



Article

Exploring the Experiences of Heterosexual and Asexual Transgender People

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Abstract: This article explores two cases at the intersection of emerging studies of transgender experience: heterosexualities and asexualities. Drawing on data from a mixed-methodological survey, we analyze the ways 57 asexual transgender people and 42 heterosexual transgender people occupying varied gender, race, class, age, and religious identities (1) make sense of gender and (2) experience coming out as transgender. Our analyses reveal some ways cisnormativity impacts transgender people across sexual identities, and the theoretical potential of incorporating transgender people into studies focused on asexualities and heterosexualities. In conclusion, we outline implications for understanding (1) transgender experiences with cisnormativity across sexual and other social locations and (2) possibilities for expanding studies of heterosexualities and asexualities beyond cisgender experiences.

Keywords: gender; transgender; asexuality; heterosexuality; sexualities; coming out; sexual and gender identities

1. Introduction

Popular representations of transgender and gender nonconforming people often categorize these groups as also lesbian, gay, bi+, or queer (LGBQ). Researchers have noted, for example, how anti-trans political and religious campaigns invoke sexual fears, such as those historically used against LGBQ people (Fetner 2016). Further, cisgender research participants often link transgender experience explicitly to issues they have with same- and multi-sex sexualities (Sumerau et al. 2017a). This conflation of gender and sexual identities is understandable given that transgender and gender nonconforming people have played major roles in historical and current movements for LGBQ rights (Stryker 2008)¹, and it is reflected in the widespread use of acronyms that combine gender and sexual identities, such as GLBT, LGBT, BTLG, TBLG, LGBTQ, and LGBTQIA. In fact, emerging demographic work related to transgender and gender nonconforming populations finds transgender people are more likely to identify as LGBQ (and especially BQ) than as members of other sexual and gender groups (Flores et al. 2016). In short, transgender people represent a vital part of LGBQ populations.

¹ Transgender people have also played important roles in, for example, cisgender women's, racial minorities', and intersex civil rights movements over time. As with their contributions to LGBQ movements, however, they often have not received much attention in representations of such movements (see Rosenberg 2017; Stryker 2008).

Nevertheless, emerging transgender studies demonstrate that transgender and gender nonconforming populations occupy a wide variety of social locations (see, e.g., [Schilt 2010](#); [Sumerau et al. 2016](#); [Vidal-Ortiz 2009](#)). For example, in their systematic review of sociological transgender studies to date, [Schilt and Lagos \(2017\)](#) describe the collection and analyses of more diverse transgender and gender nonconforming people, experiences, and outcomes as one of the most important directions for future scholarship (see also [Sumerau and Grollman 2018](#)). This type of work may be even more important because, as [Stone \(2009\)](#) suggests and empirical studies increasingly demonstrate (see, e.g., [Meadow 2015](#); [Shuster 2017](#); [Westbrook and Kristen 2014](#)), cisnormativity operates throughout society and across social locations (see also [Mathers 2017](#); [Miller and Grollman 2015](#); [Sumerau et al. 2016](#)). How do transgender and gender nonconforming people occupying varied sexual and other social locations experience contemporary society, and what insights might studies of such experience lend to sociology as well as understandings of sex, gender, and sexualities more broadly?

We examine this question through a study of transgender experience. Specifically, we explore the ways heterosexual/straight and asexual/ace transgender people (1) conceptualize gender and (2) experience coming out as transgender. Our analysis responds to calls for more recognition of diversity within transgender and gender nonconforming populations while also demonstrating ways that cisnormativity operates across different sexual identities. Further, our analyses serve as a counterpoint to representations conflating transgender identities and experiences with sexual identities and experiences (see also [Nicolazzo 2017](#)). It is not our intention, however, to generalize our findings to broader populations of asexual, heterosexual, and/or transgender people. Rather, we use the data here to illustrate the importance of examining the diversity of transgender and gender nonconforming experience, and the ways cisnormativity cuts across varied sexual identities. Put simply, we demonstrate some ways transgender people may experience similar issues in society regardless of their specific sexual identities.

2. Literature Review

This article draws upon and extends three emerging literatures by exploring two cases at the intersection of these fields. First, we turn to studies demonstrating societal patterns of cisnormativity faced by transgender people and extend these studies by showing how cisnormativity impacts transgender people across sexual and gender identities, physical locations, and social locations. Then, we discuss emerging studies of heterosexualities (e.g., [Hamilton 2007](#)) and asexualities (e.g., [Scherrer 2008](#)), and contribute to these literatures by incorporating transgender experience into each respective literature. We show how the cases of asexual and heterosexual transgender people may speak to varied discussions in social sciences focused on gender and sexual identities and populations.

