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Trans*forming College Classrooms into Gender-Inclusive Spaces:

A Case Study Amplifying Transgender Students' Voices

by

Carley R. Stieg

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2022

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UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

Trans*forming College Classrooms into Gender-Inclusive Spaces:
A Case Study Amplifying Transgender Students' Voices

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative, multiple case study examined the factors that affect classroom experiences of trans* college students in the United States pursuing associate, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degrees. Participants included 19 students with a variety of trans identities attending various institutions across the United States. I conducted initial interviews with each participant at the beginning of the spring 2021 semester, collected monthly written reflections throughout the semester, and conducted a final interview with each participant at the end of the term. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus, interviews were conducted virtually. I used open coding to analyze the interview transcripts and reflections, then identified categories and themes. Analysis revealed five themes: Navigating gender identity, the power of language, the trans* tax, the (mis)education of sex and gender, and community. I interpreted the findings using Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory and queer theory. This study provides many recommendations to stakeholders, including instructors, institutions of higher education, students, families, and more.

Keywords: transgender, trans, gender identity, inclusion, college students, higher education, ecological systems theory, queer theory*

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

Mom and Dad,

I am standing on your shoulders. I have reached this milestone because of your endless support of my education and dreams. Thank you for helping me get here and encouraging me along the way. Our family has always been my strongest support. We are strong and whole and beautiful because you love fiercely and unconditionally. Thank you, it means the world. I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

What is your gender story? From an early age in the 1990s, I distrusted how society made assumptions about family structures and gender roles—having a working mom and stay-at-home dad made my family different from what I saw in the mainstream narrative and my friends' experiences. When teachers, friends, or relatives commented that only mothers enjoyed cooking or baking, for example, I cringed because it never fit my reality. As a woman, I did not want society to bind me to that same expectation. I did not understand why someone's gender should dictate much of their life, and I wondered how so many people could take something so false at face value. While I had apparent issues with prescribed gender roles and expectations at a young age, which I now understand as sexism, I did not yet question the policing of gender as a binary construct, which I now realize as genderism.

As a young adult, I learned more about gender variance and identities outside of the gender binary. In my educational preparation to become a student affairs professional, I learned a lot about gender identities and diversity. Each of our gender identities, stories, and experiences are different; yet, those who are a part of the trans* community face additional barriers, including frequent misgendering by other people. This new way of understanding gender made sense to me. I grew up with trans* siblings in a time and place where the language surrounding trans identities was not accessible to us. Learning language to describe non-binary and trans* experiences was empowering, and both of my siblings have come out as adults.

As I continue to listen and learn about many varied transgender experiences, I continually reflect on how I can make the world a more gender-inclusive place. I often consider how I can utilize my cisgender privilege for good, and I believe I must take responsibility for anti-genderism work as a cisgender person. Amplifying the voices of trans* people through my

dissertation and aiming to create more gender-inclusive spaces on college campuses aligns with my desire to live in a gender-inclusive society and my professional experience in higher education. As a higher education professional and always-aspiring ally to trans* people, I found myself prepared for executing research that aims to amplify trans* students' voices to work towards more gender-inclusive classrooms.

Statement of the Problem, Purpose, and Significance

Eighty percent of Americans report they do not know a trans* person (Feder, 2020). Thus, most of the population relies on the media and trans* portrayals on television to get a glimpse into transgender experiences (Feder, 2020). Portrayals of transgender characters are present in film; however, few trans* protagonists are written for the audience to understand and empathize with, leading to misrepresentations and the spread of transphobia (Feder, 2020; Halberstam, 2018). Media coverage on transgender people and legal issues has significantly increased in the past decade as trans celebrities have risen. The public has debated issues affecting trans* lives, such as access to bathrooms for transgender people (Halberstam, 2018).

In 2014, *Time Magazine* featured *Orange Is the New Black* actress Laverne Cox on its cover, the first time the periodical had highlighted an openly transgender person (Steinmetz, 2014). In 2019, Merriam-Webster selected the nonbinary personal pronoun "they" as Word of the Year after lookups increased 313% over the prior year (Dwyer, 2019). In June 2020, the Supreme Court ruled employers could not discriminate against workers based on gender identity. Then, 2021 was a record year for anti-transgender legislation (Krishnakumar, 2021).

Despite increasing visibility, the transgender population faces issues including lack of legal protection, poverty, harassment, anti-transgender violence, barriers to healthcare, and lack of accurate identity documents (Human Rights Campaign, 2020). Overall, American institutions

fall short of providing gender-inclusive spaces. These issues and additional concerns are also present in the research on transgender college students, where institutions often leave students feeling invisible and silenced (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Lange et al., 2019).

If faculty and staff on college campuses interact with transgender people at similar rates to the overall population, I hypothesize institutions fail to create gender-inclusive spaces on campus. In addition to a lack of personal exposure, institutions generally do not track gender identity when collecting retention data (Garvey, 2020). Thus, institutions fail to understand what this specific student population needs to succeed and fail to provide adequate services to transgender students (Garvey, 2020). While the body of research on trans* college students has grown significantly in the past two decades (Lange et al., 2019), the majority of studies focus on campus life and inclusion broadly (Beemyn, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b), developmental processes (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005), and housing (Kortegast, 2017; Krum, 2013; Seelman, 2014). The academic success of transgender students has largely remained unmeasured and unaddressed (Garvey, 2020; Pryor, 2015). Because the core of the student experience is involvement in the classroom and curriculum, higher education must gain a better understanding and seek to improve the experiences of trans* students in the classroom. Scholars of higher education and student affairs call for additional research on the experiences of transgender students, particularly within the classroom context (Lange et al., 2019; Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Pryor, 2015).

A qualitative study that investigates the classroom experiences of trans* students nationwide assists with understanding gender inclusivity in college classrooms. The purpose of my study was to explore the curricular experiences of transgender college students through the lens of gender. A qualitative study amplifying many trans* college student voices nationwide

helps identify barriers for trans* students and contributes to the scholarship on transgender students' academic resiliency and success. Data provides practical insight into how higher education can work towards more gender-inclusive college classrooms.

This study is significant because it lifts the voices of the trans* student participants whose gender identity is typically invisible in faculty evaluation forms, quantitative studies, and institutional retention statistics due to either a low sample or absence of gender identity demographic questions. Participants had the opportunity to process and share their experiences; thus, the research was mutually beneficial to both the researcher and participants. As a student affairs professional and emerging researcher, I had the opportunity to learn from my participants and transform my knowledge of creating gender-inclusive spaces. This study also contributes to the expanding research on trans* student experiences in college, building specifically on the initial work exploring college classrooms (Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Pryor, 2015). This additional research on trans* students' experiences in college and specifically in the classroom can help institutions understand how to support trans* students.

Research Questions

In this study, I adopted the following research question: What factors affect trans* college students' experiences in the classroom at universities in the United States? This study examined course content, assignments, and trans* students' perceptions of curriculum, faculty instruction, and learning environments. Sub-questions included:

1. In what ways, if any, does course content, including readings, materials, in-class activities, assignments, and tests, affect the experiences of trans* college students?
2. In what ways, if any, does the perception of belonging in the classroom impact the experiences of trans* college students?

3. In what ways, if any, does experience outside of the classroom related to gender identity affect the classroom experiences of trans* college students?
4. In what ways, if any, does faculty language in the classroom affect the classroom experiences of trans* college students?

Definition of Terms

Terms describing gender and sexuality change in meaning over time (Halberstam, 2018; Stryker, 2017). For my study, I adopted the following definitions:

Cisgender or Cis: Terms used to describe non-trans* people (Nicolazzo, 2017).

DSM: The acronym DSM refers to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The most recent edition as of June, 2021 is the DSM–5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Gender: “This term describes the social discourse regarding how people identify, express, and embody the socially ascribed norms relating to their assigned sex at birth. Gender operates as a floating signifier for the ways individuals practice, do, or otherwise live in relation to these social norms” (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 166).

Gender Binary: “The idea that there are only two social genders—man and woman—based on two and only two sexes—male and female” (Stryker, 2008, pp. 12–13).

Genderism: The oppression of transgender people that results from binary, static male and female categories of gender (Wilchins, 2002).

Gender Dysphoria: “A sense of unhappiness ... over the incongruence between how one subjectively understands one’s experience of gender and how one’s gender is perceived by others” (Stryker, 2017, p. 17).

Genderqueer, Gender-nonconforming, Non-binary, Gender-Variant, Gender Fluid:

Terms that refer to people who “do not conform to binary notions of the alignment of sex, gender, gender identity, gender role, gender expression, or gender presentation” (Stryker, 2017, p. 24).

Heteronormativity: Describes the use of heterosexuality as the social norm against which all expressions of identity (not just those of sexuality) are measured (Jones et al., 2013).

LGB(TQIA+): An acronym used to describe the lesbian, gay, bi, trans*, and queer community. There are many deviations of this acronym used by various authors and organizations. Variations include letters and symbols to include intersex (I), asexual (A), queer (Q), questioning (Q), and all other people who do not identify as heterosexual and cisgender (Stryker, 2017).

Microaggression: Indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group (Wing Sue et al., 2007).

Queer: An historically derogatory term to describe LGBTQ people; however, some in the community have reclaimed this term (Stryker, 2017).

Sex: Generally, a term used to describe a person’s reproductive biology at birth, such as male, female, and intersex (Stryker, 2017).

Stealth: “The slang used by many transgender-identified people to describe nondisclosure of transgender status is ‘going stealth.’ Those living stealth are unknown as transgender to almost everyone in their lives” (Beauchamp, 2019).

Trans*, Trans, Transgender: An umbrella term describing all people who do not identify as cisgender, including trans men and trans women and those who

identify as non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, and two spirit (Tompkins, 2014). The shortened term trans has been used interchangeably; however, in recent years, some people use transgender to describe only trans people within the gender binary. The use of the asterisk is debated among trans scholars (Beemyn, 2019). In this study, I utilize transgender, trans, and trans* interchangeably to honor the multiple perspectives within the trans community.

Overview of Chapters

This study examined the factors that affect trans* college students' experiences in post-secondary classrooms. I introduced the study and the need to explore these experiences. I also outlined my research questions and defined relevant terms in Chapter One.

Chapter Two provides a content review of the literature. The review includes an overview of LGBTQ history in the United States, then focuses on the literature on transgender and LGB college student experiences in American higher education institutions. Chapter Two also provides overviews of two theoretical frameworks; Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and queer theory.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology and research design for this study. This semester-long longitudinal study followed a multiple case study design. I recruited 20 participants and utilized data from 19. Data collection methods included interviewing and document analysis. I interviewed participants at the beginning of the spring 2021 semester, collected monthly written reflections, and closed the study with a second interview. This chapter describes the methods used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Finally, it outlines my strategies to ensure a trustworthy and ethical study.

Chapter Four describes the five themes that emerged from the data: Navigating gender identity, the power of language, the trans* tax, the (mis)education of sex and gender, and community. Each theme includes relevant subthemes. I provide data to support the description of each theme in the form of quotes.

Chapter Five analyzes the data through two theoretical frameworks, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and queer theory. I used the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to demonstrate the components of a person, process, context, and time that affect trans students' classroom experiences. With queer theory, I critiqued gender identity, gendered language, and the student-faculty power dynamic.

Chapter Six summarizes the study, discusses the impact on current scholarship, and provides implications for several stakeholders, including instructors, higher education institutions, staff, families, mentors, and peers. It outlines the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for future research. Finally, I provide closing thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I conducted a review of the literature on transgender history in the United States broadly and specifically within higher education and college classrooms. I utilized reference lists of relevant books and articles as well as citation indexing to ensure I included relevant studies. I also reviewed the literature on queer theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which I utilized to analyze the findings.

Content Literature Review

I begin my content literature review with a broad overview of gender terms and transgender history in the United States.

Defining Trans(*)gender

The term transgender has evolved in meaning over time since it originated in the 1960s (Stryker, 2017). The modern use is an umbrella term developed in the 1990s that encompasses people who deviate from gender norms and expectations in many ways. Select gender identities that fall under the transgender umbrella include trans man, trans woman, genderfluid, genderqueer, non-binary, and agender. In this study, I use transgender as an umbrella term and use both the shortened terms trans and trans* interchangeably to refer to all identities under this umbrella.

The term trans* was created in the 2010s to create expansion and signal the insufficiency of current classification systems (Halberstam, 2018). The asterisk is used to indicate many ideas in language: A wildcard at the end of an internet search, multiplication, censorship, and emphasis before and after a word (Halberstam, 2018). Transgender scholars disagree about the use of the asterisk in trans* (Beemyn, 2019). While some advocate the symbol metaphorically communicates multiplicity, possibilities, and becoming, urging the reader to think of the multiple

ways of being as they encounter the term (Halberstam, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2016; Tompkins, 2014), others argue the asterisk is unnecessary, as the term trans is already inclusive (Beemyn, 2019; Diamond & Erlick, 2016). Scholars opposed to the use of the asterisk believe it actually is exclusionary to trans women, though the history of this exclusion is unclear (Beemyn, 2019; Diamond & Erlick, 2016). I chose to alternate my use of the terms transgender, trans, and trans* in my work in order to honor the multiple perspectives of transgender scholars and to urge for a queering of identity categories in principle. When describing specific studies, I utilize the terminology selected by the author. In my own descriptions, I will use the terms interchangeably.

Trans* History in the United States

This section provides a broad overview of trans history in the United States. Before colonization, many nations in North America and beyond recognized more than two genders (binaohan, 2014). When settlers claimed Native lands and forced new cultural and religious expectations on Indigenous people, these settlers policed gender, following a strict binary that included only men and women (binaohan, 2014). Although the transgender experience has been a trending topic in recent years, people have lived with gender identities outside the gender binary across our country's entire history, including within Indigenous populations. While some may not picture gay and trans* people when they think of early colonial America, documentation of gender non-conforming individuals in the United States stretches back to the 1600s (Stryker, 2017).

Thomas or Thomasine Hall lived at some times as a man and others as a woman in 1620s Virginia as an indentured servant (Stryker, 2017). In the 1700s, many women defied their expected gender roles, dressed as men, and enlisted in the army (Stryker, 2017). In the 1850s, as large cities rose, and modern gay subcultures began to form, laws prohibiting cross-dressing

spread to cities across the U.S. (D’Emilo, 1983). Although laws about disguising oneself, dressing outside of one’s social rank, and dressing as a Native American were often already enforced, these new laws were specific to dressing outside your gender as assigned (Stryker, 2017). Cities that adopted new gendered anti-cross-dressing laws in the mid-to late-1800s comprise coastal cities and places in the Midwest, including Minneapolis, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Omaha (Stryker, 2017). While it is unclear what cultural changes prompted the need for these new laws, some scholars argue the increasing urbanization of the United States provided for new and different ways of being and relating to others (D’Emilo, 1983; Stryker, 2017).

D’Emilo (1983) argued modern gay connections as we know them were not possible in the United States until the rise of large cities and urban working-class populations in the mid-19th century. The industrial revolution created a new economy that drew single men out of their rural hometowns and away from their families to pursue industrial work and wages in the city. Once men could leave intimate rural communities, along with the family and religious expectations attached to those communities, they could interact and form relationships with other men in new and intimate ways (D’Emilo, 1983). The required environment for developing a gay subculture formed.

Women, however, faced additional barriers to leaving rural America for the cities. Lesbian subcultures did not form until the early 20th century, when White cisgender women gained political power through suffrage and increasingly found opportunities to become independent wage earners (Stryker, 2017). It is worth noting transgender identities were not considered separate from gay and lesbian identities during this time in history. Rather than separating sexuality and gender, gay and lesbian people were often thought to be “acting like”

the other gender (Stryker, 2017). In the 1950s, the transgender experience came into view for the American people. In 1952, American Christine Jorgensen's sex-change operation in Denmark made headlines around the globe (Stryker, 2017). Jorgensen received thousands of notes full of thanks, inspiration, and hope from transgender people (Stryker, 2017). Despite the new spotlight in American media, transgender people experienced discrimination and inequality. As gay, lesbian, and transgender subcultures formed, so too did these organizations' calls for LGBTQ+ rights. The late 1950s and 1960s witnessed many uproars from gay, lesbian, and transgender people worn down by inequitable treatment and police oppression.

In May 1959, in Los Angeles, an incident occurred at Cooper Do-Nut, a late-night hangout between two popular gay bars (Stryker, 2017). A crowd of gay and transgender patrons became frustrated when, yet again, the police came patrolling the area for no apparent reason, asking to see identification, which for transgender people often led to confusion and arrests on the assumption of sex work, loitering, or other crimes (Stryker, 2017). In a spontaneous uprising, the patrons refused arrest, throwing doughnuts at the police officers, which turned into physical acts of violence (Stryker, 2017). In 1966, a similar incident occurred at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco (Stryker, 2017). The restaurant's management called law enforcement on the trans* subset of their patronage (about 50-60 people that night) who were seemingly spending a lot of time hanging out there but not spending a lot of money. When a police officer arrived and attempted to pull one of the drag queens out, the drag queen threw coffee in the officer's face, which immediately started a riot. The clientele flipped tables and broke windows before fleeing the restaurant to the streets (Stryker, 2017).

The most noted riots in the LGBTQ+ movement occurred a few years later, in 1969, at the Stonewall Inn bar in New York City's Greenwich Village (Stryker, 2017). The Stonewall Inn

was a local mob-run venue where gay, lesbian, gender non-conforming, and trans* people found their crowd. Stonewall was policed more regularly than other establishments due to Mafia activity and exchanges with corrupt police officers. On June 28, 1969, the police raid did not follow its regular suit (Stryker, 2017). As police arrested both workers and patrons, a crowd formed and resisted, chaos ensued, and soon more than 2,000 people were in the streets fighting back against the outnumbered police who barricaded themselves in the bar. The crowd stayed for hours, leaving before dawn, but returned the following night to protest. The Stonewall Riots sparked an outburst in political action around the United States (Stryker, 2017).

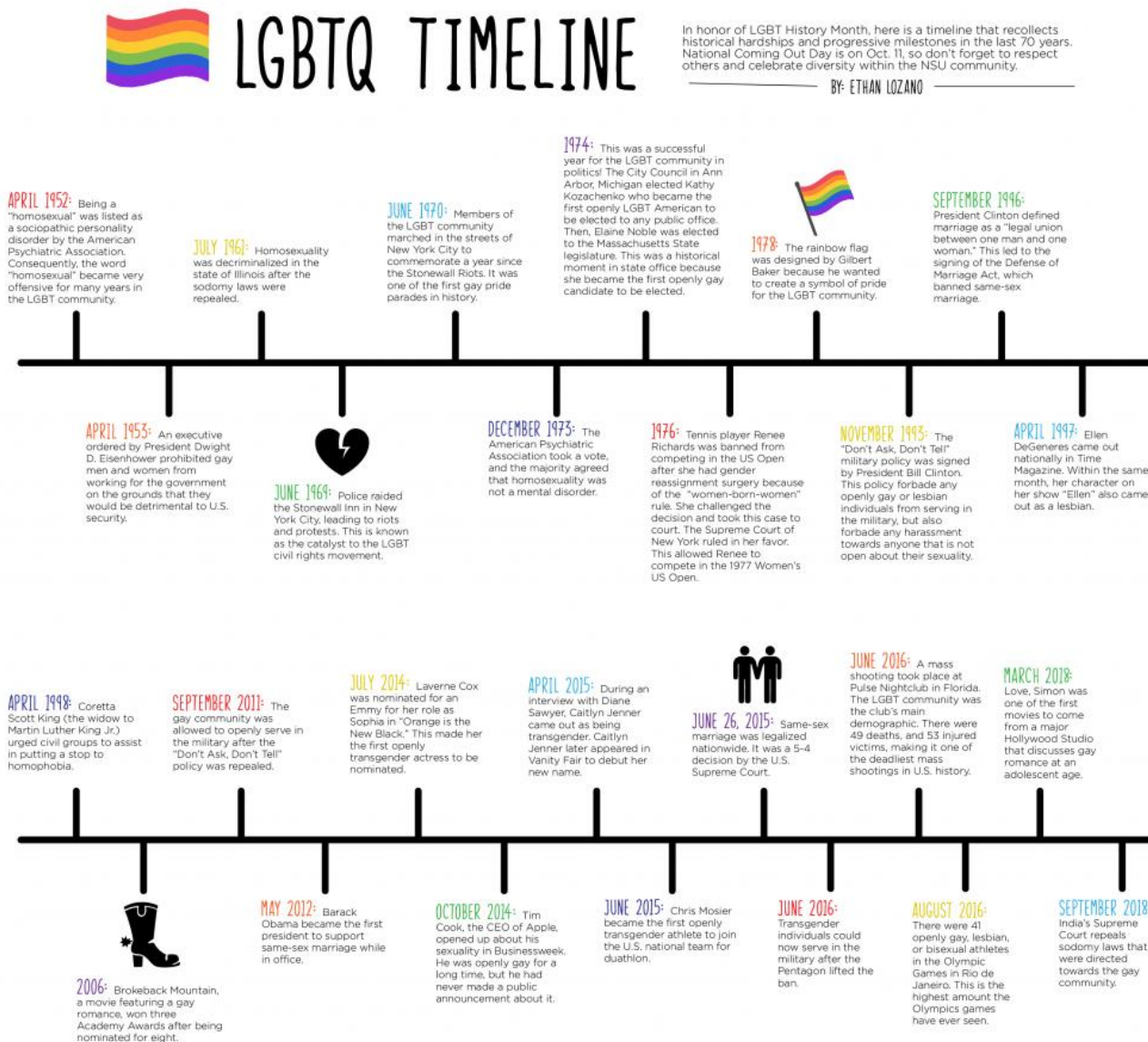
It is worth noting, though trans Women of Color led the riots, the movement that followed most benefited White LGB people (Stryker, 2017). Scholars often mark LGBTQ+ history in the United States as either pre-Stonewall or post-Stonewall, indicating the climate before and after this landmark occurrence for LGBTQ+ rights (Stryker, 2017). Stonewall was not the first case of civil disobedience in the name of LGBTQ+ rights; however, it was the biggest and brought about the most change (Stryker, 2017). In the decades that followed, many organizations were formed to improve rights for gay, lesbian, and transgender people (Stryker, 2017).

Two decades after the Stonewall Riots, queer and transgender studies emerged in the academy (Stryker, 2017). Teresa de Lauretis, a faculty member at the University of California, Santa Cruz, coined the term “queer studies” in 1991 when she organized a conference with the same name (Stryker, 2017). In 1987, Sandy Stone, a trans woman with a Ph.D. in History of Consciousness, wrote a paper titled, “The ‘Empire’ Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto,” rebutting the 1979 anti-trans book by Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, and contributing to the start of transgender studies (Stryker, 2017).

Gender theorist Judith Butler (1993) then made significant contributions to the feminist and critical understanding of gender when clarifying the idea of gender performativity. Gender performativity argues gender is something all humans *do* (or perform) rather than being something humans *are* (Butler, 1993). Butler (1993) included transgender people in this description of gender performativity. All humans, regardless of gender, enact it through actions, thoughts, and presentation (Stryker, 2017). As rights for LGBTQ+ people evolved in American society and discourse on the trans experience developed in the academy, higher education institutions followed suit. Figure 1 provides a visual timeline of LGBTQ+ history in the United States.

Figure 1

Timeline of LGBTQ+ History in the United States



Source. The Current (2018)

LGB and Transgender History in American Higher Education

Before the 1970s, colleges and universities approached homosexuality as a deviant and incurable disease, often expelling students for same-sex sexual activity (Renn, 2010). In the mid-

20th century, gay collegians could find others on campus with similar identities but were unable to express them openly (Dilley, 2002). Instead, they gathered privately, and any sex was typically secretive and anonymous (Dilley, 2002). The 1970s welcomed new possibilities. At that time, some forms of gay visibility were encouraged (Dilley, 2002). Jack Baker was elected the first known openly gay student body president at a university when he won the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities position in the spring of 1971 (Dilley, 2019). LGBT students began to organize publicly in the 1970s at universities across the Midwest, creating spaces to gather for the first time (Dilley, 2019). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, student activism transformed. Queer-identifying students began to work towards change on campus that affected larger, historical structures (Dilley, 2002). For example, students participated in student government and sought progress (Dilley, 2002).

Before the 1970s, researchers were not interested in studying LGBT students during this time (Renn, 2010). As the student affairs profession grew, this group of educators' view of homosexuality shifted, and they began to believe homosexuality was treatable. In partnership with campus health staff, student affairs professionals began to keep students practicing same-sex sexual activity on campus instead of expelling them, provided those students agreed to go through treatment (Renn, 2010). When the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973 and culture began to change due to student activism, the doors opened for student affairs practitioners to provide better support to LGBT students on campus (Dilley, 2002; Renn, 2010). With a call to support the holistic development of all students, student affairs practitioners became interested in the development of LGBT students (Renn, 2010).

According to Renn (2010), since the 1970s, studies on gay and lesbian issues in higher education have increased due to four factors. The factors include the “decreased pathologizing of minority sexualities, increased visibility of gays and lesbians on and off-campus, emerging emphasis on understanding various domains (e.g., gender, race, sexuality) of student identities, and increased attention to campus climate and experiences of non-majority students” (Renn, 2010, p. 134). Since the 1980s, student affairs professionals studying queer issues in higher education have focused mainly on three areas of scholarship: Visibility, campus climate, and LGBT student identities and experiences (Renn, 2010).

In recent years, a growing body of work has existed on LGBT students, and increasingly, on identities that intersect with the LGBT student experience (Abes, 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Bilodeau, 2005, 2009; Renn, 2007, 2010). While this body of research is growing, it is worth noting that the unique experience of transgender students has been under-researched (Bilodeau, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2016; Lange et al., 2019). In the early 2000s, student affairs professionals relied on medical, psychological perspectives on trans* identity to understand the experiences and development of the newly visible population of trans* students on campus (Patton et al., 2016). Trans* educators sought to build different perspectives and began studying trans* students in new ways, leaning on postmodern and queer theory lenses rather than medical perspectives (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The early studies of transgender college student identities include as few as two participants, limiting the findings' transferability (Bilodeau, 2005, 2009). Some of the early studies of transgender college students sought to produce transgender identity development models (Patton et al., 2016).

Trans* Identity Development

Student affairs educators and higher education professionals utilize student development theory to inform their practice (Patton et al., 2016). When it comes to gender identity development, Patton et al. (2016) put forward a social-cognitive model of gender identity development to consider when working with college students. The social-cognitive model considers personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, positing students consistently present themselves in gendered ways through their dress, posture, hair, and makeup. This then incites responses from their peers and faculty that inform whether they will continue to present themselves in these ways, or pivot to provoke the responses they desire (Patton et al., 2016).

Some researchers and student affairs educators have explored the development of transgender students specifically (Bilodeau, 2005; Dugan et al., 2012; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005;). Bilodeau (2005) adjusted D'Augelli's (1994) LGB development model to describe the experiences of transgender students. Development stages include: 1) Existing as assigned gender identity; 2) developing a personal trans identity; 3) creating a support network of people who know about one's trans identity; 4) coming out to family members; 5) developing intimacy through physical and emotional relationships; and 6) entering a transgender community through political or social action (Bilodeau, 2005). Limitations of this model include the small sample size (Patton et al., 2016) and disregard for intersecting identities or intersectionality.

Intersectionality considers the interlocking systems of oppression some students experience when holding multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Wijeyesinghe, 2019). This assumes development is linear with an endpoint like all developmental stage models. In addition to studying trans* identity development, scholars have also studied the experiences of transgender students on college campuses broadly.

Transgender Students' Experiences on Campus

Institutions sort people and bodies into binary genders through various contexts on campus, including housing, restrooms, athletics, and fraternities and sororities. Campus life is thus a highly gendered context (Patton et al., 2016). Bilodeau (2009) described this method of binary sorting as genderism. In a qualitative study of transgender students who had stopped or dropped out of college, Goldberg et al. (2019) found most identified stressors related to gender identity microaggressions as the main reason for leaving college. The study found accumulated stressors related to discrimination and microaggressions based on gender identity influenced trans* students' decision to withdraw rather than isolated incidents of discrimination (Goldberg et al., 2019). Woodford et al. (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study to identify the most common environmental microaggressions trans* students face. Participants included 152 survey respondents and 18 interviewees. Findings showed about 80% of participants reported frequently or very frequently encountering gender binary forms on campus, the most common microaggression (Woodford et al., 2017). Common microaggressions also include the inability to access gender-inclusive restrooms, inaccurate assumptions about health needs, and lack of inclusive housing policies (Woodford et al., 2017). In a study of queer and trans-spectrum student perceptions of campus climate, classroom climate, and curriculum inclusivity, Garvey and Rankin (2015) found trans-spectrum students had the most negative perceptions of campus and curriculum when compared to cisgender men and women.

Many studies of trans college students emphasize negative experiences, barriers, and hardships. In contrast to this deficit approach, Nicolazzo (2016) focused on the resilience of trans* college students, specifically defining resilience as a verb, something one practices and continues throughout their time in college. Despite facing gender binary discourse on campus and what Nicolazzo (2016) called compulsory heterogenderism, trans* students practice

resilience to get through their days. Practicing resilience looks different for each student, and some practices that serve one student can be detrimental to another (Nicolazzo, 2016).

A strength of this study is the application of intersectionality to the data, which highlights the unique experiences of each participant and how holding multiple marginalized identities creates a challenge in navigating interlocking oppression structures (Crenshaw, 1989; Wijeyesinghe, 2019). A limitation of the study is the case followed participants at just one university; thus, the culture and content may or may not transfer to other institutions (Nicolazzo, 2016). While some studies have examined the experiences of transgender students on a college campus, even fewer have sought to explore the curricular experiences of trans students. Next, I discuss the limited studies that have explored classroom experiences.

Trans* Student Experiences in College Classrooms

Linley et al. (2016) determined faculty interactions as one of three key factors that contribute to LGBT students' persistence; however, the study was not isolated to transgender students' experiences and, like many studies, grouped trans students in with students who had lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. The research showed many institutions have little incentive or accountability for faculty to demonstrate this inclusive competence despite focusing on providing a unique student experience. Trans* students stated they appreciated when faculty were willing to deviate from the normative curriculum, use inclusive language, and combat homophobic language (Linley et al., 2016).

Little research has focused solely on trans* students' experiences in the classroom. One national study on campus climate for LGBTQ students indicated "transmasculine, transfeminine, and GNC respondents were significantly less likely than their men and women counterparts to feel very comfortable or comfortable with the overall campus climate, department/work unit

climate, and classroom climate” (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 12). The 2015 Transgender Survey, the largest survey ever focused solely on the lives of transgender people, reported only one page of findings on higher education experiences out of hundreds (James et al., 2016). James et al. (2016) found, “nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents who indicated that classmates, professors, or staff at college or vocational school thought or knew they were transgender were verbally, physically, or sexually harassed” (p. 136).

Nicolazzo (2015) found the academic experiences of trans* students varied based on several factors, including the participants’ gender identity and other salient identities such as race and disability. Academic discipline also played a role in the students’ experiences (Nicolazzo, 2015). For example, one participant excelled at economics but felt uncomfortable with the expectations for dressing in formal wear for presentations in class, mainly because accessing the mixture of feminine and masculine pieces she desired would take resources, including time and money (Nicolazzo, 2015). These data show it is equally important that educators understand the classroom experiences of trans* college students and seek to make classrooms gender-inclusive spaces.

Pryor (2015) provided a voice to transgender students’ experiences with faculty and peers in the classroom by interviewing five transgender students at a large Midwest public institution. Pryor’s (2015) findings confirm faculty have not yet mastered the use of gender-inclusive language or the creation of inclusive spaces, and scholars call for additional research on transgender college students’ experiences in the classroom (Lange et al., 2019; Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Pryor, 2015). The study allowed transgender students to provide rich, descriptive data; however, the findings are limited to one university setting and a relatively small number of participants (Pryor, 2015).

These researchers all call for an additional inquiry into the classroom experiences of trans* college students. This study fills this gap by studying the experiences of a larger group of transgender college students at universities across the United States and from a range of disciplines and other salient identities. I used two theoretical frameworks for this study on trans* students' experiences in college classrooms: Queer theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Next, I provide context on each of these two analytical theories.

