, or questions about sex or genitals. This is evident from Katie Couric's invasive inquiry into transgender bodies in her January 2014 interview with celebrity Transwomen Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera (McDonough, 2014).

Transwoman, actress and activist Laverne Cox put said it best:

I do feel there is a preoccupation with [genitalia, surgery, and trans bodies]. The preoccupation with transition and surgery objectifies trans people. And then we don't get to really deal with the real lived experiences. The reality of trans people's lives is that so often we are the targets of violence, [discrimination, disparity in employment, and high rates of homicide.] If we focus on transition, we don't actually get to talk about those things (McDonough, 2014).

As mentioned above, I find it important that we move away from this generalized narrative or focus on bodies and transition. This study is about the "real lived experiences" that Laverne Cox speaks of being looked over when there is a preoccupation with bodies and transition. I also believe that *transgender* also evokes ideas of gender still operating within a binary within this generalized narrative. Meaning that for mainstream society or media, the most prevalent transgender experience is some form of transition from male to female or female to male. Although some individuals do transition within the binary from female to male or male to female, the gamut of gender-diverse individuals is just that – diverse. This aligns with assertions of queer theory that we avoid inhibitive notions of mainstream society's understanding of a group of people, especially when that group of people is marginalized by the majority.

It is important for me to bring attention to those gender transgressors who do not have this "particular destination" (Stryker, 2008, p. 1) and make gender their own, beyond the binary. The literature makes a clear statement that supports a necessity to explore the broad scope of

transgender identities and true gender-diversity (Bilodeau, 2005; Marine, 2011). Given all this, I am focusing on those identities which are less discussed and for whom literature is still being developed, (e.g. Non-Binary, Genderqueer, Gender Fluid, Gender Non-Conforming, or Agender). The participants chosen for this study, as described through their own experiences, do not cleanly align within a gender binary identity. In recognizing that there are experiences beyond the generalized transgender narrative, I can begin to challenge readers to focus on the importance of uniquely individual, personal explorations and definitions of gender. However, this assertion is not intended to diminish the experiences of those who exist within a binary concept of gender. My intention is to displace this normative and generalized narrative to make space for *every* gender transgressor who moves away from the inhibitions of socially imposed gender constructions.

**Gender and gender identity.** As explained more in-depth in Chapter Two, it is my assertion that the current accepted concept of *biological sex* is inhibitive and incorrect when determining gender. Stryker (2008) asserts that biological sex does not and should not “bear any necessary or deterministic relationship” (p. 11) to gender or gender identity. I and others, both within the transgender community and those working with gender-diverse individuals, use the term *gender assigned at birth*, rather than using the problematic *biological sex*. As Stryker (2008) states, “gender is not the same as sex, though the two terms are often used interchangeably, even in ... literature, creating a great deal of confusion” (p. 11). Stryker proposes the thought that no person is born a man or woman, but rather becomes one through a “complex process of socialization” (Stryker, 2008, p. 11). This furthers the concept that gender, in opposition to how it is accepted by mainstream society, is in fact not a biological truth but rather a social construction of behaviors, actions, or roles.

These ideas are how I understand gender/gender identity and discuss it with participants. I further assert in Chapter Two, backed by arguments of Bornstein (1994) and Stryker (2008), that this aspect of identity should not be determined by a medical designation system, but rather self-initiated and self-formed. Bornstein (1994) captures this in the following quote: “gender identity answers the question, ‘who am I?’ Am I a man or woman or a what? It’s a [personal] decision [that’s] made by nearly every individual” (p. 24). Stryker uses terms like “subjective sense of fit,” “sense of congruence,” and “what one considers oneself to be” (Stryker, 2008, p. 13). As I’ve come to understand gender/gender identity through this study, my own experiences, and the experiences of participants – gender is personal and it is self-constructed.

### **Significance of this Study**

To better understand why it’s important to center a study on deconstructing gender and its social constructions for the purpose of better supporting healthy development of it, I explore two aspects: (a) why this exploration of how gender transgressors navigate gender is important and (b) why we discuss it within the context of a higher education campus, as my participants will be college students.

### **Exploring Gender Identity Development**

In Chapter Two, I discuss the idea of the gender binary, as it currently operates within society, as greatly inhibitive and functioning as a classist system within society (Bornstein, 1994; Stryker, 2008). Various authors recognize how a gender binary system, or one that restricts behaviors to the gender assigned at birth, can limit individualized development of self (Bornstein, 1994; Boskey, 2014; Marine, 2011; McKinney, 2005; Stryker, 2008) Boskey (2014) believes that it is important to explore and discuss how individuals navigate and define their gender to better support healthy ideas of identity formation. In doing so, identity formation

could be free from restrictions of gendered practices, behaviors, or social structure for any individual, cisgender or transgender alike. In deconstructing the common idea of transgender within a binary, Bilodeau (2005) recognizes that there exists a need within the literature to explore gender non-conforming or non-binary identities. This necessity was best argued by Bilodeau (2005) who wrote: “A new agenda for gender equality lies in framing research around the unmasking of genderism and in examining and supporting the identity development of [gender-diverse] students” (p. 43). Marine (2011) believes that this could be achieved through the “outright conversion of ... [this] oppressive binary system” towards a more “fluid, malleable, and self-created” (p.75) conceptual framework of gender identity development.

### **Importance of the Context of Higher Education**

As any type of identity development occurs within a context (Stryker, 2008; Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009) it is important for those of us who work within higher education to explore what impact the college environment might have on gender-diverse individuals. Boskey (2014) cites a number of different authors to make the claim that young people who are gender-diverse or transgress normative ideas of gender are consistently bombarded with harassment or are subject to bullying within a school environment. Devor (2004) and Boskey (2014) both highlight how gender-transgressors are greatly affected by the negative interactions they encounter, which can lead to mental and emotional distress such as trauma, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, amongst others. Also, a national survey of student mental health reported that transgender students, when compared to their cisgender peers, are twice as likely to report self-harming behaviors or consider suicide and they are three times as likely to attempt suicide at least once (Marine, 2011). Knowing that gender-diverse students are more likely to experience

emotional and mental distress, it is important to understand how a college environment or campus can be inhibitive to gender-diverse individuals.

Specifically, in framing this discussion of college campuses as places that can be inhibitive and marginalizing, it is asserted that colleges and universities impose a practice of genderism, which can be defined as, “a rigid and [codifying] process of enforcing binary (male and female) gender norms” (Marine, 2011, p. 67). Bilodeau (2005) argues that higher education practices “collude with binary gender systems to enforce gender oppression” against students (pp. 42-43). These prohibitive practices, described in detail below, are not only physically but also socially structured and exist at a policy level (Beemyn, 2005). From the point of matriculation to graduation, gender-diverse individuals meet opposition from peers and staff, practices of the institution, and expectations set through societal norms. This genderism that occurs within societal norms push gender transgressors to uncomfortably conform within the gender binary in order to be successful at an institution of higher education (Marine, 2011).

**Harmful conditions.** Below are a list of harmful conditions facing gender-diverse individuals within the practices, structures, systems, and policies that impose and reflect genderism at institutions of higher education, as described above. A number of articles written address these conditions in an effort to highlight and educate others on how the system is set up against gender-diverse students on college campuses (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Marine, 2011; Marine & Catalano, 2014).

- Non-existent educational programming for students that focus on the identities, needs and concerns of gender-diverse students.
- No training for staff and faculty to better support gender-diverse students.



- Lack of trans-focused support services, which are often overshadowed by LGB services or lumped in as an afterthought.
- Limited knowledgeable, available, and properly trained medical and counseling staff and not readily accessible trans-focused services, such as, trans-sensitive counseling, hormone therapy (if desired), and other medical conveniences. Individuals need these services to be able to transition, if they desire; or at the very least, they should have the comfort of navigate medical services without stigmatization or marginalization.
- Imperfect structuring of physical facilities: rigid residence hall gendered assignments that restrict individuals to the gender assigned at birth, gendered athletic facility locker rooms, and gendered bathrooms with lack of single-stall bathrooms. These all enforce and restrict an individual to potentially conform to the gender assigned at birth, which may put them in an emotionally or physically harmful harassment situation.
- Need for support and coverage within anti-discrimination institutional policies as a lot of institutions do not support gender identity or expressed as a protected aspect of identity. This not only should support students, but faculty and staff.
- Better hiring practices that include gender-diverse (in terms of transgender) staff and faculty, to be able to give positive role models for students on college campuses.
- Better handling of modification of campus documents and records, to encompass name and gender changes for students and faculty; currently, students have to

jump through logistical hoops that can re-stigmatize or marginalize their gender when encountering gendered processes or incompetent staff.

When looking at these practices that are necessary to reform, it is very clear that students that transgress gender are continually subjected to marginalizing experiences that attempt to conform them into a gender they may not align with. Marine (2011) states, “the daily toll of attempting to live in the [genderist] framework and to manage [marginalizing interactions] can have negative effects, including depression, anxiety, inability to focus on pursuing... life goals, and a profound sense of isolation” (p. 72). These articles (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Marine, 2011; Marine & Catalano, 2014) do everything short of demanding that action begin to be taken to support this body of students. Given these harmful conditions for gender-diverse students, I find it vitally essential to engage in a discussion that challenges normative ideas of gender and genderist practices on campuses. Upon engaging in discussions focused on inhibitive genderist practices, professionals and educators can hopefully have a desire to improve conditions for gender-diverse students and staff on our campuses.

### **Overview of Existing Literature**

Although I will greatly explore the existing literature providing context and background for this study in Chapter Two, it is my hope to provide an overview of the concepts that will be explored. The entirety of the second chapter is structured in a way that outlines a process of exploration around gender. First, the reader is introduced to the idea of gender versus sex, or rather gender identity determined through sex designation. Although this is how most of society understands this aspect of identity, Bornstein (1994) and Stryker (2008) challenge this and set up the idea of gender, free from sex designation, as social construct. Within this idea of gender as

social construct, these authors argue that gender, as it is currently situated, operates within cult-like dynamics and as a class system seeking to privilege one gender (male) and set the other up for challenge (female).

This class system operates in a way that polices behaviors, interactions, actions, and a number of other social exchanges to enforce and protect the structures of power and privilege and keep the gender binary intact (Bornstein, 1994; Stryker, 2008). Where historically this became an issue for gender-diverse individuals in was in classifying this gender transgression as a pathological problem and disorder (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Reicherzer, 2008; Stryker, 2008). This set up a number of unfortunate and inhibiting experiences that only sought to keep these gender transgressors under control of the gender binary and as far away as possible from the ability to challenge this gender class system.

Presenting gender as social construction and the inhibiting conditions that can exist, I then move to a discussion of queer theory as a framework to challenge and deconstruct gender as it is described in the paragraphs above. Queer theory recognizes the existence of social concepts as constructs that exist to enforce and impose systems of power and oppression to maintain the status of those with privilege (Abes, 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Brady, 2006; Smith, 2003). I present the major tenets of queer theory as a framework to oppose these social constructs. I also seek to utilize queer theory to return agency within identity development back to the individual because this allows for personal development of sense of self within gender.

After queer theory has been described as a tool for deconstructing socially held ideas of gender, the last section of chapter two moves to describe and explore the process of gender identity development for gender-diverse individuals. As my participants are college students, the

importance of understanding identity development within higher education and student affairs practiced is discussed (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). Additionally, I discuss some research and studies that have been conducted around gender transgression in childhood and adolescence and how children (cisgender or gender-diverse) view gender identity development (Boskey, 2014; Brinkman, Rabenstein, Rosén, & Zimmerman, 2014). Lastly, I explore three models that seek to map the process of transgender identity development. These models (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) offer a framework to better understand how those who transgress gender make sense of themselves and interact with the world around them to form a gender identity that is unique and individual. It is these three models that informed my interview protocol and interactions with my participants.

### **Overview of Study**

As stated throughout this chapter, the purpose of this study is to challenge social norms and normative notions around gender through exploring how gender transgressors navigate and develop their own gender identity. This study operates within a transformative paradigm that situates participants as vitally important to all aspects of the study and focuses on challenging the marginalizing environment that impacts them. The data and findings of this study are written within a case study approach in order to provide insight to the phenomenon of gender identity and how participants navigate it. In doing that, I hope to understand how gender norms are transgressed by my participants in the development of their gender. Four participants attending the same institution were interviewed over the course of three months, and for the purposes of this thesis, three gender experiences are described and examined. Participants were engaged with a semi-structured interview protocol for the majority of the activities within the study. Additional activities utilized for data collection included participants engaging in self-reflection

of their gender and observational interactions with the researcher. Data was analyzed concurrently while being collected to impact and influence the study and the researcher. Data was presented within a silo of singular cases to promote individualization, but consistencies were observed to recognize how the process of gender navigation and development can have commonalities. My own positionality within this study and how I ensure research quality is explored in depth in Chapter Three.

### **Conclusion**

Within this chapter, I explored the purpose of this study and introduce concepts that inform this study so that readers may better understand the arguments and assertions later made within this thesis. It is my hope that readers have an initial grasp of how gender and its development for gender-diverse individuals is explored within the confines of this study. It is also my hope that readers have an outline for how the foundation of this thesis will continue to unfold before data is presented and discussed. It is important that readers keep an open mind to notions presented within this chapter, further developed in the next chapter, and argued in the final chapters. Although readers may not identify within identities that transgress gender norms, it is my hope that readers are open to the realities and truths of gender as an inhibitive and oppressive system for gender-diverse individuals. Lastly, I hope that readers move forward to challenge their own personal notions of gender or at least question how these personal notions of gender norms may be influenced by a societal history of gender normativity that seeks to police behaviors of all.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Before I, as a researcher, can begin to carefully examine the intricacies of how gendered social constructs can inhibit personal development of gender, I must be able to understand the history and roots of this gender system, how gender transgressors have been impacted by it, and potential ways that gender-diverse individuals can navigate their own gender identity. Within this chapter, I will be exploring the background and development of gender as inhibitive social construct, some contextual framework that helps us navigate the deconstruction of inhibitive norms, the construction of identity development on a college campus, and specific research surrounding gender identity development that can help me examine participants' experiences.

### **Understanding Gender and its Impact**

I find it important to discuss the cultural background and views of gender that can limit freedom of exploration within gender identity development. To be able to discuss gender and articulate my own thoughts surrounding gender, I turned to two different transgender authors and their works: Kate Bornstein's semi-autobiographical *Gender Outlaw* (1994) and Susan Stryker's historical non-fiction work *Transgender History* (2008). I believe the thoughts explored in these personal and historical narratives are important to highlight because they come from transgender voices who navigated their own gender and explored a society that sought to invalidate their experiences and identities.

Bornstein (1994) and Stryker (2008) when read together present gender as a social construct, rather than biological truth, and assert how current gender practices can constrain and inhibit social interactions and personal identity. Within this study, it is important to highlight how gender polices individuals operating in any gender identity within the confines of Western cultural and social systems. Bornstein (1994) describes this very personally as "living in a world

that insists we be one or the other [but] ...doesn't bother to tell us exactly what one or the other is" (p. 8). Stryker (2008) offers that gender operates within society as a common sense or truth, akin to gravity, and that day to day not one person thinks to ask about what makes a man a man or a woman a woman or even how one knows their gender (p. 7). Both authors believe that gender is a complicated and intricate topic that unfortunately has a place in our society to police and classify social interactions based on the gender assigned at birth. Bornstein postulates that culture creates gender and gendered people, believes these social gender constructs to be "malevolent and divisive" (p. 12), and are constructed as accepted truths that make it impossible to question it and punish those who do.

### **Classification: Sex or Gender?**

Before I can go in-depth and present gender as social construct and the limitations that follow, I must first describe how society has commonly classified sex or gender and the history behind it. Stryker (2008) relays that for the mainstream majority, gender and sex are one in the same; your body automatically determines your gender and status in society. As it is widely accepted, one's gender and the idea of identity around it is depended primarily on a combination of genitalia, hormones, and chromosomes. It is this *biological law* and its classifications, male and female, that then inform the way society interprets the interactions, rules, and restrictions any individual with a sex assignment must follow. This system of classification, as Stryker (2008) describes it, only sets up the law or belief that there can be only two acceptable bodies. This begins to be problematic and inhibitive, especially within an only-two body system, for those that are born with indiscernible biological markers (i.e. genitalia, chromosomes, or hormones) leaning one way or another. Individuals who do not fall into a determinate male or female body are described as intersex. Stryker (2008) relays that individuals born intersex are

much more common than many know, estimating that intersex births occur at one in two thousand births. Where it becomes inhibitive is when medical professionals make the decision to *normalize* intersex infants through surgery (Stryker, 2008), altering their body before the infant has an opportunity to state their interest or at a basic level - consent.

This example of non-consensual sex designation, both Stryker and Bornstein agree, equally applies to a person of any male or female “body”, as it is assigned by medical professionals. Bornstein (1994) flat out states that “membership in a gender is not based on informed consent” (p. 117), as no person, at infancy, has ever given full consent to any medical professional on the decision of their *sex* and, as society intertwines it, gender classification. Stryker (2008) begins to drive home this point of medical decision as law, describing: “since the end of the eighteenth century, science has gradually come to replace religion as the highest social authority; ...medical science [then began to play] an increasingly central role in defining everyday life” (p. 36). Stryker (2008) says that since that time conservative social powers have attempted to utilize medicine (physical or mental) to perpetuate superiority with race, make determinations of sick or healthy, classify as normal or diseased, or diagnose sane or insane. Ultimately, Stryker postulates, this has the capacity to transform basic levels of difference that exist amongst humans into powerfully “unjust and oppressive social hierarchies” (p. 36) favoring the normal or the majority. It is this researcher’s belief that this western cultural system of sex/gender, decided as medical and social truth, situates an infant for either privilege or challenge (in a male or female system) and sets up a lifetime of decided interactions, acceptable behaviors, and an innumerable variety of social and cultural expectations all without ever giving the individual the possibility or chance of consent. Where this begins to be problematic and inhibitive, not only for those who align with their gender assigned at birth but especially for



those who move beyond it, is when there are social systems and expectations that seek to keep individuals in line and in order to what is normal and routine.

### **Gender as Social Construct**

Bornstein (1994) argues and describes in detail the idea of gender as social construct and how it seeks to set up a class system of gender that not only has a cult-like dynamic but also is damaging to individuals who do not fall in line with its rules and procedures. Bornstein argues that only having two designations (male and female) to choose from is not a choice at all; believing that when one chooses one, they buy into the system and tacitly support the structures that support that identity system.

In her effort to explore gender as a construct, Bornstein (1994) discusses gender as different systems, first exploring group dynamics as a framework to look at how gender operates. What Bornstein understood is that gender systems in Western culture did operate like a group: compliance in a group often is regulated through good or bad behavior and the expectation was either to conform or be removed. When thinking more deeply on how to address the harsh constraints of gender, Bornstein (1994) also began to question gender in relation to the practices and dynamics of a cult. In a cult, boundaries and borders had a necessity to be defended; as a cult, Bornstein believed that gender did the same. Bornstein even took the analogy a step further in describing the harassment and violence (i.e. either physical, mental, or emotional) that one can endure when stepping outside those boundaries. Bornstein relayed that cults keep their members under lock and key, and similarly “gendered” folk keep their members under lock and surveillance, attacking any violators/enemies of the gender cult (pp. 101-103). When one does not follow the accepted rules of the gender, members are policed (Boskey, 2014). As children, boys often are reared to what they shouldn’t be (i.e. women) by being told, “boys don’t cry” or

“you throw like a girl.” While girls are crafted into roles they should fill by being told, “be proper,” “be ladylike,” or “wear these clothes”. In this way, this gender system enforces strict gender role oppression within a male and female binary (Bornstein, 1994; Boskey, 2014).