2.1. Cisnormativity and Transgender Experience

Cisnormativity refers to an ideological system that constructs, maintains, and enforces an imagined world wherein people are only always male-men and female-women (see, e.g., [Serano 2016](#); [Schilt and Westbrook 2009](#); [Sumerau et al. 2016](#)). While the empirical or natural world has never matched this claim and evidence suggests people have always existed in a wide variety of sexed and gendered ways (see, e.g., [Davis 2015](#); [Fausto-Sterling 2000](#); [Stryker 2008](#)), moral entrepreneurs have long promoted this belief as “fact” or “truth,” and as a requirement for social recognition, rights, and standing. While some social scientific studies began mentioning gender variant people in the 1960s ([Schilt and Lagos 2017](#)), more recent scholarship demonstrates the ways cisnormative assumptions and structures are embedded throughout social institutions including, but not limited to, families ([Pfeffer 2014](#)), the law ([Meadow 2015](#)), workplaces ([Yavorsky 2016](#)), religion ([Sumerau and Cragun 2015](#)), science ([Sumerau et al. 2017b](#)), medicine ([Davis et al. 2016](#)), and language ([Shuster 2017](#)). These studies suggest that understanding any aspect of social life requires attending to the ways it shapes and is shaped by cisnormativity.

Like other systems of social inequality, studies of cisnormativity show how people—regardless of intentions—reconstitute and reproduce this system in their beliefs about, opinions of, and reactions to transgender and gender nonconforming people (Schilt and Lagos 2017). For example, exploring cisgender people's reactions to bathroom access debates, Mathers (2017) finds that people impose cisgender binary categories on transgender others. Similarly, Sumerau et al. (2017a) analyze how cisgender, heterosexual, Christian women define transgender people in negative ways even at times when they suggest potential tolerance of such groups (see also Sumerau and Cragun 2018). Further, Cragun and Sumerau (2017) demonstrate that, compared to other social groups, transgender people are evaluated more negatively by both religious and nonreligious cisgender others (Sumerau et al. 2016). Taken together, these studies reveal the active deployment of cisnormativity to marginalize gender nonconforming people in society.

Building on these insights, we call for greater attention to the diversity of transgender experience. As Schilt and Lagos (2017) note, most transgender-focused research takes place in relation to LGBTQ populations as well as in relation to the partners of transgender people. However, scholars have paid less attention to the varieties of sexual identities of transgender people and the ways non-LGBTQ transgender people experience cisnormativity. At the same time, research related to transgender populations typically focuses on small, specific cases with relatively homogeneous samples (Vidal-Ortiz 2008). In this case, however, we draw on a diverse sample of transgender people occupying differential sex, gender, sexuality, racial, classed, and religious identity locations across the U.S. to demonstrate cisnormativity operating in the lives of transgender people regardless of sexual and gender identity and beyond any one specific place.

2.2. Asexualities

Like emerging transgender studies, the experiences of asexual or “ace” people have also witnessed growth in scholarship. While most of this work remains in interdisciplinary and psychological fields at present, early results suggest it may be an emerging area for serious consideration across the social sciences (Scherrer 2008). Using a variety of quantitative, qualitative, and historical methods (Scherrer 2008; Przybylo 2013), social scientists have analyzed (1) meanings surrounding asexualities within ace communities and more broadly (Scott and Dawson 2015), (2) romance, intimacy, and fantasy in the lives of ace people (Dawson et al. 2016), and (3) the social construction of ace identities (Scott et al. 2016). These studies show that, much like transgender experiences with cisnormativity (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), LGBTQ people's experiences with heteronormativity (Schrock et al. 2015), and BQ people's experiences with mononormativity and heteronormativity (Barringer et al. 2017), ace people face marginalization and discrimination from other social groups due to systemic notions of compulsory sexuality (see, e.g., Chasin 2015; Gupta 2017; MacInnis and Hodson 2012).

However, mirroring broader patterns in social scientific practice, emerging studies of asexualities are almost entirely focused on cisgender populations. In some cases, people who identify otherwise are dropped from the study prior to analysis while in other cases samples simply contain little or no non-cisgender people (see also Scherrer 2008). In both cases, scholarly exploration of asexualities today mostly leaves out transgender asexual experience. In this article, we begin the process of rectifying this pattern by introducing experiences of transgender asexual people across diverse social locations, and the ways they make sense of gender and coming out as transgender people. Our analysis opens a door for the incorporation of transgender and gender nonconforming populations into developing fields concerning asexual experience, identities, and practices in the social world.

2.3. Heterosexualities

While scholars have described how heteronormative (see Schrock et al. 2015 for review) and homonormative (see Sumerau et al. 2015) for review) systems influence and play out in relation to sexual and gender identity constructions, politics, and inequalities, recent scholarship has also sought to make sense of the social construction of heterosexualities (see, e.g., Barber 2008; Bridges

2014; Schrock et al. 2015)). Researchers have examined, for example, heterosexual scripts in hookup culture (Hamilton 2007), relationships between heterosexuality and homophobia (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009), the ways parents (Solebello and Elliott 2011) and media (Martin and Kazyak 2009) teach and enforce heterosexuality (Martin 2009), heterosexual intimacy negotiation (Wilkins 2012), heterosexual articulation of biphobic attitudes (Sumerau and Cragun 2018), Christian interpretations of heterosexualities (Burke 2016), and structural promotions of heterosexual partnering (Hamilton 2014) and marriage (Heath 2012). At the same time, these studies demonstrate the ways heterosexualities are often built upon a combination of sexist (Kane 2006), cissexist (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), monosexist (Steele et al. 2018), and monogamist (Schippers 2016) foundations that contribute to the subordination of transgender people, cisgender women, bi+ people, and gay/lesbian people.