Theoretical Literature Review

A content review of the literature and close examination of my research question led me to select queer theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory for my analytical theories. I chose queer theory because it calls into question heterosexual and cisgender ways of being "normal," thus inviting an analysis that questions heteronormativity that lives in college classrooms and curriculums (Nicolazzo, 2016). Renn (2010) called out a lack of application of queer theory in higher education and student affairs contexts. I chose Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory as my second analytical theory because it empowers scholars to consider cultural and institutional factors that affect students' learning and development, rather than taking a deficit-based approach to transgender students. First, I provide additional information on the history and application of queer theory.

Queer Theory

Movements in LGBTQ+ American history situated the academy such that heteronormativity came into question in the late 20th century. Queer theory emerged in the early 1990s as theorists such as Butler and Sedgwick built on the work of Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard to "challenge the idea of identity itself" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 191). Queer theorists are not interested in studying the "queer" identity; rather, their interest lies in the deconstruction of

identity groups broadly (Jones et al., 2013). Thus, queer theorists encourage the study of gender and sexuality rather than of men, women, gay, lesbian, or transgender identities (Jones et al., 2013). As a critical theory, queer theory examines power relations, calls into question current ways of thinking, and seeks to move towards social justice (Crotty, 1998). Specifically, queer theory's central idea calls into question heteronormativity. It seeks to move to a world where heterosexuality and cisgender identities are not considered the default or standard ways of being (Jones et al., 2013). Like the identity groups it seeks to examine, queer theorists generally avoid putting the theory in a box by defining it. Queer theory is often better described by what it is not (Jones et al., 2013). Yet, in the spirit of accessibility, Jones et al. (2013) provided a definition:

Queer theory is a theoretical perspective within critical theory that examines, challenges, and deconstructs social norms attached to gender and sexuality. The central argument of queer theory is that social norms and meanings linked to gender and sexuality are only and always culturally and historically constructed, therefore lacking objective or value-neutral truth and knowledge, and serve to marginalize one group for the benefit of another. (p. 197)

In addition to heteronormativity, queer theory includes three key concepts: Desire, performativity, and becoming (Jones et al., 2013). Butler (1990) described becoming as the product and process of resisting heteronormativity. Becoming references the ever-changing and fluid development of one's identities over time (Jones et al., 2013). When applied to college students, this means educators should consider the process of "developing" and not "development" (Jones et al., 2013).

Some scholars have levied critiques of queer theory. One common critique claims the discourse fails to "interrogate whiteness" (Denton, 2019, p. 59). Queer of Color

critique fills this void by focusing specifically on the importance of considering race and class differences (Denton, 2019). Johnson (2005) put forward a “quare” theory, or a Black queer studies. Another critique of queer theory is the writings are often inaccessible because they are “dense and complicated” (Denton, 2019, p. 59). Despite its pitfalls, queer theory and critique can help higher education and student affairs professionals consider how we may “exercise power in ways that may exclude students who do not fit current hetero- and homonormative binaries of sexual and gender identity” (Denton, 2019, p. 59).

While higher education in the United States has served as a space for faculty to discuss and build on the theoretical components of queer theory, little scholarship exists on queering institutions of higher education themselves (Renn, 2010). While American institutions have certainly made efforts to include LGBT people, queer theory moves beyond identity and policy to critique the very makeup of identity itself and repel oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender (Jones et al., 2013). In an interview with Mary Lou Rasmussen, Allen and Rasmussen (2015) discussed queer theory in higher education. In agreement with Renn (2010), Allen and Rasmussen (2015) suggested much of the current queer scholarship in the field centers on LGBT activism and visibility, which need not be the case. Queer theory is not limited to studies of that which is termed “queer,” and can be applied to additional power structures and constructed binaries (Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Renn, 2010).

While few scholars have applied queer theoretical frameworks to studies of college students, Abes and Kasch (2007) successfully provided a side-by-side look at analyses of data from an interview with a lesbian college student using both a constructivist-developmental theory framework and a queer theory framework. While the constructivist-developmental

narrative focused on the participant's multiple intersecting identities of development, stages of identity development, and stage progression to self-authorship, the queered narrative highlighted the infusion of identities, recognizing the participant experiences fluid intra-sectional identities that are ever-changing (Abes & Kasch, 2007). The queered narrative recognizes the participant's necessary interaction with external influences, such as heteronormativity, in order to mold their identity. Thus, we cannot describe this lesbian-identified student's development simply as linear development. Self-authorship theory does not fit (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Abes and Kasch (2007) recognized,

for students who do not identify as heterosexual, identity development as part of the journey toward self-authorship requires resisting power structures that define one as abnormal. When students necessarily deconstruct the heteronormative framework in order to reconstruct their identities, they offer a resistance that is development toward a form of self-authorship as social change, a type of development we call queer-authorship. (p. 630)

Queer authorship recognizes self-authorship alone cannot fully demonstrate the experiences of non-heterosexual identified college students due to external power structures (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

Abes and Kasch (2007) also applied queer theory to the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000). In Jones and McEwen's (2000) model, the core sense of self is surrounded by ellipses that portray the salience of students' identities at a given snapshot in time. In order to queer this model, all aspects of identity must be considered fused and ever-changing from the start (Abes & Kasch, 2007). In addition, the external context and identity dimensions are mutually influencing rather than external influences being put through a filter

(Abes & Kasch, 2007). The queered model of multiple dimensions of identity thus shows a fused intra-section of identities continually interacting with the external context (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

While a few researchers have successfully applied queer theoretical frameworks to their studies, additional work must be done (Denton, 2019; Renn, 2010). Renn (2010) described queer theory as, “the key to opening doors to theoretical advances across higher education research” (p. 137). Renn (2010) and Allen and Rasmussen (2015) called for additional work in studying LGBT identified students and development and specifically called for further application of queer theoretical frameworks in data analyses.

In addition to applying queer theory to my findings, I applied Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. Next, I provide an overview of ecological systems theory, its use in research on college students, and the benefits of utilizing this theory in my analysis of trans* students’ experiences in the classroom.

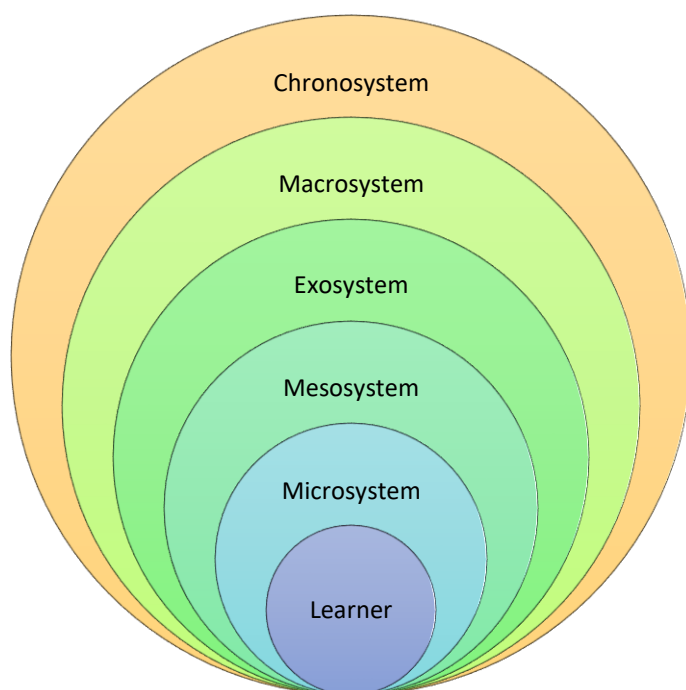
Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1976) introduced the ecology of education as a response to concerns with standard laboratory research in education, which did not account for natural environmental effects on children. Essentially, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) approach posited development does not occur in a vacuum but always exists in an environmental context. He described the environmental context as the ecology of education. Bronfenbrenner (1976) outlined three basic requirements to make progress in the scientific study of educational systems and processes. First, researchers must study in natural educational settings. Second, learning within these settings is a product of systems at two levels—“the relations between the characteristics of learners and the surroundings in which they live out their lives” (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, p. 5) and “the relations and interconnections that exist between these environments” (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, p. 5). Third,

the ecological experiment is the best strategy for studying person-environment and environment-environment interactions. Bronfenbrenner (1976) outlined the layers of structure that make up the environment, describing “a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next” (p. 5). Visually, the model places the student at the center of several concentric circles. Each circle represents a component of the student’s setting. Figure 2 depicts the structures of the environment within Bronfenbrenner’s model.

Figure 2

Environments within Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory



Bronfenbrenner (1976) described the components of the environment closest to the learner as the microsystem. The microsystem includes the learner’s immediate settings, such as the classroom and home. For example, students’ relationships with teachers and parents fall within the microsystem. The next level, the mesosystem, encompasses the interactions between the settings of the microsystem. The interactions between parents and teachers fall within the

mesosystem. The next level, the exosystem, describes formal or informal social structures. These social structures impact the microsystems, and thus, mesosystems. Structures such as neighborhoods, social networks, media, government agencies, and transportation facilities fall within the exosystem. The most distal system, the macrosystem, includes the overarching culture or subculture that contains all other components of the environment. Structures within the macrosystem impart ideologies and information on the exosystem. Macrosystems include economic, educational, legal, and political institutions. In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model, what matters is the learner's perceptions of their environment rather than an objective reality. Focusing on an ecological model highlights the perceived environmental factors that affect students' learning and development, rather than focusing solely on the learner's characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) later added the chronosystem to factor in the critical impact of ecological transitions and shifts in ecology over a lifetime. The chronosystem adds a third dimension to the ecological system and highlights changes through time on two levels. First, the chronosystem accounts for change at the level of the individual over a lifetime. Second, the chronosystem acknowledges change at the level of the society across history and generations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fish & Syed, 2018). Bronfenbrenner continued to mold and shape his ecological model throughout his career. Beginning in the 1980s, he altered his work to correct the imbalance between the strong focus on environments and the lack of focus on the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). In subsequent models, Bronfenbrenner renamed the theory a bioecological model. A bioecological approach accounts for the impact of the individual's unique characteristics on their development in addition to environmental impacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) final model accounts for the person, process, context, and time (PPCT) components in human development. The individual's characteristics (person) include biopsychological factors and genetic predispositions, as well as socially defined characteristics. Figure 2 depicts the individual's settings (context), including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The individual's multidirectional interactions with their environments (process) also impact development. Interactions with the microsystems constitute what Bronfenbrenner called proximal processes. Finally, the chronosystem depicts the three-dimensional component required to develop the individual and society (time).

While Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995) developed his ecological systems theory for young children, the model easily transfers to post-secondary students. Torres et al. (2009) presented a review of identity development theories in student affairs, including the history, state of the field, and recommendations for future approaches. Identity development theory has drawn from developmental psychology, sociology, social psychology, human and developmental ecology, and postmodern and poststructural theories (Torres et al., 2009). Torres et al. (2009) demonstrated the impact of the environment on student development was understudied. The researchers identified developmental ecology as a promising framework for future research, particularly for longitudinal studies that captured environmental changes over time (Torres et al., 2009).

While ecological theories do not always focus on human development, this was the emphasis for Bronfenbrenner's model (1976, 1979, 1995, 2006). In 2003, Renn and Arnold applied an ecological model to college student development, and they highlighted the model's ability to analyze processes and outcomes of students' peer culture. The scholars called for additional higher education research incorporating a human ecology lens (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

Renn (2003) utilized Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1979, 1995, 2006) model to understand the identity development of mixed-race college students with an emphasis on environmental factors. Additional researchers have used Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecology framework to analyze college students within the past two decades (Arnold et al., 2012; Chun & Evans, 2016; Fish & Syed, 2018; Kitchen et al., 2019).

Arnold et al. (2012) used Bronfenbrenner's ecology theory to analyze the environmental factors that affect students' college readiness. Chun and Evans (2016) utilized the model to understand how environments impact students' development of cultural competence. Fish and Syed (2018) applied a reconceptualized model of ecological systems theory to Native American college students. Fish and Syed (2018) placed the chronosystem and macrosystem in the center of the environment. The shift reflects the "unique historical and cultural factors affecting the current experiences of Native American peoples" (Fish & Syed, 2018, p. 390). While some scholars have applied ecological systems frameworks to research on college students, additional research will improve our understanding of holistic student experiences and the systems that impact them (Kitchen et al., 2019).

Overall, the benefits of an ecological approach include gaining a holistic view of students' experiences on campus. The model factors in the overarching culture and social institutions the learner does not interact with directly, highlighting environmental challenges and opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, the focus does not center on the student and their deficits. An ecological model allows for a bigger-picture approach that factors in societal impact and environmental context and characteristics of the student. In addition, findings analyzed through an ecological lens provide pragmatic implications for science and public policy, as

administrators, local and national leadership, and lawmakers shape students' environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Methodological Implications

The next chapter explains the research methodology and design for this study. I conducted a qualitative multiple case study utilizing one-on-one interviews and written reflections. Next, I provide an outline for the recruitment and selection of participants, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Finally, I describe the strategies I utilized to ensure a trustworthy study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study was to explore the curricular experiences of transgender college students in the United States. My research question asked, “What factors affect trans* college students’ experiences in the classroom at universities in the United States?” with the following sub-questions:

1. In what ways, if any, does course content, including readings, materials, in-class activities, assignments, and tests, affect the experiences of trans* college students?
2. In what ways, if any, does the perception of belonging in the classroom impact the experiences of trans* college students?
3. In what ways, if any, does experience outside of the classroom related to gender identity affect the classroom experiences of trans* college students?
4. In what ways, if any, does faculty language in the classroom affect the classroom experiences of trans* college students?

To obtain rich, descriptive data from a diverse group of participants, I pursued a qualitative research project with a multiple case study methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To achieve meaningful and accurate insights through this work, I followed a transformative paradigm, working alongside my participants and amplifying their voices to develop meaningful thematic findings (Crotty, 1998). I utilized interview and document analysis methods to explore the meaning of my participants’ experiences deeply.

This chapter provides an overview of qualitative research’s distinct goals and characteristics, the transformative framework, and multiple case study research. It explains why this methodology best fit answering the research questions. It also outlines the specific methods I used in this study, including those used for participant selection and recruiting, data gathering,

and data analysis. The chapter begins with an overview of qualitative research and why this type of research best fit my research questions.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a rigorous method of research that allows for the exploration of problems where understanding the context of the problem is essential, as well as a “complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 46). When using qualitative research, the researcher empowers the participants by amplifying their voices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is important when variables cannot be measured or when the researcher seeks to highlight silenced voices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data sources for qualitative research are words, stories, observations, and documents (Patton, 2015). Qualitative inquiry includes in-depth, open-ended interviews, direct observations, or written communications (Patton, 2015). In many ways, the quality of qualitative data depends on the skill, sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher, as they directly and significantly impact the information the participants share, the meaning they assign to the data, and how they interpret the data (Patton, 2015). While the researcher is a crucial part of qualitative research as a primary instrument for collecting data, the researcher focuses on learning about the descriptions of the problem from the views of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The result is a report that reflects the many views of the study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I adopted qualitative methodology for this study, as it allowed participants to provide data-rich, in-depth explanations of their experiences in the college classroom through the lens of gender identity; something quantitative studies cannot capture. A qualitative study allowed me an opportunity to deeply understand the experiences of trans* students as described in their own words. The methods within a qualitative approach allow for follow-up and exploring probing

questions. Within qualitative inquiry, there are several possible research designs. I used a multiple case study design. Next, I describe the basic tenets and background of multiple case study research.

Multiple Case Study Research

Case study research has roots in anthropology and sociology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Today, it is a common approach in many fields, including psychology, law, and political science (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The definition of case study research differs by the researcher (Patton, 2015). Stake (2005) defined a case study by what the researcher chooses to study, whereas Creswell and Poth (2018) defined case study research as a methodology. For my study, I follow the definition provided by Creswell and Poth (2018), which stated,

Case study research is defined as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes. (pp. 96–97)

Case study research begins with identifying the specific case(s) the researcher will study, which may be “an individual, a community, a decision process, or an event” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 97). The researcher must choose a bounded case or cases, clearly defining the parameters. In case study research, the purpose of the study informs the design.

If the purpose of the case is to understand a phenomenon and inform practice, researchers can implement instrumental-use multiple-case sampling (Patton, 2015). This sampling method allows the researcher to purposefully select multiple cases of the phenomenon to inform changes

in practice (Patton, 2015). The researcher must select relevant cases and provide a depth of analysis of the issue at hand (Patton, 2015).

The case unit in this study was individuals, specifically American college students who identify as trans. I adopted instrumental-use multiple-case sampling because the purpose of my research was to inform the work of college instructors. I selected multiple participants from various backgrounds with a variety of gender identities to understand better the answers to the research questions (Patton, 2015). To select relevant cases and provide the necessary depth of analysis, I recorded the demographics and identities of my participants. I continued to select cases until the body of cases better reflected the diversity of the trans* college student community. For example, it was necessary to select individuals with various gender identities, races, socioeconomic statuses, ages, institutional types, and areas of academic study. I ultimately selected 20 participants for this study.

After selecting bounded cases, Creswell and Poth (2018) advocated case study research also involves the researcher collecting detailed, in-depth data from multiple sources of information. For my study, I collected information about each participant from multiple sources. Looking at multiple sources of data allowed me to dig deeper into the experiences of trans* students in college classrooms. First, I completed an interview with the participants before or at the beginning of the semester. Then, I collected monthly written reflections from the participants throughout the semester. Finally, I conducted a final interview with my participants at the end of the semester.

Collecting data throughout the semester in a longitudinal study allowed me to learn more about each individual (Patton, 2015). It allowed me to explore beyond a moment in time. Participants reflected on their classroom experiences throughout the semester and, by the end,

had thought much more deeply about the connections between their gender identities and classroom interactions. They could explain themes to their experiences in their own words and describe experiences they typically would not have explored.

In qualitative research, the researcher is an instrument and brings unique experiences, perspectives, and biases into the work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research studies differ based on the researcher's guiding beliefs and philosophical assumptions. The "basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17) defines the researcher's paradigm or framework with which they approach qualitative research. Next, I describe my transformative framework and its guiding tenets.

Transformative Paradigm

My research framework was transformative, as it is my view that society fundamentally influences knowledge through power and social dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of knowledge construction in this study was to improve society by transforming higher education institutions, specifically within the classroom, for people of all genders, including those who regularly experience genderism, transphobia, and transmisogyny. I designed this study to achieve this goal by generating discussion around social issues related to gender and advocating for change. A transformative approach aims to "change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researcher's [life]" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25).

In this study, I provided opportunities for trans* students to reflect on and share their experiences in college classrooms and participate in the research process, encouraging personal development and growth. After a semester of reflection, most participants reported being in the study was a positive experience that empowered them to think more deeply about their educational experiences. Some participants reported they were more likely to make requests

from instructors or peers because they had identified and described the issues in their monthly written reflections. Describing the challenges in written words prompted them to pause and define the issue, then take the additional step to provide feedback. Thus, in some instances, the study accomplished changing participants' lives and their institutions.

The study also provided me with a rich education in the experiences of trans students. Hearing their stories has transformed my perspectives and impacted how I teach, advise, research, advocate, and interact with others. I described my research methodology and guiding beliefs that informed my research question. Next, I describe my data collection process, beginning with approvals from the Institutional Review Board.

Institutional Review Board

Historically, researchers have taken advantage of vulnerable populations, including “children, the poor, people of color, the sick, people with little education, women and men incarcerated in prisons and asylums, and children in orphanages or state correctional schools” (Patton, 2015, p. 341). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a board within higher education institutions and research organizations that checks researchers' plans to meet ethical and legal standards to protect human subjects (Patton, 2015). This check is especially essential in protecting historically under-protected and vulnerable populations.

Before conducting this study, I ensured I designed the study to protect my participants. I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Certificate (CITI) Program course: Human Subjects Research Training: Social-Behavioral-Educational (see Appendix A). The certificate requirements included five required modules and the selection of one elective module of my choice. I selected Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD) in Human Research (ID 16556) for the elective module because it was relevant to my research population. The elective covered the

unique concerns for LGBTQ participants, including a subsection for gender identity and expression.

After obtaining committee approval of my research proposal, I applied for an expedited review from the University of St. Thomas IRB to ensure my study received all necessary approvals for the study of human subjects. I submitted a description of my research design, CITI certificate, participant consent form (see Appendix B), study announcement (Appendix C), interview guide (see Appendix D), and transcriber confidentiality agreement (see Appendix E). I gained IRB approval to begin my study in January 2021 (see Appendix F). I began recruiting participants shortly after.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants and Setting

Renn (2010) called for enhanced research design and methods in LGBT scholarship in higher education, critiquing existing studies for their reliance on convenience samples through LGBT centers and student organizations, limited data, and “unsophisticated data analysis and/or interpretation” (p. 137). An alternate method might include random samples, additional participants (more than the one to two seen in some cited studies), and “screening surveys that ask behavioral as well as identification questions” (Renn, 2010, p. 137).

In response to Renn’s (2010) call to achieve better research designs and methods, I avoided relying on convenience sampling and LGBT centers and organizations. Instead, I put out a general call for participants to self-identify whether they met the criteria for the study. To participate, students had to identify as trans* (e.g., trans man, trans woman, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, or any non-cisgender identity) and attend a higher education institution in the United States. They also had to be willing to participate in all study components.

Components included a virtual interview via Zoom of about 30-60 minutes at the beginning of the semester, monthly reflections, and a final interview.

I sought to include participants from various institutions and backgrounds to understand better the experiences of trans* college students. My goal was to recruit at least 15 participants until I had both achieved diversity in participant backgrounds and demographics and reached data saturation, the point at which additional data collection does not produce new themes or insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I used two virtual methods to recruit participants. The first was Prolific, which connects researchers to willing research participants and facilitates payment. Prolific allowed me to select custom prescreening so that only eligible participants could view the study opportunity, and it also advertised the incentive for participating. The second method I used was social media. My committee member, Dr. Leah Reinert, who identifies as part of the trans community, posted the opportunity on Facebook groups for LGBT students and academics.

It was important to me to provide resources to my participants for their time. As members of a marginalized community (particularly one that I do not belong to myself) and students with courses, often jobs, and co-curricular activities to focus on, I wanted to pay these students for their time. I applied for and received a \$2,000 DEI Research Grant through the Academic Affairs Office at the University of St. Thomas. I also received a \$4,000 Graduate Student Fellowship for Research on Topics Related to Women or Gender Issues through the St. Thomas Luann Dummer Center for Women. These combined grants allowed me to pay my participants, transcriber, and editor. I paid participants approximately 20 dollars per hour for their time spent interviewing and writing monthly reflections. It is worth noting that 100 percent

of the funding I received went directly to trans* students and trans professionals supporting this work.

Within 72 hours, I recruited over 20 eligible participants to this study. I accepted participants with my goal of creating a diverse group in mind. About halfway through recruitment, I noticed trans women were less represented than non-binary and trans male participants. To ensure I had multiple trans women in my study, I modified my posting on Prolific so that only transgender women could view it rather than anyone who did not identify as cisgender. This resulted in the recruitment of another trans woman and a more balanced representation of many gender identities. I finalized my participant roster with 20 participants. One participant ended their participation in the study after the first interview. I used the data from the remaining 19 participants. Next, I provide a short description of each participant.

Individual Participant Descriptions

This section provides a short description of each of the 19 participants in this study. Table 1 provides a quick reference list of each participant, their pronouns, gender identity, other salient identities they identified, their program type, area of academic study, region of the United States, and institution type. Participants included post-secondary students with various trans* identities pursuing associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from a diverse group of institutions across the United States. Participants' study areas included the social sciences, education, business, fine arts, medicine, science, computer science, and more.

Throughout the overview of my findings, I utilize pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. Participants selected or approved their pseudonyms, and I also consulted them on the best way to list their area of study and institution to keep their identity anonymous. Next, I provide descriptions of each participant in alphabetical order by their pseudonym.

Table 1*Participants*

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Gender Identity	Other Salient Identities	Program Type	Area of Study	Region	Institution Type
Adrian	They/she/he	Non-binary	Mixed-race (primarily Black), gay/queer	Undergraduate	Chemistry	Northeast	Small private liberal arts
Ashton	He/him/his	Trans Man	Low-income, first-generation college student	Master's	Higher Education	Southeast	Mid-size private research institution
Bo	She/her, he/him, they/them	Transmasc or a guy	African American, Nigerian, pansexual or bi, Christian and Muslim upbringing, "pretty wealthy"	Undergraduate	Computer Sciences	Midwest	Mid-size private liberal arts
Brian	He/him/his	Male	Stealth (perceived cisgender identity), White	Master's	Theater	Midwest	Mid-size public state school
Brielle	She/her/hers	Trans Woman	White, lower middle class	Master's	Educational Leadership and Public Policy	Mid-Atlantic	Large public state school
Calvin	They/them	Non-binary	Experiences a chronic illness	Undergraduate	Sociology and Data Science	Midwest	Large public research

Cameron	They/them	Non-binary	White, queer, Jewish	Master's	Social Work	Northeast	Mid-size private school
Cassian	He/him	Trans Man	Queer/gay, agnostic, "not coming from a very rich White background"	Undergraduate	Business and Fine Arts	Southeast	Small private liberal arts
David	He/him	Male	Married, White, first-generation college student, "token"	Doctorate	Social Sciences	West coast	Large public research
Ezra	He/him	Trans Man	Not wealthy, half Black	Undergraduate	Sociology	Northeast	Small private liberal arts
Freya	She/her/hers	Woman, Trans	First-generation college student, Catholic upbringing, Pagan, White	Doctorate	Clinical Psychology	Midwest	Large public research
G	N/A	Transmasculine, trans man	White, diagnosed with ADHD	Master's	Education	Midwest	Large public research
Jamie	They/them	Non-binary	Queer, agnostic	Undergraduate	Acting	South	Small private religious liberal arts
Leo	They/he	Non-binary transmasculine	Queer, grew up under a lot of economic stress, part Jewish ancestrally, experiences mental health difficulties, ADHD'er	Doctorate	Medicine	East Coast	Academic Medical Center

Li	They/ze	Nonbinary, transmasculine	Asian, Chinese American, first language was Mandarin, bisexual, upper-middle class, financially independent from parents	Undergraduate	Pre-med	West Coast	Large public research
Noam	They/them	Genderqueer, Non-binary	Non-traditional age (late 20s), Jewish, Veteran	Undergraduate	Pre-med	Northwest	Small private liberal arts
Rachel	She/her/hers	Trans Woman	Lesbian, diagnosed with ADHD, diagnosed with a subset of Asperger's Syndrome, White	Master's	Journalism	Midwest	Small public
Steve	They/them	Non-binary	Physically disabled, autistic, asexual/queer	Associates	Undecided	Midwest	Community college
Violet	They/them	Non-binary	Bisexual, polyamorous, Jewish, vegetarian, disabled	Undergraduate	Environmental Science	Midwest	Large public research

Adrian

Adrian was a final-semester senior undergraduate student studying chemistry during this study. They studied at a private liberal arts college in the Northeast. Adrian described their hometown as conservative, 96% White, and generally not that open-minded. As a mixed-race (primarily Black), queer, and non-binary identifying student, leaving their hometown for a queer-friendly college was freeing. Adrian described their institution as a “protective bubble,” diverse and welcoming both racially and to LGBTQ students. It is a “very, very queer school” where people feel like they can be themselves. They shared, at their institution, professors routinely inquired about students’ pronouns and the students who do not support trans people typically “don’t make it that long.” Adrian discovered non-binary identities in college and found their fit.

Ashton

Ashton came out as trans in high school and continued to transition in college. He was a first-generation college student from a low-income background, which impacted his experiences in class and in relation to his peers. During his undergraduate years, Ashton participated in campus engagement opportunities, including membership in a fraternity, an organization whose national office he remains active in serving as an alum. During the study, Ashton was a graduate student completing a master’s degree in higher education. Overall, he described his undergraduate and graduate experiences as positive due to institutional support, such as inclusive policies, instructors, and resources. Despite having positive experiences overall, he identified some challenges related to his transgender identity.

Bo

Bo is African American and Nigerian, the children of immigrants, and comes from a Christian and Muslim upbringing. Bo grew up in what they described as a “pretty wealthy”

household, and yet sometimes people on campus would assume they did not have a lot of money. Bo described their culture as impacting how they view gender roles, as women are not decision-makers in their Nigerian culture. Bo identified as transmasc but was still reflecting on their gender identity. Bo was an undergraduate student at a mid-sized private liberal arts college in the Midwest during this study. They described their college experience as transformational in developing confidence and learning how different people view gender and sexuality.

Brian

Brian came out as transgender when he was 14 and was the first out trans person at his high school. He identifies as male, noting his trans male status only when required for medical or legal reasons. When Brian went to college, he started living stealth and has continued to do so ever since. Brian considers himself at odds with many in the trans community because he does live stealth and views his transgender status as a condition that he will always live with rather than an identity. During the study, he celebrated his 10th anniversary of being on testosterone, which caused him to reflect on his life and feel guilty for not being a role model to younger trans guys. During this study, Brian was a master's student finishing a degree in theater. Others perceived him as a cis White man. His stealth identity meant he constantly experienced conversations with cisgender people who did not think there were trans people in the room. Brian saw a lot of improvement in trans inclusion within education systems since he first came out. He also recognized some continuing challenges.

Brielle

During this study, Brielle was a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in educational leadership and public policy. She identifies as White and lower-middle class. She realized she was a trans woman when pursuing her undergraduate degree but did not begin to

transition socially until attending graduate school, which she pursued directly after completing her bachelor's degree. At the beginning of the study, Brielle described how she was very conscious of how people perceived her during class. She changed the topics she discussed, the volume and tone of her voice, and how much space she took up so people would perceive her as more feminine. In the final interview, she identified this as a theme across her experiences. She recognized these internalized anxieties and resolved that she wanted to “live the life that is best for [her]” rather than “allow [her]self to conform to the expectations of others.” Overall, she experienced a lot of growth during graduate school, particularly during the semester she participated in this study.

Calvin

When Calvin came out as transgender, they first came out as a trans woman. Later, they realized they were non-binary. They described this change in identity as a result of not being aware of non-binary possibilities. When Calvin started college, they began a challenging STEM major. After coming out and transitioning, they did not feel included in their classrooms and experienced a lack of academic and social support. At that time, they stopped attending college. During this study, Calvin had returned to college and was completing a bachelor's degree in sociology and data science. When they returned to school, they felt they were older than everyone else and not able to relate. They were unsure whether some of their experiences of exclusion were related to age or gender identity. Calvin was contemplating returning to school for a graduate degree in data science the following year. Questions about whether they would be included in the field contributed to their consideration.

Cameron

Cameron was assigned female at birth, but growing up, never felt like a girl. As a kid, they experienced fights with their mom over clothing and presentation often and found themselves choosing between presenting how they wanted or avoiding conflict. Through their adolescent and undergraduate years, they tried to be cis, straight, and a “good Jewish woman,” but eventually decided they could not do it. At the time of this study, Cameron was a graduate student finishing their last semester in their master’s program in social work at a mid-sized private school in the Northeast. They loved their program, describing it as “very gay,” but still described some challenges throughout the semester related to their gender identity. Other salient identities that shaped their experience in higher education included their Jewish background and queer identity. They identified as non-binary and were still exploring their gender identity at the time of this study. Attending a graduate program that taught critical theories and required personal reflection helped them to explore the social construction of gender and their gender identity.

Cassian

Cassian’s biological parents were not supportive of his transgender identity. For his comfort and safety, he left them to live with his former teacher and their partner, whom he now considers his parents. The move impacted Cassian’s college choice and financial aid. Cassian was an undergraduate student studying fine arts and business at a private liberal arts institution at the time of this study. He had previous experience at a community college. He identified as a trans man and also described himself as agnostic and coming from a “not very rich” White background. At the beginning of the study, he had not come out to anyone at his college. By the end, he had come out in each of his classes so that he could meaningfully contribute to

discussions centered on queer and trans issues. He had a variety of experiences within classrooms, both affirming and challenging.

