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The Work Experiences of Transgender Individuals: Negotiating the Transition and Career Decision-Making Processes

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This study explored the work experiences of individuals who have started transitioning from their biological sex to a different gender expression through 18 interviews of transgender-identified individuals. Thirteen of the participants identified as male-to-female transsexuals, 2 participants identified as female-to-male transsexuals, 2 participants identified as female-bodied gender queer individuals, and 1 participant identified as a biological male cross-dresser. Using a grounded theory (K. Charmaz, 2006) approach, 2 separate work experience models emerged: (a) the process of gender transitioning at work and (b) the career decision-making process. The 3 phases of the first model included a pretransition phase, during the transition phase, and posttransition phase. Within these 3 phases, the following 5 major themes emerged: preparation for the work transition, coming out at work, presentation and appearance at work, others' reactions at work, and affective/coping experiences related to work. The second model resulted in 6 major themes related to career decision making: occupational barriers, occupational prospects, occupational aspirations, taking action, occupational gratification, and contextual influences.

Keywords: transgender, gender identity, gender transition, career experiences, barriers

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For a number of years, vocational psychologists have paid close attention to the career experiences of minority groups. Career decision-making models have been constructed, discrimination within the workplace documented, and coping methods discussed. Although some of this research has focused on the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (e.g., Adams, Cahill, & Ackerlind, 2005), very little attention has been given to the transgender population. In the absence of legal protection in most areas of the United States, transgender individuals must navigate transitioning in the workplace with no guarantee of employment after transition. Although there have been two sociological empirical articles documenting the experiences of transgender individuals in the workplace (see Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Connell, 2007), there is no known research that has examined the transitioning and career decision-making processes of transgender individuals in the workplace. Given that transgender populations are becoming more visible in this society, and that transgender individuals seek counseling at a higher rate than most populations (Goldberg, Matte, MacMillan, & Hudspith, 2003), it is essential to further document the experiences of transgender individuals. This is of particular

importance for counseling psychologists, as transgender individuals will most likely discuss their work experiences within the therapeutic milieu. The purpose of this study was to broaden the knowledge of the process of transitioning at work and to explore the manner in which identifying as transgender has impacted career decision-making processes.

Definitions and Terms

Gender is a term that is used when referring to social, cultural, and psychological characteristics that affect and pertain to stereotypes, norms, traits, and roles of men and women (Gilbert & Scher, 1999). For the majority of individuals, traditional gender socialization fits within their conceptualization of their biological sex. However, there is a distinct population of individuals who find that their biological sex does not meet their gender identity. This population is typically defined as being transgender. The term *transgender* is an umbrella term, whereby many different gender-variant individuals fall under the definition. Typically, an individual who identifies as transgender does not identify with society's traditional, dichotomous, social constructions of gender. Included in the full spectrum of nontraditional gender identities are pre- and postoperative transsexual, cross-dresser, intersex, gender-bender, gender-variant, gender trash, gender queer, transsexual lesbian, trans-person, and those who are uninterested in passing (Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002). For more specific definitions of these terms, please refer to the supplemental information provided for this article.

Although transitioning is often referred to in the context of female-to-male (FTM) or male-to-female transsexual (MTF) individuals, the term is also used for any individual who takes measures to move from their biological sex to a different gender

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expression. This includes individuals who may reject both male and female identities, identify along a gender spectrum, or continue to identify with their biological sex but take measures to express a different gender. Throughout this article, *transitioning* refers to all transgender individuals who are in various states of the process of identifying as transgender. For the purposes of this study, only participants who identified themselves as transgender participated in the interviews.

Transition Process and Identity Formation

Devor (2004) and Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997) provide detailed analyses of the transitioning and identity process for transsexual and cross-dressing individuals. Devor's model is based on homosexual identity formation and role exit theories. Devor contends that individuals desire to be witnessed for exactly who they are and to see themselves mirrored in others' eyes as they see themselves. This process lends itself to a validation and confirmation that what is being conducted (e.g., identifying in a nonconforming way) is normal. Gagne et al. indicate comparable theories of MTF transsexual and cross-dressing identity. Gagne et al. describe four main themes of identity formation within this specific population: early transgender experiences, coming out to oneself, coming out to others, and resolution of identity. The authors discovered three ways their transgender participants came out to themselves and came to terms with their identity: (a) negotiating events that inform them they feel wrong, (b) finding out there are names for what they feel, and (c) learning there are others who have similar experiences. The authors describe two major fears from the participants about coming out to others: (a) fears about how the participant would be treated by others and (b) worry about how others would cope with the participant's nontraditional gender identity. The last theme provided by the authors is the resolution of identity. Most of the individuals in this stage indicated that they felt as though they had arrived at their true identity. Although both Devor's (2004) and Gagne et al.'s (1997) models of identity development for *transsexual* individuals and *cross-dressing* males are informative, there has not been a single piece of research to date examining the transitioning process of transgender individuals.

Transgender Experiences in the Workplace

Transgender individuals experience a number of challenges in the workplace. For example, it is not uncommon for employers and coworkers to be unaware of the types of accommodations or changes that need to be made for transgender individuals. Additionally, transgender individuals themselves may be highly unaware of what they will need in order to be provided with a safe and discrimination-free work environment and often look to counselors in order to gain more information or help throughout this process (O'Neil, McWhirter, & Cerezo, 2008). Even when employers are aware of how to accommodate transgender individuals in the workplace, discrimination may still be present. Close to 50% of transgender individuals report experiencing discrimination due to their trans status in the workplace (Minter & Daley, 2003). Discrimination can be experienced on many levels, including employer or coworker fears and misperceptions, which can in turn lead to complaints, hostility, isolation, lack of collaboration, and

other negative consequences (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2004; O'Neil et al, 2008; Schilt, 2006).

Although popular culture may have increased the public attention to transgender issues, the present outlook for decreasing work discrimination directed at this population looks bleak, as recent federal nondiscrimination legislation (Employment Non-Discrimination Act [ENDA]) did not include transgender people as a protected population (The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2007). Furthermore, only 12 states have laws explicitly prohibiting gender identity discrimination within the workplace (Transgender Workplace Diversity, 2007).

These summary reports and theoretical articles make it clear that the workplace can be a particularly challenging place for transgender individuals. Such documents are useful in that they provide much needed instruction and information about a population that is typically ignored. At the same time, we also need research that can provide a basis for the information that is given to administrators and professionals working with the transgender population. A literature review revealed that two sociology studies have examined the career experiences of a subset of transgender individuals (see Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Connell, 2007). Schilt (2006) conducted a qualitative study with FTM transsexuals and their experiences transitioning in the workplace, describing how these individuals received advantages on the basis of their new, more privileged gender. These participants described the feeling of being "just one of the guys" (Schilt, 2006, p. 473), seeing how women are treated within the workplace, and the awkwardness that ensues from being part of the ingroup, yet also feeling like they do not belong because they were once women. The FTM individuals described instances of having more authority, competency, respect, recognition, and economic gains due to their new status as men. Some barriers included not passing well (still being seen as a woman) and additional racial/ethnic issues arising from changing genders. The racial barriers were described as having stereotypes that reinforced both the intersection of gender norms and racial norms—for example, an Asian American participant feeling as though he was seen as passive at work, due to both his biological female status and his Asian American identity. Other authors have noted that race and ethnicity play a major role in transgender individuals' identity, such as levels of acculturation and the role of family members throughout the transitioning process (e.g., Rosario, 2004).

Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, and Malouf (2001) conducted a study on transgender experiences of violence and discrimination. Although workplace experiences were not a major focal point of the study, the authors reported that transgender individuals who were older, employed full time, and had a higher income were less likely to experience the adverse economic impact of their transgender status. In addition, individuals who had experienced adverse economic impact were almost five times more likely to experience some form of violence. Discrimination and rejection are associated with psychological distress (Fischer & Bolton Holz, 2007; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003), which occurs through assaults on one's sense of self-concept, self-worth, and belonging (Harrell, 2000; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). The link between work discrimination for transgender individuals and psychological distress are of particular importance to counseling psychologists, as these issues may be at the forefront of therapeutic topics and goals.

In the career development literature, discrimination and gender role socialization are documented influences of career-related outcomes, such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Byars & Hackett, 1998). Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2000) provide a useful framework for understanding the career development process for individuals who may experience discrimination and career-related barriers—they contend that socialization factors, such as gender and sexual orientation, will impact self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Indeed, there is a substantive body of research indicating that gender role is linked to self-efficacy and career outcomes (see, e.g., Fassinger, 1990), such as Betz and Hackett's (1981) seminal study in which females reported more self-efficacy for traditional careers and less self-efficacy for nontraditional careers. Conversely, males perceived self-efficacy in both traditional and nontraditional careers. In a study conducted by Sullivan and Mahalik (2000), an intervention that focused on female socialization experiences was found to influence career decision-making self-efficacy as well as vocational exploration and commitment. Additionally, studies have shown that adherence to masculine gender role norms significantly impact male vocational interests (Tokar & Jome, 1998) and career-related learning experiences (Tokar, Thompson, Plaufcan, & Williams, 2007). Research has also demonstrated the multidimensionality of gender roles by providing evidence for within-group variability of male vocational interests through masculinity measures (Mahalik, Perry, Coonerty-Femiano, Catraio, & Land, 2006).