Once again, however, much like broader societal representations of heterosexuality, such research typically only involves cisgender heterosexual samples. As Schilt and Westbrook (2009) note, cisnormativity itself is often one of the primary foundations for mainstream notions of what it means to be heterosexual and the maintenance of heterosexual (Serano 2016) and monosexual (Moss 2012) privileges throughout society that negatively impact transgender—as well as LGBTQ (Eisner 2013)—people. Despite this broader scholarly and media construction, there are transgender and gender nonconforming people who identify as heterosexual at some point or throughout their lives. In this article, we begin the process of incorporating transgender heterosexual people into discussions about heterosexualities. In so doing, our analysis brings forth questions for representations conflating cisgender and heterosexual identities as well as conflating transgender with LGBTQ identities.

3. Methodology

Data for this study derive from a mixed-methodological survey of transgender experience. Data collection took place in 2016 under the direction of the first and third authors in collaboration with another researcher unaffiliated with this article, and involved a snowball method wherein the survey was initially advertised in transgender organizations on their social media and through mailing lists. At the end of the survey, the software generated a unique URL that participants could share with others to enhance the snowball design. To take the survey, participants had to be 18 years old and self-identity as a member of the broader transgender population (i.e., identify as part of the population). This approach resulted in an overall sample of 469 transgender respondents, which we use in other analyses. In this article, however, we focus specifically on the 57 respondents who identified as asexual transgender people and the 42 respondents who identified as heterosexual transgender people (see Tables 1 and 2 for the demographics of each sample; discrepancies in total numbers are because responses were not forced and some respondents did not respond on certain identity variables). We only incorporated respondents who self-identified (by selecting or writing in an asexual or heterosexual identity) as asexual or heterosexual in this analysis. Our sample also includes both romantic asexual people (i.e., those who experience romantic desire for others) and aromantic asexual people (i.e., those who do not experience romantic desire for others), but we did not receive any romantic or aromantic identification on the part of heterosexual respondents.²

As sexualities are often complicated, nuanced concepts within and beyond varied communities, it is important to note that we make no effort here to characterize or distinguish the identifications of our respondents. Rather, we utilize their own self-reports while also being aware people come to or become differential (a)gender and (a)sexual identities in a wide variety of ways. Some transgender people, for example, may shift sexual identities pre- and post-transition while others maintain the same sexual identities throughout such processes (Pfeffer 2014). At the same time, asexual people may claim asexual identities in a wide variety of ways, and may do so at times, over their whole lives, or in

² It should be noted that there are asexual people who shift back and forth or identify in between aromantic and romantic levels at times or over the life course, but we do not focus on such populations in this article.

diverse manners (Scott and Dawson 2015; Przybylo 2013). We do not speak to such dynamics in this piece, but rather treat respondents as part of the sexual identity group within which they identified and suggest future research explore the pathways to varied asexual, heterosexual, and other sexual identities in the lives of transgender people.

Table 1. Asexual sample demographics.

Category	Identification	Romantic	Aromantic	Total
Gender				
	Transgender	6	2	8
	Transsexual	1	0	1
	Genderfluid	5	1	6
	Genderqueer	2	0	2
	Nonbinary	11	4	15
	Agender	4	2	6
	Bigender	0	1	1
	Gender Neutral	3	3	6
	Transman	7	1	8
	Transwoman	4	0	4
	Total	43	14	57
Race				
	Non-Hispanic White	27	10	37
	Non-Hispanic Black	5	2	7
	Hispanic White	3	1	4
	Hispanic Black	1	0	1
	Asian	2	0	2
	Mixed Race	3	1	4
	Total	41	14	55
Class				
	Lower Class	17	4	21
	Middle Class	25	9	34
	Upper Class	1	1	1
	Total	43	14	57

The qualitative data utilized in this article come from open-ended questions respondents answered as part of the survey. Respondents were asked about their coming out experience and the ways they made sense of gender as a concept in their lives. While these questions provide rich data utilized below, they are also limited in two ways. First, we did not force responses of a certain type or length, so we only have the information provided to us by the respondents based on how much or how little each respondent wished to share. Second, since the questions were part of a survey that was only taken once, there was no opportunity for probing or follow-up questions. Finally, it is important to note that the survey was focused on gendered experiences, so we only have identifications and whatever discussions about sexualities respondents offered. Rather than an exhaustive analysis, this study creates a baseline that others can utilize to study the sexual experiences of transgender ace and straight populations in more depth as well as develop more intensive interview protocols for exploring nuances in ace and straight transgender gendered experience.

