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# Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: 'Gender Normals,' Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality

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# ***DOING GENDER, DOING HETERONORMATIVITY***

## ***“Gender Normals,” Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality***

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*This article brings together two case studies that examine how nontransgender people, “gender normals,” interact with transgender people to highlight the connections between doing gender and heteronormativity. By contrasting public and private interactions that range from nonsexual to sexualized to sexual, the authors show how gender and sexuality are inextricably tied together. The authors demonstrate that the criteria for membership in a gender category are significantly different in social versus (hetero)sexual circumstances. While gender is presumed to reflect biological sex in all social interactions, the importance of doing gender in a way that represents the shape of one’s genitals is heightened in sexual and sexualized situations. Responses to perceived failures to fulfill gender criteria in sexual and sexualized relationships are themselves gendered; men and women select different targets for and utilize gendered tactics to accomplish the policing of supposedly natural gender boundaries and to repair breaches to heteronormativity.*

**Keywords:** *sexuality; theory; media/mass communications*

In “Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State,” Catherine MacKinnon (1982, 533) argued that “sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality.” This argument echoed earlier conceptualizations of heterosexuality as a

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compulsory, institutionalized system that supports gender inequality (Rich 1980). Despite these important insights, however, theorizing heterosexuality did not become central to feminist sociology (Ingraham 1994). Rather, it was queer theory that picked up the theoretical mantle, turning the gaze onto how the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 1989) maintains inequality between men and women (see Seidman 1995). Shifting the object of analysis from the margins (women, homosexuals) to the center (men, heterosexuals) allowed for the theorization of heteronormativity—the suite of cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex, and that only sexual attraction between these “opposite” genders is natural or acceptable (Kitzinger 2005). Heterosexuality plays a central role in “maintaining the gender hierarchy that subordinates women to men” (Cameron and Kulick 2003, 45). Yet the relationship between heterosexuality and gender oppression remains undertheorized in social science research.

In this article, we bring attention to the everyday workings of heteronormativity by examining potential challenges to this “sex/gender/sexuality system” (Seidman 1995): people who live their lives in a social gender that is not the gender they were assigned at birth. People who make these social transitions—often termed “transgender” people—disrupt cultural expectations that gender identity is an immutable derivation of biology (Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978). In social situations, transgender people—as all people—have “cultural genitalia” that derive from their gender presentation (Kessler and McKenna 1978). Yet in sexual and sexualized situations—interactional contexts that allow for the performance of both gender and heterosexuality—male-bodied women and female-bodied men present a challenge to heteronormativity. As we demonstrate, analyzing these situations can illuminate the relationship between the maintenance of gender and the maintenance of (hetero)sexuality.

Taking methodological insights from queer theory, we consider how cisgender men and women<sup>1</sup>—whom Garfinkel (1967) terms “gender normals”—react to transgender people. This focus inverts the typical model of using transgender people (the margins) to illuminate the workings of everybody else (the center) (see Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987). We draw on two cases studies: an ethnographic study of transmen who socially transition from female to male (FtM) in the workplace and a textual analysis of media narratives about the killings predominantly of transwomen who socially transition from male to female (MtF). Attention to how gender normals react to the

discovery of what they perceive as a mismatch between gender identity and biological sex in these public and private relationships reveals the interactional precariousness of the seemingly natural heterosexual gender system. We argue that these responses demonstrate that the processes of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) are difficult to separate from the maintenance of heteronormativity. Our case studies show that doing gender in a way that does not reflect biological sex can be perceived as a threat to heterosexuality. Cisgender men and women attempt to repair these potential ruptures through the deployment of normatively gendered tactics that reify gender and sexual difference. These tactics simultaneously negate the authenticity of transmen and transwomen’s gender and sexual identities and reaffirm the heteronormative assumption that only “opposite sex” attraction between two differently sexed and gendered bodies is normal, natural, and desirable.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The persistence of gender inequality is well documented within sociology. Behind this reproduction of inequality are cultural schemas about the naturalness of a binary gender system in which there are two, and only two, genders that derive from biology (chromosomes and genitalia) (West and Zimmerman 1987). These schemas constitute and are constituted by our current gender order—the patterns of power relations between men and women that shape norms for femininity and masculinity by defining what is gender-appropriate in arenas such as romantic partner selection, occupational choice, and parental roles. The gender order is hierarchical, which means there is consistently a higher value on masculinity than on femininity (Connell 1987; Schippers 2007).