Although gender role socialization has been well documented as an influential factor in career decision making, it is unknown how this process manifests within the transgender population. The present study would be the first of its kind to do so. The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how transgender individuals perceive their past, current, and future work experiences in relation to their gender transition.

Method

Participants. Nineteen transgender-identified individuals were recruited from two large midwestern cities to participate in this study. However, 18 interviews were included in the analysis, as one interview was excluded due to audiotape malfunction. Thirteen participants identified as MTF transsexuals, two participants identified as FTM transsexuals, two participants were female-bodied (biologically female) individuals who identified as gender queer, and one participant was a biological male who identified as a male cross-dresser. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 67 ($M = 45.17$, $SD = 11.51$). Fourteen of the participants identified as White, and four participants identified as both White and Native American. Sexual orientations included lesbian ($n = 6$), bisexual ($n = 5$), heterosexual ($n = 3$), queer ($n = 2$), questioning ($n = 1$), and asexual ($n = 1$). Our sample was predominantly college educated, with 12 individuals having some college education or a bachelor's degree. Other participants' educational backgrounds included three individuals who completed high school, two individuals completing their master's degrees at the time of the interviews, and one individual with a completed master's degree. The income ranges for our participants are as follows: \$0–\$10,000 ($n = 4$), \$11,000–\$20,000 ($n = 2$), \$21,000–\$30,000 ($n = 2$), \$31,000–\$40,000 ($n = 4$), \$40,000–\$60,000 ($n = 3$), and \$60,000–\$80,000 ($n = 2$); one participant did not report

income level. All of our participants provided the label for the type of work they had conducted in the past as well as for current employment. Along with these labels, the participants generally provided a description of what their jobs entailed. The occupations currently held by participants fell into several categories: sales, installation, farming, professional, and service (see supplementary documents for demographic information related to occupational labels).

Researchers. The first author is a White, female-bodied, female-identified graduate student in counseling psychology who is developing a specialization in research, social justice, and advocacy with transgender and queer populations. The second author is a White, female-bodied, female-identified undergraduate student who is specializing her interests with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Both the first and second authors are LGB-identified. They interacted with participants, conducted the interviews, and analyzed the data. Several of the transgender participants were interested in the researcher's interests in transgender issues and discussed this with the first and second authors. When asked, both of the authors engaged in conversation about interests with the transgender populations. The third author is a White, female-bodied, female-identified faculty member with expertise in vocational psychology. She helped conceptualize the project and facilitated in determining interview protocol questions. She also served as a mentor to the first two authors during the research process. Her mentoring included advising the first two authors regarding career development theories and providing insight into the theoretical frameworks for this study. In addition to the three authors, three other interviewers participated in this study. All three of the interviewers were female-bodied, female-identified, and LGB-identified.

Before embarking on this research project, there were several biases identified by the three researchers. This was the first research with the transgender population that each of us has conducted, and thus we were unsure how smoothly the research would progress. Each of us wondered whether the participants would trust us and whether they would be willing to share their experiences with us. Because the three of us are female-bodied, female-identified researchers, we were unsure whether the participants would believe that we could understand their experiences. Furthermore, we had assumptions that all of the participants would describe negative work environments and experiences of discrimination related to work. Additionally, as activists for the LGBT community and personally identifying as sexual minorities, the first two authors also wondered whether they actually hold biases skewed in a positive direction for the transgender population. Although we identified these biases when entering into the research process, we attempted to keep these biases at the forefront of the process when analyzing the data to be aware of how they were impacting the coding process. These biases and assumptions were kept in check in three separate ways. First, all data were consensus coded, such that we could discuss our biases with each other during the coding process and give feedback if one of the researchers seemed to be swayed by biases and not by the data. Second, all of the participants in the study were contacted to read over their data and our conclusions that were derived from the data; none of the members objected or indicated that our biases seemed to impact the data. Last, the assumption that most participants would have negative work experiences was not founded in

the data; reporting findings that were different from our assumptions is indicative that we were able to acknowledge our biases and continue to report data that was surprising.

Interview protocol. The primary instrument for this study was a semistructured interview developed from the literature that applies social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) with sexual minorities (see Adams et al., 2005; Morrow, Gore, & Campbell, 1996). The authors used the Adams et al. and Morrow et al. protocols as models, but added specific language that applied to transgender individuals. Interviewers asked five main questions: (a) Before your transition, what was your experience like in the workplace? (Probes: Coworkers reactions? What kinds of support did you need from your workplace? What was the best part? The worst part?); (b) After and during your transition, what has your experience been like at work? (Probes: Coworkers reactions? What kinds of support did you need from your workplace? What was the best part? The worst part?); (c) Are you currently working at a career/job that you consider ideal? (Probes: If yes: What makes it ideal? If no: What has gotten in the way of your ideal job or career? What would your ideal job/career be? What do you or would you need to do in order to find this job?); (d) Can you have any job you want? (Why or why not?) What messages have you heard from others about your abilities and career choice?; and (e) How would your career aspirations be different if you weren't transgender? Additional probing questions were also asked in the event that information needed to be clarified or expanded upon. The protocol questions were also amended on the basis of how the participants identified their gender and how they wished to be referred throughout the interview.

Procedure.

Recruiting participants and interview information. Participants were recruited via e-mail sent to support groups and LGBT university/community centers located in two Midwestern cities. The e-mail indicated that the researchers were interested in conducting interviews with any adult individual who identified as transgender and wanted to share his or her experiences in the workplace. The researchers also attended support groups after the e-mail had been sent out, so as to gain trust from potential participants and to allow individuals to ask questions about the research process before agreeing to participate. The interviews were conducted either at the university in a private office or at local community LGBT centers in both Midwestern cities. The nature of the research was explained in a written informed consent statement that was sent to the participant via e-mail to review before the interview, and was also explained verbally when the interviewer and participant met in person. The interviews were conducted by the first two authors and three graduate students. In order to aid in the training process, after an interview was conducted and transcribed, it was discussed with all interviewers so as to ensure that the interviews were carried out similarly. Interviews lasted between 90 and 180 min ($M = 100$ min). Participants were encouraged to discuss each question for as long as they wished. All interviews were subsequently transcribed by the interviewers. This study and all the methods used to conduct it were approved by the authors' university Institutional Review Board.

Data analysis. The interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methodology proposed by Charmaz (2006), as this method would allow us to explore how transgender individuals make meaning of their work experiences. The interviews were coded in

three separate phases. The initial phase consisted of line-by-line coding, where the participant's words are coded into more concise and compact statements that parcel out aspects that are not relevant or substantive. This phase allows the coders to break up the data into component parts, look for assumptions, clarify implicit meanings, crystallize the implication of the points, compare data, and identify gaps in the data. *In Vivo* codes were also a vital aspect of this phase in the analysis; these codes are typically used if participants use terms that are not common vernacular, but are essential to staying true to the participants' words. Because this population uses a vocabulary not well known outside of the queer community, *in vivo* codes were used to look for the implicit meanings. An example line-by-line code would be the following: "When she came back to work after her surgery, no one would look at her, and she'd walk into the shop and everyone would just disappear."

The second phase of the analysis included a combination of both focused and axial coding, where line-by-line codes from the first phase are placed in a higher order category. For example, the line-by-line coding provided above was coded into a higher order category called Workplace Reaction to Participant. Grounded theory methodology relies heavily on a constant comparison of data; this was achieved by conducting the first two phases of the coding for each interview, so the higher order categories could be applied to subsequent interviews for inclusion and comparison. For example, the first interview was line-by-line coded, and higher order categories were coded directly after the line-by-line codes. Next, the second interview was line-by-line coded, and then the higher order categories from the first interview were used for focused and axial coding of the second interview. Any additional higher order categories that did not exist originally for the first interview but emerged from the second interview were added to the list. This process was followed for each subsequent interview. No new categories were added in the final interview, indicating that saturation had been reached.

The third phase of the analysis was theoretical coding, which is a sophisticated level of coding used to synthesize and integrate the codes that were selected during focused/axial coding (e.g., the second phase) and to show how these codes may relate to each other as suppositions that can be incorporated into theory (Glaser, 1978). Once saturation had been reached (i.e., higher order categories were no longer emerging), all of the higher order categories were placed into larger themes that appeared to capture the essence of those categories. This occurred by listing out all of the higher order categories and grouping them together where they seemed to thematically cluster. The researchers first completed this phase separately, then they came to consensus regarding the larger themes that emerged from the higher order categories. After the larger themes emerged, the researchers determined the theoretical models that arose from the entire perspective. The researchers took the larger themes and together discussed the logistical flow and theory that materialized from the higher order categories, finding that there were two very distinct theoretical processes surrounding work experiences for transgender individuals.