We also note that heterosexual and asexual—as common terms—represent broad populations as well as populations that differ in many ways. We analyze these cases together for two specific reasons. First, these groups represent two groups to which some transgender people belong even though popular representations of transgender people almost never mention this reality. Second, these groups represent social locations within very different spaces within sexual hierarchies, and as a result, the common experiences transgender people in both groups share demonstrate broader patterns of

experience transgender people may encounter regardless of sexual identification. We do not, however, intend to downplay vast differences between the two groups overall, but rather, suggest that the incorporation of transgender people into studies of both groups may lead to greater attention to the shared and differential experiences within and between these and other (a)sexual groups in societies.

Table 2. Heterosexual sample demographics.

Category	Identification	Heterosexual
Gender		
	Transgender	15
	Transsexual	2
	Genderqueer	3
	Nonbinary	2
	Intersex	1
	Gender Neutral	1
	Transman	11
	Transwoman	7
	Total	42
Race		
	Non-Hispanic White	17
	Non-Hispanic Black	7
	Hispanic White	5
	Asian	2
	Native American	1
	Mixed Race	4
	Other Race	3
	Unspecified	3
	Total	39
Class		
	Lower Class	12
	Middle Class	24
	Upper Class	2
	Total	38

Alongside vast differences between many ace and heterosexual people, it is also important to note that these identities can and do overlap in some cases. Some ace people, for example, identify as hetero-romantic (i.e., romantically attracted to others of a different sex and/or gender), and would thus, in different ways, be both straight and ace. At the same time, there are heterosexual people who experience aromanticism (i.e., they do not experience romantic desire or connection to others alongside their sexual desire), and such people could be considered part of the broader ace and/or aromantic populations. Further, many ace people—romantic, aromantic, or somewhere in between—identify strongly with LGBTQ communities, and many also experience homo-romantic, bi-pan-queer-romantic attractions as well. In such cases, ace people may be both part of asexual and LGBTQ populations in a few different ways. Put simply, here we focus on people who identified as asexual and people who identified as heterosexual as cases of transgender experience not necessarily LGBTQ, but at the same time, such distinctions are not automatic or necessarily clean cut in the empirical world. While ace, straight, and LGBTQ populations can be completely distinct in certain cases, there are many ways these populations can overlap in other ways. We thus urge caution among readers with any demarcations made—here or elsewhere—between such populations as the empirical dynamics, differences, similarities, and overlaps between such populations can be extraordinary complex, nuanced, and varied.

For the overall data set that the examples in this article are drawn from, participants were also asked to self-identify (through selection or writing in responses) in terms of race, religion, age, social class, income, education, medical service use and access, regional location, whether or not they were out about their transgender identity, and the age at which they began openly identifying as transgender (if relevant). Participants also responded to open-ended questions about coming out, sex and gender concepts, experiences with cisgender people, heterosexual people, LGBTQIAP people, (non)religion, science, and medicine. As noted above, here we analyze the open-ended responses related to sex and gender and coming out while noting the demographic diversity of the respondents throughout.

Our analysis emerged in an inductive fashion (Kleinman 2007). While working with analyses from the overall data set and related to populations within it, the first and third author pulled samples of only asexual and only heterosexual transgender people for comparison and analyses. Recognizing these were two sub-populations within transgender populations rarely mentioned in societal or scholarly representations, they recruited the second author and began ascertaining what might be learned about these populations. Open and focused coding of the qualitative responses revealed similarities in the experience of cisnormativity and the interpretation of gender in comparison to other respondents in the data set. Recognizing this pattern, the second and fourth authors analyzed existing asexualities literatures for what, if anything, they said about transgender people and did similar work in heterosexualities literatures. At the same time, the first author began arranging the data into thematic categories built on shared or common patterns with input from the third author.

After locating very little mention or analysis of transgender experience in relation to asexualities or heterosexualities across the social sciences, we went back through the data arranging recurring themes and patterns between the two groups of interest (Charmaz 2006). Collectively, the themes were labeled to capture the most common or generic experiences as we sought to ascertain any major variations along race, class, assigned sex, religion, and political identification. Rather than revealing stark variations, this process showed consistent experiences across the samples. While it would be impossible to note every example contained in the data, the following analyses incorporate illustrative examples of common experiences with gender and coming out as transgender to begin incorporating asexual and heterosexual transgender people into studies of transgender, asexual, and heterosexual experiences.

4. Results

What follows is an analysis of asexual and heterosexual transgender experience regarding two of the most common areas in studies of gender and sexualities to date—the social construction of gender (see Ridgeway 2011 for reviews) and coming out (see Adams 2011 for reviews). We focus on these topics specifically to demonstrate shared experiences of transgender people regardless of sexual identities. Our respondents' experiences share a common thread of cisnormativity. The combination of these empirical conditions raises interesting theoretical questions for social scientific analyses of (a)sexual and gender politics, identities, and representations.