David

David realized he identified as a trans man after studying abroad in Ecuador while pursuing his bachelor's degree. The cultural context abroad in which he was consistently read as a man made him feel comfortable. After returning from the trip, he moved quickly to begin his transition. At the time of this study several years later, David was a doctoral student studying social sciences at a large university on the West Coast. He lived in campus housing with his wife and was not out to most people on campus. He came out to only a few people when he felt comfortable doing so. David expressed concern that his acceptance into his program was based on his transgender identity and worried about being a token. He reflected on how that perception impacted his academic work. While efforts to affirm his transgender identity did not take up the time and energy it had when he first began to transition, he recognized he had tasks and concerns his cis peers did not have to manage.

Ezra

Ezra was an undergraduate student at a private liberal arts college in the Northeast studying sociology at the time of this study. He considered himself an older trans college student not because of his age in years, as he was a traditional college student, but because of the amount of time since his transition. He had been on testosterone since before college and was further along than many other trans students he met at his institution. For this reason, he became a mentor to many people, helping them to find doctors and access to healthcare. He was stealth to most people on campus, choosing not to share his transgender identity for comfort. Other salient identities he believed impacted his experience in the classroom included being half Black and

coming from an unwealthy background. During this study, Ezra was exploring Judaism and experienced some friction between his religion and concealing his gender identity.

Freya

Freya came out as a gay man when she was starting her undergraduate program. After making friends with others in the LGBTQ community and becoming aware of more identities, she realized something was not quite right. For a short time, Freya identified as non-binary before realizing the feelings she was having were that she was a woman. After having these realizations, she came out to her family and began transitioning. During this study, Freya was a first-year doctoral student studying psychology at a large research institution in the Midwest. She had just graduated with her undergraduate degree at the same institution the year prior and went directly to graduate school. She identified as a woman and trans. Freya was a first-generation college student and the first in her family to pursue a Ph.D. She experienced some challenges in her education due to her gender identity, particularly with faculty. She also recognized and appreciated the support she received from her peers and her mentor.

G

G was a final semester graduate student studying higher education administration at a large public research institution in the Midwest at the time of this study. G identified as transmasculine, did not use pronouns, and experienced being misgendered frequently. During the semester of the study, G experienced challenges in the classroom directly related to gender identity. G noted that G was surprised about the lack of agreement within the trans community and lack of support from some cis peers when they were able to offer comments anonymously. During these challenges, G was grateful to have a supportive instructor who was willing to listen and do what they could to make things right.

Jamie

Jamie was an undergraduate student studying acting at a private, religious liberal arts college in the South during the time of this study. When this study began, they had just completed their first semester of college. They had come out as non-binary to some people at school, but not to their parents and family. They felt supported by their institution and instructors. Throughout the time the study was conducted, they built confidence in their ability to make new friends and take advantage of the opportunities offered in college.

Leo

Leo was a medical student at an academic medical center on the East Coast during the time of this study. They were undergoing gender-affirming surgeries in addition to focusing on school, finishing their degree, and securing their job after graduation. Leo described themselves as the first out trans person at their institution and thus had to provide the administration and faculty with a lot of education on how to meet their needs. A theme in Leo's experience was dealing with "the trans tax," which he described as the additional effort and energy trans people expend in order to get through the day, or in this case, degree.

Li

Li had experienced being the first out trans person at their high school. They had not had parental support and had to advocate for themselves a lot. They brought this advocacy skill with them to college. Li was a pre-med undergraduate student at a large public research institution on the West Coast at the time of this study. They described their gender as nonbinary and transmasculine. Additional salient identities that impacted their classroom experiences included their Asian American and Chinese identities, as well as their experience of being financially independent from their parents. Li described many instances where instructors taught in a way

that erased trans and intersex people or were blatantly transphobic. They often did not hesitate to provide feedback to instructors and request corrections be made for current and future students.

Noam

Noam was a non-traditional age student in their late 20s during this study. They had studied at various institutions in different regions across the country throughout their 20s and had spent time serving in the military. Noam identified as genderqueer and non-binary. They had been on active duty as an out trans person during the time the Trump administration banned trans people from military service. During this study, Noam was a pre-med student at a small private liberal arts college in the Northwest. They described their institution as inclusive and attractive to trans learners. They often had at least one other non-binary student in their classes. Noam identified challenging experiences with navigating binary language in the classroom.

Rachel

Rachel had come out as a trans woman during her undergraduate years. She identified as a trans woman, lesbian, and had been diagnosed with Asperger's. Rachel felt grateful for her relatively smooth experience with transitioning. During this study, Rachel was a master's student studying journalism at a public institution in the Midwest. For work, she covered political stories in the state capital where she lived. Her assigned stories centered on legislation that would impact the LGBTQ community.

Steve

Steve was pursuing an associate degree at a community college in the Midwest at the time of this study. They identified as non-binary and held some additional identities that impacted their classroom experience. Steve described themselves as queer, asexual, autistic, and experienced some physical disabilities. They had only been attending school for about a year,

entirely during the pandemic, so had only experienced online college courses. Steve had hoped college would be a more accepting place for LGBTQ students but did not find that to be the case. They found the online format made it difficult to connect with peers and instructors. During the study, they experienced some mental health challenges that caused them to miss their testosterone doses for a few months, which negatively impacted their experiences and ability to focus on coursework. Despite these challenges, they completed their semester successfully. Steve was eager to return to in-person classes the following semester.

Violet

Violet was an undergraduate student studying chemistry at a large public research university in the Midwest at the time of the study. They identify as non-binary. Many times in their education experience, Violet felt their gender identity was disregarded or erased by faculty and peers. Violet did not feel support from their parents, who utilized their dead name and incorrect pronouns when they were not around and sometimes when they were. They needed to remain connected to their parents, as they were paying for Violet's tuition. Despite many challenging experiences, Violet also had affirming experiences with the community on campus. Violet was a leader within an LGBT student group on campus. During the time of this study, they had the opportunity to present non-binary identities to their peers.

The sample provided access to various experiences, which is both a strength and a challenge. Participants' experiences better reflected the diversity of the trans* student population because the sample included participants studying different fields at different levels across the country. They shared several broad experiences, which the next chapter outlines. However, the diversity provided a challenge in more deeply understanding which components of education

impact students in specific fields or levels of education. The following section describes the methods I used to collect data.

Data Collection

I collected data using two methods, interviewing and document analysis. This section outlines both approaches. I begin by describing interviews as a qualitative data collection method and then document analysis.

Interviews

Interviews provide a window into another person's thoughts, perspectives, and perceptions that researchers cannot achieve through observation (Patton, 2015). Interviews can also recreate intense experiences for participants (Pattons, 2015). The quality of data gathered in an interview depends mainly on the interviewer's skills (Patton, 2015). For participants to feel comfortable sharing, the interviewer must establish rapport. Participants must perceive the researcher as nonjudgmental, authentic, and worthy of trust (Patton, 2015). Interviewers must also be good listeners and ask open-ended and straightforward questions, following up with probing questions as needed to gain more detailed and relevant data (Patton, 2015). A good interviewer also transitions smoothly between topics and questions (Patton, 2015).

Preparing for interviews includes preparing an interview guide that includes questions aligned to the overall research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, the interview questions should be easy for participants to digest and provide insight into their experiences. Questions should be truly open-ended, not leading the interviewee to any specific response (Patton, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) also recommended conducting a pilot study to "refine and develop research instruments" (p. 165). I conducted a pilot study in the spring semester of 2020, interviewing two participants.

In this study, I conducted interviews virtually using Zoom. Virtual interviews allowed me to safely collect data from participants throughout the nation during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual interviews provide additional benefits, including waiving budgetary concerns for travel and allowing participants to select the most comfortable interview space. Virtual interviews also have downsides. For example, it is more difficult to read body language, which could provide helpful cues to the researcher. In addition, there were a couple of instances where the internet was unstable, and I had to ask participants to repeat answers to questions. They may have told the story differently the second time, leading to potentially missed details.

As I gathered my data, I recorded the audio of each Zoom session with the Voice Recorder app for iPhone. I uploaded the audio files to a OneDrive folder that I shared with my transcriber. The transcriber produced a full transcript for each interview, which I reviewed for accuracy before deleting the audio files.

I completed initial interviews with 20 participants at the beginning of the spring 2021 semester using the initial interview guide (see Appendix D). I collected monthly written reflections during the semester, which I describe in the next section. I conducted interviews again at the end of the study. During this final interview, I asked participants follow-up questions about the monthly reflections, the themes they identified in their experiences, and what it was like to participate in the study (see Appendix G). One participant was unable to schedule a final interview, but completed all other components of the study.

Document Analysis

Case study research can also include collecting data by finding documents and documentation (Patton, 2015). Records and documents provide “a particularly rich source of information” (Patton, 2015, p. 376). They can be valuable because of the direct data gathered and

the additional paths of inquiry researchers should explore through additional methods, such as interviews (Patton, 2015).

To build rich cases of my participants' experiences, I asked them to submit monthly written reflections to five questions focused on describing experiences in the month that were affirming or challenging considering the lens of gender identity (see Appendix H). I also asked whether personal experiences outside the classroom affected their learning experiences. Finally, I asked whether any other identities impacted their experience and if they had anything additional to share relevant to the study. Most participants completed their monthly reflections each and every month; however, participants occasionally missed submissions. Two participants missed one month, another two participants missed two months, and one participant missed three months. These participants reflected on those months in their final interviews. Next, I describe the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the examination of pieces of data in relation to the whole, which involves organizing, reviewing, coding, and interpreting them (Patton, 2015). Qualitative researchers analyze the information based on the research question and code it into categories or patterns and then themes to give it meaning (Patton, 2015). Coding involves taking a large amount of data and assigning it to smaller categories of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative researchers often use qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) to code their data digitally and review and retrieve passages assigned to each code.

Patton (2015) described QDAS as best able to facilitate “marking text, building codebooks, indexing, categorizing, creating memos, and displaying multiple text entries side by side” (p. 530). While the software will assist with administrative tasks such as pattern finding

and coding, the human mind must complete the true analysis. Making meaning of the codes, naming them, and providing themes require creativity and human understanding and comparison (Patton, 2015).

Analysis in case study research begins with organizing data by case to allow for “in-depth study and comparison” (Patton, 2015, p. 535). The researcher creates a case record for each case, including all of the researcher’s information collected during the study for each participant, organized in chronological order (Patton, 2015). While cross-case comparison will provide insight, the researcher’s primary responsibility is to each case. Only when the researcher has extracted themes for each case can they look at themes across cases.

Coding

In this study, I uploaded the transcripts and monthly reflection documents into a QDAS, specifically NVivo. I listened to recordings of the interviews and read the transcripts and documents multiple times to familiarize myself with the data and each case. Once I uploaded the data to the QDAS, I conducted an inductive analysis of each case, which involved “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data (Patton, 2015, p. 542). As I reviewed the data, I kept my research question in mind, focusing on factors affecting participants’ classroom experiences.

Coding is an essential part of exploring qualitative data (Patton, 2015). Coding is the process of assigning a label to a fragment of data so you can find it again and pair it with similar data (Bazeley, 2013). Codes can include words, phrases, feelings, identities, and more (Bazeley, 2013). Open coding allows researchers to go wherever the data takes them, particularly at the beginning stages of qualitative analysis (Patton, 2015). I utilized an open coding method for this inductive analysis, going wherever the data took me.

In this multiple case study, I focused on analyzing each participant case first before seeking themes across cases (Patton, 2015). To do this, I relied on creating participant case records, which I organized in chronological order, starting with the initial interview and ending with the final interview. I coded the cases one at a time chronologically and made notes about themes within each case. After coding each case, I reviewed all of the data by code, which allowed me to pick up on patterns and understand them more deeply. I had 94 total codes, several with subcodes underneath.

Next, I reviewed the full list of codes to determine how they fit together into categories. I grouped them into categories based on similarities within the data. For example, I grouped the “mentor” code with “peers” and “trans peers” because of their synergies in providing participants with support, motivation, and allyship. I moved from creating codes to identifying several categories. Finally, I moved from several categories into five distinct themes (Bazeley, 2013).

Identifying Themes

After developing codes and categories, I found where the data converged by identifying “recurring regularities” in the data through the lens of my research question (Patton, 2015, p. 555). As systems for classification emerged, I prioritized those that were most valuable as I considered the use of my findings. I reviewed the themes from each case again and revisited the fragmented data by code to determine overarching themes from the study.

Themes describe both the content and meaning within the data; describing the relationships between like categories (Bazeley, 2013). In this study, I moved my thinking from categories like “outdated terms” and “LGBT content” to the theme of the (mis)education of sex and gender, as the tie between several codes and categories was the focus on how instructors taught or failed to teach the nuances of sex and gender-related topics. This is an example of how

I moved from categories to overarching themes. Chapter Four describes the five overarching themes in detail.

After describing each of the five themes, I interpreted them. The process of interpreting data includes making sense of them, considering the study's framework (Patton, 2015). I analyzed the themes using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and queer theory. Chapter Five interprets the themes using these two theoretical frameworks.

Researcher Experience and Bias (Reflexive Statement)

As a qualitative researcher, I brought my unique experiences and world perspectives into my research (Patton, 2015). As an instrument in qualitative research, I had to be self-aware during the research process. Qualitative research can either serve to “relay dominant voices or can be appropriated to ‘give voice to otherwise silenced groups and individuals’” (Patton, 2015, p. 605). Through my research, I aimed to give a unified voice to my participants. To do this effectively, I had to continually reflect on my role and experiences throughout the research by asking, “How do I know what I know? What shapes and has shaped my perspective? How do I perceive those I have studied?” (Patton, 2015, p. 604).

I had to consider how my identities shape my perspective in this research. I am a straight White cisgender woman from an upper-middle-class family background, and I do not experience any disabilities and am pursuing a doctoral degree. As a cisgender person, I have never personally experienced transphobia directed at me in the classroom or otherwise. Outside of this research, I do not have to frequently think about my cisgender identity on a daily basis. My race, socioeconomic status, and ability also shaped my upbringing and perspectives. I have been able to access education and succeed in higher education institutions with little struggle beyond the

regular demands of coursework. I had to be mindful of not clouding the data with my assumptions and experiences of what it is like to experience higher education.

I have spent time and energy learning about different perspectives than my own. I come from a tight-knit family of five and am the oldest of three children. Both of my siblings are transgender and have come out as adults. From a relatively young age, I learned that not everyone experiences their gender in the same way. For many years, I have considered what that means for myself and others. Through my relationships with my siblings, I clearly understand experiences within the trans community vary greatly, which I found helpful in this research. My closest relationships with trans-identifying people are sibling relationships. I feel very protective of them and connected through storge or familial love, which feels natural, instinctual, and unconditional. I had to consider this connection in my study and lean into the benefits while also resisting projecting my relationships with my siblings onto participants.

One participant, David, noticed something unique about my approach to the research as a cis person. He said that while he was usually all about “for trans by trans about trans,” it was “very meaningful for [him] to see somebody else take the approach [I] [took] to [my] work,” noting, “when one of us wins, we all win together.” He said though he did not know a lot about my approach, it was “pretty clear that [I’m] not doing this because it’s kitschy,” which is “very in vogue,” and a lot of people “don’t realize that they’re doing it.” He added, “I don’t know about your academic background or personal life ... whatever it is, it’s coming through. So, like, thanks.” David picked up on my care and genuine desire to improve experiences for trans people without knowing much at all about my background. I identify as an advocate and ally for LGB and trans* people, which was a strength for this research. I was genuinely interested in

highlighting transgender students' experiences and voices while advocating for change that eliminates genderism and transphobia for all.

I could not eliminate this bias from my research, but I used it to my advantage as I advocated for trans* students in a transformative approach. I bracketed my experiences by focusing on the data provided by participants and member-checking by sharing my findings with my participants for review and suggestions. I believe my experiences and viewpoints enhanced this qualitative research project.

Criteria for Evaluating Qualitative Research

Identifying criteria for evaluating a successful research study depends on the study's methodology and the researcher's paradigm (Patton, 2015). While traditional scientific research sought to discover a universal objective "Truth" through quantitative methods, qualitative research seeks different results (Patton, 2015). In this study, I took a transformative and constructivist approach. Constructivist inquiry requires different criteria than traditional research (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Guba and Lincoln (1986) identified criteria for evaluating constructivist inquiry, the four elements of trustworthiness: Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

First, credibility addresses whether the researcher's reconstruction of the participants' experiences aligns with how they view their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, transferability evaluates whether the researcher provided sufficient information about each case to understand whether and when the findings can transfer to other cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Third, dependability evaluates whether the researcher has sufficiently documented the study to ensure the process was logical (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, confirmability concerns relating the findings to the data through a traceable pathway (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

It was essential to ensure my findings provided a trustworthy account of participants' experiences when describing my themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure a trustworthy study, I employed a few strategies. First, I utilized triangulation of qualitative sources (Patton, 2015). Triangulation of qualitative sources required the researcher to collect data using multiple qualitative methods and check for consistency across sources. In this study, I triangulated qualitative sources by using two data collection methods, interviewing and document analysis, as well as selecting multiple participants (Patton, 2015). This triangulation increased the study's credibility.

Another strategy for increasing credibility is member-checking (Patton, 2015). Member-checking is the process of allowing the participants the opportunity to review the findings to ensure the researcher's description of their experiences matches their perception. In this study, I sent the individual participant descriptions and table, the findings, and the analysis to participants for review. Six participants sent back feedback, and four requested updates to either the identities reflected in the table of participants or the use of a quote. This member-checking process increased the credibility of my study (Patton, 2015).

A strategy for increasing transferability is to provide detailed descriptions of the participants and data in the final report (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Including background information on each of my participants and a detailed description of their experiences allows readers to determine whether the case information applies to their setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the implications, I caution readers to consider whether the findings transfer to their setting carefully.

To create a dependable study, I carefully outlined each of my steps in this chapter. I provided several copies of my materials in the appendices so the reader could follow my study

and ensure I followed a logical process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure confirmability, I provide examples and quotes to explain each of my findings and to demonstrate my analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Creswell and Poth (2018) also identified extended engagement in the field as a strategy for trustworthiness, as participants can get to know the researcher and build rapport. I was in contact with my participants for a full semester, regularly checking in to provide gratitude and reminders of the monthly written reflections. By the final interview, I built some rapport with many of the participants. After the interviews, some asked me questions about myself and were interested in learning more about my study and my background.

Finally, throughout the study, I engaged in reflexivity to clarify research bias and bracket my own experiences and perspectives (Patton, 2015). I often thought about what it meant to study trans* students as a cisgender researcher, and I considered my role as an ally and advocate for transformative change. These strategies for improving trustworthiness were cost-effective, realistic, and achievable.

Ethical Considerations

It was paramount that I consider and execute ethical decisions in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, it was essential to keep participants' personal and contact information confidential, as outlined in the consent form (see Appendix B; Creswell & Poth, 2018). To maintain confidentiality, I kept participants' names and contact information in one spreadsheet in a password-protected OneDrive folder in a location separate from any other files related to my doctoral program or my study. The file name also was not related to my study topic or coursework. To protect participants' identities, they chose or approved a pseudonym for the

study. I used only pseudonyms to reference the participants in the files and locations where I kept the data throughout the study.

This study also involved collecting audio recordings. I recorded only the audio of each virtual interview because I did not want to create any visual recordings, which likely can be more identifiable. Instead, I used the VoiceRecorder app for iPhone to capture audio. I utilized the password protection feature within the app itself and on my phone to ensure maximum protection of the audio files. The app allowed me to upload the files directly to my password-protected space in OneDrive, only accessible to my transcriber and myself. After my transcriber completed the transcripts, I deleted the audio files.

Participants also created data through their monthly reflections. To ensure this process was secure, I sent the participants unique links to Word documents in OneDrive where they could respond to each question. Sending links provided extra security, as participants did not send their reflections through email. The links also broke after the end of the month. Thus, I could control the limited access to the reflection documents.

In addition to these storage areas, I uploaded my data into a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), NVivo, where I worked with the data through the coding and analysis process. I utilized participant pseudonyms on case documents and files to maintain confidentiality during this process. Throughout the study, I maintained a high standard for ethical considerations.

Summary

This chapter outlined a trustworthy qualitative research study. First, I identified the distinct goals and characteristics of qualitative research, multiple case studies, and the transformative framework. Then, I outlined the specific methods I used in this study, including methods for participant selection and recruiting, data gathering, and data analysis. I provided a

narrative description of each participant and a table summarizing the sample. I shared my background and reflexive statement that informs my research, as well as several strategies I used to conduct a trustworthy and ethical study. The next chapter describes my findings in five themes.

CHAPTER FOUR: FACTORS THAT AFFECT TRANS STUDENTS

The purpose of this study was to answer the following research question: What factors affect trans* students' experiences in the classroom? The data revealed that many factors affect trans students experiences in the classroom, and those experiences differ based on the students' gender identity, development, other salient identities, and environments. After coding the data, I solidified five unique themes—navigating gender identity, the power of language, the trans* tax, the (mis)education of sex and gender, and community.

The first theme, centered on navigating gender identity, includes experiences of participants navigating or questioning their gender identity, gender dysphoria, and gender expression as well as how the online environment impacts their experiences. The power of language theme contains experiences, both positive and negative, with sharing pronouns, being misgendered, navigating the online environment, and encountering outdated terminology in coursework. The third theme, the trans* tax, comprises experiences which add to daily anxieties and require expending additional energy, such as transitioning, coming out, and coping with the political climate. The fourth theme, the (mis)education of sex and gender relates to the education, or oftentimes miseducation, of sex and gender topics in coursework. Finally, the theme of community stresses the important impact of individuals inside and outside of the classroom, including family, friends, class peers, mentors, instructors, and academic programs or institutions.

This chapter describes these five themes and relevant subthemes. I provide evidence from participants supporting each. First, I begin by describing the theme of navigating gender identity.

Navigating Gender Identity

The first theme that emerged from the data is participants' experiences navigating gender identity. Participants reflected on how their gender identity development, gender dysphoria, or gender expression impacted their experiences in the classroom. Participants also shared ways their classroom experiences impacted their gender identity development. Some also reflected on the experience of moving between privileged and oppressed identities and how that movement impacted how they experienced classrooms. Participants' experiences varied greatly depending on where they were at in their gender identity development journey. Subthemes include gender identity development, movement between privileged and oppressed identities, and the impact of the pandemic and subsequent move to online course formats. First, I describe experiences with gender identity development.

Gender Identity Development

Several participants described the experience they had when they began to question their gender identity and its impact on their college coursework. For some participants, questioning and considering their gender identity caused them to miss class. Brielle described her experience during her undergraduate years when she began to struggle with and question whether she was transgender. She said, "I was really, really stressed out during that time. And...I dare to say I, ...wasn't always there in class as a result, because I was often, um, very disassociated, thinking about these topics." Bo, a first-year student, was still determining their gender identity.

Some participants' classroom experiences were impacted by experiencing gender dysphoria prior to transitioning. Calvin shared about their experiences as an undergrad: "I didn't talk much, because I didn't like my voice, so everyone assumed I was, like, not knowledgeable or anything." They were also impacted by not feeling good about their appearance, "the thing

that I think mainly got to me then was not going to class, because I just did not feel good about my appearance and stuff.”

Rachel described how she developed confidence over time after beginning to take hormones, which impacted the way she showed up in the classroom. She said,

I mean ... for one, just hormone replacement therapy working as well as it has for me. Just that's given me a fair bit of peace of mind. But it's also just given me ... I've just had so much ... developed so much confidence in myself. Like, in the first year or so, I always was hesitant when I ... wore certain clothes or that sort of thing. But now it's just, I'm so confident in myself. And I'm like, “Yes, I am going to wear a dress, and no one's going to stop me.

Brielle had not yet started hormone replacement therapy but wanted to. One evening, she watched a video of her favorite YouTuber coming out as transgender. The video made her emotional and envious. She described how watching the video impacted her emotions and experiences in the classroom.

This video made me start thinking about how much I would like to start transitioning with hormone replacement therapy and that I am not at a point in my life that I can yet. It made me envious of wanting to come out so badly, but not being in a place where I can come out completely yet. I had class the next morning on Monday, and I recall being very disengaged that day. I kept my camera off the entire class period because I was ruminating in my own thoughts and upset. This only lasted a few days, but it was highly impactful while I was in class that day.

For Brielle, seeing another trans* person come out to the world and transition was inspiring, but it also made her envy this person's ability to be entirely authentically themselves when she was still out in limited spaces.

For Brian, who lived stealth, navigating gender identity looked different. During the study, he celebrated 10 years since starting testosterone and had “a lot of feelings about it—all positive!” He was grateful but also felt there was “a sense of wisdom that [he'd] been feeling with it and a sense of duty ... to ‘show up’ for the younger transmen.”

The relationship between gender identity development and curricular experiences was not linear, nor did it move in just one direction. Some participants' curricular experiences impacted their gender identity development. For example, David came to terms with his gender identity on a study abroad trip during his undergraduate years. When he left for the trip, he identified as non-binary, but others consistently read him as male in Ecuador, which made him feel really comfortable. When he returned from the trip, he realized he identified as a man and shortly after began the transition process. Freya also described a classroom experience that impacted her gender identity development. For a course, she had a reading that challenged the “born this way” movement, pushing back on the idea that LGBTQ identities are simply not a choice. Instead, the article asked the reader to consider whether it would be wrong if it were a choice. Freya reported that the reading made her think about her identities and the world in a new way, which she described as affirming.

Bo also had an affirming experience with coursework that impacted their gender identity development. They didn't expect to have such a positive experience, particularly in a theology class. They described the experience:

We were talking about love in my theology class...about...where love came from, and... all the different types of love...The main point of the lecture was that...God is love, and all forms of love came from God. And since we were made in his image, that's...proof that he loves us no matter what. And I was like, "Oh, great. So... in reality, I don't really need to...care about what other people are saying, as long as I keep that in my head that he loves me. I don't really care if other people love me because I don't need their love or affirmation, to be honest.

Bo felt much more comfortable in their skin after their first year of college. The content in two of their courses, including theology, prompted self-reflection and self-acceptance.

Participants described both challenging and affirming experiences where questioning and realizing their gender identity impacted their coursework or where the coursework impacted their gender identity development. Some experiences highlighted where coursework or course experiences positively impacted gender identity development. Next, I describe the second subtheme of gender identity: the movement between privileged and oppressed identities.

Movement Between Privileged and Oppressed Identities

The second subtheme is the movement between privileged and oppressed identities. Some participants described their lived experience with sexism on both ends of the spectrum, and how movement between those experiences impacted them. As trans women, Brielle and Freya had experienced a transition regarding the amount of space they felt they were able to take up within class. Brielle intentionally took up less space in order to be perceived as more feminine when she was transitioning. She described her experience:

I'd say the biggest thing is that I feel like I don't ... talk as much in class ... or speak up. Part of that has, or as much as I used to ... in undergrad, whenever I presented and

identified as cis, cisgendered. Part of that is because, as a trans woman ... I feel the need to ... I guess, overcompensate in some ways and to ... ascribe myself to what is commonly stereotyped as more feminine behavior. ... and what I mean by that is I ... felt like I shouldn't take up as much space as I used to. ... so I, kind of, self-censored myself going into grad school, deciding I wasn't going to speak up or ... argue or debate as much. ... and I did that because of fear that those would be perceived as more masculine qualities and would ... make people view me differently and not see me as a trans woman. ... I guess, kind of, an internalized fear. So, ultimately, I'd say the biggest change is that I don't talk as much in class.

Brielle described the personal development she felt resulted from this change in behavior over time:

At first it was very frustrating. ... I like to debate people, and ... I can also be very opinionated. And ... it was frustrating to me to not ... speak up as much or speak my mind. Over time ... I really appreciated having ... I guess, self-censor, censored myself, because I found myself listening more and learning more. ... I found myself much more level-headed as a result, because, like, I guess I was spending more time thinking and in my own head than what I was just saying whatever was off the cuff. ... I feel more, I guess, mature ... as a result of it.

Freya also noticed the difference in her interactions once she was perceived as a woman. Rather than intentionally taking up space, she noticed a difference in how much she was interrupted by other people. Freya described the change in her experiences over time:

Obviously at one point in my life, I was seen as a white cis male. And so I was able to take up a lot of space in conversations. ... before I, kind of, understood about those

privileges. And I was able to take up that space and, you know, didn't feel weird about asking questions and felt like, "No, this was," you know ... I probably felt like, "Oh, this is owed to me. Like, you should help me. I deserve this." ... but I think now that, definitely after transitioning, being a woman ... a white woman, I definitely still have some privileges over other classmates in certain regards. But I think that also now I've seen the shift in that, you know, I get talked over a lot more or interrupted or I'm not looked at as ... someone who might always meaningfully contribute to ... the discussion or different things like that because of my identity.

Freya's response to this realization was a desire to stand up and speak out, and make sure other people with minoritized identities did not experience the same thing. "I'm not letting myself internalize these feelings that people have about women. I'm going to speak up and make sure that they hear me."

Cameron also intentionally tried to take up more space and push back on the norms society set for women and for them for much of their life.

I very much try to embody the confidence of a white man. So, like ... I definitely feel like I'm more talkative and less ashamed to take up space, like, in classroom settings now. Like ... I'll be more vocal or just, like, I don't know. I feel like the conditioning that women have and, about, like, deferring or ... not taking up space or being quiet and ... kind of, passive. I'm just, like, "Fuck that." And I'm trying to actively undo that. And it's been a lot of fun. ... it's kind of, it's another process that's just, like, really meaningful and definitely, I think, impacts the way I engage in a ... in any group setting really.

Although Noam is non-binary, they would sometimes be perceived as a man in class and sometimes as a woman. They commented on how those changes in perception led people to treat them differently.

But it was interesting how I, kind of, got talked over a lot more, and ... more, like, things I'd associated with being perceived as female, whereas in other times, when ... my classmates were perceiving me male, I was treated differently.

Cassian described how he navigated from being perceived as a woman to a man.

... just, like I said, business stuff, I seem to fit in more there, where I never had before. And theater stuff, I was the one person that everyone in high school in theater talked to and here I'm, I talk to maybe half the people. ... so it's a very big change for me to have to, like, fit in with the guys-and not with the queer community.

Multiple participants experienced shifts in the way others perceived their gender in the classroom. These changes in perception impacted how they treated participants. Specifically, participants experienced shifts in how much space they could take up in conversation and how frequently others talked over them. Some participants also gained or lost a sense of belonging within their academic field due to their gender identity. The final subtheme is the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online courses.

Pandemic and Online Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shift to online classes impacted the way participants experienced courses, including how they navigated gender dysphoria and expression. Violet reflected on how the pandemic allowed students time to consider gender identity. They said:

It's just, like, exciting to see other people come into their own ... especially this year. I think, with the pandemic, a lot more people are discovering things about themselves, especially gender identity. ... and it's just really nice to see, like, as people go through college, as people go through life, like, the transformation and then, like, comparing that to myself and how much I've grown in confidence and ... self-knowledge ... over the last four years. It's ... really cool to see. ... and it feels good to feel a lot more comfortable in my own body and identity.

They further stated,

People just have more time with themselves. And also, like, not having to perform your gender [laughter], like, outside of your home too. I feel like, with both of those, with the isolation, you really just have more time to play around with yourself and, yeah, think a lot more about what actually would make you comfortable if you were by yourself.

[laughter]

Some participants found aspects of the online environment comforting. The online environment provided new opportunities to turn off your camera or mute so others in the "classroom" could not see or hear you. Violet, for example, felt they were less visible to others during class. They shared,

I've had a lot of dysphoria this month which made me pretty hesitant to have my camera on during classes. It feels more impersonal to not be visible during discussions or presentations, but some days I just need the anonymity to feel comfortable and not obsess over how I look to other people.

Li also appreciated the benefit of not having others perceive them. It allowed them to more comfortably change their hairstyle during the semester because the transition period between hairstyles as they grew it out made them dysphoric. They commented,

I would've just been too uncomfortable with, like, being perceived daily and growing my hair out. ... if I were to be, like, on campus every day, wh-, like, non-COVID, or having to, like, maybe have my video on all the time. ... so I was, like, happy that I could, kind of, do the awkward stages of growing my hair out without people really perceiving me that much. Or I put on a beanie, and they would only see me from the front, so I could be more, like, less self-conscious about how I was being perceived.