Several factors were taken into account to ensure quality and rigor within the data analysis process. As qualitative research does not claim to be completely objective, in order to obtain a certain level of neutrality, several methods were used. The first and second author coded each interview individually for each phase, and then every code (line-by-line, axial, and thematic) was deter-

mined by consensus. After all interviews had been coded, the participants received their own coded interviews to review and were asked to give comments on the accuracy of the coding. One fourth of the participants responded with suggestions and changes, which were incorporated into the initial codes. Triangulation was achieved by comparing the data with several sources, including documentaries (e.g., *Southern Comfort*; Davis, 2001) and memoirs (e.g., *She's Not There*; Boylan, 2003) that discussed the career and work experiences of transgender individuals.

Results

As the data were being analyzed, it became clear that participants were describing two separate though related processes: negotiating the course of a gender transition while at work and the process of making career decisions. The following results reflect the complexity of both of these processes.

We begin by describing the transitioning process at work and how this differs from transitioning in one's personal life. The themes that emerged from the data revealed that the participants experienced their work transition in three separate phases: (a) pretransition, (b) during the transition, and (c) posttransition (see Table 1). All of our participants described their personal transition process as occurring before their work transition process. Each one of the participants had come out to someone (friend, family member, support group, etc.) before deciding to fully transition and come out at work. Many of the participants who chose to include medical intervention in their transition process also began hormone therapy or surgery before coming out at work as well. Though each of our participants had begun an aspect of the transition process in their personal lives, it is important to note that this private transition process was distinct from their process of transitioning at work; all of our participants delayed their transition at work until well after they had begun their private transition process. All quotes in this section include a pseudonym chosen for each participant.

Transitioning at work: Pretransition phase. The pretransition phase included participants' preparation to begin their gender transition in the workplace. Because all participants had previously

come out or had begun their transition outside of work, this process typically included anticipating what it would be like to transition at work, and making preparations for the transition process to begin. Participants described experiencing anxiety prior to coming out. Some participants felt so emotionally overwhelmed with hiding their transgender identity at work that they attempted suicide.

Preparation for transition at work.

Perception of the impossibility of transitioning at work. In the pretransition phase, several participants described feeling that it would be impossible to transition at work, even though participants had already begun transitioning outside of the workplace. Tina, a 47-year-old MTF transsexual woman who is a computer technician in a university setting indicated, "I just wanted to be left alone to do my work and I could work independently . . . Basically, I had no intent or realization that I would transition—it was an impossible dream to me."

Whereas Tina wanted to be left alone and did not even realize that transitioning could occur, Rebecca, a 53-year-old MTF transsexual woman working in retail, indicated that her feelings of hopelessness came from reading about the transition process and feeling that she would not pass as a woman:

Then in August 2005, I went to work at the department store, and they were one of the few organizations that I knew of or know of that had gender identity in their EOE [Equal Opportunity Employer] in their diversity statement . . . but at that point even . . . I thought the idea of transitioning and living full time as a woman was not even on the horizon. It was so far out there. It was a dream farther than the dreams I had when I was 14, wishing I could wake up as a woman. It was like, I'm too far into male to ever get out there. I don't know how girls do that; I had no idea. I'd been on the Internet and I knew transitioning stories, I'd read the books. But, for me, I won't be that lucky, I will never get to that point.

Presenting as natal sex at work. In the pretransition phase, it was common for individuals to present themselves as their biological sex at work, even if they had come out as gender queer, cross-dresser, or transsexual in their personal lives. Although it is intuitive to expect that all participants would have presented as their natal sex before transitioning, this theme is central to work-

Table 1
Negotiating the Work Transition Process

Pretransition	During the transition	Posttransition
Preparation for transition at work Perception of impossibility of transition at work Presenting as natal sex at work	Coming out at work Being outed by others Process of coming out at work First presentation at work Presentation and appearance of transgender status at work Passing at work Retaining sex characteristics Reactions of others at work Acceptance Rejection Mixed reactions	Coming out at work Coming out in job interviews Presentation and appearance of transgender status at work Openness of transgender status at work Personality Reactions of others at work Acceptance Rejection Mixed reactions
Affective and coping experiences Suicidal ideation related to work	Affective and coping experiences Emotional response Coping mechanisms Support	Affective and coping experiences Emotional response Coping mechanisms. Support

place transitioning, as all of the participants described what it was like to present as their natal sex in the workplace. Rebecca described presenting as a man at work, despite spending the rest of her time presenting and identifying as a woman:

I went to work there as a man, and I would work my tail off to get the work I needed to do done as early as possible, and then I would leave work early, run home, and an hour and a half or two hours later I could be Rebecca and would be Rebecca until 6:00 the next morning, and I'd take everything off, go back to Dave, run to work, do my thing.

Preparation for workplace transition. Before deciding to formally come out at work, many participants took different measures to prepare for this process. Several participants described the importance of reading literature and looking on websites in order to find out what the transition process had been like for other transgender individuals. Other participants sought out legal help to find out what the legal ramifications might be if they experienced discrimination. For example, Nina, a 62-year-old MTF transsexual woman who works full time as a teacher, had not yet begun her gender transition at work. As part of her preparation for transitioning full time at work, she sought legal advice from a union lawyer, who advised her to transition at the school where she currently taught. This advice was given because the school may feel loyal toward her, and her students may vouch for her, as she has had a long-standing relationship with the school. Mark, a 44-year-old FTM transsexual man who works as a computer technician, wanted to first discuss his transition with the head of his department:

I walked into the head of our department and I said, "Hey, do you have a few minutes?" . . . I'd rather get flack from the top down, because then I would know where I stand. And he was fine with it.

Affective and coping experiences. The theme of affective and coping experiences emerged from individuals describing how they were dealing with their transgender identity at work, and the anticipation, or actual experience, of being treated with inequality. The process of transitioning at work reveals how perceptions impact the work experience. Participants in this study felt that disclosing their transgender status may negatively impact their work in some way, whether through losing their job, being treated unfairly, or feeling uncomfortable at work. These anticipated reactions resulted in significant anxiety and, occasionally, thoughts that suicide was the only option.

Suicidal ideation related to work. Rebecca described an emotional experience that several of our participants also felt before they came out at work—suicidal ideation. She had been anticipating a negative reaction at work, but was also feeling as though she could not keep her transgender identity a secret any longer:

I dragged myself to work Monday morning, but when my boss came in, she found me curled up in the fetal position on the floor of the kitchen with the chef knives in the kitchen lined up on the table. I was ready to slit my wrists . . . [I went] into her office for an hour and a half, spilled my beans, spilled the guts, and her comment was, "Well, I don't care if you come to work as a woman tomorrow, just as long as you come to work."

During the transition phase. In the During the Transition phase, participants began the transition process at work, beginning with coming out. After coming out at work, participants discussed

what it felt like to present as their true gender at work. Once participants had come out at work, they reported their coworkers' reactions to their identification as transgender and described their experiences of acceptance, rejection, or a mixture of both reactions from individuals in their work environment.

Coming out at work. For our participants, coming-out experiences at work were unique to each individual. However, a common theme emerged, suggesting there was a process involved (e.g., getting ready to tell others, choosing how to dress, and deciding how to prepare for the potential consequences). Julie, a 46-year-old MTF transsexual who works with computers in a correctional facility, described her process as "leaking"—meaning that she gradually started wearing clothing and began talking differently when she was at work. Nathan, a 41-year-old biological male cross-dresser, wore female clothing to work one Halloween, and began wearing women's clothing to work on a daily basis shortly after the holiday.

Being outed by others. All of the participants in this study had come out to at least one or two people before deciding to come out full time, both in their private lives and at work. Although the majority of our participants were able to make the decision of when they decided to tell others at work about their transgender identity, there were several participants whose transgender status was revealed to coworkers and bosses before they were ready to come out. Jody, a 44-year-old MTF transsexual woman who works as a janitor, stated:

I got another job that year, and was able to transition on the job there because of two of my coworkers outed me to my boss . . . I decided to transition . . . and I've been living full time ever since.

Jody described this outing as a positive experience, as she was able to begin her transition full time at work and was able to begin working toward changing her legal documentation (e.g., birth name and sex marker on driver's license). However, Amy, a 46-year-old MTF transsexual woman who is a social worker in the field of corrections, experienced being outed differently. She had come out to her supervisor to let her know that she was beginning her physical transition before coming out to others at work.

I started hormones in about January in 2006, about two years later, my supervisor outed me. My supervisor was at the house of corrections, and her response to this transition was that she really wanted to make this transition be a positive and a good experience for everyone. . . . What that meant was that she was now going to subject me to repeated audits and investigations and interference with my caseload all kinds of accusations, just a witch hunt of stuff, I mean I already had more than 10 years in the department with nothing but the absolute best performance evaluations . . . which completely undermined my ability to supervise those people because now these offenders would come into my office and be like, "So, Amy, are you in trouble?" And ask me questions like that.