4.1. *“Why Does Anyone Think They’re a Gender? It’s Just How We Feel”: Interpretations of Gender*

Social scientists have long noted the pervasive societal influence of gender upon every aspect of social life (see, e.g., Martin 2004; Padavic and Reskin 2002; West and Zimmerman 1987). Rather than an immutable consequence of biology, these scholars demonstrate the social construction of gender through both one's interpretation and presentation of who they are as a gendered being (Lucal 1999) and others' interpretation and enforcement of who they believe one should be in gendered terms (Shuster 2017). Further, researchers have noted how societal assumptions about monosexuality (Moss 2012) and heterosexuality (Pascoe 2007) provide fuel for the interpretation of others' genders and the enforcement of what constitutes a “properly” gendered being in the eyes of others (Mathers et al. 2018). Researchers have demonstrated the importance of exploring the ways

people from a wide variety of social locations interpret and make sense of gender in their ongoing lives (see also [Ridgeway 2011](#)).

As [Scherrer \(2008\)](#) notes, emerging studies of asexualities rarely focus on gender specifically, but rather emphasize sexual and identity dynamics. This is not surprising considering the lack of historical attention given to asexualities ([Przybylo 2013](#)). Further, most scholarship on sexual minorities focuses almost entirely on sexual identities and politics within the group ([Schrock et al. 2015](#)). There are thus many unexplored questions concerning gender and asexualities ([Scherrer 2008](#)), such as how do asexuals—cisgender, transgender, or somewhere between these ends of the gender spectrum—make sense of gender? How might their gendered meanings and experiences differ, line up with, or otherwise relate to the gendered meanings and experiences of sexual people?

Alongside these unanswered theoretical questions vis-à-vis asexualities, studies of heterosexualities may expand their theoretical possibility by incorporating transgender heterosexual experience. Unlike emerging studies of asexualities, analyses of gender have been central to studies of heterosexualities, and the ways heterosexual identities, presentations, and relationships relate to and rely upon gender ([Hamilton 2007](#)). Such studies have noted the primacy of cisnormative interpretations of gender in the social construction of heterosexuality as well as the ways heterosexualities are assumed and enforced upon others through gendered mechanisms ([Schilt and Westbrook 2009](#)). Studies of this sort implicitly treat heterosexualities as a cisgender phenomenon, and leave unexplored how transgender heterosexual people make sense of gender. Would they adopt cisnormative assumptions in the adoption of heterosexuality, or do their gendered interpretations disrupt societal assumptions about the necessity of cisnormativity for heterosexual selves?

In this section, we begin the process of addressing these questions by focusing on the ways transgender asexual and heterosexual people make sense of gender. Put simply, they echoed more fluid and expansive notions of gender common in historical and contemporary transgender communities ([Pfeffer 2014](#)) while, intentionally or otherwise, highlighting that cisgender interpretations were not necessary for the adoption of any (a)sexual identity, practice, or relationship. In the case of asexual respondents, their comments reveal the potential of systematically exploring asexual gendered experiences. In the case of heterosexual respondents, their comments direct attention to the socially constructed nature of relationships between heterosexualities and cisnormativity, and the importance of interrogating hetero-cisgender selves as something people actively create rather than a necessary component of heterosexuality itself.

Like many non-binary people ([Darwin 2017](#)), transwomen ([Mason-Schrock 1996](#)), and transmen ([Schilt 2010](#)), our respondents argued that cisgender assumptions did not align with the ways they experienced their bodies, minds, and social lives. In other words, participants did not interpret their gender identity—or others' gender identities—using biological sex markers. As a 20-year-old, Hispanic, middle class, romantic asexual transgender person described:

Sex is a social construct. There are girls with penises. There are boys with vaginas. We arbitrarily segregate people to make sex matter when everyone should be raised the same until they can tell us who they are. How do you tell someone who's agender based on that stuff? Sex doesn't have to mean anything.

A 24-year-old, White, middle class, nonreligious, heterosexual transgender person added: "I feel neutral on some things, masculine on others, but almost never feminine." A 30-year-old, Black, lower class, pagan, asexual romantic non-binary person said: "Why limit who we can be? It just doesn't fit right with my self-concept, I feel more male than female most of the time." A 45-year-old, White, lower class, Christian, heterosexual genderqueer person added: "I have reclaimed the femininity for which I was bullied and ostracized as a child and reinstated it as a proper part of my being." Echoing other transgender people ([Sumerau et al. 2016](#)), asexual and heterosexual transgender people defined cisgender assumptions and norms as too limiting, and incapable of capturing their experiences.

Respondents also noted that sex assignment of the body did not make the gender, but rather, that the person made the body and the gender. This was a common response, stated in many

ways, throughout the sample presented here and more broadly in the survey (90%). As others have demonstrated (Davis 2015), respondents noted that sex, the body, and gender require interpretation (i.e., people define what sex, gender, or bodily components of these things *are* based on their own assumptions, socialization, and experiences; West and Zimmerman 1987). Rather than natural, such efforts reveal the interpretive work of people that may or may not be correct in any given case (see also Fausto-Sterling 2000). Throughout their responses, respondents articulate the “identity work” (Sumerau 2012) people do—consciously or otherwise—to assign meaning to a given sex, gender, or body type in the first place.