Ethnomethodological theories of gender (see Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987) argue that an empirical focus on social interactions makes the mechanisms that maintain this gender system visible, as “social interactions can reflect and reiterate the gender inequality characteristic of society more generally” (Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 2002, 28). This theoretical body of work examines what has come to be termed “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987)—the interactional process of crafting gender identities that are then presumed to reflect and naturally derive from biology. As masculinity and femininity are not fixed properties of male and female bodies, the meanings and expectations for being men and women differ both historically

and across interactional settings. Normative expectations for men and women maintain gender inequality, as strictures of masculinity push men to “do dominance” and strictures of femininity push women to “do submission” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Taken together, these expectations about natural gender differences translate into an unreflexive production of doing inequality that reproduces the hierarchical gender system more broadly (Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 2002).

Fully illuminating the mechanisms that uphold gender inequality, however, requires a more thorough analysis of the interplay between gender and sexuality—what some feminists have termed the connection between patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980)—than is offered in these theories. Heterosexuality—like masculinity and femininity—is taken for granted as a natural occurrence derived from biological sex. Heterosexual expectations are embedded in social institutions, “guarantee [ing] that some people will have more class status, power, and privilege than others” (Ingraham 1994, 212). The hierarchical gender system that privileges masculinity also privileges heterosexuality. Its maintenance rests on the cultural devaluation of femininity and homosexuality. Showing the effects of this socialization, violent crimes against gay men—individuals who are culturally stereotyped as feminine (Hennen 2008)—typically are propagated by men (Franklin 2000). The gender system must be conceived of as *heterosexist*, as power is allocated via positioning in gender and sexual hierarchies. As such, understanding the persistence of gender inequality necessitates an understanding of the relationality between heterosexuality and gender.

Heterosexuality requires a binary sex system, as it is predicated on the seemingly natural attraction between two types of bodies defined as opposites. The taken-for-granted expectation that heterosexuality and gender identity follow from genitalia produces heteronormativity—even though in most social interactions genitals are not actually visible. People do not expect a mismatch between “biological” credentials and gender presentations but rather assume that gendered appearances reflect a biologically sexed reality (West and Zimmerman 1987). This assumption is not always warranted. Transgender people—people who live with a social gender identity that differs from the gender they were assigned at birth—can successfully do masculinity or femininity without having the genitalia that are presumed to follow from their outward appearance.

In many social interactions, transgender people’s private bodies matter little, as—if they “pass” in their desired social gender—their appearance is taken to be proof of their biological sex. Sexual encounters, however, can disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions that people who look like

women have vaginas and people who look like men have penises. In these situations, gender normals, particularly men, can have strong, even violent reactions. A question arises: Is the reaction related to (trans)gender or (hetero)sexuality? Framed as a (trans)gender issue, this violence operates as a disciplinary force on bodies that transgress the seemingly natural gender binary. Yet (hetero)sexuality is also an important factor as “the heterosexual framework that centers upon the model of penis-vagina penetration undoubtedly informs the genital division of male and female” (Bettcher 2007, 56). Transgender people have their claim to their gender category of choice challenged in these situations on the basis of genitalia, which in turn calls the heterosexuality of cisgender people they have been sexual with into question. How people respond to breaches to naturalized attitudes about gender and sexuality can illuminate the processes and mechanisms behind the everyday unfolding of not just doing gender but also doing heteronormativity.

## METHODS

The first case study examined reactions to open workplace transitions—situations in which transgender people announce their intention to undergo a gender transition and remain in the same job. Between 2003 and 2007, Schilt conducted in-depth interviews with 54 transmen in Southern California and Central Texas. Generating a random sample of transmen is not possible, as there is not an even dispersal of transmen by state or transgender-specific neighborhoods from which to sample. Respondents were recruited from transgender activist groups, listservs, support groups, and personal contacts. After the interview, each respondent was asked if he felt comfortable recommending any coworkers for an interview about their experience of the workplace transition. Fourteen coworkers (10 women and four men) of eight transmen in professional and blue-collar jobs were interviewed.