Process of coming out at work. It was typical for the participants in this study to have talked to the Human Resources (HR) departments as well as to have contacted their Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) before revealing their transgender identity to all of their coworkers. For many of the participants, this was a positive experience. A number of the HR departments indicated that they had never encountered having a transgender individual transition at their organization. However, these departments were

proactive in finding out how other companies handled the transition process. Additionally, several HR departments set up meetings specifically for all employees to ask questions of the newly transitioning employee. Tina, described above as believing that her transition at work was impossible stated:

Astoundingly supportive, far better than I could have dreamed for . . . There was a meeting called, mandatory for my immediate work group of about 27 people, and you know the VP of the college was there and my supervisors and the boss . . . this guy from the Employees Assistance Program led the meeting and started explaining what he does . . . [he] read this letter that I'm undergoing a gender transition, my name here on out will be Tina.

It should be noted that although many of the participants felt that coming out to HR or to a supervisor first was a good way to begin the coming-out process, several participants did not necessarily feel that it was helpful.

First presentation at work. The first presentation at work was a salient experience for many of the participants in this study. Although many had already come out to HR, superiors, and coworkers, the first time actually presenting as their true gender was memorable. Nathan had been wearing women's shoes to work for some time before he decided to present himself in women's clothing at work, by wearing a skirt, blouse, and heels on Halloween. He gained confidence after this experience and started wearing women's clothing daily a week later. Gina, a 67-year-old MTF who worked in an automotive plant described her experience:

I went back to work [after surgery]. And ooh, did that shit hit the fan. I mean, here, I walk in the door and the aisles were full of people coming out to look me. If God hates a coward, he sure loves me, because it took a lot of courage. . . . I was working in maintenance . . . there were so many people that came to look at the monkey in the cage, that it actually shut the line down.

Presentation and appearance of transgender status at work.

All of the participants in this study described in detail their process of presenting as transgender at work. This process of transitioning for transgender individuals is often very visible; even when an individual does not engage in hormone therapy or undergo sexual reassignment surgery, there may be noticeable changes. For all of the participants in this study, each phase held salient experiences of deciding how to present themselves, physical characteristics they liked or did not like, and how able they were to present themselves as their new identity and fit in or pass.

Passing at work. Passing experiences occurred differently for biologically male versus biologically female participants and also continued along the spectrum of the phases of the transition. Finn (a 27-year-old certified nurse assistant [CNA] and graduate student) and Mark, two participants who identified as FTM transsexuals, reported passing as men before they had come out as men at work. However, most of the MTF transsexual women described difficulty passing by retaining masculine characteristics, such as a low voice. At the time of the research interview, Finn had not yet come out at his job as a CNA. Here, he described cutting his hair short while continuing to identify as female:

They didn't really see it as much different, although the residents often, I mean you're in scrubs, it doesn't really show your body or anything. They thought of me as boy. "You're a young boy to work

here." One of my residents, after I did that recently, she kind of scolded me—"You shouldn't have a short hair cut, it makes you look like a boy," and I wanted to say "Well that's the point!" But I'm not going to say that to a 90-year-old woman.

Retaining sex characteristics. While Mark and Finn describe passing somewhat effortlessly, several of the MTF transsexual participants identify the impact of retaining their masculine characteristics. Typically, these experiences occurred during the transition and in the posttransition phases. Carla, a 44-year-old MTF transsexual woman described the implications of having a deep voice, by providing an example from a job search:

The [phone] interview went fine and everything. They hired me, and so, left my old job and traveled up here. And I went to fill out my paperwork and everything, and I just went in as Carla . . . [my boss said] "Okay, she's all set, ready to start work now." And he's like "What do you mean she?" Because of my voice, they thought they were hiring a man.

Reactions of others at work. This theme describes the different experiences our participants had during or after they came out at work. Although the majority of the participants believed that they would experience difficulty after disclosing their transgender identity to superiors, coworkers, and clients, a major sentiment was that many individuals were treated better than they had expected.

Acceptance. Despite the fact that within the transgender community it is considered a common event to experience discrimination and rejection at work, many of our participants described a climate of acceptance in their work environment. This feeling of acceptance occurred directly after coming out, extended into their overall experience in the same place of employment, and also occasionally when beginning new employment. Words of encouragement and use of correct pronouns were seen as acceptance of transgender identity, as well as accommodating private spaces (locker rooms, bathrooms, etc.), and coworkers and supervisors acting as they would normally. Julie, a 46-year-old MTF transsexual woman who works with computers, described her experience at work after coming out:

I am respected for what I do, because I've been there forever. My workplace experience has generally been a very positive one. It's probably been the single best aspect of all of my transition is being able to keep my job and be myself without any problem.

Tina's story also stood out in this instance because she described the most positive, accepting work environment compared with our other participants. Here, she described coming out at work and the reaction to her disclosure:

I'm thinking to myself "Oh my God, I made a really bad decision, this is going so bad. People, they're not going to accept me." . . . This woman in the back of the room raised her hand and addressed me as Tina and said, "Oh, you know this must be such an incredibly tough thing for you, I really admire your courage and I'm behind you and supporting you 100 percent," and then with one after another after that it just sprung this chain reaction of people giving the same type of sentiments and . . . it was so touching So the meeting was adjourned and instead of everyone filing out of the room, they got in a line and came over and gave me a hug and congratulated me. And I was just absolutely giddy. I was just walking on the clouds the rest of the day.

Rejection. In contrast to the positive encounters some of our participants experienced at work, several participants described being rejected by their coworkers. Half our participants described experiences such as being fired, physically threatened, or emotionally abused at work due to gender identity. Generally, participants described their coworkers' behavior as being different after the participants came out and began their transition at work. Brittany, a 52-year-old MTF woman who works in the brewery industry, described how male gender stereotypes often seen in trade-workers affected the way she was treated after she began her transition:

It was really hard, because I do work with all trades-people, and in trades there's this big macho side that you have to put on. So when I came back, nobody would look at you, and . . . all of a sudden, I was a total outcast.

Whereas Brittany and others described explicit instances of rejection, there were also instances of rejection that felt subtler to some of the participants. Alex, a 27-year-old female-bodied gender queer graduate student, described an instance of being confused about the negative reaction of a classmate:

I had a group project totally implode, and, as best as I can tell, is that something, it was something about my voice changing and me transitioning and me having to pull someone aside and saying, "look, this is what's happening," and she [colleague] could not relate to me . . . it was like she couldn't even verbalize the problem.

Mixed reactions. Julie indicated above that her transition at work has been the best part of her transition. However, she also described being treated differently since beginning her transition. Although she reported being respected for what she does at work, she also believed that respect does not extend to herself as a person. Julie described the concept of being a member of "the club," in that she felt she needed to experience some negative aspects at work in order to be a transgender individual:

I've noticed that I don't have the same respect that I used to. I used to be able to be invited to meetings and people ask my opinion. Not anymore. My mailbox used to be full, not anymore. It's okay though. It's really quite all right. In a certain way, and all this may sound strange, it's actually a good thing because it means that you're paying your dues and you're now a member of the club.

Affective and coping experiences. During the transition, participants reported experiencing a mix of emotions. These emotions were directly related to coming out and presenting as transgender for the first time at work. Generally, participants felt relieved and empowered that they were able to live as their true selves at work. Participants also described the different ways they coped with the negative emotional experiences, such as reframing their situation and using social support.

Emotional response and coping mechanisms. Carla described the process of beginning hormones without coming out to her coworkers first. She compared the difference in emotions before coming out at work and then what it felt like to present as a woman at work.

And I felt really humiliated going through that period just before my transition. I was so awkward. I was starting to grow boobs. I was starting to wear sports bras and stuff that would kind of compress me. . . . So I felt really humiliated and small and powerless during that

time. But then the week that I transitioned, suddenly I felt powerful. And I felt good about myself and everything.

Gina described how she reframed a situation with a coworker who refused to be around her at work after she transitioned:

I was in maintenance, and the person who was supposed to be my partner refused to work with me. . . . I contacted Legal Rights, and found out that there was nothing I could do. So I just kept my mouth shut, did what I had to do. . . . But you take lemons when you make lemonade. So instead of sitting there and saying, "Oh woe is me," you move on. You know, you put it behind you. You try to create a better situation for next time.

Support. Several different types of support were described by our participants. Most of the participants in the middle phase of the transition were using, or had used, therapeutic support. Support from coworkers was described as being particularly helpful. Additionally, romantic partners, friends, and family members were occasionally described as important factors in helping participants cope in this phase. Rebecca described having a counselor support her through the process of coming out at work:

The counselor said, you know, we talked a lot about how I needed to do certain things to feel female—make-up, hair, cosmetics, dress, prosthetics—and that that wouldn't work working in a hot kitchen. So, I needed a job transfer as well as a job transition. So, she wrote a letter explaining that, and that's what I presented to the employer to explain why, to give the medical reasons for accommodating me under the gender identity, and I thought I'd have a fight, but I didn't. They came back and said well, we happen to have a full-time position in women's accessories, we're going to hold it open for you.