Importantly, the realization and interpretation of sex, gender, and bodies as socially constructed did not necessitate a given sexual identity as many have argued in broader public discourse related to LGBTQ people (Schrock et al. 2015). A 20-year-old, White, middle class, asexual romantic agender person stated: “I get the biology side of it, but it’s just so obvious that sex is also a label. Nature isn’t interested in individuals or labels, it just goes on about its business. We label things. So, I label myself. My body then, is agender because I am.” A 26-year-old, White, lower class, nonreligious, heterosexual transwoman added: “I don’t really like what genitals look like, we give them too much power, and I feel like people are too judgmental and stereotypical when it comes to those labels.” Echoing longstanding critiques from transgender as well as LGBTQ people (transgender as well or otherwise) about the use of bodily interpretation to marginalize others (Serano 2016), asexual and heterosexual transgender people emphasized that bodies only mean what people say they mean, even if the people developing and promoting said meanings hold tremendous power over the interpretations of others and the ability to promote their version of reality broadly (see also Sumerau et al. 2016).

This theme also, as the illustrations here demonstrate, spanned racial, classed, gendered, sexual, religious, and age groups. While many cisgender people may often take the body for granted to define and assign sexes, genders, and sexualities to themselves and others (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), transgender people generally do not (Pfeffer 2014). A 40-year-old, White, lower class, Muslim, romantic asexual transman said: “My gender is male and I consider my body male too—physical characteristics are not inherently male or female, we make them that way.” A 59-year-old, White, middle class, Jewish, heterosexual transman added: “I was never female, I have been male all my life but others assigned me female due to their beliefs about my anatomy.” Respondents noted that the body itself did not have to be sexed or gendered, but that people did this, and like anything else people do, they could just as easily interpret such things in many different ways. In so doing, they highlighted the social construction of sex, gender, and bodies so often taken for granted in cisnormative versions of gender and sexualities.

Overall, heterosexual and asexual transgender people offer insights on gender that extend current literature on transgender experience, asexualities, and heterosexualities. In the first case, for example, they demonstrate interpretations beyond cisnormative norms and assumptions about gender across sexual identity groups. In the second case, their insights begin the process of moving asexualities scholarship beyond a mostly sexual focus, and demonstrate the usefulness of studying asexual interpretations of gender. Finally, in the third case, they demonstrate the importance of disaggregating analyses of heterosexual and cisgender meanings and of interrogating the use of cisnormativity by many heterosexual people to justify and define sexual selves, politics, and interpretations of other people’s genders and sexualities.

4.2. *“It’s Complicated, It Just Depends on How People React, and You Can’t Predict That, so It’s Scary”: Coming out Experiences*

Social scientists have long noted the social and political significance of coming out (or openly identifying or disclosing) as a sexual (see, e.g., Adams 2011; Barringer et al. 2017; Ueno and Gentile 2015) and/or gender (see, e.g., Darwin 2017; Mason-Schrock 1996; Shuster 2017) minority in the face of societal dominance and enforcement of cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and mononormativity. They have also noted how openly identifying as a sexual or gender minority can become even more difficult

for lower class people, people of color, people in conservative religions, differently abled people, and people who violate more than one of these assumptions at the same time (i.e., see [Barringer et al. 2017](#); [Davis 2015](#); [Eisner 2013](#) for reviews). Overall, such studies demonstrate the importance of exploring the myriad experiences people may face coming out as sexual and/or gender minorities.

Early studies of asexual identity development suggest coming out as asexual (in any of the many different ways asexual people identify in terms of asexual, (a)romantic, and/or intimate selfhood) may be at least as nuanced as coming out in cases of other sexual minorities (see, e.g., [Carrigan 2011](#); [Scott et al. 2016](#); [Scott and Dawson 2015](#)). Further, studies reveal the recognition of patterns of compulsory sexuality throughout society via ace coming out experiences (see, e.g., [Fahs 2010](#); [Przybylo 2011](#); [Scherrer 2008](#)). Like other sexual minorities, such studies also suggest openly identified asexual people face significant stigma and discrimination (see also [Gupta 2017](#)). However, as others have noted (see, e.g., [Przybylo 2011](#); [Scott and Dawson 2015](#); [Scherrer 2008](#)), much remains unexplored in the experiences of disclosure among asexual people. In this section, we offer examples related to one such question—what is coming out as transgender like for asexual transgender people?