There were few demographic differences between transmen from the two regions. Thirty-five of these men had openly transitioned at one point in their lives, 19 in California and 16 in Texas. The majority were white (86 percent), with relatively equal numbers of queer, bisexual, and gay men and heterosexual men. The average age of California respondents was higher than that of the Texas respondents (35 vs. 25). California transmen also had a wider range of years of transition—from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s—while all of the transmen interviewed in Texas openly transitioned in the early to mid-2000s. In both states, most transmen

transitioned in professional occupations or in service industry/retail occupations (72 percent), with a minority transitioning in blue-collar occupations and “women’s professions.”

In the second case study, Westbrook systematically collected all the available nonfiction texts produced by the mainstream news media in the United States between 1990 and 2005 about the murders of people described as doing gender so as to possibly be seen as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth. Texts included those identifying a murder victim as wearing clothing, jewelry, and/or makeup associated with a gender other than the one they were labeled at birth; naming a murder victim as *transsexual*, *transgender*, a *cross-dresser*, or a *transvestite*; and/or describing the victim of fatal violence as *a man in a dress*, *a man posing as a woman*, *passed as a man*, *a woman posing as a man*, *female impersonator*, or *a woman who is really a man*. For this article, we will refer to this group of people using the term “transgender.”

In total, Westbrook collected and analyzed 7,183 individual news stories about 232 homicides. Most texts came from searches of the databases Lexis Nexis and Access World News and included print newspaper articles and news magazine articles produced for a general audience. To gather these texts, Westbrook compiled a list of names of people identified as transgender murder victims by transgender activists and then searched for articles about these victims. She then assembled a list of names and terms used to describe victims in these news stories, such as “posed as a woman,” and performed a new search using those terms. This process was repeated a number of times. The extensiveness of the search makes these texts a census of all available stories, not just a sample, and all cases identified by transgender activists were written about at least once in the mainstream press.

Westbrook analyzed texts using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. Coding focused on how each news story explained the act of violence being reported, with explanations conceptualized as “frames”—ways that people make sense of the world by highlighting certain aspects of an event while ignoring others (Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1986). News media framings of this violence were analyzed not in an attempt to access what “really happened” in these interactions but as reflections of dominant explanations of why such violence may occur. The mainstream news media both reflect and shape dominant belief systems (Ferree et al. 2002; Gamson et al. 1992); as such, attention to media framings of violence against transgender people provides useful insight into the sex/gender/sexuality system.



Although journalists framed the violence in many ways, more often than not they described the violence as a response to actual or perceived deception of the perpetrator by the transgender person. Westbrook coded stories as using this deception framing if they explicitly claimed that the perpetrator felt deceived and, as a result, killed the victim. Stories that described the killing as resulting from anger at a “discovery” that the victim was really a man, really a woman, or transgender were also included under the code “deception frame.” In examining these stories, Westbrook also attended to the genders of the victim(s) and perpetrator(s) and the context in which the crime occurred, including the relationship between the victim and perpetrator and location of the crime. Other variables of interest, such as race and class of those involved, were rarely mentioned in news stories and so were not part of the analysis.

There are some potential limitations to this comparative model. The first lies in the populations we compare. While transmen and transwomen are lumped together as “transgender” in many situations, their experiences do not mirror one another. Still, we find these comparisons to be fruitful for our analyses for several reasons. First, while the selection of transmen in the first case study was purposive, the focus on transwomen in the second case study was not. The lack of any documented incidents involving heterosexual cisgender women killing transmen suggests that the tactics used to police gender and sexual transgressions are themselves gendered—a point we develop in our analysis. Second, this comparison reveals how responses to transmen and transwomen vary across public and private sexualized/sexual relationships. This comparison illuminates how criteria for membership in gender categories differ in sexual, as compared to non-sexual, situations.

### **DOING GENDER AND HETERONORMATIVITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS**

Open workplace transitions—situations in which a transgender employee informs her employers that she intends to begin living and working as a man—present an interesting empirical setting for examining how gender and heteronormativity “work” in public relationships. Reactions to this announcement could play out in multiple ways. Transmen could be fired for making a stigmatized identity public, thus neutralizing this potential challenge to the binary gender order. They could experience no change to their workplace experiences. Or they could be repatriated as men by being expected to follow the men’s dress and behavioral codes and being



moved into new jobs or positions that employers see as better suited to masculine abilities and interests.

The experiences of transmen in both Texas and California are largely consistent: They are incorporated into men's jobs and men's workplace cultures. These incorporations are not seamless, however. When transmen's (hetero)sexuality is raised at work, heterosexual men often encourage an open display of shared sexual desire for women—emphasizing their new sameness with transmen. Heterosexual women, in contrast, police the boundaries of who can be counted as a man—negating their new “oppositeness” with transmen. In sexualized situations, transmen's masculinity is simultaneously reinforced—as men frame them as heterosexual men—and challenged—as women position them as homosexual women.