Continuing with the idea of gender operating as cult, it stands to mention Bornstein’s (1994) comparison of cult member policing and attacks against the enemies of the cult with the way that any violence (i.e. mental, emotional, or physical) in the name of gender has been perpetuated. She argues that there exist two basic tenets: As woman, you cannot be a man, and as man, you cannot be a woman (p. 104). Bornstein thought at one time it was the gender transgressors who were terrorizing gender, but came to recognize that it is those who believe wholeheartedly in a “gender system which is *real* and *natural* [in fact] use gender to terrorize the rest of us [who violate that system]” (pp. 71-72). This idea of upholding a pure identity is one that is not foreign to history. For example, Bornstein likens it to class oppression that occurred in the caste system in India or apartheid in South Africa. In the way that those class systems were upheld to be *natural*, so Bornstein believes that these “Gender Defenders” (p. 72) uphold and defend this system for its own members and those who try to leave accepted boundaries and behaviors. These cult-like dynamics that enforce a class-like operation of gender explicitly attacking those who stray, evoking policing members to “hatred, outrage, panic, or disgust” (Stryker, 2008, p. 6) which leads to various forms of violence. On a not so extreme level, Bornstein believes that misogyny and male privilege are byproducts of this gender cult-like class system but also enabling forces that also prop up males as privileged and superior.

I find it important to discuss all of these ideas and concepts, presented by Stryker and Bornstein, in an effort to understand the societal, cultural, and social forces that can impact the way participants in this study experience gender and navigate it. Especially as this gender

system can inform the way societal pressures inhibit freedom of expression or movement beyond or around a binary gender system for anyone who navigates away from their gender assigned at birth.

### **Gender Identity Disorder / Gender Dysphoria**

In a movement to classify the navigation of gender identity away from the gender assigned at birth, medical professionals found a way to support the unnatural/natural dichotomy Stryker speaks of in an earlier section. This is important to mention because it highlights the opposition of medicine against gender-diverse folks and another way they are *othered* in greater society (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Reicherzer, 2008). Reicherzer (2008), in their recorded history of transgender identities and the reaction of the medical community, recognizes that since the 1920s medical professions have worked to classify “gender nonconformity” (p. 330) as it occurred. Reicherzer (2008) takes the time to note that although there have existed cultures and gender-diverse people throughout history, current Western (or Eurocentric) medicine began identifying and classifying the experiences of these gender transgressors.

Moving through 60 years of medical classification, the 1980 publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (DSM-III)* was the first instance and discussion of the specific terminology, Gender Identity Disorder or GID (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Reicherzer, 2008). This identity “disorder” describes a dissonance between the “biological sex assignment” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p.30), or gender assigned at birth, and gender identity. It is discussed that the process of being granted access to medical care or treatments (e.g. hormones, top surgery, or gender confirmation surgery) and/or being able to change gender designations on legal documents would only be allowed after a diagnosis of having a mental illness (GID). These gender transgressors would then, for a predetermined

period, have to live within the desired gender to ensure that the individual in question was sure about their choice (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Stryker, 2008). All the authors in this section (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; “Gender dysphoria”, 2013; Reicherzer, 2008; Stryker, 2008) make clear that this is a stigmatizing, marginalizing, and traumatizing experience for individuals attempting to make transitions toward or simply identify as they see their internal sense of gender. Talking with my participants and other gender-diverse folks within the community, these practices of needing to be granted access to processes (name/gender change on legal forms) or medical care (i.e. surgeries or hormones) still are in effect and require the signature and approval of counseling professionals. What makes it hard for gender-diverse folks who do not operate within a binary in particular (e.g. Non-Binary, Gender Non-Conforming, Genderqueer, Gender Fluid, Agender, etc.) is that prior to the most recent release of the DSM in 2013, gender identity was restricted within the confines of a male/female binary (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; “Gender dysphoria”. 2013; Reicherzer, 2008).

However, with the most recent publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, DSM-V, there was a shift by the American Psychiatric Association to move towards a more inclusive and respectful classification of the experience of gender-diverse individuals (Boskey, 2014; “Gender dysphoria”, 2013). The fact sheet released by the American Psychiatric Association, *Gender Dysphoria* (2013), recognized that previous definitions and practices, for example Gender Identity Disorder, were stigmatizing and clearly states, “It is important to note that gender nonconformity is not in itself a mental disorder” (p. 1). However, this reclassification of dissonance with the gender assigned at birth is bittersweet; although it allows for a less stigmatizing and more respectful term, the American Psychiatric Association (2013) stressed the importance and necessity of still diagnosing individuals, as it allows access to

care. Although removing the classification would endanger the loss of medical treatments, it is my belief that gender diverse people are still othered through a process of diagnosis and talked about as having a condition with symptoms. As previously stated, current gender-diverse or transgender folks I have had the opportunity to talk and discuss this with express a discomfort with this process and describe it as “hoops they have to jump through” before receiving any sort of medical assistance in their transition. These hoops highlight the grasp of control the medical system can have over gender transgressors and loss of agency over their own identities. It is important to discuss this because even though there have been great strides to de-stigmatize gender transgressors, there still exist processes and practices that other an entire group of people.

### **Deconstructing Gender with Queer Theory**

Now that the social construction ideals of gender and it inhibits those who do not conform it have been presented, it is important to understand how academia has approached and attacked these ideas. Specifically, I will be presenting queer theory as a framework for discussing gender and identity development and how academics have attempted to deconstruct previously held cultural and social norms. As presented later in this section, there have been some hesitation with using queer theory for identity development, (Abes, 2007; Alexander, 2003; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015), and as such my use and presentation of queer theory is more meant to validate the conceptions of gender that Bornstein and Stryker present and then analyze and deconstruct these social constructs of gender.

### **Queer Theory**

In a discussion of queer theory and identity development, Abes and Kasch (2007) stress the importance of student development literature redirecting attention to social power structures, “such as racism, classism, and heterosexism” (p.619) and how they inform and impact the

development of identity. As I am aligning with Bornstein's (1994) and Styer's (2008) assertions that gender within society is cult-like and classist in its social constructs, the idea of queer theory helps to begin recognize the validity of these assertions (Abes, 2007). Queer theory, as it is discussed (Abes & Kasch, 2007), pushed boundaries of thought in "critically [analyzing] the meaning of identity... and resisting oppressive social constructions" (p. 620) as they relate to identity. It stands to note that the literature around queer theory initially focused on non-normative sexual orientation identities (Brady, 2006; Smith, 2003) but still strived to analyze social constructs and how they impacted identity (Abes, 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Brady, 2006; Smith, 2003). Abes and Kasch (2007) present that queer theorists believed that gender is socially constructed; in that gender "reflect[s] the time and place in which [it] exists and the individuals who enact them", adding "the expression of gender...is unstable, changing as the individual affects society and as society affects the individual" (p.621).

Understanding this basic idea of queer theory, Smith (2003) presents some core tenets of queer theory that further this idea of social constructions and power systems in society:

(a) all categories are falsifications, especially if they are binary and descriptive of [gender]; (b) all assertions about reality are socially constructed; (c) all human behavior can be read as textual signification; (d) texts form discourses that are exercises in power/knowledge and which, properly analyzed, reveal relations of dominance within historically-situated systems of regulation (p.346).

Smith (2003) relayed that queer theorists, and in turn these tenets, proposed the destabilizing of "hegemonic cultural ideals of normativity" (p.346). Additionally, Smith proposed a "denaturalization" of human experience, akin to what Bornstein (1994) and Stryker

(2008) spoke of the use of *natural* or *pure* identities, and revoking assumptions about identities within rigid constructs and moving to a flux state of allowing relativism within thought and culture. We may achieve this Brady (2006) states in a review and analysis of Nikki Sullivan's *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, if we carefully analyze cultural power structures, a concept of queer theory, and then begin to counteract and shake up normative ideas and structures that inform our society. These ideas inform the basis of queer theory and how academics have not only recognized socialized constructs enforcing power and privilege, in relation to sexuality and gender, but also how to begin deconstructing cultural or social norms.

**Potential concerns.** In discussing the usefulness of queer theory with identity development, I also found a few authors that addressed concerns with utilizing queer theory in this way. Alexander (2003), a self-identifying black, gay man who recognizes his own history of hurt and healing around the conversations of describing and discussing identities, believes that queer theory can be inhibitive; simply put, "it erases my difference" (p. 349). Alexander proposes that although queer theory provides a clear deconstruction of the structures, it deconstructs too much and can erase conversations of intersectionality, specifically race, ethnicity and culture. The point that I believe he wants to warn of is by deconstructing for liberation from power structures, can one then separate oneself from the unity and counterculture that has formed because of those structures. Also, that in attempting to deconstruct social constructs, one can remove power of distinct identities. In a similar thought, Rasmussen views queer theory as a means for apprehending norms, not necessarily for the use of resisting them. She sees queer theory as a way to "analyze something similar from different angles" (Allen & Rasmussen, 2015). Rasmussen believes that erasure should not be a part of queer theory. Although Abes (2007) appreciated the challenges to fixed identities and norms, they believed the

danger of doing this removed identities that college students, in an environment and period of transition, needed to hold onto “to make sense of themselves” (p. 58).

However, Abes (2007) later presents that queer theory can be used as a framework of questioning and deconstructing normative and restrictive ideas of identity as a means to then reconstruct one’s own identity on an individual and personal basis. Abes believes this can be essential to education as a student affairs professional and educator, as our students should be questioning their own previously held externally influenced worldview to then personally develop and foster a complex frame of mind and self. I find it important to consider valid concerns presented by the authors above; however, my use of queer theory is more in line with Abes’ later realization of the usefulness of queer theory in Student Affairs practice - to question and then reform identity based on an individualistic basis.

### **(Re)Constructing Social Identities**

Thus far, I have discussed inhibitive gender social constructs, the concept of gender as it is situated in society, and queer theory as a framework to critically analyze external ideas of gender and then allowing for the opportunity of individual identity development. It is important, then, to discuss the process of identity development to make sense of how my participants may be constructing their own personal concept of gender.

### **Identity Development Theories in Higher Education**

Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) relay that a large portion of recent student affairs literature and research surrounds the discussion of identity development models within social/cultural and personal parameters in the lives of the students we work with on a daily basis. Even within the student affairs profession, there is this emphasis on practice and application of these models so that college educators can begin to work with and for our students to better



understand their needs and support them (Torres, 2011; Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). Within the context of higher education campuses, these authors continually come back to the importance and influence of environment in identity development. As these authors state, “identity is shaped by how one organizes experiences within the environment... that revolves around oneself” (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009, p. 577); adding that this organization of experiences happens not only internally but also within expressions and interactions with others. As an additional layer, “broader social context[s informed by] dominant values that dictate norms and expectations” (p. 577) have a capacity to impact and shape how individuals makes sense of their identity (Torres, Jones, and Renn, 2009). Meaning that what society holds and believes to be true can impact how an individual makes sense of themselves.

These ideas posed by Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) are in line with my own understanding of the college environment in its power to impact identity development; the environment provides opportunities where students are challenged by the diversity of others, engaging with these folks different than them, and navigating a sense of belonging amongst them. It is my belief that the college environment can serve as a prime springboard or catalyst for identity exploration and development; however, these authors make it clear that there is a lack of understanding of the role of environment in identity development, it “remains undertheorized and understudied” (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009, p. 591). I postulate that this remains undertheorized and understudied because people accept as logical truth that an environment of higher education would conceivably allow for growth and development and do not explore the concepts behind this truth, described above. As stated before, identity development theories can help us, as practitioners, better understand how our students navigate their own realities and sense of self (Torres, 2011). Additionally, in studying identity

development theories or models, we can gather a better understanding of a student whose experiences are different than ours and navigate ways to impact and benefit their growth while on our campuses. If we as practitioners can seek empathy with an experience that a student is encountering through knowledge of how they might be navigating identity development, we will be better in connecting with them on an individual level and seek to meet their specific needs.

### **Adolescent Gender Identity Development**

Before exploring what literature exists for gender identity development for college aged participants, I find it important to understand a little bit about what literature exists for adolescent and childhood gender development. Boskey (2014) explored the literature on childhood gender identity development. Boskey reported that although gender ideas and behaviors can vary between cultures, that by the time a child is 8 months of age they are capable of categorizing adults by gender, label their own gender by age two, and by three or four years old attribute behaviors and different traits specifically to males or females. Boskey (2014) adds that unsurprisingly, children with gender “atypical” behaviors, thoughts, or disconnect with the gender assigned at birth can begin to manifest or express it between the ages of 3 and 4 years. Some children even begin to express gender atypical behaviors it at 2 years old; that same age, as mentioned above, as when children are labeling their own gender. Other observations throughout the study of childhood gender development is that gender non-conforming and gender-diverse children often play with people of the opposite gender (in terms of how they were assigned at birth). Boskey (2014) proposes, then, that “age-appropriate lessons about gender-diversity and gender expectations could... be developed for students in elementary school and even kindergarten, ... [overlapping] with discussions of gender roles and equality of opportunity” (p. 450).

Brinkman, Rabenstein, Rosén, and Zimmerman (2014) present common and widely-held misconceptions, in their belief, about children identity development. They relay that previous children's identity development is focused in "essentialist, developmental, or socialization theories, which ...[emphasize] a deterministic, static, dichotomous and/or passive perspective on identity development" (Brinkman et al., 2014). These theories are inhibitive to gender-diverse children, and later adults, in a variety of ways. Essentialists argue that "gender is predetermined and directly tied to [biological] sex" (Brinkman et al., 2014, p. 836) and there is no development, but gender just "unfolds over time" (p. 836). Developmental theories assert that gender identity does develop over time, but in "predictable and normative" (Brinkman et al., 2014, p. 837) stages; as such, children merely take on learned gender expectations that enforce rigid gender roles and behaviors. Both developmental and essential theories are grounded in the belief that all children go through the same exact gender identity development process; this paints children as passive participants and can lead to seeing gender-diverse children as unnatural or having a disorder. The last commonly-held gender identity development theory, socialization, postulates that "gender identity [is] a process that occurs over time due to the influences of others" (Brinkman et al., 2014, p. 837).

What Brinkman et al. (2014) challenge in their study is that children, in developing gender identity, are "active agents who recognize the pressures to conform and adjust their behavior accordingly" (p. 837). Through their research, they recognized that children made informed decisions of conformity or non-conformity based on the reactions of others. They also recognized that children understood the concept of their gender identity development, the struggle of inauthenticity that comes with conformity, and that they comprehended non-conforming actions and behaviors. Additionally, the children in their study displayed

cost/benefit analysis and decision making skills that aligned with having to craft a gender identity that would aid in group belonging and a reduction in harmful interactions, e.g. bullying or humiliation. What stood out to me was this observation: “the fact that so many children resist or question gender norms... suggest that children have a desire to be authentic but weigh this against the consequences of nonconformity” (Brinkman et al., 2014, p. 846).

These articles are important because they highlight not only inhibitive widely-held theories of adolescent gender identity development, but also propose that gender identity development is not just a college phenomenon – it is a process that occurs throughout one’s life. Additionally, I believe it’s important to note that children, like adults, are active participants in their development and that external interactions and influences do play a role in navigation and development of gender. This is important as I discuss models of gender identity development and interweaving of internal and external processes.

### **Gender Identity Development within Higher Education**

While navigating the literature specifically for transgender students, gender identity has previously been incorrectly lumped with the sexual orientation identities of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) students. Although sexual orientation and gender identity are two aspects of identity that are marginalized if non-normative, they are in fact two different aspects of identity and combining these different experiences does not work to understand how individuals navigate this identity (Marine & Catalano, 2014). There simply is not a breadth of literature around gender identity development for those that do not identify with the gender assigned at birth (Marine & Catalano, 2014) nor has a widely-accepted theory been developed around gender identity. However, Devor (2004), Bilodeau (2005), and Levitt and Ippolito (2014) conducted studies around gender transgressors that explored how these individuals made sense of their

identity, both internally and in relation to the world around them. Although these development models were developed specifically around transgender folks that remained within the binary, I will utilize these development models as a framework to explore how the participants in my study make sense of their gender being mindful that it is a framework and not a certainty. As these are three different models, I will first present each model of development and then discuss my own synthesis of the three models into an idea of how I perceive gender identity development to potentially work.

**Devor's model.** Devor proposed a fourteen-stage identity development model crafted from his clinical work that spanned two decades for transsexuals, a term that was once but is no longer widely used to describe gender-diverse individuals and is now considered diminutive (Devor, 2004; Marine & Catalano, 2014). Devor postulated that this process of identity development is molded not only through exploration of one's self and identity, but also through interactions and reactions of others in their life. When moving through this identity development model, Devor (2004) proposed that an individual initially has uncertainty or anxiety around their gender and then eventually feels a dissonance with their gender assigned at birth. One moving through this model would then feel upheaval with their identity and disassociate with others' idea of their identity. Next, according to the model, the individual then look to others for confirmation, denial, or overall exploration of their developing sense of self, as it relates to gender. After recognizing and synthesizing their gender identity status through comparison to a number of outside influences, they begin another cycle of confusion in their newly formed gender identity. Then, one finds harmony in recognizing those who are like them and then seeking their support; however, they can remain in this flux, described above, indefinitely. Some will choose to adopt their new identity through a number of transition options to reflect a gender

identity (a) within the binary (i.e. male or female) different from the one assigned at birth *or* (b) move toward a genderqueer or other non-conforming identity. Before moving toward a final stage of a fully synthesized identity, anyone navigating this process will continually navigate senses of self and gender with those in their lives until they are able to reconcile their true gender identity with their prior sense of self. Lastly, the model proposes, that individuals will take pride in their identity and live openly, potentially even being comfortable in public advocacy for gender identity issues. Devor offers the idea that although those navigating this process usually distance themselves from others' negative perceptions of their gender identity, they often reintegrate and find value in how others perceive and react to their renegotiated gender identity to form a cohesive sense of self. Overall, Devor offers a comprehensive linear timeline of potential gender identity development; however, it is stated throughout that although this development can progress linearly there are cyclical or flux states that can occur. As such, I believe that Devor provides us with the most developed framework that, when used with the remaining models, offers a way to understand and perceive how my participants are navigating their gender identity.

**Levitt and Ippolito's model.** In addition, Levitt and Ippolito (2014) sought to explore gender identity development, unique to transgender identifying individuals, and factors that can inhibit or promote it. After interviewing individuals who did not align with their gender assigned at birth, these authors proposed a hierarchical or tiered breakdown of inhibitors and/or motivators that impact identity development. From their findings, Levitt and Ippolito recognized their participants develop in three core areas: constructs to represent their authentic gender identity, visibility and exploring how to communicate their gender, and balance of these necessities under pressure of survival within marginalizing social, political, and economic situations. In the first

area, development leads to the struggle of self-expression when others inadvertently pressure individuals to (a) hide, (b) conform with societal or familial expectations against their true identity development, (c) shrink into isolation and self-loathing, or (d) be subject to the inappropriate curiosity of others. The second area is influenced by positive motivators through external (interpersonal) interactions: positive language and hearing narratives of other individuals exploring gender identity. These narratives from other gender transgressors can support positive development. In finding others like them, these affirming communities with other gender-diverse people offer support for and validate this process of individualistic gender identity development. The last area involves the effects of external interactions while individuals are forming a renegotiated gender identity. In discussing this area, affirmation occurs when individuals are able to identify with their sense of self within gender, different than what was assigned at birth, and can have the choice to possibly transition in a way that is individual, to match the external body with the internal sense of self. A unique point within this area, when compared to other studies, is the observation that through deconstruction of gender identity and expression individuals find that their sexual or romantic attractions can change as well, which in turn can help individuals explore and affirm their renegotiated gender identity. This promotes this idea of intersectionality and how one aspect of self does interact with and impact other aspects. Lastly, participants' experiences of self-exploration and identification were promoted by one's sense of authenticity but could still be negated by negative external influences and interactions from family, friends, or society. I find Levitt and Ippolito's model to be useful as it helps to understand the factors or interactions that can either affirm or inhibit gender identity development. This model was not like Devor's in offering a timeline, but rather portrayed how

external influences played a key role in the development of gender identity. I believe it is a helpful additional layer to understand the process of gender identity development.

**Bilodeau's model.** Bilodeau (2005) proposed a transgender identity development model, unique to students within a college atmosphere. They proposed a set of milestones or processes that pave and direct the path of these students away from the gender they were assigned at birth. As with Devor's model (2004), this can be a sequential process.

- 1) The first moments of progression occurs when students leave a "traditional gendered identity" immersed in gender roles and the gender binary (Bilodeau, 2005, p. 32).
- 2) Then, being open to operating beyond the gender binary, students develop a personal transgender identity that is constructed and explored with the help of peer role models.
- 3) Students then adopt a transgender social identity that allows for continual exploration of self in a social network that supports and acknowledges the student's true gender identity.
- 4) Next, students can begin to navigate an identity as a transgender offspring and explore familial interactions.
- 5) Students then work to develop a transgender intimacy status that brings in current or future partners in navigating attractions and actions based on those attractions.
- 6) Lastly, students may enter into and find support in transgender community and seek opportunities, with other Trans\*-identified students, to seek change and advocacy.