In the heterosexual case, though, we run into a different sort of situation. Due to the promotion and enforcement of assumed (and often compulsory) heterosexuality ([Schrock et al. 2015](#)) (as well as pressures for compulsory monosexuality, [Eisner 2013](#)), heterosexual people face no need to engage in disclosure processes related to sexual identity in our current social structure. At the same time, however, research reveals similar dynamics to those found in sexual-identity-based disclosure of marginalized identities among, for example, heterosexual nonreligious people disclosing nonreligious identities ([Sumerau and Cragun 2015](#)), heterosexual BDSM practitioners disclosing sexual practices ([Newmahr 2011](#)), and childfree heterosexual people disclosing their desire to live without children or reproducing ([McCabe and Sumerau 2017](#)). Though sexual identities are often unmentioned in existing sociological transgender studies ([Pfeffer 2014](#)), transgender people face myriad issues, concerns, and reactions upon coming out. Our analyses here reveal some ways transgender people's disclosure of transgender and gender nonconforming identities occur across sexual identities, and raise questions about other ways heterosexual people may experience disclosure of any marginalized identity claims.

Similar to other studies of identity disclosure ([Adams 2011](#)), respondents noted variations in coming out depending upon the audience in question. We examine the two most common experiences they noted in their responses—coming out to heterosexual people and coming out to LGBTQ people. In the former case, respondents noted complicated, sometimes positive though sometimes negative, reactions and experiences. As illustrated by a 59-year-old transman quoted earlier, the audience was often very important: "My parents were accepting, but could not enroll me in kindergarten as male because my birth certificate said female and had to be shown to prove I was five." A 19-year-old, White, lower class, nonreligious, asexual aromantic agender person noted: "It went fairly well, I did a soft out, online and to supportive others, but when it came to my parents, that's when it got rough."

The vast majority of respondents noted both positive and negative experiences when coming out to others, and especially in relation to cisgender, heterosexual people. A 33-year-old, White, middle class, nonreligious, heterosexual genderqueer person noted:

At first, people just kind of listened. It was framed as "just not being a typical guy." When I became more sure of the label, the friends I told just accepted it without issue. Later, I told my mom—really told her a few times, gradual exposure, and it took hours of talking and explaining. She accepts it, but doesn't fully understand. She asks why I can't just be a man who's non-normative and that we really need more men like that. My partner is okay with it, but has complained about it. She's worried I'll eventually identify as a transwoman, and she's not sure what she'd do since she's not attracted to women.

A 31-year-old, White, middle class, nonreligious, asexual non-binary person added: "It was tough, and some of it went great, but I have gotten a lot of hate and discrimination for being openly trans." Similarly, a 19-year-old, White, lower class, Pagan, asexual transgender person mentioned a

supportive friend, but then added: “Most people don’t understand it. It was confusing. I faced a lot of bigotry from my parents and my sibling. I got misgendered a lot, and told it’s just a phase.” Overall, heterosexual and asexual transgender people’s coming out to others was often frightening and tense even when things went (at least somewhat) well.

Coming out experiences for asexual and heterosexual transgender people—as has been found in relation to broader transgender populations (Schilt and Lagos 2017)—were also complicated when it came to LGBQ others. At the same time, however, there were some, as illustrated by a 67-year-old, White, middle class, nonreligious, heterosexual transgender person, who experienced entirely positive experiences from these audiences: “It’s great, only positive experiences. People who have suffered ridicule and discrimination simply for who they are, are generally compassionate and sensitive to the needs and feelings of others.” A 53-year-old, White, lower class, nonreligious, asexual aromantic transgender person added: “Lots of positive experiences, the only negative experiences were from heterosexual groups of people.” As Stone (2009) notes, these respondents offer examples of many cases where LGBQ people become allies and supporters for transgender others.

At the same time, heterosexual and asexual transgender people noted experiences with LGBQ others that were mostly or entirely negative. As a 50-year-old, Hispanic, middle class, nonreligious heterosexual transman noted: “Negative, just tough, transphobic and cissexist reactions from separatist lesbians and queer identified women, so many times.” A 20-year-old, White, lower class, nonreligious, asexual romantic transman added: “Gay cis boys who are dismissive and blatantly sexist to the women and trans folks in the groups, and cisgender queer women who brag about advocating for trans people, but ignore our opinions or advice.” As other research into transgender experiences within LGBQ communities shows (Nicolazzo 2017), LGBQ spaces can also become cisnormative rather than trans-inclusive.

While the two extremes noted above were common in responses, transgender asexual and heterosexual people also often noted complicated or mixed experiences with different LGBQ populations and in relation to their own feelings or identities within such spaces. A 60-year-old, middle class, Buddhist, heterosexual transgender person explained: “I have had more positive experiences with LGBQ groups in the Western states. In the Southern states, gay men especially try to use a form of caste system to try to keep transgender people in their place.” A 19-year-old, White, middle class, Muslim, asexual romantic gender-neutral person added: “I am always afraid I am not trans or queer enough, and then some LGBQ people can be Islamophobic too, but then, there is this sense of unconditional support in some of these groups too.” These illustrations demonstrate the ways LGBQ people may react negatively, positively, or anywhere in between and maybe both to transgender people.