### Reaffirming “Natural” Gender Difference

Employers and coworkers find new ways to do gender “naturally” by incorporating transmen into the workplace as one of the guys. On an organizational level, some employers rehire transmen as men, institutionally sanctioning their transition into a man's career track. Preston received a directive from his boss that he should adopt the men's dress code at his blue-collar job, which meant the removal of a single earring he had worn unproblematically for years as a woman in the same workplace. John's employer in his service industry job required that he retain the women's uniform until he started testosterone—at which point he could legitimately don a men's uniform. Employers also issue top-down dictates that give transmen access to men's restrooms and lockers and ask coworkers to change names and pronouns with their transgender colleague. These employer responses show how gender boundaries can shift—former women can be accepted as men—without a change in structural gender relations or organizational policies.

When transmen receive top-down support for their workplace transitions, men and women coworkers often show their adherence to these dictates by enlisting transmen into masculine “gender rituals” (Goffman 1977). For the first few weeks of Jake's transition, heterosexual men colleagues began signaling in an obvious way that they were treating him like a guy:

A lot of my male colleagues started kind of like slapping me on the back [laughs]. But I think it was with more force than they probably slapped each other on the back. . . . And it was not that I had gained access to “male privilege” but they were trying to affirm to me that they saw me as a male. . . . That was the way they were going to be supportive of me as a guy, or something of the sort [laughs].

The awkwardness of these backslaps illustrates his colleagues' own hyper-awareness of trying to do gender with someone who is becoming a man. Jake felt normalized by this incorporation and made frequent references to himself as a *transman* to disrupt his colleagues' attempts to naturalize his transition.

Women also engage transmen in heterosocial gender rituals, such as doing heavy lifting around the office. The change is so rapid that many transmen are, at first, not sure how to make sense of these new expectations. Kelly, who transitioned in a semiprofessional job, notes,

Before [transition] no one asked me to do anything really and then [after], this one teacher, she's like, "Can you hang this up? Can you move this for me?" . . . Like if anything needed to be done in this room, it was me. Like she was just, "Male? Okay you do it." That took some adjusting. I thought she was picking on me.

Ken describes a similar experience in his semiprofessional workplace. While his coworkers were slow to adopt masculine pronouns with him, his women coworkers did enlist him in carrying heavy items to the basement and unloading boxes. This enlistment into heterosocial gender rituals suggests that while open transitions might make gender trouble for coworkers who struggle with how they should treat their transgender colleague, this disruption does not make them reconsider the naturalness of the gender binary. Treating transmen as men gives them their "rightful" place in the dichotomy—and allows schemas about men and women's natural differences to go unchanged.

Interviews with coworkers illuminate how they grapple with this potential breach to their ideas about gender. Heterosexual men emphasized that if they were not discussing the transition in an interview, it would not cross their minds. They position this transition from female to male as "natural" for a masculine woman. One man in a blue-collar job says,

I chuckle to myself every now and then, how just natural it seems. [It] took a while for the pronouns to catch on but now it just comes out naturally. It just seems like a natural fit. It just seems like my inclination or my intuition at the beginning was correct; it just seemed, like, natural that she should go through with something like this because she was gonna be more comfortable as a man than as a woman.

Another man says he was unsurprised about the transition because his colleague "was an unattractive woman." As many transmen move from being masculine (e.g., gender-nonconforming) women to gender-conforming

men, their decisions to transition can be seen as a natural fit for someone who was viewed as doing femininity unsuccessfully. Many transmen also move from being gender nonconforming women who are assumed to be lesbians to gender-conforming men who are assumed to be heterosexual—a move that coworkers can justify as confirmation of the naturalness and desirability of a heteronormative gender system.

Women coworkers express more hesitation about seeing transmen as men. Several women discuss their concern about what they perceive as mismatch between their colleague's gender presentation—male—and his biological sex—female. One woman who works with a transman in a female-dominated job says,

It's a hard thing for me [to say I see him as a man]. . . . On some levels yes, but in other ways, no. If I think about it, I start thinking about his body. I feel that his body would be different than any man that I would know. . . . When I think a lot about it, I definitely think about his body and what's happened to it. I wouldn't think of him as I would another male friend.