Leo also reflected on the Zoom environment, thinking about interviewing they did for medical school and then residency. While they are comfortable with their appearance and voice now, they thought about what it would have been like to have the experience pre-transition.

But also it's weird, because you have to see yourself. And I, reflecting on it, I don't hate the way I look anymore. And, like, it doesn't, looking in the mirror doesn't cause me distress, but ... and hearing, like, my voice ... if there were an echo or something doesn't cause me distress anymore. But if, I think it would have been really, really, really horrible if I had to do that as a medical applicant. I, I don't know how I could have done it in, like, drag, you know, essentially.

For several participants, either seeing themselves on screen or knowing that others could see them, provided discomfort.

Cameron saw both opportunities and drawbacks to the Zoom environment when it came to gender expression as well. One positive for them was Zoom showed a view only above the chest. They explained:

And as much as Zoom university has sucked, one of the pleasant things about it is that you can't see my chest ... which is usually the thing that I think sets most people off when they first see me. It's like, "Oh, you have," like, it's large. It's large. It's annoying. And that's, it's noticeable when I am out in public. So when people see that, they're like, "Oh, woman." And it, I have a binder and I haven't bothered wearing it in a very long time, because I haven't gone anywhere, because we're in the middle of a pandemic ... I think the, I guess I just didn't realize until relatively recently how much of a difference the, like, virtual environment made.

They felt, though the Zoom environment took away visuals of their chest, which they liked, it also took away other important components of their gender expression, which they did not like.

They said:

... and I definitely emphasize, like, I feel like if I was in person, and I walked into the room, like, looking the way I do, sounding the way I do, and acting the way I do, maybe people would be less inclined to assume that I'm a cis woman, just because it's, like, I think gender expression is so, like, comprehensive. And it can't really just be limited to, like, what you see from ... here up on any given day. ... so I wonder if that would have made a difference. And I wonder if I would have felt more comfortable correcting people in person.

Bo also enjoyed communicating their gender identity through clothing or actions, and described how the pandemic and online learning experience took away some of those pieces:

I would share it non-verbally. And, I don't know, it's just nice to be able to, like, express it in either how I dress, how I act, or just how I do things for my day-to-day. And that has definitely ... it has influenced parts of my college life. Just ... maybe not, like, an

incredible amount. Just because now I just, kind of, sit in my room or just go outside for, like, lunch. [laughter]

Overall, the pandemic and online course formats impacted participants' experiences with navigating gender identity, gender dysphoria, and gender expression.

Participants shared how navigating their gender identity affected their experiences in the classroom. Participants described these experiences as both positive and negative. Participants' coursework sometimes impacted or encouraged their gender identity development in an affirming way. On the other hand, identity development sometimes negatively impacted participants' classroom experiences, as a focus on gender identity took focus away from their courses. For some participants, moving between privileged and oppressed gender identities impacted their classroom experiences, impacting the amount of space they could take up in discussions. This theme describes gender identity as a factor that affects trans* students' experiences in the classroom. Next, I describe the second theme, the power of language.

The Power of Language

An important factor affecting trans students' experiences in the classroom is the power of language, which is the second theme. All participants described the impact of language on their curricular experiences, which showed up in multiple ways. Participants described both positive and negative experiences, which varied between courses, instructors, peers, and daily experiences. Subthemes that emerged include sharing pronouns, (mis)gendering, the impact of the pandemic and subsequent online format of courses, and encountering outdated terminology. Participants described both positive and negative experiences within most subthemes, which varied between courses, instructors, peers, and daily practices. Experiences with outdated

terminology were all described as harmful. Overall, language had a significant impact on participants' experiences in the classroom. First, I describe experiences with sharing pronouns.

Sharing Pronouns

Most participants described instances where students were able to share experiences with sharing pronouns in class. Participants described a variety of methods instructors used to encourage sharing pronouns, including prompts to share during class introductions, requests to share via email before the first day of class, and encouragement to include their pronouns in their online Zoom names. Participants generally had positive views of instructors encouraging students to share their pronouns. For some, it signaled inclusion and provided an opportunity to make sure others in the class were aware of their pronouns. They described opportunities during class introductions, via email prompt before the first day of class, and through encouragement to include their pronouns in their Zoom names. Noam said of an instructor, "Before I even started the class, I felt like she took trans people seriously and was aware as a professor that it was something that could potentially cause students issues in the class environment." They highlighted the impact of normalizing sharing pronouns within an institution, "Everybody's asked to put their pronouns, it's not like I have to email the teacher beforehand and be like, "Hey, can you please use these pronouns for me?" Brielle also described her appreciation for this space as a sign that the instructor is accepting:

I like that our ... professors create an environment where they ... encourage people to share their pronouns ... To me, that's a sign, like, this is going to be someone who's accepting of someone of a differing gender identity. The fact that they're willing to ask that type of thing and set up a space for it.

Ashton, Jamie, Adrian, and Cassian also appreciated instructors creating space for sharing pronouns. Participants generally appreciated this process when instructors and teaching assistants normalized sharing pronouns. However, some participants highlighted challenges.

Cameron, who had been sharing “she/they” as their pronouns for most of the semester, noticed that despite sharing both of these pronouns, everyone continued to refer to them solely as “she.” Cameron preferred “they/them,” explaining, “I only use they/she because the ‘she/her’ aspect is a built-in safety measure for people I don’t feel safe having the gender conversation around.” Because Cameron actually preferred “they,” it was challenging. They described their experience of sharing pronouns:

It’s a, just a formality, but nobody actually takes into consideration what your pronouns are. It’s just a thing of like, “Oh, we’re going to virtue signal that we’re inclusive, and we care ... But then we’re just not going to follow up on that.” ... so maybe just paying more attention to people who actually ... if you hear, like, a “they” anywhere in the pronoun introduction, to make some conscious attempt to remember that and to use it.

For Cameron, sharing pronouns did not equate to people using their pronouns. Because the follow-through was missing, the whole process felt like a virtue signal. David, who had transitioned about seven years prior to the study, described his changing interpretation of sharing pronouns in class over time:

I used to really appreciate the opportunity to share pronouns in a class (it felt inclusive and I perceived it as a signal that I would be “heard”/“respected” with regards to my transgender status). Now when I see cis-faculty leading pronoun go-arounds I experience it much more as a performance of inclusivity.

Participants whose gender was consistently perceived correctly did not rely on this process for personal comfort. Yet, they generally still found the ritual to be inclusive for others. Ezra, for example, also described a unique experience with sharing pronouns. Ezra was several years into his transition and was consistently gendered correctly. While he found the practice of sharing pronouns inclusive for others, he did not like sharing his own anymore. He said it was “nice to see that professors are still being incredibly accommodating for those who aren’t cis or are questioning their identity and expression.” However, he personally had a different experience, given how far he was into his transition. He found himself growing uncomfortable with sharing his pronouns in class, as he does not want to be visibly “queer.” He said,

I now find myself uncomfortable when sharing my pronouns. I know the importance of stating pronouns to make sure the environment is a safe space for everyone, but I worry more now that expressing my pronouns could make me more visible as a queer person. Obviously, I know that this isn’t the case and it would be incredibly hard to “clock” me, but it is something that I’ve seen discomfort with over the last few months, more so now than my fall semester.

Ezra’s fear that sharing pronouns would signal trans identity aligns with others’ perceptions that typically it is trans students who share their pronouns in class. Violet described this isolating experience:

I’ll be the only nonbinary person in a classroom. I’ll be, like, the only person to give my pronouns ... in introductions. And I’m, it singles me out a bit. And, like, that makes me less ... willing to want to ... participate.

Brielle had a similar experience, expressing a desire that other people would share their pronouns even when unprompted by the instructor, “I was the only student that ever did it. ... there

weren't really any other students that were willing to share their pronouns. And it wasn't expected or asked by the professor, which, at times, felt isolating."

Two participants provided insights into the types of courses where sharing pronouns was most encouraged. Leo shared, "I saw a very stark difference between classrooms that had everyone say their pronouns at the beginning that were, like, you know, seminars in gender studies versus biochemistry, where no one even bothered asking pronouns" Adrian, who studied chemistry, said in a monthly reflection,

I've really only had gender-affirming experiences in one of my introductory courses, as it was really the only course that asked us for our pronouns on the first day. Not many courses in my major and minor disciplines have asked for pronouns on the first few days of class.

Both Leo and Adrian suggested sharing pronouns has not been common in their STEM classes.

Overall, participants appreciated opportunities to share pronouns when instructors normalized the process, cis students also participated, and others followed through on utilizing the pronouns they shared. Multiple participants felt the normalization of sharing pronouns was a key recommendation for instructors. Ashton recommended instructors always include this opportunity, suggesting, "when you go through introductions, always ask ... preferred name and pronouns." Jamie shared a similar recommendation, "just figure out how everybody wants to identify, what their pronouns are, like ... a survey or something. Just ... something so everybody feels comfortable in your class." Cassian remarked on the importance of this practice because it takes the responsibility off of the student:

I think that that's important that everyone does it at the beginning of the semester and that it's, like more normalized that you ask for these things of your students, than having the students have to go out of their way to be made comfortable by means of their own.

Sharing pronouns is the first subtheme within the overarching power of language theme. The second subtheme that emerged is (mis)gendering.

(Mis)gendering

The next subtheme that emerged within the power of language is (mis)gendering. This subtheme includes participants' experiences of being gendered by others through language and its impact on them, particularly as it relates to their engagement with courses. Ten of the participants described at least one instance of being misgendered, including Cameron, Noam, Adrian, Li, G, Steve, Violet, Rachel, Calvin, and Leo. Cassian was not misgendered but noted he heard a professor misgender someone in the media. Violet noted an experience witnessing an instructor misgender another classmate. People misgendered these participants in several ways. Examples include using an incorrect pronoun, inappropriately gendered titles or terms, such as "ma'am" or "bro," referring to them directly as a woman or man, or grouping them incorrectly with others, such as using the term "ladies" to address a group. While Rachel generally felt supported by professors, she described an experience where her professor misgendered her:

I did have one professor who misgendered me on multiple occasions, even after I'd been out to them as trans for a while and everything. And it's, sort of, a thing where it shouldn't hit me as hard as it does, but it still does, kind of, suck ... That one professor who misgendered me didn't really apologize for and that sort of thing.

Cameron also described the negative impact, "the thing that triggers my gender dysphoria the most is when people look at me for the first time and just automatically label me a woman."

Some participants described the impact on their course participation specifically, and Violet described the impact in this way:

I got misgendered by a cis person [classmate] that has known me for about four months who has only ever known me using they/them pronouns. That hurt pretty badly and made it difficult to concentrate for the rest of class.

Li also described how being misgendered impacted their experience in class in their early years of college:

I can't focus on the course material because I have to think about the ways in which people are misgendering me and, like, how am I being perceived when I, like, speak up in class even ... So, like, [I] didn't ever ... want to present anything in class. Did not ever want to stand up in front of a class and have people look at me and perceive me, because I was just, like, dysphoric.

Both Violet and Li have experienced instances where being misgendered led to decreased focus during a class period.

A few participants reflected on the challenges with correcting people after being misgendered. One challenge was not wanting to come off as having too many complaints. Steve shared,

I have had to send multiple messages to my professor this semester, and he keeps addressing the start of his messages to either Ms. My First Name or Ms. My Last Name. I haven't addressed it because ... My messages have mostly been complaints or issues I'm having with accessing material so I didn't want to "pile on" my complaints.

Leo was misgendered repeatedly by a teacher in front of classmates, and they described their decision to move on as a disinterest in starting a discussion on their gender, "I didn't really want

to start a long discussion about my gender, so I just, like, ignored it.” For Cameron, correcting others brought up past feelings and pain of not being validated or accepted. They also felt that it was not worth the effort to correct people because they would continue to get it wrong anyway.

In response to a guest speaker encouraging Cameron to correct people, they shared:

But on the inside, I was like, “I’m never going to do that. Like, I’m not doing that.”

[laughter] I’m not going to correct people, because then I have to explain things I don’t want to explain and that this brings up all the, all the past, like, feelings of, like, not being, like, validated or ... accepted and all that past ... pain and stuff. So, like, I don’t feel like going through that every single time that somebody misgenders me, because it happens all the frigging time, so who cares.

Cameron recognized their response was related to their gender identity development, sharing,

I’m getting more secure in my identity, but not secure enough to, like, email my professors and be like, “Can you use these pronouns with me?” Or, like, “Can you, um, you know, not refer to me as she/her?” ... I think it’s just because I’m getting better at accepting myself, but I’m not fully there yet.

Adrian also described the impact of the interactions they have seen where instructors have misgendered students. They mentioned an assumption that instructors were “older” and “not going to learn,” saying,

It, it’s not, like, ill-intent. It’s more like they’re not used to it, and they see somebody, and they’re like, “Oh, that person is a man, because they look like a man, so I’m going to use he/him.” Even though, like, they’ll be like, “Oh, can you please use they/them,” and they slip up. But then, like, at the same time, it’s sort of like they don’t want to constantly

remind people to use the right pronouns, just because it's a hassle and also, like, they're older, they're not going to learn.

Violet shared about instances where professors misgendered them as well, and described their response:

I feel like a lot of times, especially older professors will not really understand that I'm nonbinary. I have my pronouns in my, like, email signature. I have, like, when it's online school, they're, like, in my Zoom name usually, stuff like that. And I'll still get misgendered by classmates and professors. And it feels, like, not great when someone in a position of authority over you is, like, not respecting you when they have the opportunity to, like, see that that's how I identify. ... so that's not super fun. ... and ... then it's harder to correct them too, because I feel like, you know, they're my professor. I have to be, like, respectful. ... so I usually leave it, unless I, like, feel like it would be worth it to try to correct them. Or I'll just, like, hope they see it again on my next email, stuff like that. Especially because it's hard to, like, casually correct them.

Each of these four participants described a desire not to correct people who misgender them in experiences related to their coursework.

Many participants experienced others misgendering them. On the other side, several described experiences of others gendering them correctly, including Cassian, Leo, Rachel, Brian, David, Violet, Brielle, and Jamie. Cassian described the impact of being consistently gendered correctly, comparing himself to peers:

The fact that all of my documents the school have align with my current name and gender, and I have had top surgery; I feel like I am finally on equal ground compared to

all of my other peers in terms of being consistently perceived as my correct gender than I have had in previous semesters.

Some participants remarked on how it felt internally when someone gendered them correctly.

Jamie described the positive impact,

I've had a couple instructors that when ... like, when I've participated in the discussion, they've, like, made a point to use my pronouns ... even when it wasn't necessary to continue the discussion ... I've had that happen a few times, and it's been, like, really great and made me feel really, really good.

Rachel described the ongoing positive feelings she experiences when gendered correctly, "It's kind of shocking, over two years into all of this, that things as small as those still manage to make me feel so giddy on the inside."

Overall, when others gendered the participants, it impacted them and their educational experiences. Being misgendered with the wrong pronoun, title, term, or grouping was harmful. These experiences had the potential to trigger gender dysphoria, and for some, impacted the participant's ability to focus in class. Several participants described a preference for not correcting people for various reasons. On the other hand, when people gendered participants correctly, they described those experiences as very positive. One participant described this experience as being on "equal ground" with cis peers. I described the second subtheme of the power of language, (mis)gendering. Next, I describe the third theme, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and online courses.

Pandemic and Online Impact

The third subtheme within the power of language is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and online courses during it. The pandemic and subsequent switch to online classes

created new environments, norms, and possibilities regarding the power of language. The third subtheme for this section is the impact of the pandemic and online environment. Several participants described both positive and negative aspects of the online environment. One positive impact for some participants was the option to privately direct-message other people in the class, including peers and the instructor. Along the same lines, the Zoom environment also limited the opportunity for people to add casual side comments. Participants characterized this limitation differently. Cassian framed this chatting limitation positively in a reflection:

I recognize that as a passing trans-man attending completely virtual to a liberal arts college gives me a different experience than others. Just the fact that this semester I am completely virtual I think is a contributor to my experiences. Last semester there were times that I was on campus, and my perceived gender and sexuality were things that others used to define me (like the way I dress, my minor, and my hobbies making me the “token gay man,” previously the “token queer trans man.” The fact that we are all virtual means that if anybody wanted to say anything to or about me the whole class would hear ...

On the other hand, Cameron, who was at a relatively early stage of exploring their gender identity, felt limited by the formal environment of being online. They felt they could not comment on their identity without making it feel like a big deal. They described the experience in this way:

One thing that I certainly miss about school, about having school in person is that, because I usually would show up to class early, I’d always have casual, like, being able to talk to whoever’s in the room or talk to professors. And I am positive that something would have come up in that casual conversation that would have felt more comfortable

and natural for me to talk about my gender identity. Like, I remember ... my first year, I was taking a class on, like, practice with children and adolescents. And we had a week on, again, trans competency or, like, LGBTQ issues. And I walked in. I was just like, “Happy gay week everyone. I’m so excited for the ...” Just, like, being really silly and, like, open about it. And those are the instances in which I think people are most likely to be like, “Oh shit, like, oh, [participant name]’s not cis or straight.” ... and just being able to bring it up organically instead of having to make a whole, like, the fact that ... I guess didn’t want to email anyone. Because it seemed very, like, sterile and very, you know, like, too formal, too important. But if I could just casually talk to someone and bring it up ... I would have felt a lot more comfortable. But I, just the virtual environment doesn’t really leave room for that. ... so I think that’s been the biggest thing this semester is just having to navigate everything through this really artificial platform.

The limited ability to speak freely in the Zoom environment limited negative comments other students could make in Cassian’s view. In contrast, the limited speech negatively impacted Cameron’s ability to share their gender identity.

Another impact online learning environments had on the power of language was they created the ability to display names and pronouns in synchronous courses. Participants found it affirming when other classmates or instructors put their pronouns in their online names. There were a few instances where seeing classmates’ pronouns helped participants make connections. For example, Li saw another student’s pronouns listed as “she/they” and they ended up continuing to communicate with the student throughout the term. The two became class friends and would check their homework with one another. Violet also made connections to other students in class who listed “they/them” pronouns.

When it comes to instructors, Violet missed the ability to go to office hours in person, which had provided visual cues of inclusivity. Instructors listing pronouns in Zoom was the best alternative for them:

I remember, like, freshman, sophomore year, I could go to office hours in person. I could see ... the the rainbow sticker ... supportive of all, like, all are welcome here stickers on professors' doors. And like, "Oh, then that's a welcoming space." But, like, I don't see that at all online ... The best is, like, if they have their pronouns in their Zoom name ... And even then, you know, it's not a complete indicator, but usually, that's, like, an indication that, you know, probably they understand what pronouns are, first of all, and they feel it's, like, worth including.

Overall, classmates and instructors listing pronouns online positively impacted the participants. However, participants' experiences with listing their own pronouns online differed.

Overall, classmates and instructors listing pronouns online in synchronous classes positively impacted the participants. Steve had a unique experience of taking asynchronous courses. Given the lack of face-to-face time, they said,

So I was kind of hoping that college would be easier to [share pronouns], and it hasn't been as easy as ... I think it would have been if I was having face-to-face classes with all of my teachers. I think there'd be more opportunities to bring it up.

They did have one course where an instructor prompted virtual introductions with an option to share pronouns, which Steve said, "was nice," though "[not] every student necessarily did do that."

While participants generally appreciated others sharing their pronouns online, their experiences with listing their own pronouns differed. Jamie shared a positive experience they had after listing their pronouns online:

And I had my pronouns up in, on my screenname. And my professor ... emailed me afterwards ... and was like, “Hey, I don’t know if I’ve ever used she/her for you. I’m really sorry if I had. I noticed that you have just they/them in your profile. Is that what you want?” I was like, “Yes, thank you so much for reaching out.”

Jamie appreciated their professor went out of the way to reach out and confirm what pronouns they wanted to use in the class. While positive for Jamie, some participants felt listing pronouns on Zoom singled them out in certain situations, particularly when they were the only person in class to list pronouns. Adrian said:

It’s also blatantly obvious in Zoom class when I am the only one in the class who uses they/them pronouns and have it displayed with my screen name—especially in a class that doesn’t really seem to care much about it.

Brielle had a similar experience. In one course, she experienced being the only one to list pronouns at all. The context mattered for many participants. For example, Li described their decision to add pronouns online as always context-specific. Their default name did not include pronouns, but they would add pronouns in when they were both relevant and deemed the space safe. For example, it was not relevant to list pronouns in a large lecture, as no one would be referring to them. However, in an LGBTQ-specific space, they “almost always put [their] pronouns[.]” In other contexts, they made a decision each time.

Cameron had a unique experience when an instructor changed all the students’ Zoom names for them to include pronouns. Cameron had been listing she/they for a portion of the

semester but then gave up because no one was using “they” anyway. Cameron described the experience of the instructor changing their Zoom name to include pronouns:

And then he got to me, and he was like, “Oh, [Cameron], you use she/they, right?” And I was just like, “Ugh, I don’t want to have this conversation right now, but I don’t also want to be called ‘she,’ but, like, please don’t type anything in here, like ...” ... “So I just then was, kind of, forced to be like, “Could you just not?” [laughter] Like, “Could you just use they/them instead?” And this was after the full year of him, like, alternating between the two. But just, again, he was going off what I gave him. So, like, he was doing his best.

In this experience, Cameron no longer had control over whether or not to include pronouns, and ultimately, it led to a conversation they were not ready to have. Like the in-person environment, the online environment also presented opportunities and challenges when it came to language, particularly the ability to speak freely and indicate pronouns visually. The impact of the pandemic and online class environments was the third subtheme within the power of language theme. The fourth and final subtheme is encountering the use of outdated terminology.

Outdated Terminology

The final subtheme within the power of language is encountering outdated terminology, or slurs, referring to transgender people within course content or from instructors. Participants rarely had any warning before reading the terms, as they were often found in required readings. In some of these instances, the content also conflated sexual orientation with gender identity or inaccurately defined gender dysphoria, characterizing trans identities as mental illnesses.

During the study, four of the participants—Brielle, Freya, Cassian, and G—described instances where they encountered outdated terms in class. All of these participants characterized

the experiences negatively. Three participants—Freya, Cassian, and G—provided feedback to their instructors, calling out the inappropriateness of the material. To ensure everyone knew what terms and discussion points to avoid, Freya posted a message to the whole class in the learning management system before the course meeting. G sent a message to classmates with a content warning. Cassian approached the instructor directly. Cassian and G ultimately received constructive responses from their instructors, whereas Freya learned her instructor had already received the feedback in the prior year and had not removed the materials from the course.

Cassian read a textbook from 2015 that seemed outdated even for that publishing date. He described his reaction to the reading:

... I actually refused to read it for a long time. [clears throat] ... because I was trying to get ahead on work, and that was the one chapter I started in and, like, could not deal with, so I just closed it and put it away until, like, the night before it was due. ... but reading it was difficult. Like, there's so many emotions of, "This is how, not only, this is how certain people see us. But this is how a class of psychology students are being taught to see trans people as, like, an object, a fetish, a freak." ... and especially because I don't know if this is people's first time learning about trans issues, but, like, I feel like that was such a bad introduction if it was.

Along with additional students in the class, Cassian told the instructor the reading was "really inappropriate." The instructor apologized to the whole class and said he was looking for new material for future courses. Brielle and Freya negatively characterized their reactions to the readings as well. Brielle felt the dated text could "isolate trans students from the field." Freya described the experience in her class as "poor training" for working with transgender clients, which was particularly troublesome for those who did not specialize in working with the trans*

population like she did.

G's experience turned into what G described as a "saga," highlighting the different approaches trans students have to similar situations. G read a textbook referring to trans people with language that seemed outdated even for the 2016 publishing date. G compared the text to other articles from the time period, including the 2014 *Time* article, *The Transgender Tipping Point*, and found it inappropriate even for 2016. G completed this assigned reading a few days after it was due and was thus surprised none of the other students had commented on the language, particularly because G was not the only trans* student in the course. G said the language wasn't "triggering to [me], but it felt weird to think no one else had acknowledged it," so G ended up sending a message to G's peers about the reading, framing it as a content warning.

Upon seeing G's message, another transgender student in the class brought up the language issue to the instructor without consulting G, making G feel excluded from the conversation. G asked for an invitation to join their meeting, and because G had a conflicting appointment, G ended up joining it late. The instructor and other student had already resolved to send a note to the book's authors, which G thought was a cool solution, but G was also frustrated with the process. G was the only student who read the text without a content warning and was not included equally in the resolution process. The instructor and other trans* student also resolved the student would present on the topic to the entire class. They invited G to join in delivering the presentation. G felt uncertain about what the presentation would contain and took some time to think about it. In the end, G decided to co-present to ensure they did it well.

It was important to G to consider the audience and the presentation's goal and avoid preaching to the choir. G's approach was very different from the other trans student, who wanted to focus on a message of "educate yourself." So, they decided to split up the presentation. G

created training on bystander intervention for passive situations, such as the outdated language in the textbook reading. G described the training: “You’re at home, reading a textbook [laughter], and you realize...something’s not right; what do you do?” ... “Locate yourself on this, almost, like, spectrum...why didn’t you do anything? Is it because you didn’t read?” G noted, “if it’s because no one read, like, we need to be having a very different conversation, right, like, Trans 101 doesn’t help anybody if it’s because we didn’t read.” G included additional options on the spectrum,

Maybe you read but didn’t realize this was a problem. Maybe you read and realized this is a problem but didn’t know what to do about it. Maybe you read, realized this was a problem, knew what you would do about it, but something stopped you.

After students located themselves on a point in the spectrum, G asked, “What’s one action you can take from that location?” G recognized that G could not expect everyone to take action if they were at different points along the spectrum, so it was most important to self-identify where they were at and one action they could take to move forward. G described the training as “a really cool way ... from the awareness to action stage ... mitigate harm.” While G was pleased with the outcome of the presentation, G was surprised throughout this experience with how much time and energy G put into getting on the same page with a trans* peer. The two students had very different approaches to communication and the presentation. G did not expect to have this kind of issue with another member of the trans community.

The experience caused G to reflect on educational experiences and the impact of identities. G reflected on the ways identities shape student experiences in a controlled classroom environment:

We're all experiencing the same things. But the way we experience them is different.

And so, how does my identity shape that? And then also how does it shape my response to things? And the moments where I'll be like, "Um, this is actually not okay." And the moments where it's so uncomfortable, it's like, "I don't even know what to do. I'm just frozen right now." And so, yeah, I think about, even just within this semester, of, like, times I reacted very publicly and times I reacted very privately, and what does that look like ... in terms of how do we support trans students, right? Uh, it's obvious, but, sort of, this idea that, like, not every situation is the same, and not every person is the same.

G's story highlights that while many transgender students may negatively experience outdated terminology presented in courses, the way they navigate and make meaning of their experiences will differ.

All participants told stories about the power of language in their educational experiences, making the power of language a central theme. Subthemes under language included sharing pronouns, (mis)gendering, outdated terminology, and the impact of the pandemic and subsequent online course environments, and encountering outdated terminology. Participants described both positive and negative experiences with sharing pronouns, being (mis)gendered, and the impact of the pandemic and online experience. Each participant who encountered outdated terminology as a part of coursework described the experience negatively. This theme highlights language as an important factor affecting trans students' curricular experiences. Next, I describe the third theme, the trans* tax.

The Trans* Tax

The third theme that emerged in this study is the trans* tax. Leo shared the term "trans tax" in an interview. They described it as "the anxiety of daily interactions" and "the amount of

energy that [they] cannot put towards [their] studies that other people [can]” because of trans-related issues, such as navigating surgeries and fighting with insurance companies. They added, “being trans itself [is] exhausting” and “living in a world that is not made for us is exhausting.” This transgender tax they defined developed as an explicit theme throughout all cases but manifested in different ways for each participant. Some experiences are the result of being trans, while others result from living in a world not made for transgender people. Experiences within this theme included subthemes of transitioning, coming out, and navigating the political climate. First, I describe participants’ experiences with transitioning.

Transitioning

Most participants described different physical, social, or legal transitions that generally required a lot of energy. Physical transitions varied greatly and included obtaining hormone prescriptions, scheduling and recovering from gender-affirming surgery, and experiencing subsequent changes in voice and appearance. These experiences sometimes involved challenges with the healthcare system, such as insurance coverage or access to providers. A few participants also described difficulties with campus healthcare providers for ongoing care. Social transitions varied and involved formal or informal name changes, efforts to change vocal tone or gait, growing or shaving hair, and changing style and expression through clothing, makeup, or hairstyle. Legal transitions included legal name changes and updates to gender markers on documents such as driver’s licenses, passports, and social security cards.

Rachel, Ashton, Steve, David, Leo, Brian, Cassian, and Ezra described experiences related to physical transitions, such as taking hormones or undergoing gender-affirming surgery. Rachel described a smooth process with obtaining her hormones, acknowledging her situation may not be the typical experience for trans students. She said, “I’ve had no trouble getting access

to medicine like hormone replacement therapy and the like ... that I know all too well that some of my trans siblings aren't so lucky to have." However, most of these participants described a challenge, large or small, associated with their physical transition experiences. Challenges included fatigue, stress, overwhelm, and difficulty focusing. For example, Ashton had trouble accessing testosterone during the study. He said it "caused [him] to be quite tired for a bit." Steve described mental health issues they have regarding taking medicine. Due to these issues, they missed three months' worth of hormones during the study, which caught up with them right around finals when they got a menstrual period. They described the effects of not taking their medication, "I just felt bad about not taking care of myself. And therefore ... it was hard to convince myself to continue to take care of myself by finishing studies." Although Steve did end up finishing finals and passing their courses, they described their results as "probably [not] the best [they've] ever done in a class before." For David, one side effect of taking hormones was acne. He described the impact of acne on the virtual classroom experience,

It felt a bit embarrassing and I felt less comfortable having my camera on because I didn't want to look unprofessional and ended up scrambling to use concealer, but it added a bit of extra stress. I never had acne prior to taking testosterone and it only came back after moving to a hotter climate and wearing a mask.

While David described his experiences with the acne side effect as adding "a bit of extra stress," Cassian described the overall impact of physically transitioning on his education as "overwhelming:"

There's been a couple times where things have been harder to focus on school, just because other things are happening that are, either physically or mentally happening, and

they're so overwhelming. ... starting testosterone was one of those things, or my voice finally dropping was one of those things.

The impact on participants was different based on various factors, including how long it had been since they started their transition. David reflected on the continual nature of the trans* tax as it relates to taking hormones. Despite having transitioned physically, socially, and legally several years before the study, he recognized he still faces obstacles because of his trans identity that cisgender students do not. David noted he picks up his prescriptions at the pharmacy, whereas many others can get medications delivered to their homes. In addition, he gives himself a shot that adds another task to his schedule. David recognized while the issues he faces are much more minor than they used to be, they still contribute to his experience as a student, "My problems are ... so small ... but they're still there." He used the experience of having a rock in one's shoe as an analogy,

It's like if you have, like, I don't know, a rock in your shoe or something like that, like, just because it's a small rock, like, you still don't want it, you don't want to walk 10 miles on it. Like, you just get rid of the rock.

Ashton, Steve, David, and Cassian described challenges, large or small, related to taking or missing hormones that added additional stress, fatigue, overwhelm, or distraction to their lives as students.

Ezra, Leo, and Brian described experiences with considering or undergoing surgery and the impact on their educational experiences. During the study, Ezra frequently thought about an upcoming surgery and described the impact on his experience as a student. He said,

I'm constantly distracted by thinking about [surgery] because I had a consult relatively recently. I'm just waiting for a date—and that it's like a clock will be ticking down to that

day, mere days or weeks after I graduate ... This definitely distracts me in class and I've missed out a lot on parts of lectures spacing out, thinking about my gender, my expressions, and my desires to change my body to how I see fit. So, it hasn't affected my coursework, but it's definitely affected my focus.

Ezra clarified that he still "ended up getting an A on the exam," so the lack of focus did not affect his grades overall. Instead, he said, it

affected my psyche ... Like, if I were doing a reading, I would zone out ... I would be reading, and I'd realize I hadn't actually read the last three pages that I'd scrolled through. And so I'd have to go back.