I presented this model last because it ties together elements of the two models presented before it. Bilodeau, specifically, was the first to address development as it can occur within college, or rather, for college students. Bilodeau's idea of main milestones of development and

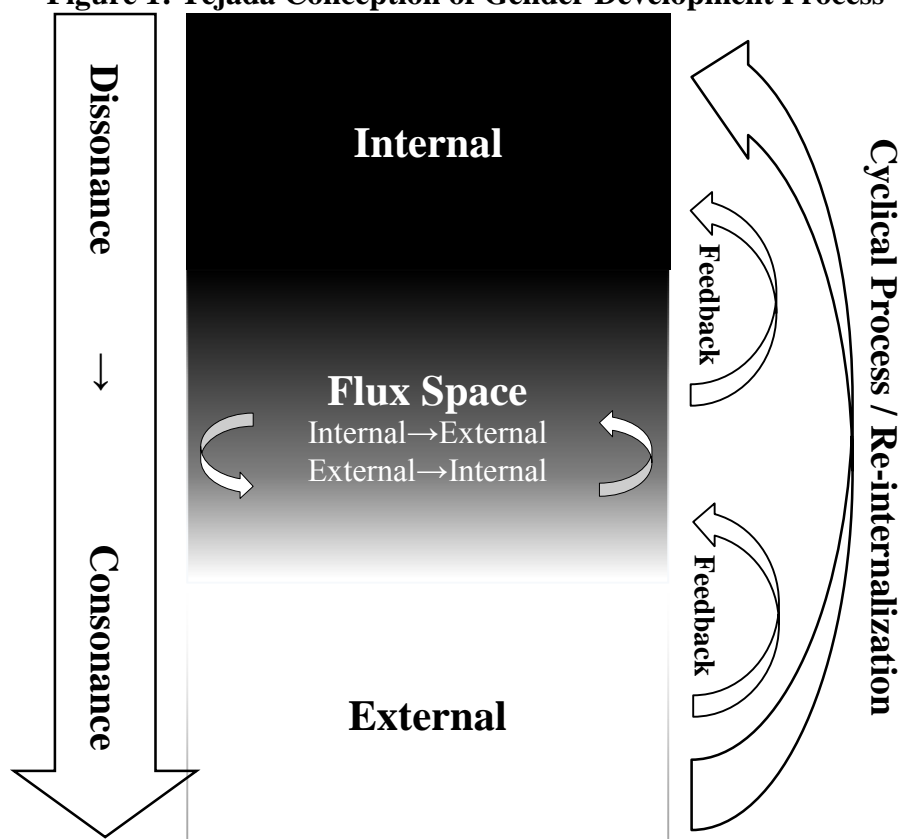


how they can be sequential offers a road maps to tie in the intricacies of Devor's fourteen step timeline and Levitt and Ippolito's external factors that inform and impact development. The next section will discuss more how all three relate to each other and my own personal synthesis of what gender identity development could look like for participants with this study.

**Synthesis of these models.** These three identity development approaches (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) for those who move beyond gender assigned at birth, do vary but also allow for connections and consistencies to be observed. I find this important to begin to synthesize all three because there currently exists no accepted model of gender identity development (Marine & Catalano, 2014). It is first important to recognize that among the three approaches there is a pattern in regard to how individuals develop their gender identity. Overall, researchers within all three models noted individuals navigate gender identity through both an internal (i.e. intrapersonal) and external (i.e. interpersonal) process. Where I begin to synthesize the three models, after recognizing the internal and external, is the idea of a flux space (Devor, 2004) where there is a cyclical exchange (my own idea) of both internal and external factors (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) that impact and influence how one makes sense of their gender identity. As mentioned before, Bilodeau provides us a sort of road map that I will discuss below, for seeing how all these elements fit together.

As visually represented in Figure 1, I recognized from the articles, two distinct process going on: (a) movement from discordant feelings around gender to a harmonized identity and (b) the navigation of sense of self within three distinct processes that one can move through as they navigate gender identity, an internal, an external, and a flux space in which a cyclical exchange of internal to external and external to internal occurs.

**Figure 1: Tejada Conception of Gender Development Process**



*As synthesized from models proposed by Bilodeau (2005), Devor (2004) and Levitt & Ippolito (2014)*

As I conceptualize the synthesis of these models, the internal process is happening when individuals navigating gender identity recognize a dissonance within their gender assigned at birth and their internal sense of gender and seek to make meaning of and develop a new gender identity (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). The external process happens when individuals have navigated the flux space and are presenting a transgender or transitional identity or have formed a fully synthesized gender identity and are open and living in that identity (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004).

Where my perception of this flux space comes in is the understanding of Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) motivators and inhibitors for identity development, supported by Devor's and Bilodeau's roadmap, and all three models in their understanding that external interactions (e.g. peers, transgender role models, family, romantic partners) do play a role in formation of identity.

Specifically, all three models addressed that the perceptions of and interactions with others play a role in how gender transgressors develop their gender identity. Devor (2004) and Levitt and Ippolito (2014) address how these external influences impact how individuals go through a cyclical process of shaping and expressing their gender (internal→external) followed by validation (external→internal). Additionally, all models understand the importance for individuals moving through identity development to need and seek out support from other peers who are exploring gender identity, or move away from their gender assigned at birth, as role models and mentors. Lastly, validation and confirmation of their true gender identity comes from interpersonal interactions from both cisgender and gender transgressing peers.

Although Devor (2004) and Bilodeau (2005) give us a sort of roadmap or timeline to understand the process that gender transgressors could follow, Devor (2004) makes sure to note that this process is cyclical and that individuals in this process continually need to readdress internally what one's sense of self is, as anyone does with an aspect of identity. Levitt and Ippolito (2014) understand that this re-addressing comes from these external influences (interactions) that happen when one presents a new aspect of self or identity, as discussed by Bilodeau (2005), and need to affirm and validate personal choices of gender expression. Negative interactions have the capacity to influence a move back toward the flux space or toward the internal re-navigation of sense of self (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), however, positive interactions with the individuals in one's life and procedures and practices can push the individual to a better formed sense of self and consonance of identity. Therefore, there are two processes that are happening simultaneously: (a) the navigation of sense of self in relation to self and others and (b) also a movement from dissonant gender identity to fully integrated and

consonant personal gender identity; this all being supported by various aspects of each separate identity development model (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt and Ippolito, 2014).

As discussed before, even though these three different models approaches exist, there is an absence of a single widely accepted and researched model of gender identity development (Marine & Catalano, 2014). Although the literature does not state the reason for this, I'm curious if the social constructions of gender influence the lack of a singular model of the process of gender development. My hope is that following this study I or others can test this conception of gender identity development, supported by and synthesized through three different development models. Although this study is not testing this conception, it did inform the interview protocol and interactions and activities participants engaged in within this study.

### **Gaps in Literature and Future Research**

Overwhelmingly, almost every article written, empirical or not, recognizes and states that those who transgress gender are a population that is greatly under-supported and under-researched (McKinley, 2005; Marine & Catalano, 2014). Additionally, there exists little to no research focusing on non-binary or non-conforming gender identities, which Bilodeau (2005) recognizes we need, unless it is lumped within a binary transgender lens or framework. This has the capacity to exclude a number of individuals who do not identify with their gender assigned at birth. For purposes of this study, various articles that included the phrase "LGBT" were examined to explore if there existed a wealth of hidden information within literature that discussed the experiences of this population group. Unfortunately, as Sausa (2002) and Marine & Catalano (2014) stated, often these students exploring their gender identity or having moved away from their gender assigned at birth are lumped in with their LGB peers because many do not understand the separated concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity and they equate

those outside of the majority as having the same experience. They see these non-normative identities as the same – or *unnatural* as described by Stryker (2008) – and do not take time to understand the individual intricacies that exist within gender identity. This could come from this systematic social construct of gender that the majority of society, at least those in power, continue to perpetuate and maintain.

Although LGB and Transgender or Non-Binary individuals “share many similar struggles, such as lack of equal rights protection, discrimination and harassment issues, lack of societal support and resources, and concerns about safety and visibility” (Sausa, 2002, pp. 46-47) their experiences and journeys are different. Therefore, educators and researchers must look past the erasure that can occur with equating orientation/attraction and gender identity in the current literature and seek to explore the story of these students. Every researcher that wrote within literature continually stated that the experiences of Transgender students still need to be explored thoroughly; I would argue that even more research is needed for individuals who do not align with the gender assigned at birth and move beyond the gender binary including Non-Binary, Genderqueer or Gender Fluid, Gender Non-Conforming or Agender identities. This study hopes to fill that gap by exploring the experiences of individuals who do not cleanly fit into the binary transgender narrative that is accepted by mainstream society, specifically considering the uniqueness of individuals and their personalized construction of gender identity. I hope to explore how those who do not fit cleanly within a binary may have different experiences than those whose gender identity is cleanly reflected by the binary, either cisgender or trans binary folks.

In reviewing and synthesizing the three identity development models proposed by Devor (2004), Levitt and Ippolito (2014), and Bilodeau (2005), I hoped to gain a framework to

conceptualize the gender identity development process of gender transgressors. As continually stated, there exists no comprehensive, tested, and accepted theory on gender identity development for gender transgressing individuals. My hope is that through this study, the stories and experiences of my gender transgressing and gender-diverse participants can begin to add to the evolving discussion around those who do not align with the gender assigned at birth. Additionally, I hope that the challenges and deconstructions of gender and gender identity I pose, can begin to challenge others to be open to discussing and exploring more inclusive concepts around gender and gender identity development.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will highlight choices I made, as a researcher, to be able to navigate and explore the questions of this study. As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to critically challenge gender and understand how it can be inhibitive for those that transgress it. I hope to articulate this conception of gender as inhibitive through examining the journey of gender-diverse individuals beyond gender normativity, to craft and practice their own unique gender identity. As the participants do transgress the social constraints of gender and the expectation to follow the gender assigned at birth, I am using the transformative paradigm for this study.

I believe that the transformative paradigm is not only useful, but essential to this study, as it places “central importance on the lives and experiences of [marginalized] diverse groups” while “[studying] the way oppression is structured and reproduced” (Mertens, 2015, p. 21). As discussed in Chapter Two, I am presenting gender as a cult-like classist social construct inherently set up as a powered and privileged system seeking to police behaviors and keep individuals in line with normative ideals (Bornstein, 1994; Stryker 2008). Mertens (2015) recognizes the importance of discussing power relationships, oppressive systems, and how these affect the marginalized individuals within the transformative paradigm. Within the scope of how normative gender exists and is structured against gender-diverse folks, it is important to understand and discuss their experiences as true, valid, and important in better understanding these power and privilege dynamics. Because the experiences of the participants are presented within a case study approach, as discussed later in this chapter, each case is set up on its own accord and not in contrast to any other.

As the voices of my participants can represent the realities of gender-diverse folks on college campuses facing these oppressive systems and practices, the transformative paradigm

becomes essential when emphasizing the validity of their experiences. This transformative practice of placing emphasis on the lives and experiences of these individuals provides the opportunity to explore gender identity development from those who are currently living it, rather than from impersonal numbers or existing data or from an outside researcher's lens. This study is specifically transformative because it is recognizing the power and oppression systems in play within social constructions of gender and allowing the experiences of the participants to highlight them and make statements against cultural norms. Through a transformative paradigm, I hoped to explore the purpose of this study through the participants' experiences. This study is an opportunity for individuals to relay their experiences which can empower them, knowing that their stories could make a difference in another's life. Each participant made statements surrounding their hope that in sharing their story they would be able to impact or educate those who read this study. Additionally, in sharing their experiences, their mutual hope is that their stories also highlight the struggles gender-diverse individuals face within gender-restrictive spaces. In sharing their experiences, my hope is that this study can empower campus administrators to work towards change and better support for these students.

### **Participants**

For this study, I interviewed four gender-diverse, current college students to explore how they navigated and developed their own gender identity. As it will be discussed later in the chapter, I made the choice to not include the journey of one of my four participants, Alex. Their data collection was not complete at the time of submission of thesis to committee, and I did not feel comfortable including their experiences without data collection being complete. The effect of the limitation of time is explored more within the limitations section later in this chapter.



As it was my hope to better understand how gender was inhibitive through how the gender navigation process occurs with gender-diverse individuals, I made choices surrounding who I recruited and interviewed. The choice to explore gender identity development around gender transgressors came from an exploration of the literature and the realization that gender identity development was not something that was greatly conceptualized or explained (Marine & Catalano, 2014). It was important than, to be able to recruit college students who navigated or were navigating that gender process. I made the choice to include a number of different gender labels to be clear that I wasn't just looking for transgender people, but that I was looking for a broad scope of those that identify within the gender-diverse gamut. As not all non-binary people do not necessarily identify with the transgender label, it was important that I didn't just include transgender but a list of gender labels. I made clear in my recruitment materials that although I listed specific gender labels, I was not limited to those listed. Additionally, I approached specific individuals, who I knew were open to exploring and discussing gender and would be happy to talk about their experiences. These choices are discussed more below.

### **Setting**

All participants were recruited from the same large mid-western research institution. This institution is located in a rural state that could be described as more conservative than liberal. This institution is a predominantly white institution, and has a number of different offices serving different populations: multicultural affairs, women and gender center, campus pride center, student veterans center, and so forth. As previously mentioned, this institution currently houses a Campus Pride Center, which serves the needs of all LGBTQIA+ students through a variety of services, student groups, and resources. The center is staff by one professional staff member, one graduate staff member, and 4-6 student staff members. The

programs offered out of this center include: queer history month programming, educational presentations/sessions focuses on inclusion, safe zone cards, student panels, routine programming surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues, and various support groups. There are Transgender specific programming and collaboration with local transgender community groups to work to be better inclusive of non-normative gender identities.

### **Guidelines for Recruiting Participants**

In setting parameters for participants, I outlined specific qualities and experiences that I believed would be useful in the confines of this study:

- a) Participants must not align, personally identify, or conform fully with their gender assigned at birth.
- b) Participants needed to either have constructed or currently be constructing their own gender identity, this process being referred to as gender identity development.
- c) Additionally, I recognized monikers that participants may use to identify their gender: Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, Non-Binary, Genderqueer, Gender Fluid, or Agender; but did not want to limit my interactions to people using just these labels or identities, just as long as they fit the parameters above.
- d) I left open my interactions to all gender-diverse individuals, not limiting my interactions to either those that operate inside (e.g trans binary: MTF or FTM) or outside of the gender binary (e.g. non-conforming, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, agender), although I was specifically interested in adding voices of people identifying outside the binary through my study.
- e) Participants needed to be current college students, at or above the age of 19. Individuals who had previously attended college would be accepted if they had

recently stopped attending an institution of higher education (through completion or withdrawal) within the last twelve (12) months after having attended for a time period of *at least* of a full academic semester (i.e. fall or spring).

- f) As mentioned in Chapter One, I made it clear that for the purpose of this study that gender (and/or) gender identity include: internal sense of gender (male, masculine, female, feminine, outside of or not fitting within the binary, between the binary, agender) *and* external presentation of gender through traditional societal expressions: masculine, feminine, androgynous, or any other expression beyond binary expectations.

My reasoning for these choices mainly come from the literature, as discussed before, in that not only are gender-diverse individuals left out of literature (McKinney, 2005) but also the process of gender identity is left unexplored with higher education literature (Marine & Catalano, 2014). Within a transformative paradigm, it makes sense then to explore these voices, especially making efforts to include gender transgressors who do not operate within the gender binary. Bilodeau (2005) recognized this gap in literature and research and this informed my decision to include these participants. Additionally, I believed that these participants were uniquely situated in constructing their gender outside of social normativity, or the binary, and would offer insight into an unexplored aspect of gender identity development. As Stryker (2008) noted, not all gender-diverse individuals align with labels that exist, as gender is highly individualistic, so it was important that I recognize possible labels but not limit my participants to these labels. Lastly, the importance of using college students was informed by not only the case study approach where context is important, but also that it is useful to understand the experience of college students, as a student affairs professional.

## **Recruitment**

For the purpose of this study, I utilized purposeful sampling in recruiting participants for my study. Mertens (2015) broadly discusses purposeful sampling as recruiting individuals who have information or experiences relevant to the study. I utilized the idea of purposeful sampling in that I identified individuals who fit within the parameters and were comfortable discussing their identity from interactions with my volunteer work at the Campus Pride Center. I also utilized a listserv from the Campus Pride Center to send out a recruitment email which was geared toward individuals who would meet my parameters, but I had no control of who would opt in. These choices were made to select participants who could help me understand my research questions and to honor the sensitive nature of privacy and confidentiality of an individual's gender identity, especially as non-normative gender identities are subject to stigma and ridicule.

Because the Campus Pride Center at the institution where the study is taking place utilizes students comfortable with sharing their transgender or non-binary gender identities in their programming, I was able to identify a small pool of potential participants to recruit. It was important for me to be able to use this pool because they were comfortable openly sharing their experiences and gender identity, and I was confident someone within this pool would want to participate. From this pool, I was able to recruit one individual who was willing to participate in my study.

Additionally, the director of the Campus Pride Center hosts an email listserv that goes out to specific students and community members who opt into receiving emails. I provided the director a recruitment email that specified criteria for participation in this study. Within this email was information about the study and my own contact information for potential participants

to reach out at their behest. I chose this purposeful sampling as an option because it allowed me access to potential participants I may not know and also it allowed for protection of personal identities in that willing and identifying participants could opt in, rather than feel pressured to be a part of the study. From this method I recruited three individuals, for a total of four participants. The lack of the fourth participant's experiences within this thesis is explored in the limitations.

### **Case Study Approach**

For the purposes of this study, I intend to utilize a case study research approach. Baxter and Jack (2008) wrote that case study research is best used when answering how or why, when covering “contextual conditions because...they are relevant to the phenomenon” (p. 545), or when the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. This is important because my study of the process of gender identity development is something that needs both the how and why to be explored. Additionally, my participants are college students and the college environment is logically assumed to shape identity development yet the reasoning behind this development has not been explored or researched comprehensively (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). I am interested in learning about the process of gender identity development that participants may navigate and the ways the college context may influence this process.

Although there are different types of case study research (Baxter and Jack, 2008), this study will focus on both descriptive and instrumental approaches. The primary focus will be on the descriptive type to fully explore a process of gender navigation and development which has not been deeply researched with gender-diverse individuals. A descriptive type is “used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548). Additionally, the instrumental type is described as “provid[ing] insight to an issue or help[ing] refine a theory” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548). This type will be used to

examine the participant's experiences in light of existing models of gender identity development. Ultimately, these two types of case study were chosen because they can provide contextual description of the process of identity development.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred in a variety of interactions with participants. Interviews, observational interactions, and a personal expression activity were utilized to gather data from participants about their experiences around gender identity and transgression of gender. It was important to me to record and take notes during all interactions as this allowed for complete collection of data and the ability to later reflect upon it. Upon collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, results were discussed with participants to ensure that findings reflected the accuracy of the participants' experiences. In this review of data findings, I presented to participants major points of their journey, as I perceived them, and asked a lot of follow up questions to ensure that I was not misrepresenting their story or their gender identity.

### **Interviews**

All interview interactions were semi-structured, in that protocol was provided by researcher and follow-up questions or conversation followed as necessary. Personal interviews and personal reflection activities were chosen to explore the very internal process that occurs, as postulated by the three identity development models (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Readers can refer to Appendix B for the full interview protocol.

The first interview was conducted with the primary purpose to begin to gain trust of the participant and get to know them in a private, secluded space. Additionally, the informed consent document, found in Appendix C, was talked through with participants to ensure that they understood the protocol of the interactions and then gave their consent through signing of the

forms. During this interaction, I took time to share my own experiences around gender identity, reasoning, and background of interest in the study. Participants were given the opportunity to explore any questions regarding the nature of the research study. Additionally, participants provided introductions into their life, their background, current situations, and an overview of their gender and gender journey. The participant, at the conclusion of the first interaction, was given a description of the self-expression activity. The objective of the first semi-structure interview was to meet the participant, allow for introductions of participant and researcher, and begin the conversation of their experiences surrounding gender identity development.