Another woman in a blue collar job makes a similar comment, saying,

I can't say yes [I see him as a man] but I can't really say no. The appearance has changed. You know . . . he always looked like a guy . . . dressed like a guy . . . and what's changed is that his hair is cut short. But I can't really say I accept him as a guy.

These comments demonstrate the power of gender attributions as, on one hand, these women see their colleagues as men because they look like men. However, when they think too much about their bodies—what they see as an authentic and unchangeable sexed reality—they are hesitant to include them in the category of man.

Yet, showing the power of institutionally supported public relationships, many coworkers will validate transmen's new social identities as men regardless of their personal acceptance of this identity—in effect “passing” as supportive colleagues. While sociologists have positioned transgender people as gender overachievers who attempt to be 120 percent male or female (see Garfinkel 1967), coworkers' adherence to these gender rituals suggests that in these public interactions, gender normals may have more anxiety about how gender *should* be done than the person who is transitioning. Whether or not this adherence reflects authentic support for transmen *as men*, it maintains the idea of natural gender differences that create “opposite” personality types with different abilities and interests.

## Gendered Responses to Heterosexuality

The incorporation of transmen as one of the guys at work is not seamless. Where this incorporation comes apart highlights the connection between doing gender and maintaining heteronormativity. While the workplace often is framed as nonsexual, interactions can become sexualized, as in sex talk and sexual banter; and/or sexual, in ways both consensual and nonconsensual (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999). Heterosexual women's perception of a mismatch between their colleague's biological sex and gender identity comes to the forefront in (hetero)sexualized interactions. Women can accept transmen as men when doing masculine roles at work—heavy lifting, killing spiders—but not in sexualized relationships with female-bodied people. Illustrating this, Preston remembers telling a woman coworker that he had a new girlfriend. He was shocked when she yelled across the room, “How do you have sex if you don't have a dick?” Her comment shows that in his coworker's mind, Preston does not have the essential signifier of manhood and therefore cannot *really* have penis-vagina intercourse—the hallmark of heterosexuality.

In sexualized situations, women frame transmen as deceptive—tricking women into seemingly heterosexual relationships without the necessary biological marker of manhood. At a volunteer organization Peter participated in for many years, before and after his transition, he developed a flirtatious relationship with a woman volunteer. He says, “We were flirting a bit and someone noticed. She pulled me aside and said, ‘Does she know about you? I am concerned she doesn't know about you. What is going on between you two? This is totally inappropriate.’” Having known his co-volunteers for several years, he was surprised to realize they saw him as suspicious and threatening. Chris encountered a similar experience in his first job as a man. Hired as a man, he planned not to come out as transgender at work. However, his transition became public knowledge when a high school colleague recognized him. While she originally agreed not to tell anyone, she changed her mind. He says, “So basically for the first time in my life—I was nineteen—I had girls *like* like me, you know. And I think what happened was [this former classmate] was thinking, ‘Oh that's sick, I better warn them.’” While his coworkers continued to treat him as a man in nonsexual interactions, a woman he had set up a date with cancelled. He had no further romantic interest shown to him by women at that job. His experience shows how women's acceptance of transmen's gender can be negated in sexualized interactions. In these situations, women regender transmen as biological females passing as men in an attempt to trick women into homosexuality.

Conversely, rather than policing transmen's heterosexuality, heterosexual men encourage it by engaging them in sex talk about women. Kelly notes,

I definitely notice that the guys . . . they will say stuff to me that I know they wouldn't have said before [when I was working as a female]. . . . One guy, recently we were talking and he was talking about his girlfriend and he's like, "I go home and work it [have sex] for exercise."

He adds that this same coworker went out of his way to avoid him before his transition. The coworker later told Kelly that he was uncomfortable with gays and lesbians. This disclosure reflects heteronormativity, as becoming a presumably heterosexual man can be viewed more positively than being a lesbian. While some transmen personally identify as gay or queer men, heteronormativity ensures that their coworkers imagine they are transitioning to become heterosexual men. These responses show that when an open transition has employer support, heterosexual men are willing in many cases to relate to transmen they see as heterosexual on the basis of shared sexual desire for women. Illustrating this, one coworker describes taking his transman colleague to Hooters because they both enjoy looking at "scantily clad women."