Posttransition phase. In the posttransition phase, presentation as transgender remained important, but manifested itself in how open the participants decided they would be if they changed employment. Participants also discussed passing at work, and feelings of wanting to fit in, just as they had in the previous phase of their transition. The emotional and coping experiences described were also similar to the previous phase, though there was more hindsight about disappointment or wishing events had occurred differently.

Coming out at work.

Coming out in job interviews. When the participants described their transitioning process at work and what it was like to come out at work, they generally described what it was like the *first* time. Most of the participants in our study did not begin their transition process until they were in the middle stages of their life, thus most of them had been working for a period of time before they first came out. For participants who were in the later stages of their transition, they had the experience of contemplating coming out again when looking for new employment.

Although it is illegal for a job interviewer to ask a potential employee about gender status, the participants in this study weighed the pros and cons of coming out without being prompted by the interviewer. Some of the participants felt that they did not pass well enough, and, thus, the interviewer would be able to identify their transgender status regardless. However, many of the participants felt that they would be placed at a disadvantage if they disclosed their transgender status up front in the interview. Carla said:

And so what I've been doing now, a couple places, they call, and one of the first questions they ask is: "Have you had any former names?" . . . I said "I'm sure you probably noticed I had a male name before, and I said I'm a transgender woman, and I've been working as a woman for two years now." But I disclose this only because some companies think I'm trying to deceive them . . . for me, it seems like when I've done that, at least they'll have a dialogue with me afterwards. . . . At least if I'm being honest about it, some of them seem willing to give me a chance.

Presentation and appearance of transgender status at work.

Openness of transgender status at work. In the posttransition phase, there were several different avenues our transgender participants used to identify as transgender at work. There was a distinct difference between coming out and presenting openly as transgender, and wanting to identify as stealth. For example, Nathan's identification as a male cross-dresser makes him extremely visible at work, and he embraces this visibility. However, many of the transsexual individuals who had reached the posttransition phase wanted to be known as their current gender rather than as transgender—this identification is also known as being *stealth*.

Personality. In the posttransition phase, an additional aspect of presentation that was apparent to several participants was a change in their personality at work. Typically, this change in personality was noticed during the transition process, but reflected on more as the participant progressed in their transition. Tina described this experience:

When I transitioned at work, I became an entirely different person, an entirely different personality. I did an absolute turn around and became very open, very much an open book . . . emotional, very social. I go to parties with coworkers, and you know I'm accepted as Tina Yeah, I'm actually a nicer person now.

Reactions of others at work. Reactions described in this phase were similar to those described in the During the Transition phase. Because the participants were consistently meeting new coworkers, changing careers, and interacting with new clients on a daily basis, many of the reactions in the previous phase are applicable here as well. The main difference in this phase included the types of emotions experienced based on reactions of others. Additionally, our participants coped differently with others' reactions in this phase. The main difference between the previous phase and the Posttransition phase for this theme was that others became more accepting as they grew accustomed to the participants' gender transitions. For example, Nathan discussed his coworkers as steadily becoming more used to his female attire and eventually complimenting him about his clothing choices.

Affective and coping experiences. In the posttransition phase, participants also described mixed emotions; however, these emotions typically occurred after they had openly identified as transgender for a period of time.

Emotional response. In the posttransition phase, many of the emotional experiences described by the participants were either positive or negative, based on their current employment status. Most participants who remained in the same work environment described positive experiences and feelings of contentment. However, those participants with changing employment statuses described mostly negative emotional experiences. These emotional experiences were occasionally due to job loss, looking for new

employment, and the frustration of the job search. Jody described the worst time she had experienced emotionally:

Probably when I was desperate for work. I was really trying to find work. And I was back on unemployment, and I was really desperate for work. I was actually thinking about detransitioning somewhat That was probably one of my low points.

Coping mechanisms. In this phase, participants discussed coping mechanisms, such as staying true to themselves and considering themselves lucky for the experiences they've had while transitioning. Alex coped by trying to stay true to an identity, regardless of the complications he anticipated might come along the way:

I don't think it's possible for me to have a trans identity or gender identity without being out or that includes being closeted in any way. And so, I'm sure things will be more complicated for me, but it doesn't mean that I'm not going to do what I'm doing, and I feel like I have a good sense that I'm not asking for anything that is unreasonable. And so I'm going to continue to ask for things that are reasonable.

Support. Just as in the middle phase, any type of support was thought to be helpful. However, support that was needed as participants began transitioning manifested differently than support needed later on. For example, Jody began a new job where she had been hired on as a woman. In response to the type of support she received at work, she responded:

I have to say that when I was hired, they were very manageable, very concerned that being a woman, I would fit in. Because there are no other women on the crew . . . [my boss said] "If you have any harassment or anything, come to me right away, and I'll stop it. (Name of company) has a very tough antiharassment policy."

Structure of the Work Transition Model

On the basis of the themes that emerged from the grounded theory analysis, a model for the process of transitioning at work was suggested (see Figure 1). To capture the developmental nature of the transition, this model is drawn in a linear fashion; the pretransitioning phase begins on the left to indicate that this is the first aspect of the transition process at work. In the pretransitioning phase, all of our participants had already come out to at least one

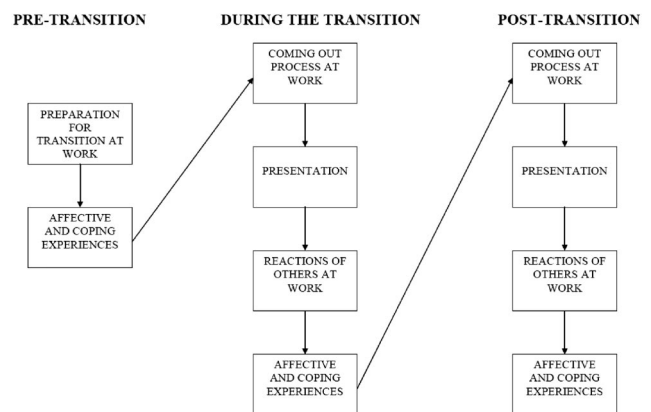


Figure 1. Negotiating the work transition process.

person in their personal lives, but were negotiating what it would be like to come out at work. In the model, the preparation for the transition at work is directly related to affective and coping mechanisms. While preparing for their transitions, the participants described a substantial amount of anxiety and negative emotions. Typically, our participants' affective and coping experiences were related to the anticipation of coming out at work—for example, Rebecca's suicidal ideation and almost-suicide attempt at work directly led to coming out to her boss at work.

After experiencing affective and coping mechanisms in the pretransition phase, our participants described moving into the next stage—during the transition. When participants came out at work, they usually first began by telling close coworkers, their supervisors, or the HR department. This process typically involved participants first discussing their options of coming out at work full time and discussing the timeline of being able to express their gender identity (through make-up, clothing, length of hair, etc.). In the model, the presentation of participants' current gender identity proceeds directly to workplace reactions to this first presentation. The participants described their coworkers and supervisors as having either positive or negative reactions—and sometimes both within the same organization. On the basis of the types of workplace reactions that were perceived by the participants in this study as well as the relief of coming out, they described corresponding affective and coping experiences. Coming out was directly related to affective and coping experiences in that participants felt as though they were no longer living with a secret. They felt relief and joy at being able to express themselves for who they truly were. Those participants who experienced positive reactions at work experienced more positive emotions and coping mechanisms; on the other hand, negative reactions were directly related to experiencing negative emotions and coping mechanisms.

The model also indicates that the affective and coping experiences in the During the Transition phase led to the third and final phase in the model—Posttransition. At this stage, participants had coped with their first coming-out experiences and had been presenting as their current gender at work for some time. Because the nature of transgender identity requires that participants will most likely need to come out for the rest of their lives, this was described as the first aspect of the posttransition phase. Coming out in job interviews to prospective new employers was described as being a new experience that brought new emotions and coping processes. Additionally, after coming out in a new job or to new people, many participants discussed their presentation, looking qualitatively different than when they first came out. When participants experienced positive coworker reactions in this phase, they described feelings of contentedness. However, when they had been searching for employment or had been fired, participants described negative emotional experiences directly related to the process of coming out in the latter stage of their transition process.

Career Decision Making

Though the participants in this study described their particular experiences of gender transitioning at work, a separate process of career decision making was also derived from the data (see Table 2). Six themes were revealed for this process: occupational barriers, occupational prospects, occupational aspirations, taking action, occupational gratification, and contextual influences.

Table 2
Career Decision-Making Process

Major theme	Subtheme
Occupational barriers	Direct discrimination Job loss due to transgender identity Difficulty gaining employment Bathroom discrimination Gender stereotypes Working harder as compensation for transgender status
Occupational prospects	Unattainable careers
Occupational aspirations	Location affects career aspirations Future ideal occupation No career aspirations
Taking action	Training in new skills Activism/educating others
Occupational gratification	Occupational security Loyalty to occupation Ideal workplace benefits
Contextual Influences	Gender Socialization

Occupational barriers. The main theme that emerged regarding career decision making was how our participants perceived potential and experienced actual barriers at work. Our participants indicated several different types of barriers, with the overarching understanding that prejudice and discrimination were the underlying causes of each barrier.