Between the first and second interviews participants were given a prompt, found in Appendix B, that ask for participants to reflect upon and self-express their gender or gender identity. Participants were given full freedom to express their identity in a format of their choice, with the understanding that if it wasn't clear, I would ask them to explain or clarify how they describe their gender. The second interview would then be used to explore the participants' self-expression of gender or gender identity.

The second interview surrounded reflection upon the personal expression of gender and allow for a deeper exploration of the participant's gender journey. This interaction included questions, provided by the researcher, that explored the processes of gender identity development, reflected on how the participant views their own gender, and how their gender identity played out in a number of interactions and contexts, including a college environment. The primary purpose for this interview is to really understand (a) how the individual identifies and (b) their journey in reaching that identity. The secondary purpose and more structured portion of the second interaction was informed by the three existing identity development models. It explored the internal and external processes as described in the models. Although the

intention was to encapsulate this interaction within one sit-down session, every participant, minus one, broke up this second interview into multiple sessions. This is important because I found it valuable to give participants as much time to explore their identity and journey as they felt necessary. I did not want to inhibit their descriptions or sharing of their experiences.

### **Observational Interactions**

Between the second and final interaction, I completed a single observational interaction activity with each participant. The purpose of this interaction was based in the recognition that identity development for these participants happen both internally and externally (as conceptualized within the three models) and it was important to examine external interactions and behaviors in addition to the internal processes we explored in their interviews. The participants were fully aware of the purpose of the observational activity as it was structured in an informal manner, akin to hanging out. Observations made during these activities focused solely on the participant, their behaviors, and reactions to an external environment. For the span of thirty to forty-five minutes, I was with the participant in a public space of their choosing, i.e. outside of private or personal spaces, observing the participant's behaviors and interactions with an external environment. Immediately following each observational activity, the participant and I debriefed on observations, notes, and/or internal thoughts of the participant. By in large, the observational interactions were not successful in painting a better picture of participants in a public setting. It was a concern I brought up, halfway into the study that a single interaction would not be sufficient but a number of interactions with each participant. As both my and their schedules would not permit multiple sessions, I realized too late that these would not be effective in the way I had originally intended. However, I believe that further use of this data collection tactic would be useful on a longitudinal scale in specifically studying the gender identity



development process. As the purpose of the study transformed through data collection and during data analysis, the objective of these observational interactions weren't capable of being met.

### **Member Checks**

The final interaction with three of my participants was primarily for the intended purpose of the researcher to present synthesis of the participants' journey/identity development and data collected thus far. Additionally, the member checks were conducted within the intention to reduce my own bias; I wanted to be able to present the participants' experiences with little to no misrepresentation of their journeys. I met with three of the participants and presented data synthesis and concept of the participants' gender journey that allowed for data checks and continued dialogue. As described, within these sessions I presented my conception of how I was presenting their story and gender. As the purpose of the study shifted focus to primarily transgressing gender from primarily the gender identity development process, it was important for me to ensure how I was framing their story still was accurate. Additionally, I asked participants directly about major points they would want someone to take away from their story and any supplemental thoughts for them to share with readers. If they had points or thoughts did not fit entirely within their gender journey, I made sure to include them within their case as *important points*. This final interviews were done as an internal check of validity of data and to ensure that the experiences of the marginalized voices, as emphasized through the transformative paradigm, are upheld and represented authentically within this study.

### **Data Analysis**

As this study operated within the transformative paradigm, it is important to note a shift, discussed a few times already within this chapter, which occurred during data collection and data

analysis. As this study operates within the transformative paradigm and is informed by the experiences of my participants and a desire to analyze power systems in play, it was important for me to continually reflect and readdress how I was collecting data and analyzing it. I recorded each session with participants to be able to re-listen to and transcribe. I transcribed each interaction with participants and took copious notes during this process. These notes posed thoughts and questions for me to revisit in members checks and while writing the data. These notes also provided moments, quotes, and thoughts that I would later incorporate into each participant's experience when presenting their data. Additionally, I utilized this process of re-listening to participants' experiences to continue to revisit the data and have it fresh in my mind to continually reflect upon it. In writing the next chapter, which is a presentation of the data and findings, I found it important to keep the discussion on individual journeys of each participants, then followed by analysis, and finally consistencies. The data was presented in this way to keep that focus on gender formed uniquely and individually.

Additionally, I felt challenged by the transformative paradigm to continually revisit the data and purpose statements and previously written sections of this thesis. This continual reflection eventually led to was a shift in the purpose of the study and how data was being analyzed and would be presented. Originally, the purpose of the study was to primarily examine participants' navigation of the gender development process. As I continued to meet with participants and continually revisit the data, my purpose of the study shifted to this notion of transgressing, or breaking the social bounds, of gender. The examination of gender, how it can be inhibitive, and moving to critically challenge it was informed by the exploration of participants' experiences navigating gender. This change in focus shifted from the gender development process itself to how each participant's individual process was impacted by

inhibitive gender norms. It is because of this focus on the participants' experiences, allowing them to influence and impact my interpretation of the data, and continually revisiting the data that facilitated the shift in purpose of this study transformed over time. This new focus of critically challenging gender norms, and the arguments and assertions that follow, are necessary to explore. It is my belief that before the literature can address the process of gender development, it is necessary to question and critically challenge the oppressive norms within gender. What are these norms? Where do they exist? How do they impact gender transgressors? These are questions that I believe this study begins to tackle with the sharing of participants' experiences.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

It is important, in having quality research, to take the time to reflect on my own experiences and biases and how these might influence, both positively and potentially negatively, my own conceptions and practice as a researcher within this study. First, I want to address my own history with research, as it led to my decision to explore this thesis and this topic. Then I will explore my own aspects of identity, as they pertain to and inform my positionality with this study.

It stands to note that this is my first major research study, both self-conducted and self-initiated. Being a first generation college student and not having knowledge of how academia functioned, the concept of research was new to me. Prior to grad school, I did not understand research, its methods, or its application within a higher education setting. However, that changed with my first research course. Taking that introductory course allowed me to understand initial concepts of research and specifically paradigms of constructivist and transformative research. These ideas of research, which focused on the individual realities and concepts of social justice,

respectively, (Mertens, 2015) allowed me to begin to explore research as a potential avenue for advocacy and support for students. As an individual who has had their major aspects of identity contested and marginalized (e.g. faith practice, size, gender identity, orientation/attraction, race/ethnicity, social class, mental/emotional health), concepts of inclusion and advocacy for change within social justice have always resonated with me. Part of my choice to pursue student affairs as a career comes from a drive to impact change and improve conditions for marginalized populations. Therefore, this research course opened my mind to the possibility of research, specifically the transformative paradigm, as an avenue to which the voice of the underrepresented and marginalized could be shared within academia in an effort to impact positive change.

As such, my interest in transgender students began to grow with the completion of a number of presentations and papers within the first year of graduate school. In my effort to be more supportive of this population of students, I wanted to learn more to be able to educate others. Through an initial literature review of the state of affairs within higher education and what is known about transgender students, I began to discover disparities and gaps within the literature. Various researchers, as continuously stated, recognized the sheer lack of representation of and research about transgender students within higher education literature (Bilodeau, 2005; Marine & Catalano, 2014; Sousa, 2002). As previously stated, this desire for advocacy and to promote the voice of underrepresented populations pushed me to continue to explore this as a potential topic for my master's thesis. As time went on and discussions with my advisor continued, what resonated with me were the conceptual inquiries into the intricate process of gender identity development: How did these students form and construct their own identity against or across the gender binary? What does that process look like for those that do

not align with the gender assigned at birth? As Marine and Catalano (2014) clearly noted, there lacked a comprehensive and singularly accepted identity development model for transgender individuals. However, there existed three separate models of transgender identity development (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) that I believed should be compared with each other to draw a conceptual map of gender identity development. However, as Bilodeau (2005) recognized, existing literature surrounded trans-binary folks, or those who did not align with their gender assigned at birth but still navigated across the binary (i.e. MTF or FTM). Bilodeau (2005) made it a point to state that this did not entirely encompass the gamut of gender diversity and left out a number of individuals who do not operate within the binary, but rather between or outside of it. All this in mind, I eventually began the journey in exploring the process of gender identity development and what would become this study.

I find it also important to share my own identities and how they inform and impact this study, its practices, and methods. As previously stated, throughout my life I have felt this need to prove or defend major aspects of my identity as they were continuously contested, to include: faith practice, size, race/ethnicity, orientation/attraction, gender identity, social class, and mental/emotional ability. For clarification, I identify as someone who was raised Catholic, now agnostic, overweight/larger in size, having Mexican heritage, Queer/Pansexual, lower middle class, and someone who has dealt with a number of emotional health issues through their life. These aspects of identity, being contested for so long, led me to challenge labels and stereotypes as inhibitive constructions that do not allow individuals to form personal and individual senses of self. These marginalizing conditions for me also evoked, as stated before, a strong desire to critically challenge social systems that were set up to marginalize and “other” individuals. Where a coincidental, yet fortuitous convergence of self-reflection, identity development, and

this study happened was the unintentional questioning and exploration of my own gender identity.

Prior to grad school, I identified as male for 30 years of my life. I think there will be a chicken or the egg moment when readers of this thesis potentially question which came first – my gender exploration or interest in this study. In all honesty, I think it was merely a coincidental and fortuitous happenstance. Now identifying as Non-Binary or Genderqueer and having a word for my own gender identity, I am able to see the signs that I never existed in male spaces nor aligned with my male identity assigned at birth. Previously, it was encapsulated within my own exploration of my queer orientation and attraction and the idea of not being masculine enough. Upon being fully comfortable with that aspect of self in the years leading up to the recognition of dissonance with my gender assigned at birth, I recognize that I then had the freedom to explore other aspects of myself. I have explained it to my participants as finally having the picture of my puzzle and finally all the pieces making sense. At this point, it is very real and very present process in my life. It is fortuitous, then, that I be able to make sense of and explore my own gender identity alongside the re-telling of my participants' experiences. Their experiences affirm and validate these very dissonant feelings I've had since I was young and now even stronger and more consistently.

My experiences reflect gender as an inhibitive societal construct as explained in Chapter Two. I believe that gender is non-consensual and constrictive, inhibitive and policing. Therefore, I greatly align with both Stryker (2008) and Bornstein (1994) in their assertion that gender seeks to set up a class-like system that does not allow for personal and individualized development of sense of self. I describe everything above, about my process to this study and my own personal journey, because they inform and mold my choices, methods, and

interpretations surrounding this study. I do have a personal stake in this study, in that I am gender-diverse and am working through my own gender process. Because of this and my desire to challenge social inequities, I want to value and hold true the voices of participants in this study. Understanding my own positionality and biases, I hope to be able to clarify in the next section how I have sought to ensure research quality.

### **Ensuring Research Quality**

The development of gender identity, as emphasized by Stryker (2008), is greatly individualistic. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the importance of both a transformative paradigm and case-study research is that they uphold the voice of the individual or the phenomenon and to contrast privileged systems that might seek to stifle or silence these voices or experiences. It is important that I, as a researcher, begin to intentionally explore and ensure research quality. As I, the researcher, am exploring my own gender identity as Non-Binary, I have a personal investment in helping others, both immediate and long-term, be able to comfortably navigate their own gender identity. I believe that a lot of stigma that exists for those who move away from their gender assigned at birth can be removed with more understanding of gender identity development. I believe this speaks to the personal and intellectual investment that I have in this study and the needs of gender-diverse individuals. Furthermore, I believe that my positionality supports my ability and motivation to report their stories in their voices. Since I am still navigating my own gender journey, I believe that I can more easily empathize with the struggle to negotiate a gender identity outside of the binary. Therefore, I am positioned to be able to hear, respect, and report participants' experiences. Yet, there still requires a check of validity to ensure that I am upholding good research practice and addressing my personal bias.

Mertens (2015) discusses ways to ensure research quality within qualitative research that I utilized within my study. To ensure credibility, researchers should utilize prolonged and persistent engagement, member checks and peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, and triangulation (Mertens, 2015). In order to achieve prolonged and persistent engagement, I met with my participants a minimum of four times over the course of three months. For three of my participants, we met more than four times. Meeting beyond the minimum expectation allowed them the time necessary to explore and discuss their gender. The one participant that stayed within this four minimum was just concise and to the point with their experiences. Member checks and were set up with participants. They were set up to invite participants to review the data I had collected and analyzed about their experiences and a draft of the findings I had created. These data checks occurred during our final interview. I utilized peer debriefing to check detailed formatting issues, if arguments and assertions were backed by data, and if the overall narrative was cohesive. Debriefings occurred throughout continual meetings and discussions with my advisor when moments of inquiry about the study came up. Additionally, I shared my findings with a peer who spent time as a thesis reader within an office of graduate studies at a public institution. Progressive subjectivity was maintained through consistent conversations with my advisor; she continually challenged my subjectivity and biases with this particular study and subject. In this chapter reflecting my progressive subjectivity I reported the major elements of my positionality and my understanding as it unfolded during this study.

Multiple cases were explored not to necessarily produce generalizability as Mertens (2015) proposes, as that is not a primary purpose of this study, but rather to ensure that connections could be made within the instrumental case study approach of providing insight and



facilitating an understanding (Baxter & Jack, 2008) of how social gender constructions are inhibitive for the process of navigating and developing a personal gender identity.

Dependability and confirmability, the act of ensuring stability of the research and reducing the influence of the researcher's judgement, respectively, (Mertens, 2015) were achieved through various meetings and notes with my committee and advisor dating back to the summer prior to the writing of this thesis, roughly nine months. I met with a faculty committee to review the design of my study prior to collecting data. They gave me feedback on my design and suggested small changes which I incorporated. In meetings with my advisor, we continually reflected on prior conversations and notes from prior discussions of the study. We both recognized how the study evolved throughout the course of this process that led from more developed concepts and inquiries surrounding gender identity development to a critical challenging of gender social constructs. We challenged each other in maintaining the purpose of the study that we originally set to achieve, even as it refined itself over time. Additionally, we continually discussed how these changes and evolution were impacted by the participants, as discussed prior, to create a cyclical process of evolution between participant interactions and researcher development of concepts.

### **Limitations**

It is important, after discussion research quality, to discuss potential limitations of the study to better understand what might be missing from this study.

#### **Time**

An important limitation to mention is time. This is a study, given its full scope, that requires multiple sessions with multiple individuals. Coordinating the schedules of four participants within a span of three months was not an easy task. This being said, there were

downsides to not having more time to conduct this study. As addressed earlier, the observational interactions were not as effective as they could have been. If time had allowed for multiple observational interactions, I postulate there would have been a greater pool of data to understand external interactions and behaviors around gender with the participants. A longitudinal use of observational interactions could have allowed for multiple external contexts to see how participants react and respond in different settings. As the focus of the study did change to challenging gender after these were mostly completed, there wasn't as much loss of data as if the purpose had remained focused primarily on the process of gender identity development.

Time also had a hand in not utilizing one of the four participants within this study, Alex. Because of scheduling conflicts, Alex's data collection wasn't entirely completed before the writing of this thesis for submission. Although contact will continue with Alex to ensure that their story is shared in later iterations or publications of this study, or as a case study by itself, it was not ready for sharing at the submission of this thesis to committee. Had more time been allowed, then the experiences of Alex would have been incorporated into the narrative of this study.

Lastly, given more time with the data or time spent researching, as a young researcher, I could have analyzed the data differently. I think this comes up when I think about my own bias with the gender transgressor experience. As I am currently navigating gender and it is a very real process, I'm curious if time would allowed for a broader reading of and potential objectivity with the data than what time allowed. That is not to say I am not confident with the findings presented in Chapter Four; I am quite confident with the analysis made, especially as it was continuously informed by participants. I just question what other nuances could have been explored just beyond what is being presented in this thesis.

## **Generalizability**

The other potential limitations are tied to the push for generalizability. Within a case study approach that is framed by queer theory, generalizability is not a focus of this study. Although I position certain consistencies within the stories of my participants to underscore and supplement the argument of gender constructs as inhibitive, a primary concern is to retain the individuality of the stories and identities of the participants. Although others might find certain similarities of their journeys with those of my participants, an assertion of this study is that gender is individually and personally formed. Therefore, generalizability is not an option within the experiences of my participants, as it should or could not be. I stand behind my choice to present each participant as their own case in that it supports the notion of individuality. It should be understood that although I share similarities in my gender identity with participants, that I cannot be the voice of the gender-diverse. Readers should seek out as many voices as possible to understand the scope of individuality that gender can evoke when not limited by social constructions.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, a hope of this study is to not only highlight consistencies amongst multiple participants to challenge our understanding of gender and how it can negatively impact identity development. It is also to highlight the inconsistencies that are inherent in very individualistic navigations and transgressions of gender for each participant. The paradigm, case study approach, and other methodological choices made throughout the process of this study have attempted to position the study to meet these hopes and goals. These consistencies and inconsistencies will also be explored in the next chapter as data findings are then discussed fully in Chapter Five. As we work to retain individual stories and yet recognize commonalities that can

provide a map of gender as inhibitive, participants are kept at the forefront of the conversation and their stories can influence critical thought to challenge inhibitive social norms.

## Chapter 4: Data / Findings

Through the interactions with three of the individuals interviewed, valuable data has come from their experiences within and around their gender identity. Their experiences have informed and shaped the entire experience of this research study. These three journeys will be presented in as individual cases. This decision was made, as discussed in the previous chapter, to focus the data on it participant and their journey. It will be later argued that the development and navigation of gender is a unique and individual process. It was important to me, then, to utilize the case study approach to encompass the individuality of each persons' journey. In relationship to the transformative paradigm, this aligns with putting the participants first and letting them tell their story. Consistencies and inconsistencies will be presented later in the chapter, but that is not necessarily the focus. Although the way that each participant navigates their sense of self around gender is individual, these consistencies have the capacity to depict either how gender is inhibitive or how participants transgress gender from a birds-eye view. This consistencies can depict where these harmful norms are prevalent. However, the focus, given our approach and paradigm, is first and foremost our participants.

The format of this chapter, and my intentional choices in structuring it this way, was focused entirely on maintaining the importance of the participants' experiences. As stated before, their experiences are presented in a case study approach. This allows for a consistent and uninterrupted focus on their journeys for the reader. Then, the chapters moves to individual examination of the participants experiences. This is done to continue to maintain each participants' navigations of gender as individual and unique. Lastly, there is a discussion of consistencies and inconsistencies within the three journeys discussed in this chapter. As

addressed above, this is done to find the connections between these stories that allow for examination of gender norms and inhibitive experiences on a broader scale.

In presenting their stories, I structured them in ways that seemed logical and salient to each persons' experiences. The majority of participants talked heavily of their home life and how that impacted their journey. I thought it was important, as I argue later that gender is individual, that I present their gender reflection. Also, I found it important to discuss how they navigated gender throughout their life, as that the framework of examining their journey. It is through that navigation that I began to see different ways and contexts that my participants transgressed gender norms and formed their own unique gender or gender space. As they are college students, I explored that context with my participants and how they believe the college environment can impact identity development. I found it important to ask each participant major points or last thoughts they had about this study or the gender process. If these points were not addressed within their story, I made sure to include these points. They were left separate from the experiences of the participants because I felt that they were important statements that should be reflection points for readers that stand on their own. Discussion and reflections about all the data presenting in this chapter will then take place in Chapter Five.

### **Participants**

As discussed in Chapter 3, participants were all current students at the same large Midwestern research institution. The three participants whose experiences are presented here are Skylarr, Bailey, and Brian. Each varying in age from 19 (Bailey), 22 (Brian), and 60 (Skylarr). Although there was another participant interviewed, as discussed in limitations in the previous chapter, the decision was made to not include their story as data collection for them was not complete.

Each participant has varying gender identities and gender assigned at birth: Skylarr – “MtF transgendered... and non-transitional”, male assigned at birth; Brian – “85% Man, the rest of that, other”, assigned female at birth; Bailey – Gender Fluid, assigned male at birth. I would ask the at reader keep in mind that I mention gender assigned at birth to convey context for the experiences that the participants have. It is no way to convey and perpetuate the notion of *biological sex* as irrefutable fact, as discussed in Chapter Two. It is the understanding of this author, and other transgender authors, that *biological sex* is a concept of a medical system and not an objective fact (Bornstein, 1994; Stryker, 2008). To perpetuate this notion is to perpetuate the gender system that this study is hoping to bring to light and challenge. As stated above, each participant’s case will be discussed individually to emphasize the necessity of viewing gender as a genuinely individual process.