Ezra noted this lack of focus was not typical for him.

Leo underwent gender-affirming surgery towards the beginning of the study and had another coming up towards the end. They said, due to the time-intensive nature of the surgery, the experiences "impacted the way [they] were able to engage in course material." They requested accommodations for some class activities because of the surgery, describing the situation as "uncomfortable because there is a culture of needing to explain why one cannot go/do/etc. And that feels more invasive since it's about my gender." For Leo, another related issue was fielding inappropriate questions. They described an experience with their advisor:

In an advising meeting, my (well-meaning) mentor asked me invasive questions about what my upcoming [surgeries] will entail and about the long-term health risks of testosterone, having [surgery], etc. It made me feel uncomfortable, because 1) I was asked to discuss my genitals, and 2) it was as if I needed to convince her that this was not a long-term health risk for my life.

Leo described experiences related to undergoing gender-affirming surgery while being a student as time-intensive, uncomfortable, and invasive.

Brian had surgery several years before the study, during his undergraduate years. He had unique challenges as a student who was not out to instructors or peers. He commented on the impact of both “having to deal with the emotional weight” while also “recovering and trying to find explanations to tell people about why [he] was recovering from major surgeries.” Ezra, Leo, and Brian each described challenges to their student experiences that arose while planning for or recovering from surgery.

In addition to experiences related to physically transitioning, participants described experiences related to social and legal transitions. A few participants, including Rachel, Brielle, and Li described the process of changing their name and how it took additional energy and effort during their educational experiences. For some, the outcome was positive, while others had negative experiences. For example, Rachel had not yet changed her name legally during her undergraduate years, and her name was incorrect on class rosters. She said, “The first day, I’d have to go to the professor and be like, ‘Do you have me marked down as [participant name]?’ ... just to avoid any awkwardness.” Brielle said her school’s system still listed her deadname, which she used through her first year of graduate school. Then, midway through her program, she “emailed all [her] professors and notified them” of her new name. Fortunately, “they made the shift very well,” she said, “they immediately started going by my new name ... and they never listed my ... old name on anything outside there. So I think they did a really good job of that.”

Li had a negative experience at the beginning of college related to changing their name. Because of unsupportive parents, they had a shortened preferred name in the university system,

though they preferred a full-length version of their preferred name. And, they still had a legal name that had not formally changed. Li was unfamiliar with the format of turning in college assignments, so they wanted to check with their sociology instructor to learn about how they should navigate listing their name on assignments. They wanted to use the full version of their name instead of the short version that appeared on their email address and university account. This was Li's very first interaction with a professor. They shared the instructor's response to their email inquiry:

And she was really rude about it actually. She, like, gave me unsolicited advice that I should be consistent with my preferred names or whatever. ... and I had, like, signed the email and it, the email, like, you know how the name in your email, I had changed it to my actual name ... And she, like, replied with my ... placeholder preferred name. And I was like, "What the heck?" ... and then gave me that unsolicited advice. It was very, like, weird and jarring. This was, like, the day before my first class ever.

Li explained to her why it was not safe for them to use their full preferred name in the university system, noting they should not have to explain that, and the instructor then said she "[retracted her] earlier statement." Unfortunately, for Li "the damage had already been done" and "[they] ended up changing [their] email back to the placeholder name for an entire year because of that." Li's first experience with a college instructor was negative and affected them for a long time. They said, "I didn't feel like I could be authentically myself because it would be inconvenient to cis people ... because the instructor told me I should be consistent."

Multiple participants shared experiences where transitioning physically, socially, or legally led to expending additional time, energy, and effort their cisgender peers did not have to expend. This additional effort is what Leo labeled "the trans tax," which emerged as one of five

themes in the findings of this study. While participants described both positive and negative outcomes concerning their student experiences, most participants characterized their experiences negatively. Next, I describe a second subtheme within the trans tax theme, coming out.

Coming Out

The second subtheme within the trans* tax theme is coming out. The coming out subtheme relates to the frequent decision participants have to make regarding whether to tell people, directly or indirectly, they are trans. This subtheme also includes instances where other people make it known that a participant is trans, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally. Overall, this subtheme captures the additional energy and effort participants must expend considering whether they want to be out and whether others will out them. When participants described instances where they decided to come out in the class setting, they sometimes did so to ensure they were not misgendered, called the wrong name, or to ensure other needs were met. Other times, they did so to participate fully in course discussions when gender was relevant. Some participants decided not to come out within the educational setting because they were still internally processing their own identity or wanted to retain their stealth identity.

Bo encountered a class assignment that required sharing identities like race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The assignment required uploading it online for the instructor as well as bringing a copy to class. Bo, who was not out, described the experience:

And I remember when I printed that off, like, initially I was like, “Oh no. I’m just going to fake it ’til we make it.” [laughter] But then I made another copy. And so the first copy, ... was the one I used in class. But then the second copy is what I actually turned in to my

teacher. And after I turned it in to my teacher, she was like, “Ok-, okay.” Like, nothing happened. I was, I left the class, like, shaking, because I was so scared.

For the class copy, Bo listed “the easiest, best answers,” “female,” and “straight.” They said, “because it’s, no one will suspect a thing.” On the copy for the instructor, they listed “questioning” and “pansexual.” Bo was scared leaving the class but described the assignment positively overall. “I liked it because it gave me a chance to be honest with myself. Instead of denying it how I normally, well, how I normally used to, I’m more open about it.” While Bo did not come out to classmates, they were honest with themselves and the instructor. While described positively, the experience had components of additional stress and fear to Bo’s educational experience.

Cameron described an experience where they did not want to come out and the impact on course discussions. They were in a class where the scheduled topic for the week was LGBTQ issues. Another trans student was “very open and chatty” when it came to the topic and talked about the anti-trans legislation emerging at the time. After he spoke, the rest of the class was “just silent.” Given that prior to this conversation, the class had been having a lively discussion about Derek Chauvin’s trial verdict, this student had an emotional reaction, saying, “Come on, we just spent all this time talking about one issue, but then we switched topics, and suddenly nobody is, like, seems like nobody cares.” Cameron described how they felt in that moment:

And then I got, like, really fragile about it, because I’m like, “I do care, because it’s relevant to me, but nobody realizes that it’s relevant to me, because I’m not out. So now I have to,” again, that vicious cycle of, “Now I have to out myself in order to be, like, viewed as, you know, someone who cares about this stuff and not just sitting here because I don’t care. I very much do care.” ... and it was just very internal moment of,

like, reminder that everybody in here who doesn't know me very well probably thinks I'm a cis woman. And now I have to out myself to tell them that I'm not. And I just have a lot of internalized transphobia, which is preventing me from speaking on this topic, because I don't feel, like, valid enough to do so.

The other student's assumption that no one cared about the discussion hurt Cameron, who was still navigating their own internalized transphobia and comfort speaking on the topic. This experience and pressure to come out added additional stress.

Ashton also described considerations around coming out in class. He described his consideration of whether to come out when discussing sexism and sexual harassment in an undergraduate class:

And sometimes I want to, kind of, voice my opinion on this, based on my life experiences, but now that I present myself as male and I, sometimes in my classroom setting, I don't necessarily want to disclose my trans identity, it makes me have to just, kind of, remain quiet on some subjects that I feel like I may be able to ... normally engage with. But in that setting, it, without having to go through my entire ... gender identity transition and all of that ... makes it hard to talk about that. Because I've been in several courses that are oriented toward women. So, like, women and law and women's studies and, and things like that. But ... I don't want to take up any space ... from people who ... currently identify as women. ... but I still can empathize with those experiences, if that makes sense.

In addition to not wanting to take up space from women students, a reason for not wanting to share his transgender identity in his undergraduate classes was "definitely safety." While he was "never really worried about faculty," he was "worried about students."

Cassian was hesitant to come out in class also. He explained, “I don’t necessarily want to out myself in every class and have that be the main thing that people know.” Yet, three of his classes discussed gender and sexuality, specifically trans people, and he felt he needed evidence to justify himself. He described his decision to come out and approach to not making his gender the center of the conversation:

I ended up just coming out in all my classes, because it got to a point where, like, trying to find ways to justify myself without saying I’m trans just wasn’t working. ... yeah, so I would, like, slip it in conversation, just to try and get it out there and not, I guess, not if I’m having an argument or trying to defend a point. Just so that way, it’s, it’s not associated with, “Let’s focus on his gender,” and not, “Let’s focus on what he’s saying.”

The reason he decided to come out was to contribute. He said:

I wanted to say stuff. I really [laughter], really, really wanted to say stuff with all the discussion that was going on regarding queer topics. ... and, I guess it just ... I felt like I had to justify myself, so I ended up doing it ... in a way by coming out. ... but then I was able to talk and give people insight that they wouldn’t have thought about. And the stereotype of, like, “Well, I don’t know any trans people.” It’s like, “I’m in your class. Like, just because you don’t you know them doesn’t mean you don’t know them.”

Cassian weighed whether it was worth coming out in order to have a voice in class and ultimately decided he wanted to be able to speak on gender and sexuality issues from his authentic identity, particularly in discussions on trans topics.

Li came out during class several times to correct professors. They said, “But I also find it that people don’t listen to me ... until I’m like, “Hey, this personally affects me.” Then, and then sometimes they’re like, “Oh.” ... and sometimes they’re

really sweet and good about it. But ... at the same time, I'm like, "I don't want to hide it." I'm very proud to be trans. And, like ... they need to know that there are trans students in their classes. We're not this, like, invisible, like, random minority of students who don't exist. And, yeah, I don't know. It's very tiring, and sometimes it's really rewarding. And ... it does take mental space. And it does sometimes take away from my experience of just, like, being a student in the classroom. Because I feel like it's just always there. ... but at the same time, I'm like, "I love being trans." Like, wouldn't trade it for anything.

Many participants described instances of considering and weighing whether to come out. The experiences added additional time and energy to participants' plates their cisgender peers did not experience, and thus, fit within the trans tax theme. Next, I describe the final subtheme of the transgender tax, the political climate.

Political Climate

Another factor contributing to the transgender tax for some students was the political climate, the final subtheme. This study was conducted during 2021, a record-breaking year for anti-trans legislation. At the time this study was conducted, 33 states had introduced anti-transgender bills. Bills included bathroom and locker room bans, youth sports bans, restrictions to trans medical care, and more (Krishnakumar, 2021). The bans proposed predominately affected trans youth, but some extended to adults. For example, Iowa introduced a bill to remove gender identity as a protected class under the Iowa civil rights act (Krishnakumar, 2021). Whether the legislation impacted participants directly, it sent a message to some and affected how they interacted with instructors or the course. Steve, Freya, and Ashton mentioned the political climate's negative impact on their studies or post-graduation job search.

Steve studied exclusively online during spring 2021, limiting the personal relationships they could build with instructors. They defined the effect of the legislation on their experience in this way:

It makes [me] feel more unsafe than I already did feel. Of course, I'm aware that there's transphobia in the world. But for quite a while, I hadn't ... experienced any, just because of who I was able to surround myself with. ... but then just seeing all of the people in the world and specifically, like, even in America and in ... states surrounding me ... attempting to pass these anti-trans legislatures ... makes me feel less safe and just reminds me that, like, "Hey, it's not all good yet." You know? There's still a lot of challenges and a lot of people who don't like you for who you are and want to get rid of you.

Because Steve had not had the opportunity to build relationships with instructors online, they were unsure whether they could trust the instructor enough to come out to them. During this study, an instructor had addressed Steve with an incorrect salutation in an email. Steve described how the anti-trans legislation prevented them from correcting the instructor:

I've heard news stories about professors specifically, like, getting in trouble for saying homophobic, sexist, transphobic things recently. And just, like, I've never met this man. I don't know him outside of this classroom experience. So I don't, yeah, I don't know. It could have gone over fine. Or it could have been a negative experience as well. So yeah, it definitely reminds [me] that, "Hey, maybe you should, like, figure out if people are cool first before you open the doors."

Steve decided not to broach the subject without knowing the instructor's views, leaving the potential to be addressed incorrectly again in the future but preserving safety and comfort in other ways.

The bills also negatively impacted Freya's experiences as a student. For Freya, social media amplified the impact of the anti-transgender legislation when people from her hometown published painful, transphobic posts on Facebook. In one of her written reflections, she described the effect of these experiences on her schoolwork:

I have started arguing with them, but it also hurts to know that when I go home to visit my family, there are a lot of people in my hometown who act nice to me in person, but who post these terrible opinions on Facebook. This has impacted my coursework because I have been having to practice a lot more self-care recently which has made it so I don't have as much time as I would like to prepare for class or work on the homework that is assigned. I also am a lot less present in class discussions because sometimes people will respond or post something and I will see it right before class starts which puts me in a mood where I do not want to engage with the course.

Freya's experience highlights the additional energy she must spend on practicing self-care. The political climate and its effects negatively impact her ability to focus on the course and actively engage in the content. Ultimately, Freya decided to get rid of her social media accounts. As a result, she "[doesn't] get inundated with ... people's reactions ... that much" and "[it hasn't been] as impactful in [her] everyday life."

In Ashton's experience, because he attends an inclusive and supportive institution and program, the anti-trans legislation had a more negative impact on his job search than classroom experiences. Anti-trans policies came up at one point in a class discussion, and he thought

everything his peers and instructors said was very affirming. He acknowledged the impact may have been different had he been somewhere else, even had he been at his undergraduate institution still. But at his graduate institution, he felt supported. Ashton described the effect of the legislation having a direct impact on his job search. He described “not feeling welcome in those states anymore” and thus did not look for jobs in places proposing anti-transgender legislation, adding an additional factor to the job search.

While Steve, Freya, and Ashton described negative experiences, Rachel described both a negative and an affirming experience related to anti-trans legislation. Rachel, a journalism student, worked on pieces reporting on LGBTQ-related bills in her state legislature. She sighed when describing how Republicans worked transphobia into their messaging. However, Rachel had interacted with a couple of those legislators, and they had gendered her correctly. She found this heartening, particularly given the lawmakers’ views. Overall, the political climate impacted Steve, Freya, Ashton, and Rachel directly and contributed to shifts in their energy or direction; examples of the trans* tax.

Participants described the many ways they must focus their energy differently from their cisgender peers. Leo labeled this additional required energy and anxiety “the trans tax,” and it developed as a theme throughout the data. The trans tax sources included physical, social, or legal transition, coming out, and the political climate. This theme contains overlaps with the other themes, such as navigating gender identity, challenges with language, and the (mis)education of sex and gender, which also impact students’ energy and add anxieties. In this section, I described the transgender tax theme. Next, I describe the fourth theme, the (mis)education of sex and gender.

(Mis)Education of Sex and Gender

The fourth theme emerged as the (mis)education of sex and gender. This theme relates to the education or miseducation of sex and gender topics in coursework. Participants observed how course content approached the nuance of gender, sex, and sexuality and whether curriculum, course materials, and instruction included trans* people. Some courses failed to acknowledge the complexities of sex and gender and did not include people outside the sex or gender binary. On the other hand, some courses or instructors did present the nuance and included trans people. The material even supported participants' gender identity development in a few instances. The experiences within this theme do not neatly fall within two categories of positive and negative experiences but are instead along a spectrum. The subthemes within this topic include miseducation, the student as an educator, centering identity in coursework, and the impact of student selection in curriculum and coursework. First, I describe experiences of miseducation.

Miseducation

In their coursework, many participants received education regarding sex and gender that erased people outside of a male/female, man/woman binary. Most participants described experiences of instructors teaching or referencing sex and gender without consideration for trans* people and with little nuance. For Li, this was a centering theme of their academic experience. They said,

People don't think about trans people. [laughter] Like, most of the time, if trans and nonbinary and also intersex people are ever mentioned in a class that isn't centered around gender, we are an afterthought, especially in, like, STEM and biology classes.

Freya described a similar experience, which did not align with her expectations. Going into psychology, she thought the field would be inclusive because research on homophobia and trans

identities exist in the field's scholarship. She was disappointed with what she found in class. She said,

But I think I was, kind of, shocked that in my psych coursework that wasn't always necessarily focused on gender or sexuality, ... there was definitely a lot of assumptions, not only about my identity but about just gender identity in general.

She described how instructors left out people who were not a part of the man/woman and male/female binaries by using phrases like, "Oh, the mom and dad" or "the male and female" or by using phrases like "when women give birth." In these instances, sometimes she challenged the instructor to go further, and sometimes she did not. She described how it felt when the material was not inclusive,

I would just, kind of, move along and still feel like I was missing out on, you know, relating to the material or missing out on information that I thought would be relevant to my identity and my community. ... and so I think that those things have definitely felt uncomfortable.

Freya missed out on being able to relate to the material. Noam had a similar experience in a dance class.

Noam's dance class focused heavily on the body and gendered movements and interactions between dancers. "The teacher seems to be very open and respectful, but most of the language around body differences is framed in a binary male-female way." They described how the course included options for men and women, leaving them uncertain about how to participate as a nonbinary person. Noam shared,

While I understand why that is, it does challenge me to try and figure out where I fit in—both in the ways I dance (not as much as this level, but ballet specifically has ways that

“men” dance and ways that “women” dance) and how I will potentially interact with other dancers once this is not a Zoom class anymore ...

Noam noted the binary approach to the course would also complicate how they would navigate which dance uniforms to wear, making the experience challenging. Noam described the harmful impact of not being reflected in courses:

It makes you almost feel like you're not real ... sometimes even just that, that absence can be—maybe not as bad as outright hostility—but just bad that, because feeling ... like, invalidated or, like, “maybe, maybe I am really just making up this thing to be not,” you know? And ... feeling, you know, pressured to pick, you know ...

Brian, Cassian, and Violet also commented on gendered experiences within fine arts. Brian commented on the challenge for actors, “I think, in theater especially, it can be tricky for actors. You know, almost every role is a gendered role. There's very few plays out there that actually have gender-neutral characters.” Cassian experienced playing a woman for a class activity before he transitioned. The assignment was for the men to act like women and women to act like men. He went with the other men and acted like a woman. He said, “you feel like you're playing a character playing a character, and that's a really difficult thing to have to deal with.” For Cassian, the assignment was much more complicated than for cisgender students. Finally, Violet was in a “women's chorus” during their first two years. Violet said being in that chorus as a nonbinary person was “kind of difficult, especially as I was, like, presenting pretty masc and pretty androgynous. I felt like I stuck out a little bit.” They recommended the chorus change the descriptor from “women's” to “treble” and from “men's” to “bass,” describing voice types rather than gender.

Like Noam, Brian, Cassian, and Violet, Steve also experienced coursework focused on the body with a male-female lens. The course was on wellness and physical fitness and involved doing physical activity and recording your stats. The materials, for example, listed how many push-ups you should be able to do if you are a man or a woman. Students had to pick one of the two options using a button. Steve described their experience,

I oftentimes was left floundering on that because ... I'm nonbinary and for, also for the purposes of the class, it was, you know, it was supposed to be based on if you were biologically a man or a woman. And I'm biologically [laughter] female, but I'm taking testosterone, so I wasn't sure where that would fit in, and there wasn't really any—so like I said, there was no in-person interaction with this teacher—so I didn't, I had no idea where I would fall on that, how to, if there was anything I needed to do ... I was uncomfortable. And it also just didn't feel like it was correct because, like I said, I am on testosterone, so my body isn't, like, the typical female body anyway.

The assignment instruction left Steve feeling uncertain about how to proceed, as it did not include an option that accurately described them. On the final, they could write in their gender rather than select one of two options, so they described themselves as “assigned female at birth, but on testosterone.” The final was the first opportunity to reflect themselves accurately, but there was still uncertainty, and the instructor did not acknowledge their write-in response. Steve felt the lack of inclusion was not out of malice. They said of their educational experiences,

In general, it seems that while my teachers and the courses themselves wouldn't react negatively to my gender identity, that a lot of it hasn't caught up yet to allow for intricacies ... It doesn't feel negative or hateful, but just that they haven't thought to

catch up yet and that I feel like there could be ... just a general update in thinking across classes.

Steve described the impact as negative but acknowledged the intent likely was not to cause harm.

Participants, including Li and Leo, described some harmful miseducation experiences within the STEM fields. In an animal behavior class, Li's instructor showed a video about hyenas that commented on how female hyenas have pseudo-penises. They said in the video, some of the scientists were "making jokes about how ... unusual or ... funny or strange or, like, I don't know, whatever it would be ... for ... women, like, human women to have penises." Li said, "I was literally sitting there, and I was like, 'Some human women have penises, and there's nothing wrong or unusual or strange or funny about it,' but people were, like, laughing at that." They approached the professor after class and told her it was "really uncomfortable to watch," outing themselves as trans in order to share their discomfort. Li described the instructor's reply:

And she went like, "Oh, I'm sorry, is that offensive?" And I was like, "Mmm." Like, it wasn't really about it being offensive ... so much as, like, literally inaccurate, because these people were, like, implying that human women don't have penises. And it's, like, one, irrelevant to be bringing up ... humans in the first place and two, like, incorrect and transphobic.

Li had several similar experiences in biology classes where either information was inaccurate, or the instructor left out the nuance of sex and gender.

Participants also had negative experiences when the content was explicitly focused on sex, gender, and LGBTQ issues. Leo had what they described as a "really awful experience with an interactive lecture on LGBTQ Health that was attempting to be "affirming" but made a whole bunch of awful missteps." They ended up staying on the Zoom meeting despite encountering so

many missteps because they did not want others to receive misinformation, and they put several corrections in the chat. Li took a class on diversity in psychology, including the diversity of gender, and expected to explore trans issues. Instead, the focus was on cisgender women. Li described their response, “We’re talking about diversity of gender, ... I would really expect us to talk beyond cis women’s experience ... I expected more, and I was disappointed.”

Cameron generally described their social work program as a positive experience. Instructors often included trans people in course discussions and assignments. Yet, they still encountered some negative experiences in class. The instructor assigned an outdated article Cameron described as focused on “helping the parent cope with their kid coming out as trans.” Specifically, it was focused on “this whole loss and grief thing that goes with [a kid coming out as trans].” Cameron described the experience:

It was a really problematic article in that it was talking about, like, the adults being the decision-makers for the kids. And ... the, a lot of other stuff, like, I forget the details now, but I just remember being really triggered. Because it was ... too close to my experience growing up—about my parent trying to, like, force me into a very, like, cisgendered role and how much pain that caused me and how much rejection I felt ... that I ended up, like, having to leave the room, because I started crying in the middle of class.

The class had two other out transgender students in it. One rebutted the article in the class discussion and the other followed Cameron to the bathroom to support them.

Some participants also reflected on the big-picture impact of the miseducation of sex and gender. David reflected on how the lack of nuance and inclusion in his education, directly and indirectly, impacted transgender health and wellness outcomes in addition to his focus on coursework:

One exercise in particular was on breast cancer development in women who had been exposed to a particular risk factor, and I was distracted by the thought that transgender men who haven't had top surgery/a double mastectomy are also at risk for breast cancer. It occurred to me that most of the students in the class were probably not also thinking about these issues while doing this homework problem set, and therefore may have worked through the problem more quickly. Refocusing my attention back to the task at hand felt like "looking away" from something that otherwise warranted attention. Calculating a confidence interval didn't seem like as good of a use of my time as critiquing the research methods/design.

For David, it was distracting not to have transgender men included in the homework problem, as he thought about the greater implications for leaving this population out.

Overall, participants encountered many experiences in their education where the nuances of sex and gender were left out, along with trans people. Participants encountered these experiences of miseducation in several subjects, including biology, psychology, medicine, health and wellness, the fine arts, social work, and more. They described negative experiences in classes that explicitly focused on the body, sex, or gender, and in some classes where sex or gender was not the focus. Most students described miseducation events even if they overall described their student experience positively. The impact on participants differed. Some participants experienced uncertainty about how they fit in with the course material or how to complete assignments. Some participants were unable to focus or participate in the class. Some participated in class and corrected instructors but struggled. Finally, multiple participants considered the big-picture impacts on the trans population. I described many experiences within

the first subtheme, miseducation. Next, I describe the second subtheme, the student as the educator.

Student as Educator

The student serving as an educator is the second subtheme within the (mis)education of sex and gender. This subtheme includes experiences of participants correcting their instructors or challenging curriculum when the nuance of sex and gender is lost and trans people are erased. Students serving as an educator requires instructors' willingness to learn from students, which challenges the power dynamics of a traditional instructor-student relationship. This subtheme includes instances where students have provided feedback, whether successfully or unsuccessfully, as well as instances where students would have liked to provide feedback, but something prevented them. Li described their experiences with correcting faculty:

It's very tiring and exhausting and frustrating. ... very few times does it feel rewarding and positive. And, you know, I have ... with [three] professors out of the many professors that I've had ... been able to connect and have them learn from me and have a dialogue and feel really respected and ... very much valued for my lived experience, and have them actually change and update the way they teach biology. I've had a few other instructors and TAs who have been, like, chill and good, but it might not be relevant to the, like, material, so less of an impact. ... or they don't have control over the material itself. But I've had, I don't, I don't know how many, a, more than that, a good handful of professors who have been dismissive of me, like, outrightly just rude to me, transphobic.

Li almost always took the initiative to correct the instructor in order to get accurate information to the whole class and to protect other trans students from encountering the same exclusion in the future. They said, "The labor should never fall on trans students—trans, nonbinary, and intersex

students—to be correcting our professors. And yet no one else is correcting them.” Leo also described why they stayed in an LGBTQ health lecture that included incorrect information, “I felt compelled to correct them, and it was extremely painful, infuriating, and exhausting.”

The impact of miseducation for them was extensive. Li highlighted the effect of miseducation on other fields:

You’re teaching people who are going to go into fields such as healthcare and medicine and public health, and you’re giving them literally incorrect information ... to completely erase us is really continuing to marginalize us in biology and eventually healthcare and medicine and all the fields that people are ... going into and, like, research. ... and also just, like, in social settings and lives. Right? Like, you’re saying we don’t matter. So that’s what deeply frustrates me about some of the encounters I’ve had in academia.

Reasons to correct faculty on miseducation included ensuring accurate information was taught to the class and protecting future trans* students from encountering the same inaccuracies.

Some students chose not to bring up corrections. Or, sometimes they did, and others did not. G described their thinking on these types of decisions:

I struggle, even though I’m totally comfortable in my identity, like, there are times when I really struggle with the, like, “Am I going to bring this up? Like, am I going to be this person?” ... and so what does that mean? Like, what does it, what does it mean that I feel that level of, like, I don’t want to say guilt, but, like, what does it mean that I’m anticipating the other person’s discomfort more than I’m centering the fact that I’m uncomfortable and that’s why I want to do something about it.

Steve also felt unsure when deciding whether to correct instructors. For them, the reasoning was different and centered on another salient identity. Steve is autistic and said they struggle with

navigating these types of situations. They explained how their identities as trans, autistic, and nonbinary intersect:

... and I was really worried about coming off poorly. ... because ... the social skills just sometimes don't come as easily. And I am very aware ... that there are times when I say things that other people ... think are rude, where I did not intend that. And so that definitely ... impacted, like, my interactions and ... even especially, like, deciding, "Hey, is it okay to correct this person on my pronouns? Or is it okay to ... like, the previous semester, is it okay to ask ... what I should be doing when we did ... the male and female fitness thing? Should I be doing male since I'm on testosterone? Or should I doing, be doing female because I still have estrogen?" ... I worry a lot about if that's ... something that's socially acceptable. ... and either that, if I did say something, it would be out of line. Or ... I don't say something because I think it would be out of line, but it's not, and I could have fixed the situation for myself if I spoke up. So I feel like ... both the chronic illnesses that I have and developmental disorders present their own separate problems, but also definitely intersect ... with my experience of being trans and specifically nonbinary and not fully ... socially transitioned. I feel like those definitely can intersect.

Steve's challenges to navigating whether to correct professors intersected with their disability; however, their hesitation in making corrections was not. Several participants also chose not to correct instructors because they perceived the instructor to be unwilling to learn or grow. Frequently, they described instructors as "old," "tenured," or "near retirement" in situations where they decided it was not worth it to try to correct the instructor.

Students hold less power than instructors, who assign grades. When students correct instructors, they challenge the power dynamic. Leo commented on this challenge to trans

students:

I think power dynamics are really complicated as ... trans student. It's ... you don't have, as a student, you don't have control over a lot of your environments, a lot of your systems ... that you have to work within, whether that's the computer system at your school or whether that's just, kind of, the red tape bureaucracy of whatever. And it can be really terrifying to have to ask for help ... and not know whether or not you'll get it.

Overall, participants encountered several situations where they corrected or considered correcting an instructor due to miseducation of sex and gender issues. They described the experience as exhausting, tiring, frustrating, and one that should not be put on trans students. I described the second subtheme within the (mis)education of sex and gender, the student as an educator. Next, I describe the third subtheme, centering identity in coursework.

Centering Identity in Coursework

The third subtheme within the (mis)education of sex and gender is centering identity in coursework. This subtheme includes experiences where participants described coursework that allowed them to reflect on their own identities, including, but not limited to, gender identity. The participants all described these experiences as affirming their gender identity, as the coursework allowed time and direction to focus on their gender. Rachel, Bo, Cameron, and Brielle described affirming experiences with centering identity in coursework.

Rachel had an experience in her undergraduate diversity in journalism class where she had an assignment to write a poem about herself. She said, "I've accepted who I am. I'm proud of who I've become ... I think it was that sort of thing that was just affirming of how far I've come." Bo had an assignment to list their multiple identities, including gender and sexual orientation. The assignment challenged them to face their identities, and while it was difficult,

they appreciated it in the end because it “gave [them] a chance to be honest with [themselves].” Cameron described their experience as a social work student as very reflective and described the experience as affirming. “You need to be really self-aware and self-reflective. So a lot of our assignments involve a lot of personal disclosure and reflection. So there has never been a time where I’ve been uncomfortable disclosing something to a professor.”

Brielle encountered two assignments centered on identity in her graduate coursework, which she found affirming. Early on in the program, she wrote a positionality paper. She said, “That was ... one of my first papers in grad school, where I, kind of, opened up. And, in case my professors didn’t know by that point, admitted, like, I was transgender. And that ... was an empowering paper for me to write, and it was very affirming.”

Brielle also created an e-portfolio documenting her learning in her graduate program, which served as a capstone experience.

I felt really good about myself and where I had come. ... I’d posted some pictures on the portfolio, and it was interesting to see, like, pictures of me at the beginning of the program and then toward the end of the program. And it helped me realize, like, how much happier I am with my life, following. ... and I attribute a lot of that to transition. ... I no longer feel like I’m bringing a compromised version of myself to spaces. Instead, I feel that I’m authentically who I am. And ... within that portfolio, I was able to reflect on a lot of those little experiences that led up to it and see the overall big picture of how far I’ve come in the past two years, which has simultaneously been the entirety of the amount of time that I’ve begun socially transitioning.

The portfolio created space for Brielle to reflect on her transition, which was a big part of her graduate school experience. She added it was also helpful to share the portfolio with other

people. Part of the requirement was to present and defend the portfolio to a panel of advisors. She was able to invite guests to the defense and invited mentors from undergrad, supervisors, peers, and even her mother, who had not been supportive of her transition. The portfolio assignment and defense provided an opportunity for Brielle to share her journey with others. She described the opportunity to share her portfolio with others:

And this was the first time I was in a space where ... I was going by [Brielle] and presenting as me around [my mother]. I never had before. And even at the beginning, we had done introductions, and ... I was really worried my mom was going to call me by my deadname. But ... I quickly text her, I'm like, "Hey, would you mind, like, either not naming or gendering me during yours or gendering me the way I prefer to be gendered?" And she called me [Brielle], which I really appreciated. As well as, I also had several mentors and peers at the defense that ... for me to show them ... Sorry, I'm getting emotional ... I had mentors from undergrad and supervisors, and to have them there and show them, like, who I've become, a lot of it with my transition, really meant a lot to me.

Rachel, Bo, Cameron, and Brielle encountered assignments that centered their identities. They each described the assignments as affirming their gender identity, as they took time to consider and reflect on their own experiences. Centering identity in coursework is the third subtheme within the (mis)education of sex and gender. Next, I describe the final subtheme, student selection in curriculum and coursework.