Overt discrimination. Several of our participants reported instances of overt discrimination at the hands of their coworkers and other individuals in their work environment. For example, Amy described a relatively tolerant work environment, reporting instances in which she needed to conduct her job outside of the work environment and the discrimination she experienced in these instances:

The director of services at the county jail refused to allow me entry into the jail because . . . prior to our meeting, he had talked to two of his neighbor ladies and asked them if they would feel comfortable being taught a class by a trans woman, and they had told him that they would feel “icky.” And so he refused me to enter the jail—I’m overseeing the program, but I can’t enter the jail.

To our participants, name-calling, destruction of property, and deliberate use of former names or pronouns were extremely difficult to handle emotionally. Brittany indicated that her coworkers destroyed her property, linking this destruction with her coworkers' negative reaction to her transgender identity. Erin, a 46-year-old MTF transsexual student who previously worked in construction, described her terrifying and disturbing instance of discrimination:

Right after I went back to work when money ran out and I couldn't transition . . . my friend divulged the fact that I was transgender, and a bunch that I was working with decided they were gonna have fun with me, and over a period of about a month I was attacked and sexually assaulted by these guys. That pretty much that really messed me up bad. For about a year and a half to two years, I didn't work anywhere. I was homeless. I slept where I could find a place, wherever I could find a corner where I thought I could protect myself. I was pretty messed up for a while.

Job loss due to transgender identity. Although all of our participants expressed worry about losing a job due to their identity, for a number of individuals in our study, this worry became a reality. Typically, the job loss was explained by employers as being attributed to other factors, such as budget cuts or improper conduct at work. The participants who experienced this kind of job loss indicated that the employer's reasoning did not make sense, such as having seniority over others when there were budget cuts, and not understanding where the improper conduct occurred. Also included in this category was resignation due to discrimination on the job. Jody described her experience of being fired:

I learned the hard way . . . they fired me. They trumped up some charges against me, harassing other employees . . . asked me to resign. And I didn't. I called legal, and they told me that's a classic discrimination case. I lacked the money for legal help, so I couldn't pursue it.

Haley, a 49-year-old MTF transsexual woman who studies massage therapy, indicated that she lost her job because her emotions were so overwhelming due to her transition status. She had been experiencing suicidal ideation due to the difficulty of her transition:

It was very much, as close as I've ever come to [suicide], and I have handguns, and it wouldn't be hard for me to finish myself off. I didn't want to let it beat me. I felt very alone and very broken up for quite awhile. And that's probably why I lost the job at (name of company) too because I wasn't very good mentally on the job even.

Difficulty gaining employment. Just as our participants' transgender status may have caused them to be unemployed, they also experienced difficulty in regaining employment after experiencing job loss. This difficulty was occasionally due to not passing as their preferred gender in job interviews. Additionally, background checks that employers use also reveal the individuals' transgender status (due to previous names and gender markers).

Jody, a 44-year-old MTF transsexual who works as a custodian at a newspaper, described her experience before she was offered her current position:

It's been tough finding work as a female, because I think employers are able to read me as transgender, and that's a big disqualifier. Even though it's illegal in [city] to discriminate . . . there are other more qualified candidates or something like that employers argue. But I fly-in with stellar credentials, in many cases and excellent resume, etc., because I was getting interviews, but I wasn't getting offers.

Bathroom discrimination. Many of our participants also described problems with using the bathroom at work, as they wanted to use the bathroom of their new gender and were either told that this was not a possibility or received complaints from coworkers. Some participants agreed to use unisex bathrooms, others felt that it was a trite complaint, and others feared for their safety when using the bathroom of their biological sex.

Gender stereotypes. Although our participants indicated feeling as though they were discriminated against due to their transgender status, many of our participants described feeling the double discrimination of being both transgender and female. For example, even though Robin identifies as gender queer, her body looks female, and she is treated as a female. She indicated that the men at work would not allow her to do hard labor and required her to prune flowers instead of doing the more labor-based landscap-

ing work. Brittany described working in a stereotypically male environment and how she was treated after she transitioned to be a woman:

I'm a blonde, I'm sitting there, and "oh, here's some paperwork you can do." It still gets to you because it really hurts, and it undermines your self-esteem. . . . So pretty much it's like going from being a White male professional and being respected, to not only being treated down at the bottom of the totem pole because you're a woman, you're like a subclass of a woman. So you're at the bottom of the barrel.

Working harder as compensation for transgender status. Along with gender socialization issues, another societal factor described by our participants was the concept that transgender individuals will work harder for less money just to show that they are just as good as other workers. Gina stated:

Every job that I did, I gave it 110%, 120%. As a rule, transgender people would be willing to give way above what a normal person would do, whatever normal is, and would bust their hind end if they're just given a chance to be a productive citizen.

Occupational prospects. One question asked of the participants was: Do you feel like you can have any job you want? The majority of our participants responded with a resounding no. Julie's response indicated the importance of passing when she considers attempting to find another job and the devastating impact this has had on her life:

I don't pass, so there are a lot of jobs where people wouldn't hire me because I look strange. Actually, if I lost this job. I don't know if I could get any other job. Maybe dishwashing or something. I don't think I could have many jobs in the public eye, and other jobs would be hard. So, no. If I lose this job, I'd think about the gun.

Robin described specific types of work she felt she would not be able to have because of the implications of working closely with people, especially children:

I think there are plenty of jobs where I just wouldn't even dream of trying to get, trying to be apart of. . . . I'd be hard-pressed to find anything where I'm working with children . . . or anything where I'm going to be working very closely [with people], like customer service or something, I might not be the image they want to have representing their company.

On the other end of the spectrum, Mark described an entirely different experience than what most of our participants illustrated. When asked if he thought he could have any job he wanted, he stated, "I don't feel like I'm limited by my gender, by my transition. In fact, I probably have more choices now . . . would have a much harder job blending in as a woman a lot of times." As a follow-up question, he was asked whether he had more choices as a trans man now than he did as a woman. He responded by saying, "Oh yeah, definitely, I think I would, I think that if I'd started it a lot sooner, I would be making a lot more money now." Our other FTM participant, Finn, described a different experience, in that he is working in a traditionally female career and is worried when he transitions to being a man that he might not have respect in the workplace.

Occupational aspirations. Participants were asked how their career aspirations would be different if they did not identify as transgender. The majority of the participants indicated that their

career choices would be based more on interest, and it would be easier to gain employment if they did not identify as transgender. Hayley indicated that being transgender and dealing with the emotional experience of her pretransition distracted her from attaining her undergraduate degree in architecture. Others discussed what it would be like had their identity fallen more in alignment with society's expectations. Kate, a 46-year-old MTF transsexual woman, elaborated:

It would be a lot easier. Obviously, it still would be not as easy because women still do not have the equality in the workplace that they should with men. I'd still face that, but it would be a little better if I didn't have the transgender issues to deal with.

Additionally, participants described specific types of employment that were unattainable. Occasionally, the type of employment differed on the basis of the location (rural vs. urban, or legal protection). Also described were careers that seemed very available and desirable, either because of, or despite the discrimination experienced due to a transgender identity. Some participants indicated that they were happy with their current employment and did not wish to think of any other career aspirations.

Unattainable careers. Many of our participants described a feeling that there were many employment situations that would not be attainable, due to their transgender identity. Thus far, in the Results section for career decision making, themes of barriers and lack of access to employment have been described. The theme of unattainable careers is composed of specific types of employment that were considered to be unavailable. Robin indicated that, as a gender queer person, she felt it would be more difficult for her to work with children or work in customer service. Amy reported that it would be impossible for her to work in a jail, based on the discriminatory experiences she described above. Stereotypically masculine jobs, such as lumberjack and railroad worker, were seen as unattainable to Rachel (a 52-year-old MTF transsexual woman who works as a computer technician). Staying in the U.S. Army was seen as a definite impossibility for Hayley, and working as a Boy Scout leader was a laughable prospect for Robin. All of these potential careers were seen as unattainable, not because of a lack of training or interest, but because of discrimination and negative reactions from other individuals.

Location affects career aspirations. This group of participants was unique, in that they were recruited from the only two counties in their home state that included employment protections for transgender individuals within their equal protection laws. Many of the participants indicated that they had moved to their current cities because of the employment protection that was offered. Even if there was employment available elsewhere, participants discussed not wanting to move away due to the lack of legal protection, or of more conservative community ideals. Finn indicated that he felt that both legal protections and community ideals make a difference in his occupational aspirations:

I've told my partner I want to stay in the city because . . . a nondiscrimination thing was just passed . . . I feel that certain suburbs, certain small towns are like homophobic and transphobic. So I don't want to apply for a job where I don't think they're going to accept me.