### **Skylarr**

Skylarr describes their gender as “MtF transgendered... and non-transitional”, was assigned male at birth, is sixty years old, white, and has been on a college campus for 39 years studying within a variety of fields related to earth, human, or computer sciences.

**Views and description of gender.** Skylarr utilized three specific terms: describing their gender as “MtF transgendered, heterosexual, and non-transitional.” In discussing what was important about their story, Skylar wanted readers to know that they describe their gender in specifically the ways presented. Although this may have some tension with what was presented in chapter two and this author’s own beliefs, I find it necessary to hold up each participants’ experiences as their own and how they want to be described. Skylarr and I had a long discussion on how although our semantics and perception of gender and identity might be different, that our core conception of them were in fact similar.

Skylarr conceptualizes gender, their own gender and in general, as being biologically informed. Skylarr sees their gender as a “developmental goof up” in that they have a female brain and a male body, as they also believe that the infant brain comes prewired with gendered personalities. Skylarr calls this “normative male brain” and “normative female brain”. They also believe that occasionally biology messes up with what Skylarr describes as a “condition” of transgenderism where the internal wiring of the brain and the external body do not match. Although these beliefs do not align with my own personal views nor modern conceptions of gender, I recognize that Skylarr views the world through scientific means or objective facts and logic; they believe their self, and the world, is made up of a real set of tangible facts. They specifically make the statement: “Transgender is a fact we are born with.” To further this point, Skylarr goes on to describe their gender with words like “functional body map”, “biochemical signals,” “internal wiring,” or “base sex”; all words that focus on tangible objective fact and realms of science. They do not feel a connection with parts of their body that are distinctly male, and their female “neurological body map”, or internal wiring, does not align with what is on the outside. Lastly, there is a comment that I believe sums up where Skylarr eventually sits with their gender, internally: “Honestly, I can’t say that I totally identify to myself as fully male or fully female, but I think I would identify as fully female if I had a female body to go with it.” This will be explored in a later paragraph about how Skylarr navigated gender throughout their life.

In describing their gender, Skylarr makes a note to describe their orientation as “heterosexual” in that they are not fond of same-gender sexual activity, but excited by opposite-gender sexual activity. However, as Skylarr does not have a cooperative consonance of either the male (their description of their external body) or female (their description of their internal



wiring or brain) aspects of themselves, they do not feel the need to engage in romantic or sexual endeavors because neither space is comfortable. As they see their body as male, they are only comfortable with engaging with female individuals but that is not comfortable because Skylarr are not male internally. However, if they had a female body to match their female brain, they would want engage romantically or sexually with a male. Implications of this will be explored more in the section about how Skylarr navigates their gender.

Lastly, Skylarr describes their gender, in addition to “MtF transgendered”, as “non-transitional”. They specifically describe their experience: coming to terms with their gender, self, and (as they see it) objective fact of who they are in their mid-forties as not conducive to transition. Skylarr notes their own denial of their transgender “condition” well into their forties, and believes that many share the same experience. Skylarr makes an important note that “transgender does not necessarily imply that the person is transitioning either socially or physically.” Meaning that just because a persons’ internal sense of self or gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth, not every transgender individual makes the decision to go through the same transition process. For Skylarr, transition is “a very personal choice,” with regards to transition. In Skylarr’s life, they do not feel that the “benefit [of transition] is worth the price” and that “no amount of surgery and hormones can ever give me a properly female body at this point in my life.” Skylarr believes they would be throwing away their social life and connections and putting their bodily health, if they decided to physically or socially transition at this point. “I have lived over 60 years in a male body, and although I’ve never really liked it, I’m not going to kill myself over it either.”

**Home life.** Skylarr was assigned male at birth, and from an early age grew up in a household where gender roles were flipped. Skylarr’s parents, by description, were opposite of

what a normative gendered family might encompass: “My father was generally a sort of guy; not really forceful, masculine-type...and my mother was fairly strong... sort of self-declared ‘tom boy’” who also defied femininity in wearing slacks and not wearing make-up in the 1960s. Skylarr recognized this difference of family dynamics/gender roles but did not see it as unusual later in life: “[it’s] until you’re out in the world... and realize that nobody is like you.” Skylarr also recognized that both their mom and dad provided an environment that Skylarr would later appreciate as “fairly advantageous” to their gender experiences. Skylarr received a lot of support to develop in their own way from their mother who treated Skylarr as an “independent, more or less sovereign human being.”

**Navigating gender.** Skylarr has had various experiences throughout their life that has impacted how they navigate and make sense of gender. From a young age, even as early as preschool, Skylarr wanted to socially be with the girls in play situations, so much that Skylarr “would have preferred... to be identified as a girl at that time; I basically wanted to be one.” However, Skylarr talks about a specific instance in Kindergarten that was formative in policing their gender on a social level. At that early age, Skylarr’s parents began to notice the inclinations to play with girls and their mother sat them down and made it clear that if Skylarr didn’t want to get teased, they should play with the boys. In kindergarten, Skylarr was impacted by a strong instance of the social policing of gender or gender spaces in the 1950s/1960s. On the first day of Kindergarten, Skylarr was forced to make a choice of finding their seat at the table, with one table for boys and another for girls, and remembering what Skylarr’s mom had said, they made the choice in order to not be teased or ridiculed. This is an important point for Skylarr’s choices around gender and remaining within a male space for so long. Although Skylarr didn’t have words or the conception for gender as a child, they understood that there were “lines” or

“boundaries” they dare not cross for fear of losing the respect of operating within their male gender assigned at birth.

“Of course this was back in the... late ‘50s, early ‘60s. It was a different social environment at the time, and people pretty much- homosexuality was sort of considered, pretty much, a petty crime or something as it were. And transgender [wasn’t] something people talked about except in hushed whispers. So if you- if you are tended to go that way, you are a small child, and you know even less than the adults do at that time. And there is NO option. You basically have to be male. So you are a boy...so you have to be. So pushing those boundaries is just completely futile. On the other hand, the respect is something you can have if you don’t push those boundaries, and that’s important too.”

Navigating gender was a journey that continued past these kindergarten encounters throughout Skylarr’s life. Moments of this disconnect continued throughout their life: “As a kid... I didn’t fight with being a boy, but I could never really picture myself as a man.” Additionally, Skylarr stuck to this social notion of a male identity because of the aforementioned respect that it earned them and the pressure to follow the notion of normalcy that included getting married and having kids. Holding on to this idea of respect that came with following the social expectations to be male and the necessity to start a family, Skylarr eventually became married and was in that commitment before ending it after eight years. It was upon the divorce from that individual and other subsequent events that Skylarr was able to face themselves and begin to explore their gender beyond societal pressures or expectations.

However, it is important to note ways Skylarr transgressed gender boundaries. Skylarr found solace and peace in uniquely finding spaces that felt comfortable to them. By this I mean that Skylarr, as mentioned before, felt a dissonance and lack of ability to be either “fully male or

fully female” and as such, traditionally gendered roles were never an important part of Skylarr’s life. Skylarr recognizes that they centered their identity throughout their childhood and adolescence not so much on gender specific instances, but rather very gender-neutral activities and spaces. This came out in Skylarr’s focus on intellectuality, the arts, and forms of social entertainment, like being the class clown. As Skylarr sees it, these three gender neutral spaces do not put Skylarr in the place of having to conform to strictly male or female norms. In this way, although there was underlying dissonance, Skylarr found peace and freedom in themselves through exploring their social identity and interactions in three gender neutral spaces.

*Reclamation of self and identity.* Although Skylarr had some initial inclination to socialize with mostly females and reflectively recognizes that they would have liked to identify as a girl, Skylarr lived more than half their life socially as male, or not challenging perceptions of maleness. As stated above, this continued through Skylarr’s mid-forties until the point that they could no longer stay in a marriage. Skylarr believes that the split eventually occurred because of issues around Skylarr’s gender and inability to maintain their maleness. Skylarr retrospectively notes that they were attempting to still exist in this male social identity or space, that required that they be married and have kids. This did not work for Skylarr, and upon their marriage ended in divorce and following a failed romantic encounter occurred after that, Skylarr went into a depression. It was during this depression that Skylarr began to face the notion of their gender. Skylarr explained, “increasing investigation of what I was [led to] a gradual erosion of that intellectual belief in my own maleness.” Skylarr began exploring their experiences and what they meant, through online resources. Moving through healing away from the depression, Skylarr became more and more okay with their transgender-ness. Now, although Skylarr accepts themselves as transgender, they are not openly expressing it to others but not denying it as well.

They are comfortable with existing within male social identity, or at least being interpreted as such, as it is the path of least resistance.

**College's role in developing self.** As college is something that has been part of Skylarr's life for 30+ years and an important part of their identity, I explored the context of college with Skylarr and how that could impact self-discovery or exploration:

“A college campus is kind of the intellectual center of well, pretty much *the* intellectual center of whatever I could find in the surrounding region. I like being on the campus because I like the intellectual stimulation; knowing everything that's going around me. ...It's fundamentally a liberal community, [or] at least has somewhat liberal or tolerant standards I should say. ...But again, that's sort of the situation of my default identity... kind of flowing away from a definite gender identity and do something moderately gender neutral like intellectual pursuits. And I can pursue those intellectual interests on campus... to much better than I can anywhere else.”

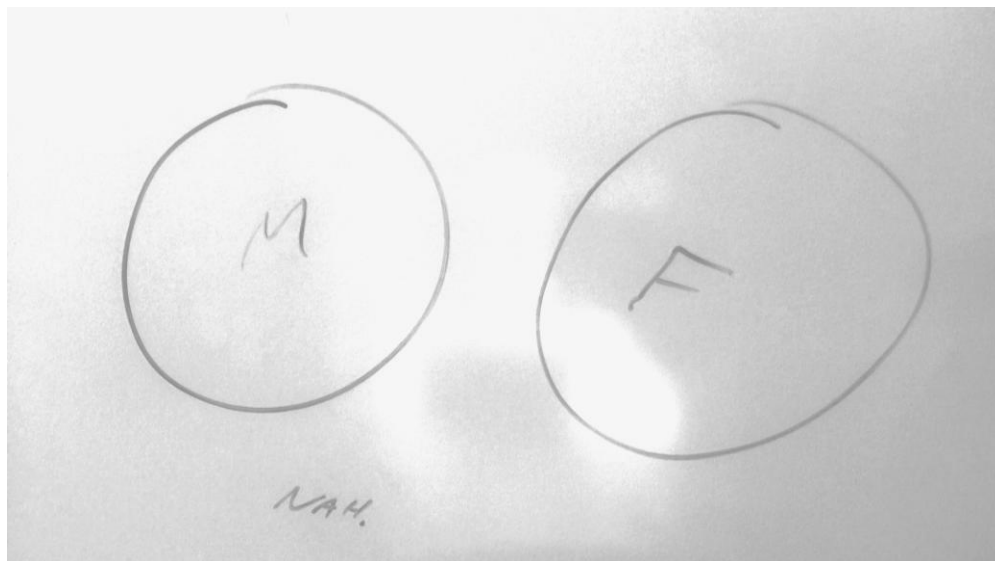
Although the campus provides gender neutral spaces that Skylarr finds comfort in expressing self-identity, intellectual pursuits and the arts, Skylarr recognizes certain notions that occurs in a college environment more than anywhere else: intellectual pursuit of new knowledge, the diversity of thought, and subsequent tolerance that comes from encouraging both of these. Given these conditions, Skylarr believes that this environment is prime for self-exploration, especially for transgender people, as these conditions “require a fair amount of toleration for alternative points of view.”

## Bailey

Bailey describes their gender as primarily Gender Fluid, was assigned male at birth, is nineteen years old, white and culturally Jewish / has Jewish heritage, and began their college journey in the summer of 2015.

**Views and description of gender.** In Bailey’s self-expression activity, they described their gender as Gender Fluid. This is better explained through their comments: “Some days I identify as male. Some days I identify as female. Some days, I identify as agender, meaning [for me] neither male nor female. Picture a venn diagram, only with the circles separated.” This picture is shown below. (Picture shows two circles, not touching, and a word outside of the circles: One M for Male, One F for female, and Nah. outside of the circles.)

**Figure 2: Bailey’s Visual Representation of Their Gender Identity**



As Bailey continually described it in our interactions, their gender, or rather their fluidness, is set by what their “gender is not.” To explain this, Bailey relayed that their gender fluidity rests within their comfort with maleness, femaleness, or agenderness and that it can vary from day to day. This means that Bailey’s determines their daily gender through which gender they do not align with. For example, Bailey describes this determination process can occur

through a series of questions: “Am I Female? Am I Male? Am I Agender?” Whichever of the three that Bailey does not align with, or answers with a “no”, determines which gender space Bailey aligns with that day. Additionally, Bailey says that pronoun usage within their group of friends that understand that Bailey uses he/him, she/her, and they/them can also determine Bailey’s gender. If Bailey does not align with two of the gender pronouns, the third is the answer. Lastly, Bailey relayed that their gender being set “by what it is not” is tied to a concept of internal pain. On any given day when Bailey determines their gender, a process that is described above, the gender(s) they do not align with that day causes them pain, emotionally and physically. It is this pain and dissonance with two of the particular genders (i.e. Male, Female, or Agender) that influences Bailey’s determination of which gender they are on a daily basis.

Bailey wanted to be clear that there are only three gender options for them within their gender fluidity: Male, Female, and Agender. Bailey does not align with bi-gender, or both male and female concurrently, but do recognize that some can and do. Bailey wanted to make it clear that gender fluidity is not about having a lot of clothes or all about presentation (clothes, hair, and combination of both). This is a common joke or misconception of gender fluidity that Bailey relates can be found on the social networking site Tumblr. Bailey emphasized the notion throughout our sessions that they “do not speak for all gender fluid people”; and recognized the individuality of gender and definitions.

**Family and important intersections of identity.** Bailey’s gender journey is impacted by their past, relationship with family, and intersection of various identities. Bailey identifies as Jewish and has a family that is very conservative in their Judaism. This is still an aspect of self that is a conflict for Bailey, not because they have personal conflict with Judaism, but because their family’s conservative take on Judaism has led Bailey’s family to refer to Bailey as their

“dead son.” Bailey, shocked and affected by this, could not understand why their parents felt this way when a) mainstream Judaism was fairly liberal with sexual orientation and b) their parents were fairly liberal in supporting inclusion for other marginalized populations. The importance of Judaism within Bailey’s life was very apparent. Bailey is still being very active in Jewish services and Jewish clubs on campus. Also, Bailey holds to the Jewish belief in a statement relating their gender and body, “G-d does not make mistakes.” Throughout their gender journey, Bailey’s immediate and extended family have cut emotional ties with them.

**Navigating gender fluid.** Bailey’s journey has been a journey filled with unique experiences as they attempted to sort through their own meaning of gender. What I find helpful in understanding Bailey’s journey and development with their gender is this notion of control. This is evident through an analogy Bailey makes about video games that I think is essential to understanding their journey:

The point of this is, video games for me... has always been about control. And... there’s a lot of things we don’t control. [After some hard times] I went back to playing video games because... it’s all about you and you have the control. And you know, the monsters in real life can come from anywhere and you don’t know what to do with them or even that they’re monsters. In the game you know exactly what to do. So games for me have always been about control, so when you say controlling your gender I think that’s exactly what it was. I felt like I was having these feelings that I could not control but in the video game I could safely I could explore these feelings and exert some sense of control over them.”

This exploration of Bailey’s love of video games, something that is tied to their social and personal sense of self, is something that I believe plays a huge role in their journey. They



mention a video game they've played where they could control their gender on a sliding scale so it wouldn't be distinctly male or female. This control, in discussing it with Bailey, is a fantasy example of what they wish could happen in real life. As it is currently situated, Bailey constantly has to think about their gender and what it is not.

“In an ideal world I'd tell you and everyone else, 'Hi, my name is Bailey, which means you should call me Bailey. Today I use he/him pronouns, someday I'll use she/her or they/them, and when I tell you what I am on a given day, you say those things. And if I *choose* to dress differently, just for the hell of it, then *don't fucking comment on it except to say I'm pretty.*' ... People don't understand because most people – thank G-d – don't have to think about their gender. And I wish it was the same for me. I wish I could just give that opening speech and be done with it.”

Navigating their gender, Bailey moved through a separate gender identity before landing on Gender Fluid. In high school, after learning about transgender identity from a friend, Bailey recognized that the feelings they were feeling were not aligning with their male sense of self. Sometime after that point, Bailey moved to identifying as a transwoman and lived as a transwoman in their day-to-day life with record changes and respect for their gender at their high school. However, after coming out to parents as a transwoman, Bailey received hurtful and harmful backlash that then flared up Bailey's depression and suicidal ideation. At some point after this, Bailey's father made the point, “You don't always seem like a woman.” Taking that feedback, and through the help of a counselor that dealt with gender transitions, Bailey worked through exploring their gender and eventually settled, months later on gender fluid, just prior to entering college.

Throughout Bailey's journey, they've experienced validating moments that supported personal growth. For example, Bailey's partner who has been with them and supported every gender, name change, and expression. Also, a single family member who has reached out to Bailey to offer support is an example of these affirming encounters. Specifically, since coming to college and identifying as Gender Fluid, Bailey has found the college environment and their campus to be particularly encouraging and easy to navigate because of gender neutral housing, peers and teachers mostly using right names and/or pronouns, and other instances.

Moving back to this notion of a video game analogy, I would equate Bailey's comfort with their gender with when they have control: when they can set the terms (pronouns), personally decide which gender they are (not what they are not), and honestly just not have to think about their gender. As Bailey stated in our last interview, "you [create] a world in which you control" within video games that is freeing, removing the inhibitions. It's this point, with Bailey not fitting into a nice box but rather fluid moving through their three boxes: Male, Female, and "Nah." I think gives them power and they deserve the freedom and control to not be constrained, to the point of pain, by gender policing.

**College role in developing self.** As explained in the earlier section, Bailey has had a great and positive experience within a college campus. Most of their interactions with people have been positive, with most people handling Bailey's name, pronouns, or gender well. Bailey believes that college equates to acceptance and that even if people aren't 100% on board or understanding of gender fluidity, that they'll respect name and pronouns. For Bailey, this college environment provides a space where they "are more free in exploring different things... and [they] feel more free in expressing [themselves]." This space allows college student to try new things and express themselves in new ways. Additionally, Bailey respects and appreciates

the accountability systems on college campuses: “At home if you don’t agree, that’s it; but at college you can report it up.”

**Important points.** I include these last points as specific thoughts Bailey wanted those reading their and other’s stories to keep in mind:

“I hope that our stories...are not just distilled to the trauma. Because so often, you know, every LGBT movie is about the tragedy of the world that didn’t accept them and one of them dies, almost always. I hope that our stories just don’t become the struggles we faced... the people pushing against us. ... There’s a lot of good too. There’s the goodness of when you finally discover [and] it’s allowed... [that] there’s nothing stopping you from being who you are. That was such a revelation for me. [...that you don’t] have to feel miserable and not right forever. There’s a lot more to the experience than just the bad things. ...The bad things are important and probably need to be corrected first.”

Additionally, Bailey added: “Gender is complicated, but accepting someone’s gender is simple. ...Accepting it is so simple... you ask someone their pronouns, and then whatever they want you to call them – you do that. Just listen to the wants and the needs of other people.” I find this last two points to be important, vital to sharing all my participants’ stories, and plan to discuss this more in Chapter Five.

### **Brian**

Brian describes his gender as “85% Man [and] the rest of that, other”, was assigned female at birth, is twenty-two years old, white, and is continuing his education to pursue counseling work.

**Views and description of gender.** Brian’s gender is as individual as the gender of his peers. Although Brian does identify as a man, it isn’t the sole desire of or alignment with

maleness or male identity that informs Brian's gender. For Brian, it is not the distinct maleness that he is aligning with, but rather this movement toward individual development of gender and maleness just happens to be a part of that. Brian describes:

“What it actually means to be a gender of any sort... is just so... there's conscious aspects of it and unconscious aspects of it, there's so many different personalities [and] individual traits that go into your perception of self. And I think that's what really our concept of gender is describing: an innate sense of self that varies so broadly between different people.”