Student Selection in Curriculum and Coursework

The final subtheme of the (mis)education of sex and gender is student selection in curriculum and coursework. This final subtheme includes opportunities participants took to integrate learning about sex, gender, sexuality, and trans* populations into their educational

experiences. Students chose courses that focused on these topics to fulfill degree requirements in some instances. In others, students had options on what to delve into for projects or assignments, and they could incorporate these topics into their assignments. All participants who tailored their experiences described the opportunity to do so positively overall, as it allowed them to learn more about themselves and their communities, share the information with others, and in some cases, make an impact on their communities. However, a few participants did encounter challenges while exploring this coursework, which I outlined in the miseducation subtheme. Freya, Leo, Cassian, Ashton, Brielle, Rachel, Ezra, and David shared about selecting courses and assignments related to sex, gender, sexuality, or trans populations.

Freya described her approach to selecting undergraduate courses that matched her interests. She majored in psychology and added two minors related to women, gender, and LGBTQ studies, and her psychology electives focused on areas like gender and social psychology. For her general requirements, she also looked “to see if [her] communication class or [her] English class could take a queer spin.” Or if not, she’d try to “work those [topics] into [her] papers and projects.” She said,

Trying to learn about myself and my identity in this community that I hadn’t known about before coming to college definitely impacted my interests, and it ... you know ... not forced me, but directed me to take classes like psych of gender or pick up my women’s and gender studies minor and my sexuality minor and focus on also getting some of that education and exploration ... within the classroom.

Freya described the experience positively, framing it as taking ownership over her own learning experiences:

And so I think that's definitely been a positive thing, because not only have, you know, I been pushed to learn a lot more about my community, but I've found a real passion in it, in that is, you know, the population that I focus on now in my future in, in grad school and in my future career, I'm focusing on TGD folks. And so I am really ... making something out of that education instead of just having it ... kind of, be something that I needed to do for myself ... I think it's also provided me direction in figuring out what I want to do in education and really helped me shape my learning experiences.

The two other doctoral student participants also focused their research on transgender issues. David said, "Because my coursework has a lot of opportunities for me to focus on my own research, it is very affirming to be able to produce academic work that pertains to transgender issues." Leo also focused on gender and trans populations in research during undergrad and graduate school, with plans to continue focusing on the trans* population after completing their degree. Overall, the participants tended to study gender, sex, sexuality, and trans populations when the opportunity presented itself.

Participants shared experiences about how coursework and instructors approached education around sex, gender, sexuality, and transgender populations. These experiences developed as the fourth theme, the (mis)education of sex and gender. This theme includes four subthemes: miseducation, the student as the educator, centering identity in coursework, and student selection in curriculum and coursework. Participants described mainly negative experiences with miseducation and the student as the educator and mainly positive experiences within centering identity in coursework and student selection in curriculum and coursework; however, experiences lie within spectrums in each of these subthemes. This theme highlights the

education or miseducation of sex, gender, and identity as a factor that affects transgender students' experiences in the classroom. Next, I describe the final theme, community.

Community

The fifth and final theme is the importance of community. This theme relates to participants' interactions within classrooms and the broader community, including class peers, friends, family, mentors, instructors, and academic programs or institutions. Participants described both affirming and challenging experiences with building community; however, all highlighted the importance of community support. Subthemes include family, peers, mentors, institutional support, and the impact of the pandemic and online course formats. First, I describe participants' experiences with family.

Family

Several participants described the impact family members had on their education. Many of these experiences were challenging because parents did not accept their child's trans* identity or utilize their name or pronouns. For example, Cassian's biological parents kicked him out of their home for being transgender. Instead, he lived with the people he considers his parents now, a former teacher and her fiancé. Moving to a new place impacted Cassian's college choice, as it changed his location and ability to pay for school. He attended an institution that provided him with substantial financial support. Li was also financially independent from their parents, which impacted their financial aid. Additional participants experienced a lack of support from family members even though they were still connected to them.

Bo lived with a fear that their parents would find out about their gender identity or sexuality. They tried coming out to their parents, and it had not gone well. They ended up playing it off like coming out was a joke so they would not get kicked out of the house. For Bo,

living with this fear impacted their interactions with people on campus. They said they were hesitant to share their identities with people voluntarily “because [they’re] always just like, ‘Oh no, what if, like, in some weird way, my mom or dad, like, knows [this person]?’”

Violet’s parents did not understand Violet’s non-binary identity, even three and a half years after Violet came out. Their parents had pushed back on using singular they/them pronouns, which still bothered Violet. Violet’s parents did not always use Violet’s name or pronouns, and Violet felt the effort typically was not there, especially with pronoun use. Violet learned their dad still used their deadname and described the impact on their coursework:

... yeah, learning that my dad’s still using my deadname ... which is not super cool. ... and I guess, like, it, kind of, just gets my energy down a lot because I’ve tried really hard, ... to, to assert myself. So if I’m thinking more about that or if, like, my mind’s turned to that, it’s a lot harder to get work done and schoolwork done specifically. ... so it’ll be, kind of, like, my energy’s low. I’m, like, less likely to want to be productive and, like, interact with other people too, if they know, like, people who are supposed to care about me are, like, also not respecting me.

Violet experienced low energy, lack of motivation, and disinterest in interacting with other people due to their parents not using their name and pronouns, which impacted their ability to get their schoolwork done. Violet also struggled to recharge during breaks from school because they were with their parents. “Instead of being recharged, I’m, like, kind of depressed.” Violet felt they could not push back on their parents because their parents were helping them pay for college.

Brian also reflected on his experience during his undergraduate years and how his “explosive, aggressive relationship” with his parents impacted him emotionally. Like Violet, he

also described how the relationship impacted his college experience, including his ability to go home for breaks:

So that was constantly influencing ... my mood, especially, or even going home for breaks or not going home for breaks. And, you know, that was a really rough time emotionally. ... you know, people would be like, "Oh, are you going home for break?" And I'd be like, "Nope. I'm not going home for Thanksgiving." Or, "No, I'm not." And then there was always the, "Why? Why aren't you doing that? Wh-, why are you staying here?" And ... so that was hard.

Several participants struggled with their relationships with their parents, which negatively affected their college experiences. Relationships with peers also impacted participants' experiences in the classroom.

Peers

All participants described the impact of interactions with their peers. Some participants shared challenges with building community among peers. Calvin shared they did not have a lot of social or academic support when they first began to transition. "Sometimes people just don't like when you transition, I guess." They ended up taking a break from attending college before returning and wondered how their experience would have been different had they had the support. They said,

A lot of times, I do wonder how the way, the way, like, I lost social support and the way I was just treated by people differently in that first year of transitioning, I wonder how much that has impacted the direction of my life.

Rachel also experienced a shift in her relationships with class peers when she started transitioning. She said,

I think the big thing for me was, if anything, it, sort of, ended up distancing me more from some of my fellow people in the journalism program in there. And I mean, not that I ever really was friends per se with any of them. At most I was acquaintances with, like, a good chunk of them. But it felt like that that distance, sort of, increased a little more as I was coming out.

Ashton also encountered some challenges building his desired community during his undergraduate years. When Ashton started college, forming a sense of belonging with other men was important to him. He had started his transition in high school and was, as he described it, “kind of rejected from potential male friends” at that time. In college, Ashton wanted to “just be friends with a group of guys,” which led him to seek membership in a fraternity. He said, “I just wanted male friends so desperately. And ... when I found out what fraternities were ... I was like, ‘Oh, that sounds so, so cool. Like, I want to be, I want to experience that.’” Ashton participated in the recruitment process for Greek life and decided on one fraternity he wanted to be in because it was the best fit for him. He did not receive an invitation to join the fraternity on his first attempt but kept trying. Ashton participated in recruitment four times before receiving an invitation to join. He learned part of the rejection was due to his trans identity. Ashton described the impact the rejections had on his academics.

It definitely ... pulled from my studies ... for a little bit. Basically, after each rejection—so there were three rejections—and so after each rejection, it was just, just periods of ... struggle. ... and those struggles really impacted my academics ... mental health struggles. Just feels like, periods of, of just extreme sadness and just isolation, that sort of thing. It was hard to get there sometimes. I missed class a lot ... during those periods.

Despite encountering challenges, Calvin and Ashton both felt they were on a good path and did not have regrets. Ashton enjoyed his involvement in the fraternity. He said, “I’m still heavily involved in it. And ... really loved it. ... I hate the process that I had to have, but now I’m doing things to try to prevent that ... for others.” Ashton’s perseverance and resilience highlight how important it was to build community.

Many participants described affirming experiences with their peers. When participants spoke about affirming experiences with community, they described several examples where their trans identity was normalized. Li described an experience going to office hours and talking with learning assistants about the female reproductive system. They were comfortable enough to share personal curiosities about the system, which outed them as trans. They said of the learning assistants, “It felt nice that they didn’t question me and were just trying to figure out the information.” Cassian participated in a class discussion about how Gen Z is “dismantling gender norms and working towards all gender expressions.” Multiple peers shared ways they deviate from gender norms, which Cassian described as affirming.

Participants also appreciated when others shared pronouns, normalizing the practice. Violet shared a similar view,

I’ve also had interactions with classmates where I will share my pronouns and then they also share their pronouns as opposed to letting people just assume. It’s really nice to not feel singled out as the only one sharing pronouns and being non-binary/trans.

Li described a similar experience when working with a partner on a presentation. They said, “I shared my pronouns via text, and she shared hers back, so that was a nice moment to know that someone would at least acknowledge and hopefully mentally take note that I am nonbinary.”

Jamie's experience with peers was very positive overall. They appreciated the acceptance, effort, and willingness to apologize quickly and move on if they messed up. They said,

My peers have been really great, especially when I was ... thinking about changing my name or what I wanted to change it to. They were, like, "Here's about eight hundred suggestions that I think fit you. Look through them." And I was like, "Wow, that's a lot." ... yeah ... the people I've surrounded myself with and my peers that I've found in my classes, they've all been super open and welcoming, and if they, like, mess up on something, like, they mess up on my pronouns or my name, they, like, they don't make a huge deal out of it, they just, they're like, "Oh, sorry, um, them, whatever." ... they don't, like, super freak out and make a huge apology and stuff. And that's really important to me is just, you know, just address it, move on.

Cassian also had a positive experience with peers overall, which was surprising to him considering he attended a religiously affiliated institution. He described his interactions with peers when queer content came up in class:

I mean, people were really open, which was, kind of, surprising. ... when something queer did come up, not necessarily gender specifically, but just anything, kind of, queer, I was, I was really surprised to see how many students, like, had some knowledge and were really accepting. Because I, I feel like, at a [religious] school, it's not ... it wouldn't be that way normally. Or at least ... I wouldn't think it would've. ... so that was kind of nice, having a little community.

Beyond accepting and normalizing diverse gender identities, some participants described experiences where their peers acted as allies.

Allies

At times, peers went beyond acceptance, acting as allies. For example, Freya's cohort provided her with a warning when an instructor used outdated terminology to describe trans people in a class, as they knew she would be watching a recording of the lecture later asynchronously. She described the experience:

He actually, in one of the recordings, was using the wrong terms ... and was saying, like, "[outdated term]" instead of "trans people" or "transgender people." And someone in the room who I know is, was cis ... a couple of cis people in the class called him out, both then and there and was like, "Let's stop. Let's not use that word in your example." And some people also messaged him after. And so I think, you know, he's definitely learning, and people are calling him out. ... and those people also messaged me then and were like, "Hey. Warning. Like, just in case you don't want to watch this."

Ashton also experienced allyship from peers in his graduate program on more than one occasion. For example, he said, "When discussing studies on college access and persistence, my peers questioned how the data would look different if it was inclusive of various gender identities instead of just the binary, male and female options." Ashton further said, "the fact, I guess, that people are thinking that way ... is pretty affirming because it shows that, and at least people in the future of the field, are wanting to make it more inclusive ... for future students."

Participants felt affirmed when their peers acted as allies. They also felt affirmed when interacting with peers who identify as trans or queer. Next, I describe experiences with trans*- and queer-identifying peers.

Trans and Queer-Identifying Peers

Several participants described experiences interacting with other transgender and queer-identifying community members. Violet shared, “I think also community is just really important. The more I’ve found other people who are nonbinary ... the more I felt comfortable in myself.” They added, “... but in the same sense, like, since we’re all marginalized, we tend to band together. So I think it’s more out of, like, [laughter] necessity to stick together that we’re more supportive of each other.” Some participants described the impact of having other transgender and queer-identifying peers in the classroom. Jamie felt more comfortable participating in class with other queer-identifying people. They said,

Just ... seeing other queer people in the classroom, I’m more ... I feel more likely to ... associate with them, but also if there’s a lot of other queer people in the classroom, I find myself being more involved and vocal and ... just interacting in the classroom setting more than if it’s, like, predominantly cis-het people.

Some participants shared about experiences with peers who were not in their classes. Li described their experiences with trans- and queer-identifying friends outside the classroom, saying those relationships made their experience.

I’ve enjoyed my college experience very much. I started ... kind of, volunteering at the LGBTQ center, getting involved in a lot of the, like, queer and trans organizations and making a lot of friends through that. So that’s been wonderful. I have, like, no [laughter] complaints there.

Ezra also described benefitting from forming relationships with many trans- and queer-identifying people. However, he prefers to make friends with people outside of the university-sponsored LGBTQ center. He said,

The people who look for [campus] services are very different from the ... trans and queer people that I hang out with. It's a very separate demographics of people searching for those spaces versus people who end up finding them by nature of their interests.

While participants connected with trans* and queer communities in different ways, many found the opportunity to form those relationships impactful and affirming.

G, who experienced friction with another trans* student, pointed out the importance of having relationships with people who do not identify as trans but are competent in discussing trans issues as well. G's perspective highlights that there is a lot of diversity within the transgender community, and simply sharing that identity does not mean students will feel they are part of a community. G said:

So I think the, sort of, surprise of, like, sometimes your trans classmates can be your source of support. And other times, like, you might be fighting with them, and that makes it even lonelier because you disagree about something. And so ... it's frustrating to always get lumped together. And, like, in the moments when you are not in agreement ... all of a sudden, it's like, "No, who, now who do I talk to? Who gets it?" ... so yeah. That was one theme of, like, how community is, like, so essential and why it's essential to have, like ... people who share those identities, because sometimes you're not all on the same page, and then that can't be your only group of people who, like, know how to talk about this ... You can't only have people who share the identity, like be competent in discussing it or providing support or yeah. Because, yeah, it's not, we're not all on the same page all the time. And that's great.

Building relationships to form a community was affirming for participants. Some participants described relationships or connections with peers who accepted and normalized trans identities.

A few described experiences where cis peers acted as allies. Building relationships with trans- and queer-identifying peers was affirming as well. Participants described forming community through relationships with instructors and mentors as well. The next subtheme describes relationships with mentors.

Mentors

Many participants described affirming experiences with mentors. Mentors typically were instructors or advisors at their institutions. Some participants described mentor relationships they formed with allies. Several described relationships with trans*- and queer-identifying mentors. First, I describe mentor relationships with allies.

Allies

Participants described meaningful mentor relationships they formed with allies. Freya had fantastic experiences with her advisor during graduate school. Freya commented,

I mean, I knew she was going to be amazing because she does trans and gender-diverse research ... and is, like, the head of the diversity committee and all these things. So I already knew she was going to be amazing. But I think it just, kind of ... continues to be amazing at how well she is able to, kind of, frankly ask me about situations and make sure that I am, like, being ... protected and being, like, uh, treated fairly in the program at all times.

While Freya described marginalizing experiences during her undergraduate and graduate school years, she also felt she had a community of supportive people. She described her classmates and advisor support after a challenging incident:

The nice thing, however, that came out of this experience is that my classmates and my advisor all checked in with me following the incident to provide emotional support and to

ask whether or not I wanted them to get involved in the situation. Both my peers and my mentor were willing to step in and advocate for me or have a talk with the process while making sure I remained anonymous.

Jamie, Adrian, Ashton, Brielle, and Cameron also felt they had very supportive instructors within their programs. Cameron described how their faculty normalized sharing new pronouns:

Being in a school where this is just commonplace and, like, I would ... switch pronouns, like, mid-semester, and my teachers just, like, wouldn't even skip a beat. They're like, "Okay." You know, just, like, I'll, I'll use they/them instead of she/her, like, "No big deal. Thanks for telling me." ... This is so, like, common for them.

Mentors who served as allies provided helpful support to participants; however, trans- and queer-identifying mentors had an additional layer of impact. Next, I describe participants' experiences with trans*- and queer-identifying mentors.

Trans*- and Queer-Identifying Mentors

Several participants described positive experiences connecting with trans- and queer-identifying mentors. These connections supported participants in not feeling isolated, furthering their gender identity development, and supporting their coursework. Violet said, "I was fortunate to have ... a nonbinary professor my freshman year, and it really helped me feel, like, more comfortable." For Cameron, having queer faculty in the program helped them not feel isolated. They said,

And there're, like, a bunch of open ... queer faculty walking around in this program too, so, like, I always feel like I definitely have, you ... I will never feel, like, isolated or alone in this program as a trans person.

Adrian also felt like they could be themselves in their environment with queer and trans faculty.

They said,

My thesis advisor is actually ... queer and nonbinary, so that's, like, very, very cool.

And, I don't know, I just felt at home almost at my school. Like, really being able to, like, express myself and who I am without, like, judgment.

Brielle and Ezra also had trans advisors. Brielle's relationship with her advisor positively impacted her gender identity development. She said, "My advisor has always been incredibly supportive and has really helped me to process and understand, um, my identity." Ezra's advisor identifies as a lesbian and has a nonbinary partner, making Ezra feel more confident about his personal development. He also felt the relationship would positively impact his intellectual development and even his thesis work, which he planned to focus on the intersection of queer identity and mental health. He described how having a queer advisor would impact him:

They're going to help ... me develop as a student, as a person, as, like, an intellectual, and then also maybe would be better for my thesis in talking out those ideas. Because it's someone who does come from that background, where they're going to understand in a way that other thesis readers might not understand.

Overall, Ezra felt his gender impacted his relationships with his professors. He said, "I've been more willing to develop a more personal relationship with those professors when they've revealed [their queer identity] to me." Developing relationships with instructors, advisors, and mentors benefitted participants. Next, I describe the third subtheme of community, institutional support.

Institutional Support

Participants described the impact of building community with peers and mentors. Some participants also highlighted the importance of the larger institutional environment in providing a space where those relationships could form. Noam, who had attended multiple undergraduate institutions over the years, described the impact of being at a welcoming and inclusive institution actively recruiting gender-diverse students. They said,

I think just because of the fact that the college has tried to create that type of environment and, you know, hire teachers that promote that type of environment, it attracts more students who identify ... in that. So, like, ... I think in ... at least in all my classes, there's at least one other nonbinary person, and in a couple of them, there's two or three. Which feels great, because I don't feel alone, you know, I'm not the only one being queer over here with my different pronouns, you know, there's other people. And, you know, and then I'm able to connect up with them and, and feel more ... comfortable. So just, just the fact that ... because of how, what the, the college is trying to do is attracting more of those students, you know ... that also has ... made it a lot, a lot better experience for me.

Adrian also described the belonging they felt as a result of attending a very open institution, "So, like, honestly, overall it's been pretty great, because, like, I go to a really open, accepting school. Like, for the most part, people are, like, very open." Cameron did not describe their overall institution as inclusive, but because their academic program was inclusive, it had a similar effect on them as a graduate student. They said,

... but it's been, like, it's just been great, really. It's been, I think, a really healthy environment for me. And I'm around a lot of really, really supportive people who ...

probably saw a lot of my queer identity come out before I did and were just, like, patiently waiting for me to get my shit together.

Ashton also commented on the importance of support at the institutional level. He said,

... I think, just what I've noticed to be the biggest factor in my experiences is the policies and standards of the institution itself. ... you know, the resources that they already provide for their students. ... their willingness to talk about these issues. Their willingness to outwardly support their students. ... I think played a, a huge role in my level of comfort and ... the level of support I receive.

He added, "I will say that my gender identity really impacted my decision to go to that institution, considering how outspoken they are ... in terms of their inclusivity and ... their policies for their healthcare and on-campus support." Overall, 10 of the participants considered the inclusivity of an institution when deciding whether to apply or attend. They used tools such as the online Campus Pride index, on-campus visit days, and interviewing current students to determine whether the institution or program would be a good fit. This subtheme demonstrates the importance of institutional support in creating environments where students can build community. Next, I describe the final subtheme, the impact of the pandemic and online environment on building community.

Pandemic and Online Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic and transition to online courses impacted participants' community support connections. Calvin said, "Zoom school is very hard to have, like, social interaction." Noam had a similar experience, saying, "being in the digital environment, I haven't had as much interaction with my classmates." Steve described the online barriers to forming

relationships with instructors, which prevented them from feeling seen as a student and as a nonbinary person.

I don't feel like my teachers necessarily know who I am as well. So, the ones where I have had, like a Zoom meeting with them every once in a while, I don't necessarily think they know who I am. Coming into the meeting, they don't know, you know, anything about me, other than, like, this person is talking about class schedule, this person is scheduled to talk about classes, and they look like a girl in the video.

In addition to limiting interactions with peers and instructors broadly, a couple of participants also remarked on the challenge of identifying other queer and trans students within an online environment. David said of the Zoom experiences, "It's way harder to [identify other trans* students] online. ... it's, kind of, weird to, like, DM somebody in Zoom and be like- [laughter] 'Are we clocking each other right now?'" Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic and online course environment limited participants' ability to connect with classmates, identify trans peers, and build relationships with instructors. These challenges restricted their ability to build community through classrooms.

Building community through relationships with peers and mentors had a significant impact on participants. Institutional support through inclusive policies and environments allowed participants to build these relationships, while the COVID-19 pandemic and online environments provided challenges. This final theme that emerged in the data is the importance of building community. Next, I provide a summary of my findings.

Summary

This study sought to identify the factors that affect transgender college students' experiences in classrooms. I collected data from 19 participants during spring 2021, during the

COVID-19 pandemic when most classrooms transitioned to an online format. Participants included students pursuing associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from institutions across the United States. I interviewed the participants virtually at the beginning of the term and again at the end. I asked questions about their background, gender identities, and both affirming and challenging experiences in coursework as it relates to gender identity. Between interviews, participants submitted responses to monthly reflection questions. The written reflections also asked participants to report on experiences that affirmed or challenged their gender identity. After collecting all data, I uploaded them into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, and coded each transcript and written reflection. I read the data by code and grouped similar experiences into categories, and then themes.

Five themes emerged from the data, including gender identity, the power of language, the trans* tax, the (mis)education of sex and gender, and community. Participants described how their gender identities impacted their experiences as students, including experiences of dysphoria, discovering and accepting their gender identity, and the development of their gender identity. The online environment impacted how the participants navigated experiences within this theme. Participants also described experiences that highlight the power of language for this population, including sharing pronouns, misgendering, and the use of outdated language, or slurs. The online environment also impacted participants' experiences with the power of language.

In addition to language, participants described experiences related to their gender identity that added to their daily anxieties and concerns, which Leo defined as the trans tax. These experiences included transitioning, coming out, and navigating the political climate. In addition, participants explained how well their curriculum and coursework approached topics of sex,

gender, sexuality, and trans populations. Some participants had positive experiences with coursework centered on identity or allowed students to select their topics for projects and assignments. However, many participants shared experiences with the miseducation of sex and gender, which focused on a binary man/woman approach. Participants described their responses to miseducation. Some approached instructors with feedback, while others considered doing so, but ultimately decided not to for a variety of reasons, often centered on power dynamics. Finally, participants described the impact of community. Building community offered a sense of belonging and allyship. Building community support was another theme impacted by the pandemic and switch to online learning.

In this chapter, I described the data that emerged from this study through five overarching themes. In the next chapter, I analyze the data using Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory and queer theory.

CHAPTER FIVE: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I analyze the factors that affect transgender students' experiences in the classroom using Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1979, 1995) ecological systems theory and queer theory. I begin with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, applying the PPCT model, which posits that whether and how people learn in educational environments is a product of individual characteristics (*person*), their environment (*context*), interactions between the individual and their environment (*process*), and changes over the lifespan (*time*). I analyze participants' individual characteristics and the multiple environmental levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1979) ecological system—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Then, I present queer theory and its tenets and analyze the data using a queer theoretical lens.

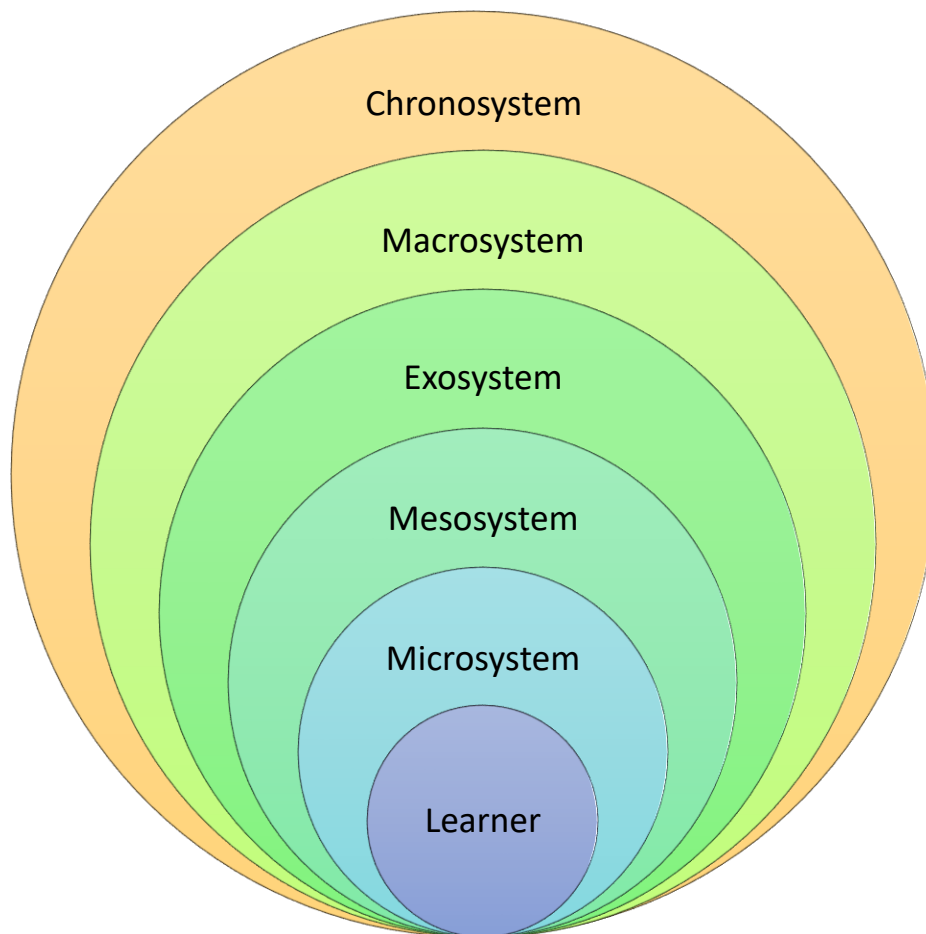
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) ecological systems theory acknowledges both characteristics of the learner and outside factors of the environment impact learning and development. Additional components of this model include the interactive processes between the learner and their environment as well as time. The PPCT model captures each of these elements (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The person component includes the learner's biopsychological, genetic, and social characteristics, such as ability, personality, intelligence, and social identities. The context includes the multiple components of the learner's environment. Interactions between the learner and their environment describe the process component, and time accounts for the three-dimensional component required for learning and human development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995) described the context, or environment, as consisting of multiple structures in a nested arrangement, each contained within the next. Figure 2 shows the arrangement of the structures with the learner at the center.

Figure 2

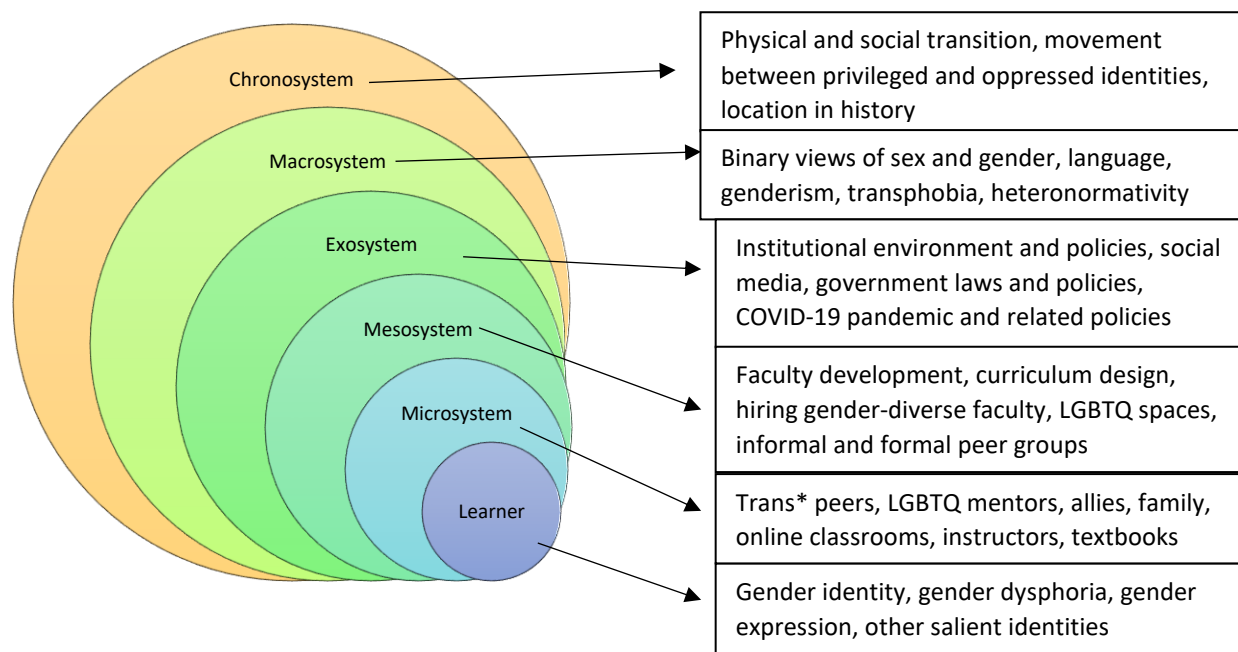
Environments within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the microsystem, closest to the learner, includes the immediate surroundings of the learner, such as the classroom or home environment. The following structure, the mesosystem, represents the relationships between microsystems. For example, the mesosystem would include the relationships between teachers and parents for learners in K-12 systems. The exosystem is the structure that follows the

mesosystem. It includes formal and informal social structures that encompass the immediate surroundings of the learner. The exosystem includes social structures such as government agencies, mass media, and informal social networks. The macrosystem includes the overarching components of the culture, such as economic, social, and political systems. The components of the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem are manifestations of the macrosystem. Each layer of the environment interacts with those around it (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The final structure, the chronosystem, includes the environmental events that occur over time at the individual level and environmental level. The chronosystem captures learners' life transitions as well as changes to the historical, societal setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Each system's impact on the learner depends on the interactions between systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The thematic analysis of participants' experiences in this study aligns well with ecological systems theory. This study sought to identify the factors that affect transgender students' experiences in the classroom. The five themes identified in the findings—navigating gender identity, the power of language, the trans* tax, the (mis)education of sex and gender, and community—and their subthemes reflect factors that include the characteristics of the participants, their environments, interactions between the two, and the impact of time. Next, I use the PPCT framework to analyze the components of the ecological system for trans* college students. Figure 3 depicts how the factors fit into an ecological systems theory framework.