Future ideal occupation. Just as there were specific careers that seemed unattainable, there were specific careers that did seem

attainable and ideal for our participants. Many of our participants felt they were constantly teaching and educating the public about transgender issues and that their experiences with this process helped them come to the conclusion that teaching, in some form, would be a good profession. In alignment with aspiring for teaching positions, many of the participants also indicated they would seek positions that allowed them to be activists simultaneously, such as working at LGBT community centers or starting up agencies for transgender individuals.

No change in career aspirations. Although all of our participants described barriers and discrimination within the workplace, there were a few participants who indicated that their career aspirations did not change based on their transgender identification. Mark, who said that he experienced a relatively smooth transition on the job, indicated he had accomplished what he wanted with his career and did not believe his aspirations would be different. He also acknowledged that he works in the computer industry, which can be more amenable to those who identify in a masculine way. Other participants who said their aspirations were not different based on their identity said that they have followed the same career path both before and after identifying as transgender, so they had not noticed a change.

Taking action. After describing barriers, expectations, and career aspirations, our participants indicated that the next step would be to take action related to employment. Taking Action was a theme that encompassed both taking action in finding/gaining employment and also any action taken while at their current place of employment.

Training in new skills. Several of our participants discussed the impact of education on the importance of gaining employment. Many of our participants were in training programs of some kind during the period of time that the interviews were conducted. Additionally, those who were not in school indicated a desire to go to college in order to obtain skills needed for a different career. Erin stated,

I deserve this education, I'm working hard for it. It'll get me where I need to go and where I want. I have a long way to go in my transition. There's no way I'm going to earn that money working in the construction field and transition at the same time.

Rachel and Haley were both attending technical programs, and taking such courses as keyboarding lessons, or going to massage therapy school. Alex and Finn were both in graduate school in order to gain a better specialization in their chosen fields.

Activism/educating others. Most of our participants indicated that activism and public education to raise awareness of transgender issues is of great importance, both in their private lives and in their places of employment. Although a small number of our participants were not out at work, they noted the importance of other transgender individuals advocating for the transgender community to make the transition process easier for those who had not yet come out. Additionally, activism manifested itself in changing policies to promote transgender equality within an organization. Tina stated:

I lobbied our union to change the language in the contract, and it was renegotiated effective July 1 of this past year, and they did add gender identity protection in the union contract, so that's a pretty big victory for me.

Occupational gratification. While our participants discussed their career decision-making process, they also spoke to what allowed them to be happy in their current positions, as well as characteristics of employment they would like for the future. Most of the participants were employed at the time of their interviews and spoke to the satisfaction they received from their current positions. Participants also referred to experiences from past employment and thought about what future employment characteristics that would be gratifying. For this question, participants were asked whether they considered their work to be ideal. Typically, participants described both the pros and cons of their position—with the cons having been described in the Occupational barriers section. The positive aspects of work were described as an overall gratification with employment, such as expressing a sentiment of liking the work in general and feeling satisfied. An additional subtheme of occupational gratification involved a sense of job security, most often resulting from involvement with a union. Job security may especially be important to transgender individuals because of the discrimination and prevalent job loss that is well known for this population.

Contextual influences. The final theme that emerged in the career decision-making model for transgender individuals involved contextual influences on the decision-making process. Although there are many different contextual influences that may impact factors unique to individuals, the overarching contextual influence that impacted our participants was gender socialization. Although transgender individuals may be more open to challenging traditional gender socialization, participants still reported a limited understanding of the types of work that were available to them based on their chosen gender identity. Many of the MTF transsexual individuals described feeling that they would need to find a job that was more suitable to their new female identity. In addition to finding a job that would fit a female stereotype, Rebecca indicated: “Working in retail, I feel I have gotten socialization in the new gender in a year or two what may take another [trans] girl five or six years to get.” Brittany elucidated:

Most people don't think they have that kind of skill base. Because if they think of you as a woman, there's no way you can do this. . . . So I just do something within my technical expertise now? Do I go into something, I hate to put it that way because it's almost like a sexist type view, female-oriented job? So I don't know what I should be looking for, I'd be totally at a loss.

Structure of the career decision-making model. Separate from the work transitioning model, a model also emerged from the career decision-making themes (see Figure 2). Barriers are presented on the left side as the focal point of the model—although each participant talked about their own unique career decision-making process, it was clear that barriers were at the forefront of their minds when thinking about how coming out as transgender would impact their current/future employment. Descriptions of perceived and experienced barriers were pervasive throughout the interviews, and therefore the next step in the model indicates that barriers lead directly to perceptions of occupational prospects. Even if the participants had not felt they had experienced firsthand discrimination and/or barriers, they still felt that being transgender directly impacted their employment prospects.

After describing their occupational prospects, participants discussed their aspirations of attaining specific occupations. In the

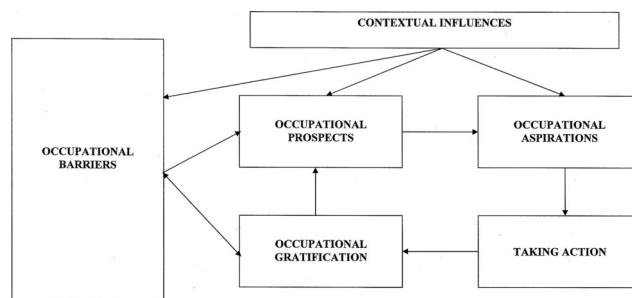


Figure 2. Career decision-making model.

model, prospects lead directly to aspirations. Participants described having fewer occupational prospects after coming out, and thus felt that their career decision making was narrowed. Taking action follows occupational aspirations in the model, and leads directly to occupational gratification. Many of the participants discussed the appreciation gained from having employment. In the model, there is a bidirectional line that links occupational gratification to barriers. The fewer barriers perceived or experienced, the more occupational gratification was experienced, and vice versa. Contextual influences were placed at the top of the model, and these contextual influences affect barriers, occupational prospects, and aspirations.

Discussion

This study explored the work experiences of transgender individuals. Our findings provide what we believe to be the first empirical psychological analysis of career development and workplace issues for the transgender population. Our findings elucidate the transition and career decision-making experiences of transsexual, cross-dressing, and gender queer individuals. Two separate processes emerged from our grounded theory analysis: (a) process of transitioning at work and (b) career decision making.

The separate stages of the work transitioning model are essential to understanding the thought processes, behavioral aspects, emotional experiences, and coping mechanisms of transgender individuals in their transition process. One of the core important findings from the model indicates that transitioning while at work is a distinct process from transitioning in one's private life. This finding is likely due to most of our sample beginning their gender transition at later stages in life, when their employment had been well established. A younger sample composed of individuals who had begun transitioning during childhood or adolescence would begin their work experiences already having integrated their transgender identity into the work process. Several studies regarding gay and lesbian experiences of coming out at work indicate that the degree of outness in nonwork life predicted the level of disclosure of sexual identity at work (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Although the gay, lesbian, and bisexual experience at work is quite distinct from gender transitioning, both populations have the unique experience of coming out at work. Our results are consistent with the work of Griffith and Hebl's in that our participants came out to at least one person before making the decision to come out at work.

Several factors were identified in the model that appear to facilitate a positive beginning to transitioning at work. One of

these facilitative factors was having an HR department that is knowledgeable about transgender employment issues. If an HR department was open-minded and willing to research the process, they were deemed helpful. An additional factor was the manner in which information about the transition was communicated to the company, such as e-mails to all company employees and setting up meetings for the coworkers and supervisors of the transitioning individual.

Although there were factors that facilitated the transition, factors that hindered the process were related to negative reactions from individuals within the place of employment. Schilt and Connell (2007) noted that when transsexual individuals transition in the workplace, coworkers, as well as the transsexual individuals, must learn to renegotiate difference. Other research has shown that, even when coworkers appear to be accepting, the mere introduction of transgender individuals in the workplace is not enough to change coworkers' thoughts about gender as a societal construct (Schilt & Connell, 2007). Our own biases were apparent, as we were surprised that many of our participants had experienced a better work reaction than anticipated. There are several reasons for our anticipated response of negative reactions of coworkers. First, as there is an overall climate of intolerance in the United States for protections of gender identity (e.g., change in the ENDA), the perception is that workplace environments are also intolerant. Although we were excited that more of our participants had better workplace experiences than anticipated, it is devastating that half our participants described rejection and discrimination at work. It is unacceptable that many of our participants had been fired, physically threatened, or emotionally abused at work as a result of their gender identity.

The work transitioning model provides a theoretical framework for understanding the transitioning processes for transgender individuals in the workplace. It also provides information regarding facilitative and hindering aspects of their gender transitioning process. Conversely, the career decision-making model elucidates knowledge of how transgender individuals think about the types of careers that are available to them, as well as the process that has facilitated or hindered them. Because several of the interview questions were derived from SCCT, the model that emerged from the data confirms several aspects of the model that Lent et al. (1994) theorized for general populations, though there are several substantial differences. Lent et al. (1994) theorize that, in SCCT, personal inputs and background are in the beginning of the career decision-making process and provide context for making decisions. For the participants in this study, barriers were most likely at the forefront because the participants (except for Robin, a 20-year-old student) had been employed full time for at least several years before expressing their current gender identity at work. Most of the participants had already been through a career decision-making process without considering their transgender identity—the model presented in this article pertains specifically to transgender individuals because their views on employment changed substantially after coming out as transgender. As many transgender individuals do not have legal protections in the workplace, it is understandable that many worry about or actually experienced job loss due to their transgender status, as well as felt as though they needed to work harder to keep their employment.