In building upon Brian's not distinct alignment with maleness, we go back to his description of his gender, “85 percent man, and the rest of that, [something else].” For Brian, his gender exists beyond normal constructions of gender in that he described it, as anything else, as fluid yet informed by social roles. Brian recognizes that gender, as with any aspect of identity, continues to form throughout life and that he isn't sold on a distinct identity just yet. “[I'm continuously] trying to figure out what that something else is, and figure out what a man means to me.” Discussing this concept of his maleness informed by social roles, Brian believes that gender also doesn't exist within a vacuum. That Brian's idea of gender is constantly informed on a “micro level” by what other people think about gender and informed on a “macro level” by what society thinks about gender.

Speaking specifically about the formation of Brian's “85 percent” maleness and not necessarily just being male, as discussed above this is informed by social roles. Interpreting what Brian means by this, having had continued discussion with him, is that his gender is informed by what hegemonic social roles he picks and chooses. In having a long discussion about his gender, as opposed to a written reflection like the rest of my participants, Brian

described that it wasn't the maleness, but rather the respect and how socially the *male* gender is viewed and treated by society that made it more attractive. It wasn't hegemonic masculinity or maleness itself, as Brian saw that as toxic and not particularly formed, that Brian was choosing to form his gender. It was this idea of maleness receiving more respect and better treatment that attracted Brian. "[In terms of respect], the way that we [in society] treat men is closer to the way that I want to be treated." Additionally, it was distinct aspects of maleness that Brian found attractive about maleness, e.g. hobbies, interests, or even ways of speech. "[As a man] I don't have to think about what I have to say, [but as a woman I would]."

If this description of gender seems odd to any reader, and more conceptual than objective fact, there is a distinct reason for that. For Brian, the only part of being a man that is attractive to Brian is the social role of it, rather than the arbitrary classifier of people. Brian, as do I, doesn't understand how gender is currently constructed the way it is, "why do you even assign gender in the first place? It doesn't make a lot of sense to me." Brian believes deciding "two distinct sets of personality traits" on visible genitalia at birth is ludicrous, as "it's a lot messier than that." Brian states, "gender isn't a thing to define in the first place... masculinity and femininity isn't a thing... it's all super arbitrary." Brian stated that even explaining his gender to me is very complicated. Brian didn't have a distinct gender that he needed to explain and he felt that even attempting to explain it in an abstract sense wouldn't quite get to it. Lastly, Brian explains why giving a distinct gender can be hard, "gender is just another way of saying, 'this is me'... these are the ways I want you to see me as a person." For Brian, gender is highly individual and faceted, not to be bound by a single label but fluid to each individual that creates it. As Brian puts it, "I deserve to exist as me."

Brian believes the gender box, even with transgender and cisgender, still operates within a binary and “there’s so much [more] variation within that.” Brian sees transgender as a sense of being, more than a distinct identity. As such, his gender is always more about the transgender-ness over the distinct maleness, “To me, transgender means that I refuse to fit into that standard of what society expects me to do.” Also, in deconstructing mainstream ideas of transgender, Brian states, “I don’t see transition as a point A to point B process, it’s a constant journey of self-evaluation, self-discovery, and figuring it out.” Brian wholeheartedly believes that this state of being transgender and transgressing gender is highly political. “As long as there’s some aspect of people’s identities that are devalued over others, then I think self-identification [and] the personal will always be political.”

**Navigating gender.** Brian’s journey is one that is as fluid in formation as his view of gender is. Brian grew up in a home with a lack of gender norms, or as he put it, “I wasn’t brought up very gendered.” He was allowed to play with Barbie dolls and power rangers or take dance lessons and sports. His parents practiced what another participant called “consensual gender;” in that the parents didn’t enforce gender policing within different situations or interests. Brian was allowed to wear whatever clothes he liked and play with dinosaurs, something that wasn’t assumed to be feminine. Even within video games as a kid, Brian had a choice of gender avatars and would most of the time choose boy avatars.

It wasn’t until high school that Brian developed an interest in activism and community development that grew from a need to heal his mental health ailments at the time. Brian specifically sees this interest in activism as a way to heal his depression, anxiety, and other mental illness. Reflectively, Brian believes that through helping others he was able to help and heal himself. In coming to terms with his mental illness, Brian was able to develop and navigate

his gender identity. Specifically, Brian became involved with a social activism group of young people who were focused on social equality and the deconstruction of –isms or socialized phobias (e.g. racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, sexism, and so forth).

It was through the involvement with this *collective*, as it will be further be referred to, that Brian engaged with his first disconnect from his gender assigned at birth. In an online electronic forum designed to introduce new members of the group to each other, there were various choices for new members to choose from to self-identify themselves. Specifically, Brian encountered the gender portion of the form and instead of just female or male, there was the opportunity to put not applicable or leave it blank. It was at this point, where a choice was given beyond male or female, that Brian sort of went, “huh” and recognized that “this is probably something [he] should be thinking about.” Later that year, when the members of the collective met in person, someone who recognized that Brian left the gender marker blank brought it up in conversation and made it a point to ask gender pronouns. This was another point where Brian, at that point still identifying as their gender assigned at birth, recognized they he didn’t care about his gender assigned at birth and wasn’t invested in feminine pronouns. At that point, Brian describes the pieces coming together and that, “maybe [this] was more than a whim.” At that point, Brian was aware of Transgender folks, was okay with it, and began to move to question if it was something that he was.

After that point Brian moved to identifying as agender and non-binary, and in his words, “rocked that for a while.” Brian made a comment that I think helped explain his later move towards a more binary, but not entirely binary, identity, “Being non-binary is difficult in a very binary society... trying to figure out where I fit in is very hard.” Working with his therapist, Brian recognized that he wasn’t entirely non-binary, but wasn’t entirely male either. “I did not

really care about being female, but I wasn't 100% committed on the whole guy thing... I'm am [and was] very critical of hegemonic masculinity." It was after this initial identification with non-binary or agender that Brian then became okay with a transgender label. However, it was through work with Brian's therapist that he became okay with a transgender label, as it individually applied to him. Through our discussions, and as stated above, the transgender label gave Brian that freedom to construct his own version of his gender. It was through this freedom that Brian then discussed a move towards masculinity, but a guarded one. Brian, as stated above, was not comfortable with hegemonic masculinity, but with the freedom of individual choice and formation of gender, Brian recognized that he was more masculine than feminine, but still considered himself a feminine man. Brian believed and believes that "[hegemonic masculinity] has such a narrow range of what that means" and that with Brian's own development of his gender, he could personally develop his own brand of masculinity that fit him.

**College role in developing self.** When asked about what role the college environment does or can play in identity development, Brian offered some ideas. Brian believed that the college environment offers the opportunity to interact with a range of different people and ideas that you wouldn't normally have the opportunity otherwise. Also, Brian describes college as a place of learning where student make the conscious decision to continue education beyond what is required. This implies that students are open to education and exploring new ideas and concepts because they make the choice, it is not just secondary education where it is required by law to attend. Brian expands on this by describing the college environment as "free range learning," in that students have the agency to pick and choose their education and what they are learning. The college environment, Brian also believes, allows for more outlets for someone to learn about themselves and others. It is through this learning and experimentation of self that



creates an environment where students are open to self-exploration and also accepting the self-exploration of others.

**Important points.** There are a few points that I close with that Brian felt necessary for readers to keep in mind as they move forward with this information.

- “When it comes to any marginalized community, just listen to what they think is best for their community and try your best to accommodate those needs.”
- “It’s not about everyone being equal, so much as it’s everybody getting what they need. Everyone is different and needs different things to be happy, so really its about figuring out what those needs are. And the best way to figure that out is just to listen and help them reach those needs the best they can.”

In closing out Brian’s interviews, I resonated with one of his final statements, “Treating anyone as their authentic self is the end goal.”

### **Examining Participants Experiences**

I think it is important to discuss each participants’ experiences separately to not only recognize ways that they transgress the boundaries of social and cultural gender but also how gender may be inhibitive in each of their cases. Although some of this is expressed in the relaying of their cases in the previous section, I think it is important to clearly state my perception of their experiences, especially in regards to the purpose of deconstructing gender and recognizing it as inhibitive.

#### **Skylarr**

Skylarr’s experiences are distinct for a variety of reasons. Skylarr is my oldest participants and one who has a social and cultural context of societal norms as they progressed in the last 60 years. Growing up, gender was heavily policed, in a social sense, outside of their

home. This is evident from the first day of kindergarten where Skylarr was made to pick a side between the gender binary, boys or girls. I very much believe that Skylarr, and their experiences, were a consequence of the social climate they grew up in. One need look at advertisements from this era of the 1950s or 1960s and see how society viewed gender as a strict binary with little room for variation. Skylarr described it as “lines I dare not cross” for fear of social ostracizing or worse. They describe it best in this excerpt:

“It was a different social environment at the time [in the 50’s and 60’s], and people pretty much... homosexuality was sort of considered, pretty much, a petty crime or something as it were. And transgender [wasn’t] something people talked about except in hushed whispers. So if you- if you are tended to go that way, you are a small child, and you know even less than the adults do at that time. And there is *no* option. You basically have to be male. So you are a boy - so you have to be. So pushing those boundaries is just completely futile. On the other hand, the respect is something you can have if you don’t push those boundaries, and that’s important to.”

Skylarr’s journey was greatly impacted by the time they grew up in. In addition to the strict lines of gender they had to follow, there was also this need for a normal life that included a wife and kids. This evokes the societal idea of the American Dream from this time: wife, kids, picket fence, 2.5 kids. This picture of “a normal life” or normalcy, in regards to gender, greatly impacted Skylarr’s journey. It impacted their journey to the point where they felt this need to be male so much as to not lose the “respect”, mentioned above and through their interviews. It also impacted their journey and their life to the point that they felt the need to enter into marriage that was not sustainable because of Skylarr’s eventual coming to terms with their female internal sense of self. However, even though Skylarr’s gender was a consequence of their times, I do

believe that Skylarr found a way to even transgress the strict boundaries of societal gender pressures.

As mentioned above, social pressures to conform to gender and gender expectations greatly inhibited Skylarr's opportunity to fully explore their female internal sense of self. However, in their own way Skylarr found opportunities to take gender out of the equation and exist in social spaces that they saw as free from it. Or at least aspects of identity where gender did not play a role for Skylarr. They describe it as "non-sexed identity" or a "gender-neutral zone" where their core identity is formed and exists. I believe that Skylarr transgressed gender boundaries in finding ways to exist in these spaces free from gender and gender expectations, as they interpreted it. For Skylarr this genderless identity exists in intellectuality, humor or jovialness, and exploration of the arts. In these three spaces, in Skylarr's own words and understanding, they could exist within these three social spaces and would not be inhibited or affected by gender. These three spaces, for Skylarr, were free from any sort of gender expectations and were comfortable for Skylarr to inhabit.

Recognizing this, I believe this is one of the reasons why Skylarr finds the college environment extremely encouraging and supportive. Skylarr has been in college for 39 years, almost consecutively. Although we did not discuss this explicitly, my mind makes the connection that because of intellectualism and the arts are greatly encouraged on a college campus, this is an environment that is comfortable for Skylarr to exist within. The college environment allows Skylarr to exist outside of societal pressures because the focus is on this gender-neutral zone, as Skylarr describes it, of intellectualism and pursuit of knowledge. I believe that because there was a sort of societal pressure to conform to gender impacting Skylarr for so long, they found a space that aligned with the core of their identity and was free of gender

and never left. Skylarr can just be Skylarr on a college environment, at least as I am conceptualizing it. Granted, there still exists gendered norms on a college campus, but as Skylarr describes it, for them college as a concept is one where they don't have to focus on their gender and rather on the pursuit of knowledge.

I would say that my overall telling of Skylarr's journey heavily focuses on and is influenced by how gender is inhibitive, at its most extreme case. It wasn't until roughly fifteen years ago, such a small portion of Skylarr's life, that they were able to come to terms with their gender and begin to explore it. Living the majority of their life in their gender assigned at birth, because they felt a pressure to conform to it, is a large part of their story. However, their story is a strong example of gender as inhibitive, I believe that there is solace in knowing they formed their identity in a space that promotes gender-neutrality, as they see it, and greatly aligns with who they see themselves to be.

## **Bailey**

Although Bailey's journey is one marked by gender policing, what stands out for me is how much Bailey transgresses gender. Bailey's gender flies in the face of normativity with their destruction of the boxes. They are gender fluid, and by their definition, they exist in a gender box on a given day or exist without it. Bailey is not bound by their gender in so much that they are able to decide what their gender is: male, female, or Nah. Their gender is fluid. Society would have Bailey remain within their gender assigned at birth or follow the transgender narrative of transitioning into the other binary gender, female, if not male. Although those are both now options for Bailey, they also have the option to take binary genders off the table.

There's this idea of control that continued to be a point of conversation with Bailey. One of Bailey's major interest is video games, and more importantly, the creation of video games and

the worlds they exist within. Their interest in video games is rooted in the idea that they could create their own world. The games that are specifically important to Bailey are the games where the player can control large elements of the outcomes; meaning that the player's individual choices greatly impact the gameplay or sometimes even how the game ends. Think of them as Choose-Your-Own-Adventure video games, for those that are not familiar with video games. My interpretation of this is simple: Bailey enjoys this idea of being able to create a world full of choice and personal development. This is individualism at its core. It is also how I interpret Bailey's gender, and their transgression of gender norms – that they are able to form their own gender, free from other's idea of what they are or what they are not. And although taking control back plays a big part of their journey, it evolves into a freedom and agency of Bailey's gender. It is this freedom from societal ideas of gender and agency over gender that I think Bailey pursues.

Bailey is confident in who they are and although there continues to be opposition influenced by social norms for gender, they continue to explore who they are in spite of that. And by Bailey's own admission, it is the college environment where this exploration of self is possible. It is the college environment that Bailey believes promotes tolerance, accountability, and the exploration of new things and of self. Although their story is greatly traumatic, it is part of the journey, not the core of it. Just like a video game where traumatic events occurs, the point of those games is the journey itself, the growth that comes from it, and the ending which leaves the protagonist triumphant. I find Bailey's story not only important because it explores a different type of gender journey and identity but also encouraging in that Bailey's gender is highly individual.

**Brian**

Brian's journey, by my own interpretation, is marked by the least amount of gender policing of my three participants. However, it is Brian's journey that marks an example of how gender can be and should be consensual, or decided by the individual, and rooted in individualism. Brian's journey transgresses gender norms in that it never really followed policed norms, by my own interpretation. Brian grew up in a household where gender was consensual, at least to the point where social activities and hobbies were not policed within normative gender roles. Although Brian was assumed to be female, as he was assigned at birth, there were no distinct leanings or strong pressures to conform to feminine roles. His parents allowed him to explore and express himself as he wished. He only conformed to feminine roles, prior to identifying as male, in rare circumstances, such as wearing a dress on super formal occasions. That is not to say that Brian's journey was not marked by awkward or dysphoric gender moments, but out of all my participants Brian described the least amount of opposition to his gender journey, both by family and outside forces.

That being said, Brian's journey is one that evokes a strong sense of gender being individual and continually developing over one's lifetime. Brian viewed gender as fluid, not in the sense that Bailey sees fluidity between genders, but fluid as in it is self-created and self-evolving over one's entire lifetime. Brian believes that how one views their own gender and chooses to express it will and should continue to evolve as they move through life. This is entirely antithetical to current social constructions of gender. As described in chapter two, gender is determined by medical doctors and then social expectations of those genders are enforced throughout one's life. How Brian views his own gender and how gender should work is that gender is just an extension of the individual self; as one individually develops interests or

hobbies over time, so too should one be able to pick and choose what their gender is and what it means to them. As such, Brian's journey was marked by a transition from female, to agender/non-binary, to male adjacent; Brian's gender was fluid in its evolution.

“I hope my experience [relates that] there's not a clear cut transgender script [or narrative]. Gender is a process and a journey, and is not a clear cut thing. It is for some people, but it isn't for everyone. Non-Binary people exist. It's not clear cut.... there's more ways to go about it than [what is proposed]. [We must avoid] being a product of society telling us what gender is.”

### **Consistencies and Inconsistencies**

Through writing my findings up in a case study approach, I wanted to avoid the idea of themes that are common in qualitative research. As discussed heavily within Chapter 4, there is this emphasis on individual stories that is best suited within a case study approach. However, I find the discussion of consistencies and inconsistencies in my participants' stories useful in analyzing how gender is inhibitive and how we can begin to change that. I believe that gender, as it is currently situated and constructed, lends itself to commonalities in different individual's journey, whether specifically or conceptually. This examination of consistencies or inconsistencies, as stated above, can allow us to see where we can begin to deconstruct gender and gender norms, inasmuch that they are inhibitive.

### **Parenting / Home Life**

With every participant, home life and parents played a role in their development or gender journey. Bailey's parents, due to their conservative beliefs around not accepting anything other than straight and cisgender, had the strongest reaction to Bailey's gender. They used terms like “dead son” and made efforts to cut financial support. In doing so, Bailey's parents'

reactions had a strong negative impact on Bailey's gender and their ability to explore it. Family and religion meant a lot to Bailey and the inability to be able to have harmony between those things, has definitely left a negative mark on Bailey. Skylarr, although recognizing the support they received from their parents, also recognized the push from their mother at an early age to conform to gender social norms so Skylarr wouldn't be ridiculed. This early push did inform Skylarr's decision to conform to maleness, at least from a social label standpoint. Brian's parents practiced a form of consensual gender or rather constructed an gender-neutral leaning environment where there was a lack of focus on gender roles and expectations, minus formal occasions where Brian wore a dress.

These experiences tell us that parental interactions and a home environment play a key role in the process of gender development of gender-diverse individuals. How the parents do or do not ascribe to religious or social beliefs of gender norms or conservatism can impact how they create a gender environment in the home. The participants' experiences exhibit how a gendered environment or parental view of gender within the household could impact the process of gender development.

### **Mental Illness**

All three of my participants described a process in which they were forced to come to terms with their gender identity, opposed to their gender assigned at birth, through depression or dealing with their mental health. Keeping in mind that not all gender-diverse individuals have the same experience, I found it useful to recognize that all three went through some sort of depression or had issues with their mental health. The importance of this consistency is in recognizing the powerful impact of gender normativity in that it may have a non-visible



emotional and mental impact on individuals. In my participants' case, the impact was negative and harmful.

### **Conformity versus Freedom to Express**

All of my participants approached the idea of gender conformity and freedom of gender navigation very differently. For Skylarr, there was this self-imposed necessity to conform to gender norms and roles for the consequence of social respect. Although Skylarr took on a male label for much of their life, Skylarr reflectively recognizes that they have never fit into a male nor female identity. In response, Skylarr developed a personal identity around what they conceive to be gender-neutral spaces or identities. For Bailey, their gender has evolved into one that does not conform into conventional gender boxes and outright opposes them. However, Bailey recognizes that gender, as it is constructed, makes it difficult for those to understand any sort of deviation from established norms. Brian's view and personal construction of gender, although fluid and open to evolution, does conform to male social roles. He believes that he must still conform, in a sense, to gender social roles. Inasmuch that gender social roles, specifically masculine ones, dictate how he is treated and respected. These are important to highlight because of the recognition of how gender has a history of constraining and still impacting individual development of gender.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of describing my participants' journeys, analyzing them, and providing consistencies in a case study format was important because of the individualism that I am arguing for with regards to gender. Gender, as my participants emphasize throughout their interactions, is that gender is and should be individually formed and developed. Each of my participants' journeys are their own and should stand on their own to emphasize this point.

However, it is relevant to analyze and look at their journeys so we can begin to engage in discussion around gender and how we can begin to deconstruct this harmful and inhibitive social construct.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to critically challenge gender, as it is currently socially constructed and situated, insomuch that it can be problematic for gender-diverse individuals and their development of gender. This chapter will be a discussion and culmination of this purpose and my arguments throughout this paper to situate gender as inhibitive and necessary to deconstruct. I will discuss how my participants addressed the research questions of this study and validated arguments and assertions made in chapters one and two. Additionally, I will discuss why this study is significant and address elements brought up in this study that could be researched further in the future. Lastly, I close with a discussion of recommendations for practice that are influenced by this study.