Figure 3*Applying Ecological Systems Theory to Trans* Students' Classroom Experiences***Person**

According to my findings, factors that affect transgender college students' experiences in the classroom include personal factors, such as gender dysphoria, gender expression, gender identity, and other salient identities like socioeconomic status, ability, and race. These personal characteristics impacted participants' experience as college students. For example, Brielle struggled as a student when she first questioned her gender identity, explaining, "I was really, really stressed out during that time. And ... I dare to say I ... wasn't always there in class as a result, because I was often ... very disassociated, thinking about these topics." Brielle's reflections on gender identity took up space that competed with her priorities as a student. Participants were also very aware of their appearance and how others perceived them. Cameron, for example, felt their gender dysphoria was most triggered when others misgendered them

immediately. Thus, they thought a lot about how their clothing, hair, and body language impacted others' perceptions. Violet's gender dysphoria also impacted their classroom experiences. They kept their camera off during virtual classes sometimes, explaining, "Some days I just need the anonymity to feel comfortable and not obsess over how I look to other people."

Several participants described other salient identities that impacted their classroom experiences as well. The intersection of marginalized identities led to additional challenges. For example, Steve described how their identities affected their communications with their instructor, including self-advocacy. They explained being autistic impacted their interactions with their instructors because they worried about their social skills and ability to read situations. Specifically, they worried about whether it was appropriate to correct people when being misgendered. Steve's gender identity, coupled with their developmental disorders, affected their experience in the classroom. Analysis using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory highlights while personal characteristics of transgender college students impact their classroom experiences, environmental factors may have a more significant impact. Next, I analyze the data using the process component of the PPCT model.

Process

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) process component of the PPCT model describes learners' interactions with their environment and responses from the environment. The data from this study show a few trends in students' interactions with others, including being misgendered, sharing pronouns, and coming out. Ten participants described at least one instance of being misgendered by a peer or instructor. Li described the impact, "I can't focus on the course material because I have to think about the ways in which people are misgendering me and, like,

how am I being perceived.” Sometimes participants corrected the people who misgendered them, but often they did not. Cameron, for example, did not correct people because it would require reliving past feelings of not being “validated or...accepted.” Adrian added a distrust that people would learn after being corrected, “they don’t want to constantly remind people to use the right pronouns, just because it’s a hassle and also, like, they’re older, they’re not going to learn.”

Although being misgendered was common for some participants, sharing pronouns was also a typical classroom interaction. Most participants appreciated the opportunity to share their pronouns in class and noted it was best to normalize the process. Cassian, for example, emphasized the importance of instructors leading this experience. In addition to normalizing the process of sharing pronouns, Cameron noted the importance of actually utilizing the correct pronouns after someone shares to avoid the common experience of being misgendered. When people did not do so, it made Cameron hesitant to share at all. After others continually failed to use their pronouns, they saw the experience as “just a formality” that “nobody actually takes into consideration.” Thus, the outcome of sharing pronouns impacted the participants’ interactions with the process going forward.

Another process students repeatedly encountered was determining whether and when to come out as trans*. Sometimes coming out was necessary to be gendered correctly, called the correct name, or meaningfully contribute to class discussion. Thus, some students chose to do so. Some participants decided not to come out at all within the classroom setting, either because they were still internally considering their gender identity or wanted to remain stealth. Cassian weighed whether it was worth coming out and ultimately chose to come out in all his classes because the course topics included gender, and he “really, really wanted to say stuff.” He said, “it

got to a point where, like, trying to find ways to justify myself without saying I'm trans just wasn't working.”

The processes of being misgendered, sharing pronouns, and coming out were common interactions trans students had with their environment. Participants' reactions to each situation differed based on the situation, their development, gender identity, and more. Examining the process component highlights how participants navigate common experiences differently based on their development. Next, I describe the environmental factors that impact trans* students' experiences in the classroom.

Context

The exact ecology for each participant differs depending on their location, institution, area of study, and more. Analyzing the data using ecological systems theory in this study identifies common factors within trans* students' learning environments that impact their studies. The findings highlight factors at each level of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) system—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. First, I describe the microsystem.

Microsystem

The microsystem consists of the immediate settings with which the learner interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). In this study, the findings highlight many factors that affect trans students' classroom experiences within the microsystem, such as the online classroom environment, relationships with family, peers, and mentors, and (mis)education from instructors and textbooks. According to ecological systems theory, environmental components within the microsystem have the most significant impact on the learner (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Thus, it fits that much of the data exemplify factors within the microsystem.

The online classroom environment impacted participants' interactions with others within the microsystem, such as peers and instructors. First, it provided limitations and opportunities to change the way others perceived the participants. Participants could often choose to turn off their cameras when they did not want others to make perceptions about their gender. Or, if they had their camera on, the image was limited to their upper body. Li described this aspect of the online environment positively, "[People in class] would only see me from the front, so I could be more, like, less self-conscious about how I was being perceived." The online setting also limited communications. The participants described these limitations differently. For Cassian, limiting side comments meant other people could not make rude remarks without the whole class hearing, which positively impacted his experience. For Cameron, the lack of casual conversation took away their ability to have a comfortable and natural way to talk about their gender identity, which was limiting. Finally, the online setting challenged participants' ability to build relationships with peers and instructors. Calvin explained, "Zoom school is very hard to have, like, social interaction," and Steve described their relationship with instructors in online courses, "I don't feel like my teachers necessarily know who I am as well." The data clearly show the course format is a factor within the microsystem that affects trans students' experiences in the classroom.

Another factor that affected participants' experiences was relationships with individuals within their microsystem, such as family, peers, and mentors. The data within the community theme exemplifies these relationships. Several participants had experienced poor relationships with their parents after coming out. For example, Cassian had left his biological parents for safety reasons, and Li had become financially independent from their parents. These experiences had financial implications. Some participants were still connected with their parents but did not

feel supported. Violet's energy and productivity were impacted by their parents misgendering them and using their deadname.

Relationships with peers in the microsystem also significantly impacted participants' experiences within the classroom. Ashton shared his experience of joining a fraternity to gain friendships with men, including three rejections before receiving an invitation to join the organization. He learned the rejection was partly due to his trans* identity. After each rejection, he experienced "periods of struggle" that "really impacted [his] academics," including "[missing] class a lot." Once he did join the fraternity, the membership and relationships with his peers meant a lot to him and had a significant impact on his college experience. His perseverance to join shows how important building community was to him. Relationships with trans* peers and allies positively impacted participants' experiences in the classroom. Many participants commented on interactions with trans* peers that improved their experience in higher education. Jamie said, "Seeing other queer people in the classroom, I'm more ... I feel more likely to ... associate with them ... I find myself being more involved and vocal." And while Li had many negative classroom experiences, their relationships with friends at the institution outside of the classroom made for a positive college experience overall.

Connections to mentors within the microsystem also significantly impacted participants. Freya knew her mentor would have her back if any issues arose in the program. She described her mentor ally as "amazing" and felt that she would be protected in the program. Multiple participants described the positive impact of having LGBTQ mentors at the institution, making them feel less isolated. For example, Adrian's thesis advisor was queer and nonbinary and just one of several LGBTQ faculty members. Adrian described the feeling of being among many other trans* and queer people as feeling "at home."

Another significant impact within the microsystem was the (mis)education of sex and gender from instructors and course materials, such as videos and textbooks, and interactions with course instructors to provide feedback. Freya described the erasure of trans* identities in the classroom through instructors' heteronormative language. Instructors used phrases like "the mom and dad" or "the male and female" or by using phrases like "when women give birth." Freya said she "definitely felt uncomfortable" in these situations and that she "[missed] out on, you know, relating to the material." Noam, Brian, Cassian, Violet, and Steve described coursework focused on describing people through a binary male-female lens. The assignments erased trans* identities and made it difficult for the participants to complete the assignments in a way that felt authentic and accurate. Although Steve did not feel the lack of inclusion was done out of malice, they were unsure of how to proceed.

Multiple participants also encountered outdated terminology referring to trans people in their classrooms or assigned readings. The miseducation of sex and gender caused some participants to provide feedback and accurate information to their instructors, putting them in a position to challenge the student-professor power dynamics. These interactions impacted participants' relationships with their instructors, whether positive or negative, and directly impacted their energy, time, and mental health. Li described the experience of correcting their instructors as "tiring and exhausting and frustrating." More times than not, their instructors did not take their feedback and make meaningful change.

Li also noted the (mis)education of sex and gender within the microsystem would also impact the future of the exosystem for the trans community. Their peers' understanding of trans* people would affect how they would lead in their careers within social work, education, medicine, research, and more. Overall, it would continue to marginalize trans people in these

fields. The data show the elements of participants' microsystems significantly impact their experiences within the classroom. Next, I describe the components of participants' mesosystems.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem represents the interconnected relationships between components of the microsystem. For the participants in this study, the mesosystem included relationships among the faculty, such as curriculum design, faculty development programs, and the hiring of gender-diverse faculty. The mesosystem also includes informal and formal peer groups, such as project groups, student-led clubs, and LGBTQ centers. The participants did not reference all of these structures directly; however, I can infer through participants' descriptions of experiences with members of the microsystem. For example, participants did not speak directly to curriculum design but described the positive impact of taking courses related to gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ populations. For example, Freya added two minors related to women, gender, and LGBTQ studies and took electives on these topics whenever she could. The faculty design of minors and courses relevant to sex, gender, and LGBTQ populations impacted participants' classroom experiences. I make similar inferences to the hiring of gender-diverse and queer faculty. Participants' positive experiences with interacting with trans* and queer-identifying mentors suggest that selection committees' orientation towards hiring diverse candidates impacts transgender students' experiences in the classroom.

Peer groups also impacted participants' experiences in the classroom. Cassian, for example, was positively surprised by having accepting peers in the classroom who were able to contribute to discussions on queer and trans issues. Participants also had positive experiences with their peers sharing their pronouns, though this often was not the case. Some participants felt singled out when they were the only person to share their pronouns voluntarily in class. Violet

said the experience “singles [them] out a bit” and makes them “less, like, willing to want to, like, participate.” Although fewer data fall within the mesosystem, the components of this system have a meaningful impact on participants’ classroom experiences. Next, I describe the structures within trans* students’ exosystem.

Exosystem

The exosystem comprises the social structures the microsystem operates within (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). In this study, participants’ exosystem included their institutional environments and policies, social media, and local, state, and federal laws and policies related to trans* populations and the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors impacted participants and their micro- and meso-systems. Most participants chose their institution because of its resources and environment for trans* students. Ashton identified institutional support as “the biggest factor in [his] [college] experiences.” For him, important marks of institutional inclusivity included access to healthcare, on-campus resources, inclusive policies, and outspoken support for transgender students. Noam added gender diversity to the list, highlighting that creating inclusive campus cultures attracts more trans* students, making other transgender students feel less isolated. Noam’s experience shows how the environment at the exosystem level impacts the environment at the microsystem level. The campus culture and recruitment strategy shape relationships with members in the immediate setting, such as peers and mentors.

The political climate also impacted several participants’ lives and learning experiences. During the study, several states had proposed anti-trans bills, making 2021 a record year for anti-trans legislation by early spring. Freya experienced the intersection of two components of the exosystem, the political climate and social media, when people from her hometown published transphobic posts online related to the anti-trans bills. These exosystem factors impacted her

studies directly. The anti-trans political climate combined with the online classroom environment also impacted Steve. Steve struggled to build relationships with instructors during the pandemic. Paired with the political climate, they were unsure whether they could trust the instructor enough to come out as trans*. Steve's example also shows how the exosystem and microsystem interact. Legislation and national public safety conditions impacted both the classroom environment and relationship-building. The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions impacted all participants' experiences, as it necessitated a shift from in-person to online learning. The last and most distal structure within the environment is the macrosystem.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem includes the overarching components of the culture that affect the learner and other structures within the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Participants' macrosystem included binary cultural views of sex and gender, commonly-used language, transphobia, and heteronormativity. The fourth theme, the (mis)education of sex and gender, provides multiple examples of how society's binary views of sex and gender and binary language translated into the classroom and course materials. The power of language also exemplifies a component of our culture within the macrosystem, the standard of binary language and assumed pronouns. Li described trans people as an afterthought. Multiple participants encountered experiences where instructors or peers described members of the population as "men and women" or referred to people as "he or she," erasing nonbinary and trans* people entirely. Steve said the binary thinking reflects that instructors and course materials "[haven't] caught up yet to allow for intricacies," highlighting that while culture has progressed in terms of trans* inclusion, not everyone is there yet. The dominant culture still views gender through a binary lens.

The data also clearly show language has a powerful impact on transgender students. Language is an important cultural tool that connects us. The tool has harmed trans students time and again because it is common in our culture to gender people based on their name or appearance alone, without knowing anything about them. Participants shared multiple experiences of being misgendered in the classroom or via virtual communication such as email, whether the offender was aware of their pronouns or not. The cultural norms run deep. Even when students include their pronouns in their Zoom name or email signature, they can still get misgendered. Violet shared how their professor and classmates continued to misgender them despite visually sharing their pronouns online. This is particularly complicated given power dynamics. The language people use in the classroom and the content instructors teach are steeped in heteronormativity, the standard paradigm within society. The elements at the macrosystem level impact all other levels within the ecological model—the exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem, and the learner. I have described each of the systems within the environment that create the context. Next, I analyze the data through the final component of the PPCT model, time.

Time

The chronosystem considers the third dimension to the ecology of trans* students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It factors in the location in time which participants find themselves, both on an individual and sociohistorical level. Participants experienced many personal changes over time, given that most physically or socially transitioned their gender while in college. These significant transitions further define their setting. Within the chronosystem is participants' physical or social gender transition status. Some participants described their experience moving between privileged and oppressed gender identities and how it impacted their experiences in

class. Freya noticed people talked over her more in class when they perceived her as a woman. This experience impacted Freya's development, as she began to speak up for herself and others with marginalized identities when people talked over them. She said, "I'm not letting myself internalize these feelings that people have about women. I'm going to speak up and make sure that they hear me." Participants' transition status also impacted their levels of gender dysphoria. For example, Brian, who had been on hormones for ten years and lived stealth, had a very different experience than Brielle, who had not yet started taking hormones but wanted to. These locations within the chronosystem on an individual level affected participants' experiences in the classroom.

The chronosystem also includes the student's location in time through a sociohistorical context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I conducted this study in spring 2021, less than a year after the Supreme Court ruled that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protected transgender workers from workplace discrimination. While the United States made progress, trans* people were still not protected equally. The Equality Act, which would prohibit discrimination based on sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation under a broader scope, was passed by the United States House of Representatives in 2019; however, the United States Senate did not act on the bill. In early 2021, many states introduced anti-transgender bills that would limit access to healthcare and youth sports.

Despite being unprotected by federal and sometimes state law, trans* representation in media was rising. In June 2020, Netflix released a documentary, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, which examined the depiction of transgender people in film. Transgender experiences became a part of the national conversation. This big-picture component of the chronosystem significantly impacted the macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-systems. For example, the national

conversation on transgender rights impacted the political climate, which, as I demonstrated in the exosystem, impacted participants' classroom experiences. In addition, students had easy access to learning about transgender identities through media, which opened up the boundaries to explore their own gender identities.

The factors that affect trans* students' experiences in the classroom fit well with Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory. The PPCT model demonstrates how the ecology of trans* students impacts their classroom experiences. While trans college students' characteristics (gender identity, gender dysphoria, and other salient identities) impact their experiences, environmental factors have equal or greater weight. The ecological model empowers us to look beyond the all-too-common deficit-based research on trans populations and instead examine how our culture, institutions, and people can affect marginalized populations.

Next, I analyze the findings using queer theory. I provide an overview of queer theory and its major tenets. Then, I provide data that align with each.

Queer Theory

Queer theory calls identity categories and power relations into question, highlighting identity categories, such as gender and sexuality, are always socially constructed to benefit one group and marginalize another (Jones et al., 2013). As a critical theory, queer theory challenges current thinking and aims for social justice (Crotty, 1998). As a primary objective, it examines heteronormativity and genderism and works towards a world where society does not consider heterosexual and cisgender identities the normal ways of being (Jones et al., 2013). Another central tenet to queer theory is the concept of becoming. Becoming is the product and process of resisting heteronormativity, which continues over time (Butler, 1990). Becoming includes the fluid, changing development of identities over a lifetime (Butler, 1990).

Queer theory analyses help higher education professionals consider how we might be “[exercising] power in ways that may exclude students who do not fit current hetero- and homonormative binaries of sexual and gender identity” (Denton, 2019, p. 59). Some scholars have used queer theory to examine student identity categories that might be termed “queer,” such as lesbian identity (Abes & Kasch, 2007). When using a queer framework, Abes and Jones (2007) recognized developing lesbian students experience fluid intra-sectional identities that are ever-changing as the student interacts with external forces, such as heteronormativity. Queer theory is not limited to applications of sexual orientation and gender identities (Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Renn, 2010). Scholars can use queer theory to deconstruct and analyze any dichotomies based on power structures (Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Renn, 2010). For example, we might examine the structure of the academy or power relations in higher education institutions by deconstructing the roles of faculty and students.

Analyzing the data from this study using queer theory allows for a deeper look at the factors within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) macrosystem, namely heteronormativity and genderism, and examine their impact on all other levels of trans students’ environments. A queer theoretical analysis provides the opportunity to critique the structures of gender and sexuality within higher education institutions and the binary language used to relate to one another and teach. Queer theory also provides an opportunity to question the identity categories and power structures within academia that separate the faculty from the students. This section analyzes select factors that affect transgender students in the classroom using queer theory. First, I consider the queering of gender identity.

Queering Gender Identity: Towards Multiplicity

The first theme in the data was participants' experiences with navigating gender identity. Participants navigated their identities internally and considered whether and when to come out to other people. Using a queer theoretical framework, this highlights the heteronormativity and genderism present and plentiful in the data. Institutions, classrooms, and the people in them generally default to two gender identity options—men and women. Individuals sort people into categories to understand who they are because of genderism's role in the culture. This classification limits trans students and leads to marginalizing events.

Institutions limited gender identities indirectly and directly. Li described their challenging experience applying to graduate schools. One barrier was the exclusionary nature of applications where they had to type in "nonbinary" to describe their gender rather than check a box. Colleges and programs collect gender data, offering limited options that applicants and students must assign themselves. The process of choosing between limited identities fails to serve trans* students, and for Li, made them question whether accurately answering the question will negatively impact their admissions.

The common practice of trans people "coming out" also demonstrates the default way of being in society is cisgender. Multiple participants considered whether and when to come out to classmates and instructors, which shows this default is commonplace in our institutions of higher education as well. Students often came out to ensure others used the correct name and pronouns or to participate meaningfully in a discussion. Other times, students decided not to come out because they were still internally navigating their gender identity or did not want their trans identity to be known.

In this study, instructors and peers often assumed participants were cisgender unless they came out directly. Brian, who was "stealth," described conversations with faculty who assumed

he was a cis man. He described how a faculty member demonstrated they felt entitled to know whether someone was trans in one conversation, which was quite ironic given his identity. Brian experienced this “need to know” multiple times. He said, “I’ve experienced that more than once in my life, where somebody finds out I’m trans, and they’re like, ‘Why did you never tell me?’” This example highlights the desire to classify gender. Classifying gender allows people treat others differently according to their gender identity. Li found instructors responded to their calls for inclusion differently when people learned they were trans*. Overall, receiving what they needed required outing themselves. Li had no problem with telling people they were trans, as they were proud of their identity and wanted instructors to understand that there are trans students on campus.

Li’s desire to be visible so that people know trans* students exist highlights that classrooms currently operate under the assumption that everyone is cisgender unless someone says otherwise. This analysis highlights the need to consider the opposite—that people of all gender identities are around and amongst us, whether we explicitly know it or not.

Assignments and course materials often reinforced genderism. Participants had to navigate binary language and find their place within it, often without help. Participants were used to this. Noam, for example, took a dance class where the teacher used binary male-female descriptors. They said, “While I understand why that is, it does challenge me to try and figure out where I fit in.” The same was true for Steve’s experiences in a wellness course and Brian and Cassian’s experiences in theater courses. Li and Leo frequently encountered genderism in biology and medicine courses, which described the human body. This list includes just a few examples of genderism participants identified in their curriculums.

A few participants had positive classroom experiences where instructors encouraged them to queer gender and deconstruct the binary. For example, Cameron often had experiences in their social work program to reflect on their identities and discuss gender as a social construction. Brielle wrote a positionality paper and created a reflective portfolio centered on her gender identity development for her capstone course. Bo and Rachel also had opportunities to reflect on their gender identity through class assignments. Each of these participants described the opportunity to reflect and center identity in their coursework as affirming experiences.

Examining the construction of gender identity in college classrooms using queer theory shows how the default of binary man/woman categories harms trans* students. The analysis also shows some students have had experiences and opportunities that encourage them to examine gender identity as a social construction and resist the binary. This analysis shows trans* students benefit from a curriculum that acknowledges and celebrates trans* identities, bodies, and lives and calls for a move from gender boxes to multiplicity. In this section, I analyzed the data on gender identity using queer theory. Next, I examine the queering of language in the classroom.

Queering Language: Scrap the Equation

Another prominent theme from the data was the power of language. Language shaped participants' identities, interactions, and educational experiences. Important components of language that impacted trans* students were names and pronouns. Using a queer theoretical lens, I examined genderism at work in the classroom through language.

Most participants had experienced being misgendered, meaning someone had used an incorrect pronoun to refer to them. Those who identified outside of the binary and used "they," "ze," or no pronouns at all were often assigned the "he" or "she" box based solely on their name or appearance. For example, even though Violet had their pronouns in their email signature, an

instructor continued to misgender them via email based on their name. Others misgendered Noam with both binary pronouns “he” and “she,” sometimes within the same class period. In our culture and classrooms, the dominant views on gender assume a binary man/woman system. People lean on the flawed equation of men equals “he” and women equals “she,” enforcing genderism. This equation benefits cis students and marginalizes trans* students.

G called out the problem of having an equation altogether, highlighting that to queer language, you cannot simply add a “non-binary equals ‘they’” to the equation. G does not use pronouns at all. G has a full legal name that G occasionally uses for formal settings and a shortened nickname that G uses daily. The way G uses names is like when people named Jennifer put “Jennifer” on their diploma or resume but go by “Jenni” on a daily basis; however, G’s full name and nickname are a bit more unique. G described how peers make incorrect assumptions about G’s name in an effort to be inclusive.

On my diploma, it’s going to say [participant full name, middle initial, last name]. I’m not bothered by [participant full name]. But it’s also just weird to think about, like, I went through this whole experience, and, like, there are definitely people who don’t know my name is [participant full name]. But not because it’s a secret, just because it’s not the name you know me by ... When someone brought up that my name was [participant full name] or, like, referred to me as [participant full name], like, this other person ... who is not cis ... sort of, snapped at the person and was like, “That’s [participant nickname]’s deadname.” And the person would be like, “No, it’s really not.”

Making assumptions about trans* students’ names or pronouns, even in an effort to be inclusive, limits possibilities and creates new “boxes” for being trans. To be inclusive and open up opportunities for multiple possibilities, we need to scrap the equation altogether and queer

language by rejecting norms and resisting learning new “inclusive” assumptions. A queer theoretical analysis of language demonstrates a need to open up possibilities rather than seek new best practices.

Queer theory also highlights identities are fluid and ever-changing (Jones et al., 2013). We are always in a state of becoming. Therefore, to be inclusive, classrooms must operate under the assumption that students’ identities, names, and pronouns are in a state of flux. Cameron’s experience with an instructor changing students’ pronouns in their Zoom names for them provides an example of a well-meaning faculty member failing to consider that students are constantly developing. Cameron’s experience reveals a need for faculty to share power and put students in control of continually defining themselves, their names, and their pronouns. This section centered on the queering of language. Next, I look at the dichotomy of student and educator and the power relations between these two roles.

Queering Student and Faculty Identities: Limitations of an Expert

Queer theory can also be used to go beyond gender and sexuality and analyze higher education student and educator identity categories. Within the higher education system, faculty are typically seen as experts within their fields. The faculty provide the information, then students receive it. The arrow moves in one direction. Students rely on instruction from faculty to learn about and discuss knowledge that they deem “the truth” within their respective fields. Thus, the faculty is the expert, and the student is simply the sponge.

From this study, we know the factors that affect trans* students’ experiences in college classrooms include the miseducation of sex and gender. Participants often found errors and a lack of nuance in instructors’ teaching of these topics. Shortcomings included teaching outdated information and language, erasure of trans people, transphobic course materials, and more. In

these examples, the course content often directly opposed participants' lived experiences. For example, Freya was disappointed with her psychology material, which she thought would be relatively inclusive given her perceptions of the field. She was "kind of shocked" when "there [were] definitely a lot of assumptions, not only about [her] identity but about gender identity in general." Noam had similar experiences and described the impact, "It makes you almost feel like you're not real."

Several students had difficulty with graded assignments because they did not reflect their identities. For example, Steve's health class repeatedly required students to reference their biological sex, giving only binary options, which made them uncomfortable and uncertain how to respond. Miseducation faced by trans* students adds a challenge to their educational experience. They must determine whether to challenge the unidirectional power dynamics between faculty and students.

Some participants did decide to approach their instructors with feedback. For example, Li did this several times so other trans students would not have to have the same experiences in the future. The reactions they received from instructors were mixed and, unfortunately, mostly negative experiences. Li described this proves as "tiring and exhausting and frustrating." Using queer theory to analyze faculty-student power relations highlights how faculty hold power that benefits them and marginalizes the student. In this example, power structures support the continued incorrect teaching of sex and gender in biology courses. The power relations within higher education have reinforced heteronormativity and genderism.

Leo highlighted the issue of power dynamics, describing that it was difficult to ask for help as a trans student. Some participants shared examples of times when they did not provide the instructor with feedback related to miseducation or even situations of misgendering. For

example, Violet had a hard time with the dynamic of correcting someone in a position of authority. Often, participants described instructors as “old,” “tenured,” or “near retirement” in situations where they decided it was not worth it to correct the instructor. These data provide additional insight into power relations between students and instructors and how students navigate these dynamics. Students perceive older faculty members as unlikely to learn and recognize tenure provides faculty with protection that may limit the incentive to improve.

The dissonance between the expected faculty role of “the expert” and the outcomes for trans students leads me to question the limitations of “the expert.” How can instructors share the power to acknowledge student expertise and lived experience? This analysis suggests trans* students would benefit from a readjustment of power roles. Limiting the power of the faculty and increasing students’ influence could empower marginalized students and improve educational systems for the changing student demographics.

In this section, I analyzed the factors that affect trans* college students’ experiences in the classroom utilizing queer theory. Queer theory demonstrates how the socio-cultural impacts of heteronormativity and genderism show up in our classrooms and language. It also highlights the power dynamic between instructors and students that leads to marginalizing events in the classroom. A queer analysis of the data allows us to look more deeply at cultural implications that affect trans* college students’ experiences in the classroom.

Summary

In this chapter, I analyzed the factors that affect transgender college students’ experiences in the classroom using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory and queer theory. Ecological systems theory provided a framework for understanding the components of the *person, process, context, and time* that impact students’ experiences. The PPCT framework

demonstrated both individual characteristics of the student and the many structures within their environments impact trans* students' educational experiences. The interactions between the student and their environment and the third dimension of time also determined student outcomes. While personal characteristics impact students, the weight of environmental factors was significant. Elements of our culture impact our government, laws, and media, which then impact our higher education institutions and the people within them. An analysis using queer theory invited us to examine the significant environmental elements of heteronormativity and genderism within our classrooms. Queer theory questions identity categories and power relations, and it posits identities, such as gender identity, are socially constructed to benefit one group and marginalize another (Jones et al., 2013). In this chapter, I considered a queering of gender identity, language, and the student-faculty dynamic in higher education. The analysis suggests students benefit from instructors sharing power, resisting "best practices," and being open to many possibilities.

In the next and final chapter, I begin with a summary of the study. Then, I discuss the implications of my findings for instructors, institutions of higher education, and government institutions. I outline the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclude with closing thoughts.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to identify the factors that impact transgender students' classroom experiences in the United States through the lens of gender. The semester-long study followed 19 students pursuing degrees in higher education who did not identify as cisgender. Qualitative methods explored internal and external influences on their classroom experiences. A thematic analysis synthesized the data, and a theoretical analysis using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and queer theory provided further insight into its meaning. This chapter compares the findings to prior research, discusses implications, and provides limitations and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This study adds substantially to the literature on trans* college students' experiences in the classroom, as little prior research exists. To date, I have located just one study that aligns closely. Pryor (2015) conducted a study at one Midwest institution to discover how trans college students at a research university experience the classroom environment. Pryor (2015) interviewed five students, all of whom were White, and identified four themes: Coming out, instructor interactions, peer (non)support, and campus and course context impact college environment. The findings of this study confirm these findings and build on them.

The findings from this study confirm Pryor's (2015) theme of coming out. In both studies, participants frequently weighed whether to come out in class. Similar to Pryor's (2015) study, the participants in this study frequently described impactful interactions with instructors; however, this study also highlighted the (mis)education of sex and gender instructors create in classrooms. In addition, this study provides additional insight into interactions with instructors by specifically highlighting experiences with sharing pronouns, being misgendered, and the

important impact of trans* students having access to trans and queer-identifying instructors and mentors. Both studies identify that campus and course context impact the college environment. Further, both call out STEM fields as further behind in gender inclusion. Finally, both studies identify peers as having an impact on trans* students' classroom experiences, both positive and negative.

This study builds on Pryor's (2015) work by expanding the size and diversity of the sample. The ecological systems theory analysis provides a framework for understanding the diverse factors that impact trans* college students' experiences in the classroom, all of which are influenced by heteronormativity and genderism. A queer theoretical analysis allows us to break down the elements of the environment. Overall, this study contributes to understanding an under-researched population within higher education.

Implications

The findings from this study have several implications. In this section, I highlight the implications and recommendations. My recommendations provide practical examples that stakeholders can implement to work towards gender inclusion. However, like Nicolazzo (2017), I caution against relying on best practices, as those ideals captured at one moment in time may serve to maintain trans* oppression while working towards gender inclusion. In other words, what we call best practices may improve experiences for trans students today but not work to deconstruct the underlying issue of genderism pervasive in our culture. Thus, we must acknowledge that deconstructing genderism is a process and long-term commitment. I implore the reader to consider multiple possibilities using my implications and recommendations as a framework.

The ecological systems analysis shows many structures of the environment impact trans* college students' classroom experiences in addition to personal characteristics. Environmental impacts exist at the societal level, within institutions and government, and at the individual level within class environments and interpersonal relationships. Thus, this study has implications for people and institutions at multiple levels of impact, including trans students' parents and families, peers, instructors, staff, higher education institutions, local, state, and national lawmakers, and more. I organize the implications and recommendations using the five themes from my findings.

Navigating Gender Identity

The findings of this study highlighted some trans* students question and discover their gender identity while in college, which can impact their experiences in the classroom. Some participants missed class or generally lacked focus. While participants' struggles are likely rooted in the genderism and transphobia that exist within our society and ourselves, higher education institutions can intervene to provide support while these challenges persist. Leaders at colleges and universities can provide access to counselors equipped to help students discern their gender identity. In addition, employees who work directly with students should be aware of these resources and help promote them. For example, faculty can include information on counseling services in their syllabi, class, and individual appointments with students, providing examples of the many ways counselors can provide support, including navigating gender identity.

This theme also included a subtheme of experiences within the online learning environment. The shift to a virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic presented new challenges and opportunities for trans college students. While participants' preferences for online or face-to-face coursework varied, several correlated their preference with gendered perceptions.

Some participants found the online environment more beneficial overall. It provided them with the opportunity to turn off their camera and cut off others' ability to perceive them and their gender. Given this, instructors of online courses must recognize students may turn off their cameras for various reasons, including experiences with gender dysphoria. While this is likely not an issue in large lecture classes, faculty may prefer students have their cameras on in small, discussion-based classes. Trans students would benefit from faculty allowing their students to participate in whatever way they are most comfortable on any given day.

On the other hand, some participants felt they could better express their gender identity in person through body language and casual side conversation, both of which online classroom environments impeded. Given trans students experience these formats in various ways, institutions should consider offering required courses in both in-person and virtual formats. This strategy would allow students to choose the method most conducive to their learning for each course in each term as their preferences change. This finding also reminds us the trans* student population includes diverse gender identities and people whose needs and experiences vary greatly. Again, there is no one best solution, but a need for multiple options.