In sum, transgender asexual and heterosexual people experience much of the complexity noted in LGBQ and broader transgender experiences related to disclosing marginalized identities to others. Cisnormativity and the assumption of cisgender identification throughout contemporary social relations necessitate such disclosure, and, much like other transgender groups within the overall population, they never know if they will face cisnormative, trans-inclusive, and/or both of these reactions from others (Schilt and Lagos 2017). While researchers have explored the experiences of asexual people disclosing their (a)sexual identities (Dawson et al. 2016), these findings reveal the potential of exploring asexual experiences navigating multiple disclosures over the life course. At the same time, they call for attention to heterosexual experiences disclosing marginalized identities alongside much research focused on the ways heterosexual people react to such disclosures from others (Worthen 2013).

5. Discussion

The asexual and heterosexual transgender people in our sample represent two cases at the nexus of emerging sociologies of transgender experience, asexualities, and heterosexualities. In this article, we outlined the ways members of these groups experience and respond to societal patterns of cisnormativity documented throughout other scholarship on transgender experience

(Schilt and Lagos 2017), while drawing attention to ways in which asexualities and heterosexualities scholarship could be expanded by the incorporation of transgender asexual people and transgender heterosexual people, respectively. To this end, we outlined the ways they make sense of gender beyond cisnormativity and experience complicated reactions from others upon coming out as transgender. While examination of asexual and/or heterosexual transgender people may be rare at the present stage of social scientific history, these examples reveal interesting ways in which studies of transgender experience, asexualities, and heterosexualities could expand with more attention to these populations.

Our findings reflect broader observations of the pervasive impact of cisnormativity in the lives of transgender people (see, e.g., Schilt and Lagos 2017; Sumerau et al. 2016; Westbrook and Kristen 2014), and extend these findings by highlighting two seldom mentioned subpopulations within the broader transgender community. While many popular portraits of transgender people conflate their experiences with sexualities and assume they automatically belong to LGBQ groups (Nicolazzo 2017), we demonstrate that cisnormative oppression of transgender people spans across sexual identities, and demonstrate the ways transgender people of any sexual identity group may make sense of gender and coming out experiences in relation to cisnormativity. Our work begins the process of responding to calls for greater attention to both the diversity of transgender experience (Pfeffer 2014) and the pervasiveness of cisnormativity across varied social and physical locations (Westbrook and Kristen 2014).

At the same time, our findings affirm emerging discussions about the diversity of asexual populations (Scott and Dawson 2015; Scherrer 2008) and extend these studies by incorporating transgender asexual people into the discussion. We further extend this work by revealing the potential of exploring the ways asexual people (identifying in varied asexual, (a)romantic, and gendered ways) make sense of gender. Especially as asexual identities, much like sexual ones, span the spectrum of gender preferences in partner selection and personal gender identification (Carrigan 2011), there may be much to learn through the ways that asexual transgender, cisgender, and otherwise gendered people make sense of gender in relation to relationships, intimacy, (a)romance, and more broadly. For example, while we were unable to examine it here, research could seek to ascertain how transgender ace people's experiences with compulsory sexuality expectations and norms are similar to or different from cisgender ace people's experiences of these issues. This is, of course, only one potential avenue for future research. In fact, while what might be found from systematic examinations of asexual experience across the gender spectrum remains an empirical question, our analyses continue emerging processes in the recognition and examination of asexual diversity, experience, and identities.

In relation to studies of heterosexualities, however, our findings diverge from existing observations of the ways cisnormativity and heterosexism often intertwine in the case of cisgender, heterosexual people (Schilt and Westbrook 2009) and societal patterns of inequality (Hamilton 2007). Rather, our transgender heterosexual respondents rejected cisnormative definitions of gender, and articulated gender-expansive (Nicolazzo 2017) interpretations commonly located in broader transgender and gender nonconforming communities. While researchers have importantly demonstrated the disastrous effects for marginalized groups accomplished through the combination of hetero-, cis-, and mononormative systems (Schrock et al. 2015) and the ways heterosexuality is most often socially constructed in cisnormative, sexist, homophobic, and biphobic ways in many cases (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), our findings lend more empirical weight to scholars and activists arguing that it does not have to be constructed and performed in these ways (Hamilton 2007). These findings suggest that the incorporation of transgender heterosexual people into such studies could provide opportunities to empirically and theoretically explore and demonstrate more gender- and sexually inclusive forms of heterosexual identity, practice, and relations predicated upon embracing rather than limiting sexual and gender diversity in the social world (see also Pfeffer 2014; Schippers 2016).

To fully understand the diversity of sexual and gendered experiences, identities, and inequalities in societies, we must analyze variations in the ways people blend different gendered and sexual identities. Considering the experiences of transgender heterosexual and asexual people in relation to studies of transgender, asexual, and heterosexual experience reveals variation and diversity within

and between sexual and gender groups that may play out in a wide variety of ways. As intersectional (Collins 2015) and LGBTQ (Schrock et al. 2015) scholars have shown, the varieties and diversity of contemporary sexual and gendered populations and experiences provide fertile ground for understanding the social construction of norms, inequalities, and assumptions that benefit some at the expense of others. Integrating a wide variety of gendered and sexual populations into analyses will be a crucial tool in understanding how such patterns play out.

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