### **Discussion of Data**

As previously discussed, the purpose of this study is to critically challenge the social construct of gender, as Bornstein (1994) and Stryker (2008) describe it: a cult-like, class system that is in fact inhibitive and policing. This study focused on the experiences of those who transgress gender, specifically those who do not align with their gender assigned at birth and have made some effort in navigating toward a self-defined or self-developed gender. These experiences were chosen because they did not align with the social system of gender that assigns gender by genitalia at birth (Stryker, 2008). The participants' experiences were chosen because they transgress expectations and boundaries of gender and form their own unique and individual sense of gender. Although my participants do transgress gender and its norms, it is important to further highlight how gender was inhibitive within each and across all of their journeys.

## Addressing Research Questions

Beyond the purpose of challenging the social construct of gender, there were three major points brought up through the research questions posed:

- 1) The gender identity development process for gender-diverse individuals
- 2) Movement beyond or transgression of gender normativity
- 3) Impact or influence of a college environment

The gender identity development process was explored as a framework for understanding how the participants explored, navigated, and transgressed gender. The three models of development (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) and my own conception of the combination of the three of them informed the interview protocol for all my participants. Although it was not the primary purpose of this study to understand the specific process of gender development, through exploration of their gender journeys I better understood how my participants were inhibited by or transgressed gender. These moments of inhibition or transgression were explored greatly in Chapter Four in the examination of the participants' experiences. As explored in Chapter Four, participants navigated gender in their own way, and by doing so, moved beyond the expectations of gender, the gender binary, and/or their own gender assigned at birth. Each participant created their own gender space or gender concept that although was influenced sometimes by social norms, still was quite individualistic. It also stands to note that the participants were able to communicate distinct impressions of the college environment and how it impacts or influences gender development. We explored within our interactions why the college environment, as a concept or as it was structured, was important to any sort of identity development. Although this is an overview of how these questions were

answered throughout this study, they are better explored in detail through addressing individual arguments and assertions made through chapter one and two, as informed by the literature.

### **Arguments and Assertions**

There were a number of arguments and assertions made throughout chapters on, as informed by the literature, that I believed should be addressed and discussed. Discussion of these arguments and assertions help to better explore the research questions posed.

**Queer theory.** The core tenets of queer theory, as described by Smith (2003), greatly align with and inform the arguments and assertions of this study. Queer theory, as explored in chapter 2, is a theoretical and conceptual framework that historically has been used to recognize and then critically challenge social structures or definitions around non-normative gender or orientation/attraction (Abes, 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Brady, 2006; Smith, 2003). With Bornstein (1994) and Stryker's (2008) recognition of gender as a cult-like, classist system, queer theory is evoked in its recognition that current social categories are "falsifications," especially in relation to and how they describe gender (Smith, 2003, p. 346). As my arguments continue, the prevalence of social gender normativity supporting power and privilege systems is further explored. Following what Smith (2003) postulated about queer theory, this study helped reveal that gender contains "relations of dominance within historically-situated systems of regulation" (p. 346). For example, similar to what Stryker (2008) noted, medical professionals have been set up as gatekeepers of gender identity through *sex designation* or gender assignment that occurs at birth. This assignment of gender at birth, as argued within Chapter Two and further below, sets up privileged and policing systems of behavior and interaction for any individual in society. It stands to note that my use of queer theory is as Abes (2007) suggested, a framework that allowed for the realization and deconstruction of power

systems and structures that are and were inhibitive for my participants and are still very present within our social gender system.

**Gender is nonconsensual.** A large argument presented in Chapter Two, made through the combination of statements from Bornstein (1994) and Stryker (2008), is that gender is nonconsensual. As presented in Chapter Two, science slowly replaced religion as highest social authority (Stryker, 2008) and medical professionals were set up as gatekeepers of natural and unnatural, within this system, and ultimately set up social boundaries of acceptability. This comes to a head, in relation to gender, with the assignment of gender assigned at birth. My argument presented in Chapter Two states that gender is never asked of the infant, but merely made as a designation based upon external genitalia. This then sets up a lifetime of problematic expectations and interactions based on male or female designation.

The participants each do not cleanly fit within the gender box of explicitly male or female. As such, their journeys were greatly impacted by their gender assigned at birth. Skylarr is an example of this in that they, by their own admission and recognition, grew up in a time where crossing of gender boundaries was not socially acceptable. Their consent of gender was stripped and they were socially guided, if not coerced, by necessity for respect into a gender label that was not theirs. Bailey's journey is also an example of this in that they are bounded by "what their gender is not". Meaning, that they do not have the freedom to explore their gender fluidity except by the constraints of how others interpret their gender. Bailey's consent for gender fluidity is one that is socially opposed through the centuries-old structure and expectation of the gender binary. There is not a wide acceptance of gender fluidity because it greatly opposes the social binary structure of gender and the spaces or contexts that are set up as *either/or*. This lack of a social space that is free of the *either/or* mentality robs Bailey, or any non-binary identifying

individual, of a social space that is comfortable for them. There simply lacks any sort of social space that is free of the gender-binary and for non-binary individuals, they cannot easily escape societal expectations of gender.

**Gender is inhibitive and policing.** As presented throughout the literature and this study, gender, as it is currently constructed and socially situated, is greatly inhibitive and policing. Bornstein (1994) and Stryker (2008), identifying as transgender themselves, spend time each writing an entire book chronicling their own experiences and the history of gender as inhibitive and policing. Popular adolescent gender development models set up gender as predetermined, having no development, predictable or normative, or paints individuals as passive or having no control of how their gender forms (Brinkman et al., 2014). Even historical practice on college campuses paint a picture of how gender, and a gender binary, is reinforced and policed for college students, faculty, and staff (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Marine, 2011; Marine & Catalano, 2014). Examples, as addressed in chapter one, would include there being a lack of gender-neutral spaces (e.g. restroom, locker rooms, housing), lack of education about non-normative gender identities, or policy hurdles that gender transgressors face when they are attempting to change their gender or name on official documents. These notions of inhibition are explored and supported through the journeys and experiences of my participants.

Skylarr's journey is an evident picture of social structure greatly impacting individual gender development. Skylarr describes this as a necessity for respect that comes from not crossing gender lines and boundaries. Skylarr's choosing of a male label for so long was because they "did not dare" cross gender expectations for fear of losing social respect and belonging that came from being within acceptable boundaries. Additionally, social expectations

for males, as Skylarr understood it, were to strive for what they describe “a normal life” with a wife and kids. Choosing this male label to avoid social stigma, Skylarr also believed they had to meet this necessity for wife and kids and eventually entered into a marriage, one they could not sustain due to their understanding of and conflict with their gender. Even identifying as “MtF Transgendered” after years of carrying a male label, Skylarr chooses not to make any form of transition. This necessity for and acceptance of Skylarr as male I believed inhibited and still inhibits Skylarr from exploring their internal female sense of self fully; as Skylarr puts it, “I can’t say that I totally identify to myself as fully male or fully female.”

Additionally, Bailey’s experiences paint another picture of gender as policing. Bailey’s gender is one that is greatly policed by other’s interpretation of lack of understanding. Although Bailey has reached a point of confidence in knowing their own gender, gender fluid is still an identity that people question or do not understand. The understanding of gender, on a mainstream society level, is bound by a binary system of male and female and completely discounts and limits any sort of deviation beyond that. This fact alone accounts for a lot of opposition Bailey faces, as I understand it, from others; they discount Bailey’s experiences because they do not understand them. Bailey is also bound by this binary in the expectation of male or female by others and the strict interpretation of Bailey’s gender that follows. Bailey was expected to conform to maleness, as they were assigned at birth, and a deviation from that has accounted for a large amount of resistance from Bailey’s family. Referring to Bailey as “their dead son” evokes this notion of either/or: Bailey’s parents are limited by the societal expectation of gender assigned at birth. Bailey’s parents would rather have their child be a son and meet their gender expectations, than acknowledge or support a child who is happy in their gender identity.



Lastly, Brian's experiences, although different, still reinforce this notion of gender as inhibitive and policing. Brian's gender is unique in that he recognizes that his gender has the capacity to continue to develop and change over time. Although Brian uses he/him pronouns and identifies as "85% Male", Brian recognizes the limitations of gender and policing that still occurs. Brian's discussion of his gender is centered on taking on masculine social roles because that is what receives respect in our society. Brian recognized that to receive the respect and treatment he wanted and deserved, he would need to identify as male and take on the social roles that came along with it. Brian also recognized the limitations of hegemonic masculinity, as it related to his own gender. Brian believes that his gender is formed through responses to other's interpretations of his maleness and masculinity. Brian believes that this sense of masculinity he must follow is not one that is entirely healthy. It is also a sense of masculinity that Brian believes is limited by societal ideas of what men *should be* rather than based in individual development of masculinity.

**Deconstructing the transgender narrative.** As discussed in Chapter One, with the rise of transgender stories in the media like Caitlyn Jenner or Laverne Cox, there is a transgender narrative that is being formed and generalized by mainstream society. It is a narrative that still focuses on binary construction of gender, genitalia and transition, and overall a cookie cutter generalization that transgender individuals are expected to fit into. Mainstream society is trying to generalize the transgender experience into a routine happening to better understand something that this thesis argues is personal and individualistic. All three of the participants discussed within this thesis expressed the belief that individuals should be given agency over their own gender identity and development. Their gender, as they conceive it, does not exist within a binary construction. Additionally, with the necessity to normalize and make routine the

transgender experience, normative mainstream society is limiting the gender experience of gender-diverse individuals to that of a cisgender one. This occurs by limiting the transgender experience to a binary, or what cisgender folks understand, when there is a diverse gamut of gender identities beyond just male and female.

Each of my participants do not fall cleanly within this normative transgender narrative that is being attempted to be portrayed. Additionally, current literature is full of binary transgender experience and lacks the representation of a diverse of experiences (Bilodeau, 2005). Each of my participants' journeys are individualistic, and are presented as such to highlight their uniqueness. The similarities that occur can happen because gender is socially constructed in a way that inhibits people in similar ways. However, my participants transgress the expectations of gender normativity not only because they do not align with their gender assigned at birth but also because they have each constructed gender or gendered spaces for themselves that exist outside of societal norms. Skylarr found themselves a gender-neutral space of identity, that by their own conception does not focus on their gender as they do not feel they can exist in either male or female spaces. Bailey's gender is fluid and does not constrain to a consistent boundary of male or female, but rather moves through male-, female-, and agenderness. Brian's gender is not fully male and only male at a social role level, insomuch that Brian understands that is where the respect and treatment he wants and deserves comes from.

This point of deconstructing transgender normative narratives, as it is constructed by normative society, is an important point of this study. Deconstructing gender is about naming the norms of gender, or in this case more specifically these generalized narratives and challenging the systems of power that are attempting to simplify a complex process. In this study, participants and I challenge the transgender narrative that a person who does not identify

with their gender assigned at birth necessarily will then identify and transition toward the gender at the other end of the binary. That is not to discount the experiences of those gender-diverse folks that fall within the gender binary, but rather to emphasize the point that there isn't a normative gender experience, but rather individual ones. I believe Brian's quote, from earlier, sums it up the best, "there's not a clear cut transgender script. Gender is a process and a journey, and is not a clear cut thing. It is for some people, but it isn't for everyone. Non-Binary people exist. It's not clear cut.... there's more ways to go about it than [what is proposed]. [We must avoid] being a product of society telling us what gender is."

### **Significance**

I believe there are distinct reasons why this study has significance and relevance to the continued literature within the study of gender.

**Non-binary gender identities.** As Bilodeau (2005) recognizes, there exists a lack of information and literature about individuals who do not fit into binary constructions of gender and move away from the gender assigned at birth. This study specifically asked for the experiences of individuals that identified within the gamut of transgender and gender-diverse labels. This study explored the individual and unique experiences of three very different participants who each had a different self-constructed conception of gender. These individually developed conceptions of gender were not only uniquely different, but also did not fit cleanly within explicitly binary constructions of gender. They were neither explicitly or exclusively male nor female in their identities. Their stories were important to tell because they add to the already growing literature and collection of narratives surrounding gender diversity. If these stories are left out of the growing body of literature then people who identify in similar ways

may continue to feel confused, marginalized, invisible, invalidated, traumatized, and/or disposable.

**Gender is individual.** Because participants' gender journeys are unique, their experiences and this study impact the broader literature by highlighting how gender should be given the freedom to be personally formed and as different as a fingerprint, free from gender expectations. This study makes the statement that gender is not limited to genitals nor the assignment at birth that comes from them. I recognize and highlight the individual journeys and personal conceptions of gender of the participants. All the participants recognized that their gender is or was affected by gender norms or expectations and that their gender is their own. They each created unique conceptions or operated within social spaces that are each unique to their own identity. These findings aligns with assertions proposed by Abes (2007), building on queer theory, that move toward and support this idea of individual development of gender. A development of gender that is unconstrained and separated from social constructions that seek to perpetuate power and privilege. The findings within this study emphasizes gender can be personal and individualistic, as highlighted through the stories of the participants. It is these findings and the assertions made within this thesis that I believe can begin to set precedent for challenging social constructions of gender and its norms.

### **Future Research and Application**

Within this study I touched upon certain ideas but because of the focus of this thesis, I was unable to fully explore them as fleshed out concepts. Presented below are these concepts that I believe can either be applied or explored in future research studies.

## **Gender Identity Development Process**

Although there exists three models of gender identity development within the literature (Bilodeau, 2005; Devor, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), there exists no current single model of the gender identity development process that encompasses transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse individuals. Through my own interpretation of these models, I synthesized a conception of the process of gender identity development that is informed by consistencies and connections of all three models, as depicted in Figure 1 in Chapter One and Appendix A. I believe this synthesized conception could be utilized in the future as it draws upon the research of experiences of transgender folks. Keeping in mind the queer theory aversion to generalization of experiences and the assertion of this paper that gender is individualistic, this conceptualization is meant to help us better understand the potential process that occurs when one develops their own gender identity outside of the binary. It is still my argument that the individual composition or formation of gender identity within each person can be as unique as a finger print. However, as one understands that the developmental processes of children to be similar even when they are unique, so do I believe can one understand the process of gender formation to have overarching consistencies or commonalities. I do not believe this to be in direct opposition to the concept of gender as individualistic, because even as the college experience as a process has similar major milestones, each person's experiences as a student are greatly individualistic.

Taking this synthesized conception of a potential gender identity development process and testing it is a potential future avenue of research. Using this conception or other models of the gender identity development process is important to test and form ideas around how transgender and gender-diverse individuals shape their gender and identities. As Marine & Catalano state, "the developmental literature on trans\* adults is relatively nascent, and begs

further definition” (p. 140). Although this study recognized and explored the gender identity development of the participants as an element of its purpose, it was not this study’s purpose to test these any of these models or my own conception of their synthesis. There was valuable data presented within the experiences of the participants that could be further explored as testing of this conceptual model of gender identity development. The conception presented above comes from the research surrounding transgender individuals’ experiences; should future literature present additional models or ideas about the gender identity development process, this conception should be explored and tested to provide a better conceptual map of gender identity development. Additionally, we should continue to explore the development of gender non-binary individuals and how they navigate gender.

### **The College Environment**

Something that was explored with each participant was the role, influence, or impact of the college environment on their gender or ability to navigate identity development. As Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) explore, “identity is shaped by how one organizes experiences within the environment... that revolves around oneself” (p. 577). However, these authors also recognized within the same article that the role that the college environment plays within identity development is under-researched. It is my assertion that it is accepted as logical fact that college students will develop aspects of self-identity because what Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) note as interactions with others and challenges to what students have previously known. What my study did produce was interesting ideas about the college environment from transgender folks:

- a) College is a place of “free range learning” where students are allowed to explore what they want and therefore are open to new ideas and concepts.

b) The college environment allows freedom of expression and self-exploration that might lend itself to college students being open to others' exploration of self.

c) The college environment is the centralized hub of intellectual pursuits, one that can be potentially described as gender-neutral, insomuch that the focus is on exploring knowledge and diversity of thought that allows for tolerance of other views.

I think as Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) noted, we have to better understand the role and phenomenon of the college environment in identity development. We can no longer accept as logical fact that students just do change and grow, we must better understand what prompts this change. We must understand what factors go into making the college environment a catalyst for personal development and growth. I believe that my participants' points are valid, especially as those who hold marginalized and non-normative identities in understanding this process. However, I also believe that researching a multitude of both normative and non-normative identities would be best in exploring this phenomenon of the college environment in relation to identity development.

### **Exploring Gender Beyond and Within the Binary**

As mentioned in an earlier section, there exists a necessity of averting the normative society's desire to generalize transgender experiences at the cost of individual conceptions of gender. I believe that further research needs to continue to explore non-binary identities that do not fit the generalized transgender narrative. We need quantitative data that can give us a better idea of the numbers of individuals who exist within non-binary identities. We need qualitative data that does not focus on generalization, as stressed by queer theory, but rather on individual experiences. I think we can begin to better understand the individual and personal identities of

gender when we begin to stop normalizing or generalizing narratives that should remain personal.

Even more so, I think there exists an eventuality within gender research: a necessity to explore individualistic development of gender for those that do align with the gender assigned at birth. As my participants note, everyone deserves gender free of expectations. Although those with normative gender identities are potentially less scrutinized, policed, and attacked, I align with Stryker (2008) and Bornstein (1994) in their assertion that gender is inhibitive for all. I think that an eventual exploration of individual gender development can allow cisgender folks the freedom to test gender norms and boundaries as well. However, I do want to state the importance of focusing on non-normative identities prior to normative ones, to highlight the extremes of gender inhibition and not refocus on normative identities, ignoring non-normative ones.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

It is admittedly difficult to write recommendations for practice as I believe it can move readers towards generalization and away from the emphasis of the participants' experiences. However, I recognize that practitioners, especially those in student affairs, want to better serve their students and peers and sometimes need tangible and practical recommendations for practice. It is a choice that the majority of this section focuses on conceptual notions that challenge social gender constructions. As discussed within the previous chapter and this one, it is these notions that can be harmful for gender transgressors. Therefore, I stand behind my decision to primarily leave readers with questions and critical thought, and less emphasis on lengthy descriptions of tangible recommendations.



The purpose of this study is to challenge gender and its inhibitive norms, and through that recognize that gender can be uniquely and individually formed for anyone. Therefore, it is my hope that this study evokes readers to critically challenge years of socialization that construct gendered norms and normativity through the examination of the experiences of the participants. This study was formed within a paradigm and written in a case study approach so that the stories of the participants wouldn't be generalized. This generalization of their experiences is entirely antithetical to this study and its purpose and something to be avoided by readers. However, it is understandable that readers might transfer notions through questions asked and posed below, and keep in mind these questions when thinking about practical application. It is my hope that readers be okay with tension or lack of understanding that may arise from these questions. It is this tension or lack of alignment with this critical challenge of gender or the notions that follow that is integral to the purpose of this study and this thesis. As this study is written by a Trans researcher, specifically one who identifies as Non-Binary, I hope readers understand that these experiences are real and true for individuals, even if they are not experienced by the reader themselves.

This being said, I believe there are notions presented within this thesis and questions that arise that readers should reflect upon and walk away with:

- a) Readers should focus and reflect on the experiences of the participants. Readers should focus on receiving the participants' experiences as *their* truth and not be stumped on the readers' possible lack of understanding. As said by Bailey, "Gender is complicated... but accepting someone's gender is simple." Is it more important to support these participants and be empathetic to how the construct of gender can be inhibitive for them *or* more important to be able to fully understand their experiences

- and not move forward until you do? How can this process of reflecting on these participants experiences help you support those in your life or you work with who do not conform to gender norms?
- b) I want readers to walk away from this study challenging their own lifetime of socially influenced notions of gender and how these notions can be inhibitive for others or themselves. Is there something that does not resonate with you about this study or the experiences of the participants? Is there something you have trouble believing? Why is that? Even though something may not resonate with you, does it mean that it is not another's truth?
- c) I want readers begin to process through the notion, as presented by the participants and argued within this paper, that gender can be uniquely and individually formed. Also, within this, readers should understand that gender is a social construct with hundreds of years of socialized norms and behaviors that surround it. Lastly, that gender assignment at birth does not correlate to one's own gender identity or sense of self. Even if one aligns with a gender that does not mean that one should make assumptions (e.g. gender roles, personality, etc.) based on the gender that that person aligns with. How is your gender unique to you? Are there norms or gender roles that don't sit right with you? Are there expectations of your gender that you don't like?
- d) I want readers to be okay with being challenged. I want readers to be okay with something that doesn't resonate with them. This discussion of gender and its inhibitive norms does not end with the reading of this thesis. The purpose of this study is to critically challenge gender, so it is my hope that readers at least walk away questioning gender normativity and how it can impact themselves or those around

them. How does the way society sets up gender impact you? Does it give you privilege or challenges? If so, in what areas or contexts? Beyond that, do you recognize how gender, as a construct, can be harmful? How can you begin to question and challenge this?