In SCCT, Lent et al. (1994) described outcome expectations as being a part of the career decision-making process. The concept of

occupational prospects from this study is very similar to Lent et al.'s description of outcome expectations. However, in the current model, barriers lead directly to occupational prospects without the inclusion of learning experiences or self-efficacy, as in Lent et al.'s model. The findings from this particular aspect of the study are indicative of the effect of discrimination and prejudice upon transgender individuals—most of the participants felt they could not have any type of employment they desired as a direct result of their gender identity. Although other studies have shown that self-efficacy, not contextual factors, are related to outcome expectations (e.g., Ali, McWhirter, & Chronister, 2005), occupational prospects in this study appear very different for transgender individuals.

Many of our participants' aspirations changed after coming out as transgender. This is a unique process that is difficult to compare with most other individuals' career decision-making experiences. Many minority groups are visible minorities, and may openly identify at a young age as a minority. In comparison, our participants' identities were not apparent until a later age in their lives. Thus, career aspirations changed for many of our participants. In SCCT, interests and goals directly follow outcome expectations. In this model, occupational aspirations are somewhat similar, in that participants continued to discuss the types of careers they were interested in and their goals. However, these were also discussed within the context of their transgender identity, such as seeking out employment related to educating others on transgender issues or engaging in political or activist work. Chung and Harmon (1994) found that gay men aspired to more nontraditional careers than their heterosexual counterparts. Although our sample should not be compared with gay men, it is of importance that sexual and gender minority groups may choose nontraditional or activist careers in order to help others' future employment processes.

Like SCCT, our model conveys a process in which occupational prospects are evaluated, aspirations are made, and taking specific action follows. Though the evaluation of occupational prospects and aspiration formation components of this article's proposed career decision-making model have thus far differed substantially from those described in SCCT, the theme of taking action follows Lent et al.'s (1994) theory fairly closely. However, the examples given by the participants indicate a complex process in which, although taking into account their transgender identity, the participants also evaluated which actions to take. For example, in SCCT, action is directly related to seeking employment. In our study, that was partially the case as many participants also described the role of activism and education. This information appeared to help the participants make sense of, and cope with, the discrimination and prejudice they experienced throughout their transition process.

Although the taking action theme in the present study fits neatly into Lent et al.'s (1994) SCCT model, the next step in our proposed model—occupational gratification—deviates from SCCT. This is most likely due to the previous components of our model, in which participants evaluated their barriers and possibilities for future employment and described either feeling grateful for being employed (if they were currently employed) or finding satisfaction in their day-to-day work.

Contextual influences, although sharing a similar name to the construct in Lent et al.'s (1994) model, was very specific for the particular population in our study. The most common apparent contextual influence was gender socialization. Gender socializa-

tion could be seen as exacerbating barriers, and limiting occupational prospects and aspirations, especially if the participants felt that certain occupations were no longer relevant or possible according to their personal ideas of traditional gender roles and the types of careers available to men and women. A number of our MTF participants described feeling that they now needed to look for work more applicable to women. Betz's (1993) research indicates that men are less likely to hold liberal views than women about women's roles and women's career commitment. Though the SCCT model contends that contextual influences impact goals and actions, our proposed model suggests that contextual influences play a larger role in the transgender individual's career decision-making process, as these contextual influences impact every aspect of the model.

Limitations and future research directions. One of the advantages of the present study is that it is the first of its kind in the field of psychology to examine transsexual, gender queer, and cross-dresser's experiences in the workplace. However, with this advantage comes a limitation: Our small sample was fairly heterogeneous. It may be difficult to reach saturation with a sample that has differences among gender identities. However, we believe that the importance of starting to gain understanding of this population's workplace and career experiences outweigh the possible disadvantages that may come from heterogeneity. Future studies may want to focus on each of these transgender identities separately to determine whether there are any within-group phenomena that may be attributed to each gender identity. This may be especially important for gender queer individuals, where gender identity exists outside of the dichotomous categories of man and woman. It may be that coworkers will have an easier time grasping the concept of switching from male to female, or vice versa, but the general public could have more difficulty with the concept of gender existing on a spectrum. As a result, it may be the case that transgender individuals who identify within the bounds of the gender binary may experience greater privilege than those who identify as neither fully man nor fully female. The purpose of the present study was to generate theory regarding transitioning and decision-making processes for transgender individuals. However, future research should focus on the specific experiences of subgroups of transgender individuals in order to determine whether processes may look different for the separate groups. Our sample was also predominantly White and Native American, which may mean that our results are mostly applicable to these populations. Additionally, our sample included individuals who resided in the Midwest, with a possible oversampling of rural communities. It could be helpful to extend this particular study to a quantitative nationwide sample in order to determine whether there is generalizability. A nationwide sample would provide a better determination of the differences between more gender inclusive cities. A larger sample may also provide a better representation of ethnic/racial minority groups that have not been represented in this study.

An additional limitation lies in the recruitment of transgender individuals for a qualitative study. Because this population experiences marginalization and transgender identities can remain invisible, the sample most likely represents those individuals who were comfortable telling their stories, and was perhaps not a sample of individuals with different experiences and who may have been fearful of the implications of participating in a study of this nature.

Although we may have some understanding of the coping mechanisms of the transitioning and career decision-making processes for transgender individuals in the workplace, it is unclear how transgender individuals overcome psychological distress associated with coming out at work. This specific study did not ask questions about the affective and coping experiences of transgender individuals—despite not being asked, participants provided information regarding these experiences. Out of all of the themes in this study, the affective and coping experiences were described in less detail. This is most likely due to the fact that participants were not specifically asked about these types of experiences. It is of great note that these types of experiences were discussed, despite not being asked questions about emotions and coping mechanisms. This indicates the importance of the emotional process in transitioning genders while in the workplace. Future research should specifically target the types of coping mechanisms used during the transition process at work to better explore the emotional experiences of those transitioning at work and how they cope with that process.

Another limitation of this study was that information regarding the length of time it took individuals to transition in the workplace was not gathered; there was also no follow-up to see how the participants had made further changes in their transition process at work. An additional research question that would be pertinent for future research with this population would be to determine whether there are themes in the length of time it takes for individuals to transition at the workplace. Because this study was exploratory in nature and focused more on the processes of the work transition, specific information about the timeline of the transition is unknown.

Future research projects should delve more into how the intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity impacts career decision making and identification at work. It was not the purpose of the present study to examine sexual orientation, as we wanted to focus on gender identity exclusively; however, the two identities can be intertwined and may provide a rich understanding of how the intersection of sexual identity and gender identity impact work experiences simultaneously.

Counseling implications. Several authors (O'Neil et al., 2008; Pepper & Lorah, 2008) in vocational psychology have called for research to be conducted with the transgender population regarding their work experiences. This study is a first step in addressing issues that have been long ignored. Until transgender issues become more of a priority for psychologists and employers, there will be little motivation to make political changes, such as modifying the ENDA bill to include the transgender population. Additionally, vocational psychologists who seek multicultural competence will need to accommodate the transgender population. Counseling psychologists and other mental health professionals need to be aware of the unique challenges that transgender individuals face when they begin the transition process in their workplace. As Pepper and Lorah (2008) suggest, the first step should be for counselors to educate themselves on the terminology of the transgender community. Additionally, it is essential that counselors understand that transitioning is a complex, dynamic process. Counselors need to be aware that even the notion of "transition" can differ from person to person. While some individuals may be looking to medically transition by way of hormone therapy and/or surgeries, others' final goal may only be to change the pronouns

they go by, or the clothes that are worn on a day-to-day basis. To that end, counselors should discuss what “transitioning” means to their client and work with the client to accomplish stated goals, with special attention given to transitioning in the workplace.

Counselors should be acutely aware of transgender clients’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination in the workplace, ranging from loss of employment to negative and sometimes even violent reactions from coworkers. Transgender individuals, lacking legal protection in most areas of the United States, often fear employment discrimination when transitioning at work. Even if transgender individuals are able to maintain employment, they must still contend with the potential prejudice of coworkers. For those individuals who have yet to transition in the workplace, counselors must help clients to face fears of discrimination and discuss coping with negative experiences at work.

Though research literature discussing sexual minority issues often briefly touches on transgender issues, the transgender experience is far more distinctive from other sexual minority issues than past research has suggested. Despite many similarities, transgender individuals face challenges that are unique from those faced by LGB individuals, particularly in the workplace. These fundamental differences should be at the forefront of counselors’ minds as they work with transgender clients. In summary, counselors should help transgender clients discuss their emotions associated with transitioning in the workplace, help clients explore different career paths, if needed, and help clients cope with experiences of prejudice and discrimination that may occur in the workplace.

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