The Power of Language

The second theme from my findings emphasized the power language has on transgender students' experiences in the classroom. Participants experienced others misgendering them frequently, which had very harmful effects. First and foremost, we all must resist assuming another person's gender, using gendered language, or assigning gender to someone. Examples of gendered language include using pronouns (e.g., he, she), personal titles (e.g., Ms., Mr., sir, ma'am), and referring to groups of people in gendered ways (e.g., ladies, bros). To use pronouns for a person, we must first ask them what their pronouns are.

Many participants described experiences in class where instructors prompted them to share their pronouns. Overall, participants agreed including pronouns in introductions was inclusive and beneficial, though not all participants wanted to provide their pronouns in classroom spaces. Given this, trans students would benefit from making sharing pronouns optional. The process of optionally sharing pronouns alone does not meet the needs of trans* students. Trans students would benefit from this process being normalized and utilized by cis students as well. Most importantly, peers and instructors must follow through and actually utilize their peers' and students' pronouns. If a student lists two sets of pronouns, it can be helpful to ask them if they have a preference or would prefer both. Finally, requesting pronouns should be done in situations where it is relevant. In some circumstances, like small group discussions, people will likely refer to one another. In others, like large informational lectures, they likely will not. It may be helpful to ask for pronouns only when it is relevant.

Participants also experienced instructors and peers using a lot of binary and transphobic language in the classroom to describe human anatomy, biology, body parts, and families. We also need to change our language to talk about our bodies and the world around us. Referring to families, gender roles and bodies should be non-gendered and descriptive. For example, an accurate description of menstruation would reference "people who menstruate" rather than "women." An accurate portrait of a family would describe "parents" or "caregivers" and not "mothers and fathers." Gendered and heteronormative language is an incredibly impactful structure at the macro level of the participants' environment. Language within a culture slowly changes as people use words differently and create new words. Genderism at the macrosystem level will not change until individuals within the culture normalize a new way of using language.

Thus, all of us can impact trans* students' experiences by utilizing accurate and inclusive language.

Another subtheme within the power of language was trans students' experiences encountering outdated language or slurs referring to trans people in their class materials or discussions. As discussed, language changes over time, and we must account for these changes. To remedy encounters with slurs, instructors need to remain educated on what terms the trans* community uses to describe themselves. Before class each term, they should re-read their materials and check for outdated terms or slurs. Instructors should opt for updated materials that use appropriate language. If the historical context is part of the class materials, including an outdated and unacceptable term, instructors should provide content warnings and discuss the context and reasoning with the class.

The Trans* Tax

The third theme, the trans tax, describes the daily energy and anxiety trans students must expend that their cis peers do not due to gender-related issues such as transitioning, coming out, and dealing with the political climate. First and foremost, instructors, mentors, and peers must recognize inquiring about the details of people's bodies and health is unacceptable. There is no exception for close advising relationships or friendships. Gender-affirming care is personal. Students can share to the extent they are comfortable and should not receive questions or concerns about their bodies or medical procedures.

Trans* students may need to miss class or request accommodations due to necessary appointments or surgeries related to gender-affirming care. Instructors can support students by providing flexibility, accommodations, makeup opportunities, and more. It is also important to note that not all students will be ready to share what they are going through or why they might

need accommodations. Thus, transgender students will benefit from disability services providing necessary accommodations to their instructors, so that any disclosure can occur outside of the faculty-student power dynamic, and students can receive the accommodations they need to succeed.

Students also experience issues with the trans* tax when transitioning socially. Institutions can support trans students by providing systems that students can easily access to update preferred names and pronouns. Further, institutions can provide support by ensuring preferred names then appear everywhere. For example, practitioners can ensure new software feeds in preferred names if integrated with existing data, if possible. Institutions can also utilize preferred names for university identification cards and email systems. Some institutions may be limited by government policies or budgets, and should utilize these recommendations as a framework, finding creative ways to ensure preferred names are respected and documented.

The trans* tax theme also included challenges related to the political climate. Participants were negatively impacted by anti-trans legislation even if it would not directly impact them. We can all support politicians working towards trans* inclusion with our votes. Local, state, and national lawmakers must recognize the harm anti-trans legislation causes for members of the trans community regardless of whether it impacts individuals directly. Instructors can help by remaining aware of legislation and news that impacts trans communities, acknowledging when issues arise and integrating discussion on these current events when appropriate for the course and development of students in the course.

The (Mis)education of Sex and Gender

The fourth theme included participants' experiences with sex and gender topics in their coursework. Subthemes included the miseducation of sex and gender, the student as an educator,

centering identity in coursework, and the impact of student selection in curriculum and coursework. The miseducation of sex and gender has concerning implications. Instructors educate future professionals who will serve the public as doctors, educators, lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and more. The miseducation of sex and gender directly negatively impacts trans* students. It also impacts the education of the entire next generation and, thus, the services they will provide to others in their careers. In short, miseducation impacts the student directly and all of the people they will serve in the future indirectly, which will ultimately negatively impact the transgender community on the whole. Teaching gender accurately and with nuance would benefit everyone by increasing understanding of fluidity.

Academic fields that miseducate on sex and gender or that transgender students perceive not to be inclusive may also deter trans* students from pursuing degrees or careers in those fields. For example, in this study, Brielle chose to earn a master's in education instead of an MBA because she felt business would not accept trans women. In addition, participants found courses and instructors in the humanities to be more gender-inclusive than STEM fields. Trans students may then gravitate towards the humanities and away from business and STEM fields. If this occurs, it may contribute to trans graduates earning lower salaries than their cis peers on average and having a more challenging time accessing economic mobility due to career choice. Given that trans Americans do indeed earn less on average than cis Americans, including experiencing an unemployment rate that is three times higher than the U.S. employment rate (James et al., 2016), the American workforce must also vastly improve to create equitable income and employment conditions, regardless of which fields trans students select. On college campuses, departments and instructors within business, STEM, and related fields must work diligently to catch up with their colleagues and improve their reputation within the trans*

community by creating inclusive classrooms and curriculums, and clearly communicating the message that they are supportive and actively working toward gender inclusion. These efforts must include education for cis community members, and especially students, who have a big impact on trans students' experiences.

Another subtheme within this finding was the student acting as an educator. Throughout the data, it was trans students who were advocating for and demanding change within classrooms—instructors who valued student feedback and were open to change made progress in creating gender-inclusive classrooms. The implication is that we will only achieve gender-inclusive classrooms when we have trans students in our institutions, see them, and listen to what they need. Some participants encountered instructors who were unwilling to listen, learn, or change based on student feedback. Analyzing the student-faculty dynamic using queer theory provided an opportunity to examine these socially-constructed power dynamics. Transgender students would benefit from restructuring faculty incentives, including abolishing the tenure system. When participants decided not to provide feedback to faculty, it often was because they did not expect the faculty member to change or even try. They described these faculty members as “old,” “near retirement,” or “tenured.” Trans* students would benefit from a system that holds faculty to a high teaching standard where student perceptions on classroom inclusion heavily impact remuneration and employment. In addition, instructors whom students may perceive as older may consider making more explicit statements about their desire to be inclusive.

Further, to move towards gender inclusion, we must have trans* students at our institutions in the first place. Most participants in this study researched their institutions and programs before applying to evaluate their acceptance of trans people. Thus, institutions must earn trans applicants' trust through genuine efforts towards inclusion. Overall, a gender-inclusive

campus is most likely to attract trans* students and having a large population of trans students is most likely to continue to move efforts forward.

The third subtheme showed participants had positive experiences with centering identity in their coursework. When instructors gave students space to reflect on their positionality and share their reflections with others, they felt affirmed and experienced growth, even if it was challenging to navigate internally. Only some of the participants completed these types of assignments. The courses that called for this type of work tended to focus on writing, education, and social work. Thus, students pursuing degrees outside of these spaces may be less likely to encounter similar opportunities for reflection. Faculty and higher education administrations should consider including reflection on identity within core curriculums so students pursuing all majors and degrees have the chance to explore their identity. This exploration can benefit trans* students as well as their cis peers.

The last subtheme within the (mis)education of sex and gender is the impact of student selection in coursework and curriculum. Participants benefitted from being able to choose LGBTQ-focused courses within their required curriculum. Some also pursued majors or minors that centered coursework on sex and gender. Trans students would benefit from colleges and universities providing majors, minors, and course offerings centered on gender, sexuality, and specifically trans* populations, particularly with an emphasis on deconstructing the gender binary, genderism, and heteronormativity.

Community

The final theme in my findings was community. Participants experienced challenges and support from members of their communities, including family, peers, mentors, and even the institution. Several participants experienced challenges with their families. Parents of trans*

students must consider they may be causing stress for their child even when they do not perceive themselves to be causing harm. Using their child's incorrect name or pronoun either in front of them or behind their back may cause harm. Faculty and student affairs practitioners can also be mindful that not all students experience support at home or feel excited about breaks.

Another impactful component of community was peer relationships. When cis students distanced themselves, participants felt it. Trans students would benefit from their cisgender peers being welcoming and inclusive. Cis students can create gender-inclusive classrooms by sharing their pronouns, asking clarifying questions about pronouns if needed, and accurately using their peers' pronouns. To go a step further, cis students can act as allies to trans students by correcting or educating instructors who fail to acknowledge the nuance of sex and gender, erase trans people, or utilize inappropriate language. Improving extracurricular peer environments may require policy reviews and training from staff and administration. For example, student affairs professionals working with Greek organizations on campus can evaluate the gender inclusion policies to ensure they welcome trans students. Practitioners can also coach student leaders on utilizing inclusive language to describe their clubs and their membership.

Relationships with other trans* or queer-identifying peers also improved experiences for transgender students. Again, institutions can become more gender-inclusive solely by recruiting and admitting more trans students. Institutions can also provide opportunities to bring trans students together by creating trans*-centered centers or organizations or connecting students with off-campus trans groups.

The findings also showed trans* students benefit from having trans* and queer-identifying mentors on campus. Human resources teams and hiring managers for both faculty and staff should implement inclusive hiring practices aimed to attract top trans and queer-

identifying talent. Ideas for inclusive hiring include using inclusive language on the application and job posting, providing a statement encouraging people from diverse backgrounds to apply, ensuring employee health insurance plans cover gender-affirming care, and promoting this on the job posting. Of equal importance, institutions and teams must retain trans talent by creating a genuinely welcoming and inclusive work environment.

The data revealed institutional support could significantly impact trans* students' experiences in the classroom. Thus, trans* students will benefit when institutions openly and proudly support trans community members. Institutional policies, procedures, and resources must also align with stated intentions. For example, gender-inclusive institutions would provide easy access to gender-free restrooms, health insurance that covers gender-affirming care, and access to counselors equipped to navigate gender identity. In addition, residence life professionals would not use assumptions about gender information to assign housing. Institutions must also provide gender-inclusivity training opportunities for people at all levels of the organization—from board members and upper-level administrators to faculty, staff, and students. Training could include information about pronouns, gender identities, changing language, and suggestions for creating gender-inclusive spaces.

In this section, I provided many implications and recommendations from this study. My research question and diverse participant sample allowed me to examine many aspects of trans students' environments and factors impacting their classroom experiences. However, the study does have limitations.

Limitations

I conducted this study during the spring 2021 semester, during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, students were predominately attending classes in online formats. The findings of

this study are relevant to an online learning environment specifically. Practitioners should keep this in mind when considering whether findings are transferable to other settings. Additionally, I conducted my interviews entirely on Zoom. The interview setting may have also impacted how participants shared their stories.

In addition, participants held a variety of identities from several institutions and regions of the country, studying a variety of academic fields. While this allowed me to examine a broad range of factors that affect trans* students' experiences in higher education, the diversity limited my ability to deeply explore specific identities within the sample. Also, the demographics of my sample are certainly not representative of the wide range of diversity within the national trans* college student population. Scholars should consider the limitations of my sample as well when considering how findings can apply to other settings.

Another limitation of the study is that it did not measure student outcomes alongside student experiences. This study identified the broad factors that impact transgender students' classroom experience. However, I do not claim how those factors impact student success, persistence, or retention. Thus, future research is needed to understand how these factors impact student outcomes. Next, I build on these limitations to provide recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study identified several factors that impact trans* students' classroom experiences, described with five overarching themes—navigating gender identity, the power of language, the trans* tax, the (mis)education of sex and gender, and community. These findings apply to online learning settings, and additional research is needed to examine in-person learning experiences.

Future research may replicate the study with participants participating in in-person courses and interviews.

To more deeply understand what factors impact students with specific gender identities or other salient identities, future research can explore a more narrow participant demographic. For example, researchers may explore factors that impact trans women, non-binary students, or students who do not use pronouns specifically. Future research could also center on the intersection of gender identity and socioeconomic status, race, or other identities.

It was beyond the scope of this study to examine the relationship between factors that impact trans* students' experiences in the classroom and student outcomes. However, understanding these relationships would further aid in our understanding of how trans* students persist and earn degrees. Further research is needed to understand how the factors that impact transgender students in the classroom affect student academic success, persistence, and retention. Future research could focus more narrowly on each factor and its relationship to academic success. For example, a mixed-methods study might examine the relationship between trans students' experiences with transitioning, course satisfaction, and successful degree completion.

Closing Thoughts

Many internal and external factors impact trans* students' classroom experiences. Navigating gender identity, gender dysphoria, and gender expression significantly influences trans students' educational experiences. In addition, language significantly impacts trans students' experiences, both orally and in text. Trans students also expend energy and experience anxiety in unique ways related to transitioning, coming out, and navigating the political climate. Another factor that impacts trans students' experiences in the classroom is the instructor's approach to teaching topics related to gender, sex, and sexuality. While several participants

described their college experiences as positive overall, they could still identify several instances where their gender identity was challenged in the classroom. All of these factors are rooted in heteronormativity and genderism. Thus, we need cultural change to transform students' experiences.

We can use Harro's (2018) cycle of liberation model as a framework for creating culture change. According to Harro culture change begins with each individual making changes within ourselves and our spheres of influence. This cycle begins with the getting ready stage, which includes education and introspection (Harro, 2018). Then, it moves into reaching out to others, such as calling out injustices. Next, we must move into building community and coalescing, working with people "like us" and "different from us" to gain support and build coalitions, respectively (Harro, 2018). We can influence systemic change and affect policy, structures, and roles through communities and coalitions.

Using Harro's (2018) framework, we can begin to dismantle genderism by reflecting on our own gender identities and learning about trans* communities and experiences of genderism. As we become more knowledgeable, we can reach out by seeking new experiences and naming injustices. We can utilize accurate, descriptive, and inclusive language. We can resist gendering people, and we can call out others who fail to do the same. As we continue in our path to liberation, we must work together to build communities and coalitions equipped at making systemic change.

Relationships with members of their communities also impacted trans* students' experiences in the classroom. Families, peers, mentors, and instructors can positively or negatively impact transgender students' experiences. We must care for ourselves and others as

we work towards liberation through systemic change and the deconstruction of genderism and heteronormativity. This focus on care is the final step in Harro's (2018) cycle of liberation.

Reflect. Keep learning. Call out injustice. Find fellow justice-seekers. Let us challenge genderism internally and in our institutions together and take care of ourselves and each other along the way.

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APPENDIX A: CITI PROGRAM CERTIFICATE



Completion Date 30-Jan-2020
Expiration Date 29-Jan-2024
Record ID 35071275

This is to certify that:

Carley Stieg

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Subjects Research (HSR) (Curriculum Group)
Human Subjects Research Training: Social-Behavioral-Educational (Course Learner Group)
Researchers
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of St. Thomas - Minnesota

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w10107f71-9d85-4b3a-a828-e04ba82b838f-35071275



APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Research Participation Key Information

Trans*forming College Classrooms into Gender Inclusive Spaces: A Case Study Amplifying Transgender Voices

What you will be asked to do:

Participants will be asked to complete three main components:

1. An initial Zoom interview of about 60 minutes with the researcher at the beginning of the Spring semester. Interview questions will investigate participants' experiences in college classes through the lens of gender identity.
2. Throughout the Spring 2021 semester, submit to the researcher course assignments and/or reflections on classrooms experiences that affirm or challenge the participant's gender identity.
3. A final reflection interview of about 60 minutes with the researcher over Zoom at the end of Spring semester.

Participating in this study has risks:

- I will ask you personal information about your gender identity
- Owing to the nature of the study, you may feel emotional or very uncomfortable if remembering negative experiences related to your gender identity
- While unlikely, as with any online information there is the potential for confidentiality of data breach and/or violation of privacy
- If a breach of confidentiality did occur, there may be social or economic risks if you live in an area that does not provide legal protection for transgender individuals

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study about how transgender college students experience their classroom environments and course work. The title of this study is Trans*forming College Classrooms into Gender Inclusive Spaces: A Case Study Amplifying Transgender Voices. You were selected as a possible participant in the study because you meet the eligibility requirements. You are eligible to participate in this study if you are a college student in the United States who identifies as transgender. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether you would like to participate or not.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- **Schedule and participate in an approximately 60 minute Zoom interview** with the researcher to be held during January or February 2021. The interview will explore gender identity and experiences in college classrooms and curriculum through the lens of gender identity. Audio will be recorded for a transcription, then deleted within one month of the interview. Transcripts will not include any identifying information.
- **Share your preferred first name, pronouns, and university email address (ending in .edu)** so that I can communicate with you throughout the semester and verify your college student status.
- **Stay in contact throughout the Spring 2021 semester** by submitting course assignments and reflections on classroom experiences that affirm or challenge your gender identity.
- **Participate in a final reflection Zoom interview of approximately 60 minutes** with the researcher at the end of the Spring 2021 semester (May or June).
- **Review my findings and provide feedback** on my study if you wish.

Your preferred first name, pronouns, and email address will only be used to contact you throughout the duration of the study and then will be deleted after the study is complete.

The time commitment for this study is approximately 5.5-7.5 hours total throughout the Spring 2021 semester. Any additional time committed is at your discretion if you wish to provide feedback on the study. All correspondence and interviews will take place online using email and Zoom.

What are the risks of being in the study?

The study has risks:

- I will ask you personal information about your gender identity
- Owing to the nature of the study, you may feel emotional or very uncomfortable if remembering negative experiences related to your gender identity
- While unlikely, as with any online information there is the potential for confidentiality of data breach and/or violation of privacy
- If a breach of confidentiality did occur, there may be social or economic risks if you live in an area that does not provide legal protection for transgender individuals

To minimize these risks, I will ask open-ended questions in interviews. You are free to skip any questions I ask if they require recalling traumatic or distressing events or cause emotional distress. You may also choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

I will keep your preferred name and contact information stored in a password protected file on my password protected computer. Your contact information will be kept separate from the data collected and all references to my study topic.

Note that transcripts and document data collected in my study will be kept indefinitely, but will be de-identified to protect participants' anonymity.

Here is more information about why we are doing this study:

This study is being conducted by Carley Stieg, EdD Candidate at the University of St. Thomas School of Education. This study was reviewed for risks and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

The purpose of this study is to explore what factors affect the experiences of transgender college students in the classroom and curriculum through the lens of gender identity in order to identify barriers for students. Identifying barriers may assist instructors and higher education professionals with creating gender inclusive classrooms.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

We believe your privacy and confidentiality are important. Here is how we will protect your personal information:

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study since you have control over when we meet and what you choose to share with me. Your preferred first name, pronouns, email address, and any other identifying information will only be used to contact you for the study duration and will be deleted as soon as this purpose has been fulfilled.

The records of this study will be kept as confidential as possible, though, as with any online information or Zoom call, the possibility of a confidentiality breach does exist. In any reports I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you (*e.g.- your preferred name, where you are from, your graduation year, the name of the college you attend, etc.*). The types of records I will create include:

- An audio recording of your interviews that will be transcribed, then deleted within one month. My transcriber and I will have access to these recordings.
- A transcript of your interviews (with identifying information removed) will be stored on my password-protected computer. Only my transcriber, advisor, and I will have access to these documents.

Though I will do everything I can to protect your confidentiality, State law and ethical standards require that I report any disclosure of the following to appropriate local or State authorities:

- **Clear and imminent danger or harm to yourself or others, or**
- **Suspected or confirmed abuse or neglect of a child or a vulnerable adult.**

There is no limit to the length of time we will store de-identified information, but if you choose to withdraw from the study your information will not be stored for future use.

This study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the research with no penalties of any kind.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether to participate or not will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be destroyed unless it is already de-identified or published, and I can no longer delete your data. You can withdraw by emailing the researcher, Carley Stieg, at carley.stieg@stthomas.edu. You are also free to skip any questions I ask if they require recalling traumatic or distressing events or cause emotional distress.

Incentives:

Participants will receive compensation for participating in this study. Participants will be compensated \$20 per interview for participating in the initial and final Zoom interviews with the researcher. Participants will also be compensated \$10 per month throughout the Spring semester when they send course assignments and reflections that affirm or challenge their gender identity at least once per month. Participants will receive compensation for participating in the study regardless of whether they choose to withdraw. The total compensation per participant is \$80 over the course of the semester.

Who you should contact if you have a question:

My name is Carley Stieg. I am a doctoral student at the University of St. Thomas. You may ask any questions you have now or at any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions before or after we meet, you may contact me at 651-962-5841 or carley.stieg@stthomas.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Jayne Sommers at jaynesommers@stthomas.edu. Information about study participant rights is available online at <https://www.stthomas.edu/irb/policiesandprocedures/forstudyparticipants/>. You may also contact Sarah Muenster-Blakley with the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns (reference project number 1578643-1).

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. **I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.**

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date



Should you experience emotional distress, you may utilize the following national resources, outlined on <https://transequality.org/additional-help>:

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

24/7 hotline, staffed by trained individuals, for those in suicidal crisis or emotional distress

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Crisis hotline: 800-273-TALK (8255); 888-628-9454 (en español)

Crisis Text Line

Free, 24/7 support for people in crisis

<https://www.crisistextline.org/>

Text 741741 from anywhere in the USA to text with a trained Crisis Counselor.

The Trevor Project

Crisis intervention and mental health services for those ages 13-24

<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

Crisis hotline: 866-488-7386 (for those ages 13-24)

Communities Against Hate

National coalition documenting hate incidents

Report an incident at: <http://communitiesagainsthate.org/report>

Report and get help at: 1-844-9-NO-HATE

APPENDIX C: STUDY ANNOUNCEMENT ON PROLIFIC AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Seeking Trans College Student Participants for Study on Classroom Inclusion

The purpose of my study is to understand the classroom experiences of transgender college students in the United States and factors that may affect students' experiences. I am seeking college students who identify as transgender (including trans women, trans men, non-binary, genderqueer, and agender individuals and all who do not identify as cisgender) to participate in a semester-long study.

Participation will include:

1. An approximately 60-minute individual Zoom interview in January or February 2021 with the researcher.
2. Throughout the Spring 2021 semester, submitting to the researcher course assignments and/or reflections on classroom experiences that affirm or challenge the participant's gender identity.
3. A final individual reflection interview with the researcher of approximately 60 minutes over Zoom at the end of the Spring semester (May or June 2021).

The total time required for the study is approximately 5.5-7.5 hours throughout the Spring 2021 semester. Participants will be compensated throughout the study for their time, regardless of whether they choose to withdraw. Participants will be awarded \$20 for participating in the initial Zoom interview. A payment of \$10 will be awarded to each participant for each month during the spring semester that the participant submits at least one course assignment and/or reflection on classroom experiences that affirm or challenge their gender identity. A final \$20 will be awarded for participating in a second individual interview at the end of the semester.

Each participant will be compensated a total of \$80 throughout the spring semester for participation in the study.

Contact the researcher, Carley Stieg, at carley.stieg@stthomas.edu with any questions or if you'd like to participate in the study.

APPENDIX D: INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. I want to start by learning a little about your background. Where are you from? What brought you to your college or university and degree program/major?
2. Tell me about yourself as a student. What types of classes have you taken? What classes are you taking this spring (titles/formats)?
3. How would you describe your gender identity? Has this changed over time? If so, how and when?
4. If changes occurred during college/your degree program, what prompted this change?
5. What additional identities do you hold that you believe affect your experience in the classroom?

Consider race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious or spiritual affiliation, first language, national origin, military status, physical/emotional/developmental ability, first generation student status
6. Tell me about your overall college/degree experience so far. Tell me about your classroom experiences and interactions with faculty overall.
7. If your gender identity changed during college/your degree program, did your experiences in the classroom change?
8. How (if at all) do you think that your gender identity has influenced your college experiences?
9. How (if at all) do you think that your gender identity has influenced your experiences in the classroom specifically?
10. Have you ever felt uncomfortable in class or while engaging with class material because of assumptions other people make about gender? Your gender identity? Tell me more. How did you respond?
11. Do you feel that your professors support you as a student? Your overall wellbeing? If so, how? If not, why not?
12. Do you feel that your peers support you as a student? Your overall wellbeing?
13. Describe specific assignments or course materials that have either affirmed or challenged your gender identity in past courses.
14. What else would you like me to know about your experiences in college courses and classrooms (specifically as it relates to your gender identity or genderism)?

APPENDIX E: TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

1



Institutional Review Board

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

A. INSTRUCTIONS

Please read through the entirety of this form carefully before signing.

Electronic signatures are not valid for this form. After completing the required fields, please print and sign this form in blue or black ink. After this form has been signed by the transcriber, it should be given to the principal investigator of the research study for submission. After receiving the *Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement*, the principal investigator should scan and upload the signed form to their IRBNet project package.

The transcriber should keep a copy of the *Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement* for their records.

This agreement is for transcribers only. However, if your duties as a research assistant include transcription, you will need to review, sign, and submit the *Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement* as well as the *Research Assistant Confidentiality Agreement*. Confidentiality agreements can be found in the document library in IRBNet.

B. CONFIDENTIALITY OF A RESEARCH STUDY:

Confidentiality is the treatment and maintenance of information that an individual has disclosed in a relationship of trust and with the expectation that it will not be divulged to others in ways that are inconsistent with the understanding of the original disclosure (the consent form) without permission. Confidential information relating to human subjects in a research study may include, but is not limited to:

- Name, date of birth, age, sex, address, and contact information;
- Current contact details of family, guardian, etc.;
- Medical or educational history and/or records;
- Sexual lifestyle;
- Personal care issues;
- Service records and progress notes;
- Assessments or reports;
- Ethnic or racial origin;
- Political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs.

As a transcriber you will have access to research information (e.g. audio or video recordings, DVDs/CDs, transcripts, data, etc.) that include confidential information. Many participants have only revealed information to investigators because principal investigators have assured participants that every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality. That is why it is of the utmost importance to maintain full confidentiality when conducting your duties as a transcriber during a research study. *Below is a list of expectations you will be required to adhere to as a transcriber. Please carefully review these expectations before signing this form.*

Revised: 08/08/16

C. EXPECTATIONS FOR A TRANSCRIBER

In order to maintain confidentiality, I agree to:

1. Keep all research information that is shared with me (e.g. audio or video recordings, DVDs/CDs, transcripts, data, etc.) confidential by not discussing or sharing this information verbally or in any format with anyone other than the principal investigator of this study;
2. Ensure the security of research information (e.g. audio or video recordings, DVDs/CDs, transcripts, data, etc.) while it is in my possession. This includes:
 - Using closed headphones when transcribing audio taped interviews;
 - Keeping all transcript documents and digitized interviews on a password protected computer with password-protected files;
 - Closing any transcription programs and documents when temporarily away from the computer;
 - Keeping any printed transcripts in a secure location such as a locked file cabinet;
 - Permanently deleting any digital communication containing the data.
3. Not make copies of research information (e.g. audio or video recordings, DVDs/CDs, transcripts, data, etc.) unless specifically instructed to do so by the principal investigator;
4. Give all research information (e.g. audio or video recordings, DVDs/CDs, transcripts, data, etc.) and research participant information, back to the principal investigator upon completion of my duties as a transcriber;
5. After discussing it with the principal investigator, erase or destroy all research information (e.g. audio or video recordings, DVDs/CDs, transcripts, data, etc.) that cannot be returned to the principal investigator upon completion of my duties as a transcriber.

Name of Transcriber: Madison Stieg

IRBNet Tracking Number: 1578643-1

Title of Research Study: Trans*forming College Classrooms into Gender Inclusive Spaces: A Case Study Amplifying Transgender Voices

Name of Principal Investigator: Carley Stieg

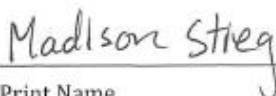
By signing this form I acknowledge that I have reviewed, understand, and agree to adhere to the expectations for a transcriber described above. I agree to maintain confidentiality while performing my duties as a transcriber and recognize that failure to comply with these expectations may result in disciplinary action.



Signature of Transcriber

1/4/21

Date



Print Name

Revised: 08/08/16

APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL



All for the Common Good™



Date: January 20, 2021

To: Carley Stieg

From: Sarah Muenster-Blakley, Institutional Review Board

Project Title: [1578643-1] Trans*forming College Classrooms into Gender Inclusive Spaces: A Case Study Amplifying Transgender Voices

Subject: New Project Approved

Approval Date: January 20, 2021

Project report due: May 1, 2022

Dear Carley:

I have reviewed your protocol and approved your project as reflected in the application that you submitted. Please note that all research conducted with this project title must be done in accordance with this approved submission. **IRB approval does not expire; a Study Closure Form must be submitted once all data collection and de-identification of data has been completed.**

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and assurance that the project is understood by the participants and their signing of the approved consent form. The informed consent process must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between you and your research participants. Federal law requires that each person participating in this study receive a copy of the consent form. All original records relating to participant consent must be retained for a minimum of three years upon completion of the project.

Amendments to targeted participants, risk level, recruitment, research procedures, or the consent process as approved by the IRB must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementing changes to the research study. No changes may be made without IRB approval *except* to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participant.

Any problems involving project participants or others must be reported to the IRB within one (1) business day of the principal investigator's knowledge of the problem. A problem reporting form is available in the IRBNet Document Library or on the IRB website and should be submitted to muen0526@stthomas.edu. Any non-compliance or complaints relating to the project must be reported immediately.

Please direct questions at any time to Sarah Muenster-Blakley at (651) 962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu. I wish you success with your project!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Muenster-Blakley".

Sarah Muenster-Blakley, M.A., CIP
Chair, Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX G: FINAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. When I write up my findings, I'll have a table describing each participant and their identities, pronouns, institutions, and areas of study. How should I describe your institution and area of study accurately while keeping your identity anonymous?
2. After reviewing your monthly written reflections, I have a few follow-up questions for you about some of your experiences. (*Insert participant-specific follow-up questions.*)
3. You've perhaps been reflecting on your classroom inclusion and gender identity in a different or at least more directed way this semester because you're a participant in this study. Whether positive or negative, how was this experience for you?
4. Is there anything you've reflected on in these past few months in terms of themes to your experiences that you'd like to share?
5. (*If applicable*) As an academic yourself/someone who studies trans experiences, is there anything you hope I'll consider as I move to the next phase of the study?
6. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about you or your experience with coursework/classrooms that might be relevant to the study?

APPENDIX H: MONTHLY WRITTEN REFLECTION PROMPTS

Prompt: Please reflect on the following and type your responses below:

1. In what ways (if any) has your gender identity been affirmed in your course experiences this month? Describe specific examples when possible.

Consider course materials (syllabi, readings, videos, cases), assignments, in-class activities, projects, instructor and peer verbal and nonverbal communication, classrooms/physical spaces.

2. In what ways (if any) has your gender identity been challenged in your courses experiences this month? Describe specific examples when possible.

Consider course materials (syllabi, readings, videos, cases), assignments, in-class activities, projects, instructor and peer verbal and nonverbal communication, classrooms/physical spaces.

3. As a student it can be difficult for us to separate personal experiences from coursework. Have you experienced anything in your personal life connected to your gender identity this month that you believe has impacted your course experiences?

4. We all hold many identities that may impact our experiences in courses. Have your experiences in class this month been impacted by any additional identities that you hold? If so, how?

Consider race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious or spiritual affiliation, first language, national origin, military status, physical/emotional/developmental ability, first-generation student status.

5. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences this month that may be relevant to the study?