Overall, I want readers to understand that gender, just like race or class, exists within a system of power and privilege that greatly harms and negatively impacts all, and especially transgender and gender-diverse individuals. Most importantly, I want readers to reflect on the experiences of the participants and examine how they can be more supportive of personal and consensual gender, insomuch that it is supportive of those that transgress gender normativity. My ultimate hope is that readers walk away from this study challenging gender and attacking its systematic oppression and policing of all, and avoid challenging and attacking the individual and personal gender of their peer, friend, or loved one.

I believe that Bailey offered a framework for how practitioners can begin to apply a main takeaway from the notions above, “Gender is complicated, but accepting someone’s gender is simple. Accepting it is so simple... you ask someone their pronouns, and then whatever they want you to call them – you do that. Just listen to the wants and the needs of other people.” As I present the experiences of my participants as individual and unique, I believe that practitioners can begin to just listen to experiences of gender-diverse individuals, accept them as valid, and work to find ways to affirm those experiences. As described above, practitioners should use names and pronouns as each individual requests. Beyond individual interactions, practitioners should work within their roles as campus administrators to adapt, change, or deconstruct the harmful practices, policies, and norms on college campuses that constrict students, faculty and staff into binary social constructions of gender (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis,

Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Marine, 2011; Marine & Catalano, 2014). These practices and harmful conditions are highlighted within chapter one of this thesis. Practitioners can refer to that section when looking for specific ways that transgender-identifying individuals have expressed how college campuses can be harmful or marginalizing. Practitioners should then work to make policy and practice changes that remove these barriers from their campuses.

### **Conclusion**

This study serves as a critical examination of gender as inhibitive social construct through the experiences of those that transgress gender norms, expectations, and boundaries. Although there are a number of arguments made in relation to and about gender, it is important for me to reflect that this study would not be possible without the participation of and sharing of experiences of my participants. It is through their own challenges and triumphs that they experienced through developing their own personal gender experience that evoked the desire to expose and deconstruct gender as a system of power and privilege. It was their journeys that made it imperative to make the arguments and assertions I'm making. It because of the sharing of their stories that I was and am able to better explore my own non-binary identity. It is because of my participants that I can support the statements, "Gender is nonconsensual," "Gender is inhibitive," and most importantly, "Gender is individually and personally formed." It is these voices, and the voices we've not heard, that are the most important to highlight to challenge our status quo and equitably better serve the needs of each individual within our scope of care.

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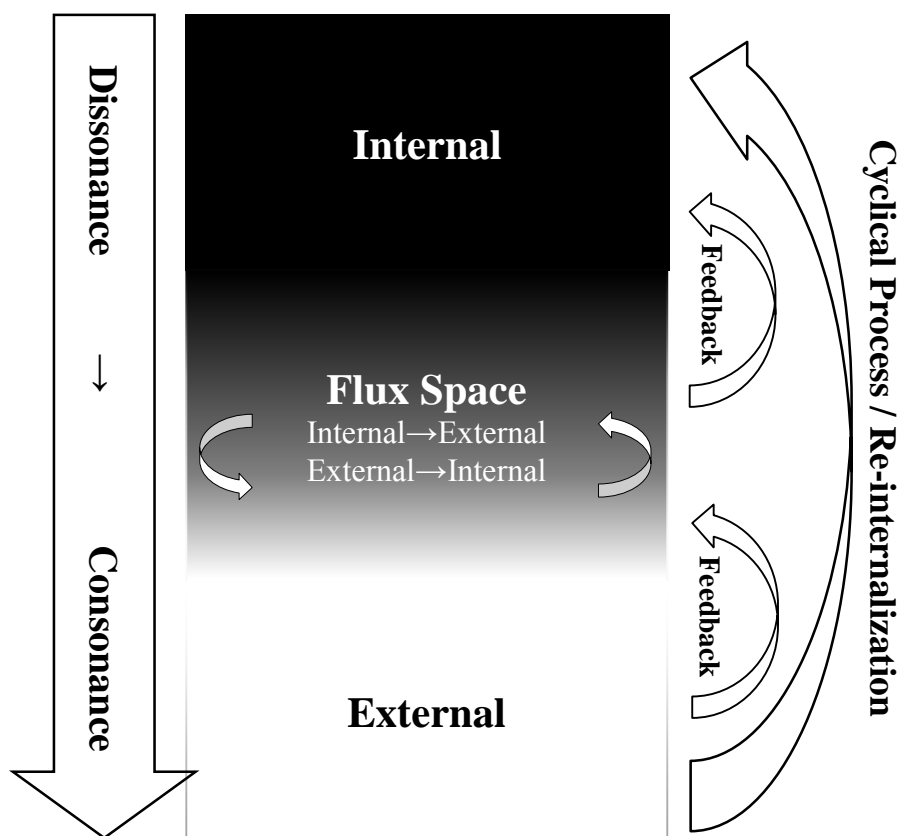
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## Appendix A: Tejada Conception of Gender Development Process, Detailed



*Note: This conception is a synthesis of three models developed and presented by Devor (2004), Bilodeau (2005), and Levitt and Ippolito (2014). (These three models were informed by transgender participants and their experiences.)* This conception (above) postulates two separate, yet cooperating processes that can occur within the process of one navigating or developing one's own gender. The overall process that is occurring is one from a dissonance with one's gender assigned at birth to a consonance with one's developing personally developed gender. As the models describe, and I understand it, the other process is one that moves from an internal space (thoughts/ideas) to an external space (actions/behaviors), with a flux space in-between, and then a re-internalization (or cyclical process) that navigates the processing back to the internal.

One would first begin in an internal space, processing one's identity with thoughts about or internal conflict of one's gender. In moving from the internal to the external, one that is navigating this gender development process encounters a flux space where there is a cyclical exchange of internal processes being externalized through behaviors or actions and then external responses to these then being internalized. Once that flux space is navigated, then one could move to an external space, where one externally presents the internal sense of self in some capacity. As visually represented on the right side, feedback (positive or negative) can send individuals to a previous space to move back through the overall internal to external process. Also, as stated before, once one reaches that external space, one can then continue to cycle through this internal to flux space to external process continually. As one of the participants views and describes their gender, this can be a process that continues throughout the entirety of one's life.

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol, Semi-Structured**

### **Interview Protocol, Session One**

Hello, we are meeting today because you have opted to be a part of this research study. I want to take the time to answer any questions you have and explain the nature of the study to you. The purpose of this study is to explore and better understand the intricacies of identity development that occurs within the aspect of gender, specifically for individuals that move beyond or around the gender assigned at birth; to include Transgender (Trans\*), Gender Non-Conforming, and/or Non-Binary identities. I hope to better understand your experience, and the experiences of others who have also explored their gender identity and do not align with their gender assigned at birth, so that I may then help others begin to better understand this process of gender identity development. That being said, do you have any specific questions about this study? [Allow for questions/follow-up]

I do want to take the time to explain and have you sign the informed consent document before we begin. [Gives document to participant and allows them to read.] Did that document make sense and do you have any questions about this? [Answer.] Please sign if you do want to continue in this study.

[Will have procedures portion of IRB available to answer questions about procedures/data collection.]

This first session is really to allow us to begin to know each other through this process. I do want to take some time to discuss my interest in this subject, what will happen through the course of the study, and hopefully get to know you more in this process. Although my hope is to get through our session within an hour, I do not want to limit the ability to explore your journey and experiences and I have as much time as you need to answer any questions and really dig deep into your own gender identity development journey. First, I'm going to discuss my own path and interest in this subject and my own journey/identity.

[Discusses researcher's own identity, where they are in their identity development, background in work with LGBTQA advocacy and specifically with this "group" of individuals, and the personal and professional interest in the importance of this research.] So is there anything you would like to know about me I haven't answered yet?

If at any time, you have any questions, I want you to know that you have the ability to stop and ask me anything. Given what I've said and we've discussed, what do you think the importance of this research study can be for you? [Allow for conversation / follow up questions]

So how that you have gotten a bit of background to what I'm doing, why I'm here, and why I see this as important, can you tell me a little about yourself? Your background and what you're currently doing in your life (school/major, hobbies, etc.) [Allow for conversation / follow up questions to get to know participant – ask about partner, friends, family, etc.]

Thank you so much for sharing. This session, again, is really an opportunity for us to begin to get to know each other or develop our comfort with one another. There will be an activity where you are given the opportunity to express/describe your gender identity which I will present at the end of our session today and we have a second session where we will explore your own development of your gender (identity). However, I want to give you time to begin to unpack and discuss your gender identity, since that is the purpose of our study. What would you like to share about your gender identity and your journey that you think is important to me to begin to understand your own experience? [Allow for conversation / follow up questions]

Were there any questions maybe you were hoping I would ask? Said another way, is there anything I'm missing in regards to my initial questions?

Ok, as we close up this session, let's talk about what's next: There is an personal reflection activity that I've created for you to really dig in deep to help me understand your own gender (identity). This activity can be completed on your own, or you can take the time in our session to complete. There is no limit to what you describe or express. The purpose of this activity is to really allow you to begin to express and describe your identity, void of any box or label which may be inhibitive and marginalizing. We will discuss in length in our next session how you identify, what it means, and how it has evolved, specifically as we begin to unpack your own journey of gender identity development.

And as I've asked continually, do you have any questions for me, about myself, this study, or what is next?

Thank you. Let's plan/schedule our next session.

### **Personal Reflection Activity, Prompt**

The purpose of this activity is to help me understand how you view your own gender identity. As gender identity development is not only personal but also individualized, it is important, for the purposes of this study, that you be given the space to express it as such. In a manner that you choose, please describe, explain, and/or express your own personal gender identity and/or how you identify. This is meant as a space for you to fully express the possible complexity and entirety of your gender identity. You can choose from any possible way to express this, including but not limited to: journaling/written expression, visual representation (painting, illustration, graphic design, etc.), media (video, song, etc.), or any other medium that you choose. During our next session, you will bring this with you and we will discuss what this means to you (if not explicit through video/words) so that there is no question about how you describe/express your identity. You are free to ask any questions regarding this activity, but it is meant to be open to interpretation to each individual. All materials given to the researcher will be kept for the duration of the study then given back to the participant at the completion of the study.

### **Interview Protocol, Session Two**

The purpose of this session is not only to discuss your own identity, but also explore what it means to you, and then move into a discussion of the internal and external process of exploring

any/all aspects of your gender (identity) and how you are / have developed. It is entirely okay if this is a process you still navigate / are navigating because any aspect of identity can be continually formed within different contexts and in conjunction with different aspects of identity (race, size, ability, faith practice, etc.).

Let's discuss the reflection activity. [If participant opted to complete during session, allow for time to reflect/complete.] Tell me not only about your gender (identity), but what it means to you.

Is there anything you want me to be sure not to misunderstand about any aspect of your identity?

Understand, this entire process is about you and your journey, so let me be sure I understand what you're saying. [paraphrase what participant has said, allow for follow-up]. Is there anything I'm missing or anything you would like to add about your own identity and what it means to you?

Okay, tell me about your own journey of gender identity development. If you are curious what I mean, I've got specific questions I can follow up with, but I'm really hoping to understand a sort of timeline of your journey from initial conflict with the gender assigned at birth and where you are today. The hope is that I can better understand what your particular journey was. [allow for answer/follow-up questions]

Ok, as previously stated, I do have some specific questions regarding your own journey/timeline of gender (identity) development. You may have answered these, but I want to make sure I'm getting clarification, understanding specific intricacies, and allowing for the best possible understanding of your journey.

What would you say was a moment where there was a direct disconnect or conflict from the gender you were assigned at birth? What were some of the thoughts that were going through your mind? Was any of this expressed in a way outside of your own internal process (actions, words, expression, etc.)?

How would you describe how you process, processed, and/or are processing (make meaning, explore, develop) your own gender (identity); specifically with regards to internally (mind, thoughts, sense of self) or externally (expression, action, relationships – familial, friendships, peers, or romantic, or interactions with others)? [If needed: To clarify, I'm curious what that process of internal to external, combination of both, or external to internal looked like for you? – can explain in more depth for participant]

Tell me about your interactions with others and how that has affected your internal sense of self (gender). Your external sense of self?

How has your gender (identity) journey affected how you interact with others?

Tell me about your relationships with others and how that has affected your internal sense of self? Your external sense of self?

How has your gender (identity) journey affected how you interact in any type of personal relationships (familial, friendships, peers, or romantic)?

Throughout your journey have your experiences lent you to seek out supportive communities? What types? Tell me about those communities.

Throughout your journey have your experiences lent you to seek out opportunities to be an active member of the LGBTQA+ community or an ally/advocate for change? Tell me about those experiences.

As identity development does happen within contexts, I want to understand the impact, if any, of being a student or being on a college campus/environment. I've got specific questions, but again, I'm allowing for you to discuss this. [allow for answers]

Tell me about how the college environment has helped or hindered your own identity development.

What are pros and cons of being on a college campus, in relation to your gender identity or the development of it?

What else can you tell me about how the college environment or being a student has affected your own gender identity or gender identity development?

Lastly, as identity development does happen within contexts and with the intersection of different identities, are there any contexts or different identities, not previously discussed, that you believe has had an impact on your gender (identity) and development? (e.g. race, size, ability, faith practice, culture, nationality, geographic region/culture, etc.)

What are some positive personally affirming moments that you've experienced in your own journey?

Is there anything additional that you would like to share that you think is important?

As the next portion of our sessions is an Observation Interaction Activity, or Hangout, I wanted to take the time to describe. As I've read (and you've discussed – if they did) gender identity development is not only an internal process, but an external one. Also, gender identity development happens within contexts and it's better to understand how these external contexts have an impact on you, if any. The point of this is to be with you in a space, of your choosing, where you interact with others so that I can observe these interactions. You will be aware that these will be occurring, as I will be with you. After about 45 minutes of observation, you and I will sit down to discuss and reflect. I will present my own observations/notes as well as you will have the opportunity to discuss what was going on internally. We can do this once or twice, depending on your comfort level with the activity.

### **Interview Protocol, Observational Interaction (Hangout) Session**

[After Observation for 45 minutes, Participant and Researcher will sit down and discuss. As each Observational Interaction has the capacity to be unique, these are some follow-up questions

to guide our conversation, but there will potentially be questions to ask about what happened during the activity.]

So, let's talk about this activity – what do you want to share?

How are you feeling about it?

Are there any frustrations or stressors you need to get out or vent about?

Anything good that you noticed happened or would like to comment on?

What was going on internally through this activity?

[leave room for specific questions]

Ok, I have some ideas about my interactions, that I would like to discuss:

[unique to interaction activity]

What do you think about this?

Is there anything I missed that you would like me to include or discuss?

We discussed before how development not only happens internally but externally, was there any conscious decisions you made about your actions or interactions during this activity in regards to your gender/gender identity?

Were there any moments during this activity that you felt not validated in your gender?

Were there any moments where you externally felt validated in your gender?

Were there any moments where there were positive or negative intersections with different aspects of your identities outside of gender (e.g. race, size, ability, faith practice, culture, nationality, geographic region/culture, etc.)?

Would you enjoy the opportunity to do this again?

### **Interview Protocol, Final Session**

[This Session will primarily serve as a conversation/discussion of findings by the researcher as a form of data checks. Participant will be allowed to review the findings related to them with the researcher. This will also be a follow-up session to the entire experience.]

So, we've met a few times and you've possibly had time to reflect on this entire experience and what I've discovered through our time together.

Through this experience, is there anything you learned about yourself, your journey with gender identity, or your gender identity?

What would you say has been some positive moments within our interactions with each other?

What do you hope to be done with these findings? What do you hope can be gained?

What do you believe you've gained through this process? What will you walk away with from this process?

Throughout this entire process, is there something you wish I had asked you?

Throughout this entire process, was there information you maybe still want to share about your gender (identity) or your development?

My hope is that together we leave no stone unturned, as such, is there anything I'm missing?

[Take time to express genuine thanks and gratitude.]

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form with Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration

### Participant Informed Consent Form

**Title:** Gender Identity Development and Higher Education - Masters Thesis

IRB# 15717

#### **Purpose:**

This research project will aim to explore and better understand the intricacies of identity development that occurs within the aspect of gender, specifically for individuals that move beyond or around the gender assigned at birth; to include Transgender (Trans\*), Gender Non-Conforming, and/or Non-Binary identities. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a current (or previous) student and personally identified yourself as: at or above the age of 19, you do not (or did not) align with the gender assigned at birth, *and* you explored/are exploring aspects of your gender identity. (Note: Potential participants may identify as Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, Non-Binary, Genderqueer, Gender Fluid, or Agender but are not limited to these identities or labels.) Additionally, we are recruiting current college students or those who have recently stopped attending within the last twelve (12) months after attending for a duration of *at least* one full academic semester (fall or spring).

#### **Procedures:**

You will be asked to participate in three interviews, an observational activity, and a personal reflection activity. The interviews are conversations designed to understand participants' experiences around their own gender identity and the development that has occurred/is occurring. Each interview will last at least an hour and be scheduled on different dates between December - February based on your availability. Interviews will be conducted in a private, secluded space where they cannot be overheard. All interviews will be audio recorded to ensure all correct data and statements are collected from the participants. Audio recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer and will be destroyed upon completion of the study/project.

The personal reflection activity will ask participants to describe and express their own gender identity and what it means to them. This can be done on your own time before the second interview or during it. If you do it on your own time, it is expected to take between 20 minutes to an hour.

The observational activity is designed to understand participants' external interactions/behaviors (in regards to gender) in a public space with others and will take at least an hour. The researcher will be with the participant in an informal manner (akin to hanging out) and observe their interactions with others or behaviors in a public space, and immediately follow-up with a conversation with the participant about reactions or observations. The observation will be conducted in a comfortable, public space of the participant's choosing.

#### **Benefits:**

Ability to reflect on and discuss the process of their gender identity development is a direct benefit to participants. Indirectly, their experiences have the capacity to impact opinions and understanding of this body of students within the context of higher education and potentially affect policy/practice to better serve their needs.

#### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

Participants may feel some discomfort in relaying emotional/mental adversities that occurred while going through their internal process of identity development around gender. Please know that the UNL LGBTQA+ Resource Center is a safe environment for them to find like-minded peers to commiserate and seek additional resources. Additionally, a reference to on-campus Counseling and Psychological Services can be provided as an alternative if participants need additional support.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Although participants have the ability to self-disclose or describe their involvement to others, every possible step will be taken to ensure that identities and confidentiality are protected. Any information obtained during this study, which could identify you, will





be removed from collected data and kept strictly confidential. Although direct quotes can be utilized in findings and the final published data, all identifiable statements/information will be removed. These direct quotes will be used to strongly emphasize concepts or thoughts that add to the subject being studied. Pseudonyms chosen by the participant or the researcher will be utilized for confidentiality and anonymity. All data collected will be stored in a password-protected computer in the investigator's office/home and will only be seen by the investigator(s) during the study. The information obtained in this study may be published in academic journals or presented at professional meetings or conferences but the data will be reported without identifying you.

### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) via email first, but numbers are also provided, if necessary. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

### **Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. A copy can be made for your own records at your request.

### **Please Check Before Signing:**

I agree to be audio-recorded for the purposes of data collection and to ensure that my own statements are accurately portrayed. I understand that all audio recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the study/project.

### **Signature of Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### **Name / Email of investigator(s):**

Enrique Tejada III, Principal Investigator  
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