As heteronormativity requires men to ignore other men's bodies, heterosexual men do masculinity, and simultaneously uphold their heterosexuality, by ignoring the bodily details of transmen's transitions. Cisgender men are hesitant to admit any interest in genital surgery. Those who did ask questions about genital surgery in their interview qualified that this interest was purely "scientific," rather than prurient. Ignoring genitalia gives transmen a "sameness" with heterosexual men at work. This sameness allows cisgender men to enlist transmen into discussions of heterosexuality that never go beyond the theoretical. Heterosexual women, in contrast, now have an "oppositeness" with transmen, making them and other women at work part of a potential dating pool. This transition moves transmen's heterosexuality closer to practice than theory—a move that accounts for the reactive, policing steps to thwart transmen's heterosexuality by placing emphasis on genitalia. Perhaps drawing on their own surprise at learning that someone who looks like a man might not have a penis, they want to alert other women who could be "tricked" into homosexuality.

These experiences illustrate that while both cisgender men and women treat transmen as socially male in nonsexualized public interactions, there are gender differences in responses to sexualized public interactions. In

these situations, men gender transmen as heterosexually male on the basis of gender presentation, while women gender them as homosexually female on the basis of biological sex. When gender category and heterosexual authenticity are policed through reference to genitalia, the choice of targets is gendered. Further illustrating this, heterosexual cisgender men often engage in policing and harassing behaviors toward transwomen's public workplace transitions (Schilt 2009; Schilt and Connell 2007). This difference suggests that cisgender people react more strongly toward transgender people who become the "opposite gender" but are presumed to still be the "same sex," as they—and their entire gender—now run the risk of unwittingly engaging in homosexuality. Yet the public context of these relationships still mediates the methods used to enforce heteronormativity. As the next section shows, in private, sexual relationships, men show more extreme reactions.

### **DOING GENDER AND HETERONORMATIVITY IN PRIVATE RELATIONSHIPS**

Examining media accounts of killings of transgender people provides important insight into the beliefs that maintain gender inequality and heteronormativity. Journalists frame a minority of the murders of transpeople in the United States between 1990 and 2005 as caused by reasons wholly, or mostly, unrelated to their membership in the group "transgender." These sorts of cases—the result of personal conflict, random violence, or membership in categories such as "woman" or "person of color"—account for about 33 percent of transgender homicides in which reporters provide a cause for the violence. Journalists attribute the other 67 percent to reasons more closely related to being transgender. Articles describe homophobia or transphobia as the primary cause of violence in only 6 percent of the total cases, while in the majority of cases, 56 percent, journalists depict violence as resulting from private, sexual interactions in which the perpetrator feels "tricked" into homosexuality by "gender deceivers." An additional 5 percent depict the murder as resulting from cisgender men defending themselves from unwanted sexual advances.

As with reactions to public, sexualized relationships, the response patterns in these private, sexual interactions are gendered. Almost ninety-five percent of reported cases involve a cisgender man murdering a transwoman, while no articles describe a cisgender woman killing a transman.<sup>2</sup> The gendered pattern of violence represented in mainstream news stories echoes, although significantly exceeds, that for all reported homicides in

the United States, as 65.3 percent involve a male offender and male victim and 2.4 percent of cases are females killing females (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007). While reports of homicides, whether they be from the Bureau of Justice Statistics or transgender activists and the mainstream news, are unlikely to include every murder in the United States, the extremity of the gender gap in identified fatal violence against transgender people demonstrates that, while doing masculinity and doing violence are socially linked, the combined threat to both gender and sexuality posed by transgender bodies in private, sexual relationships can result in hypergendered responses by cisgender men.

### **Gender and Heterosexuality in Private**

Most of the transgender homicides covered in the mainstream news media occur in what can be understood as private relationships, such as those between lovers, family members, friends, acquaintances, and strangers met on the street or in bars; or outside the realm of socially authorized public relationships, such as people engaged in illegal activities like prostitution and drug dealing. Of the 136 cases in which journalists identify the relationship between the perpetrator and victim, only one is said to be a relationship between coworkers, and it occurs far outside the realm of legally sanctioned working relationships—an MtF prostitute portrayed as killing her transsexual madam in an argument over money (Grace 2003). Similarly, although many of these murders occurred in public spaces, such as in parks and on the street, they rarely took place within the more regulated spaces of retail stores or other places of business.

Almost two-thirds of the reported fatal violence in these private interactions transpired within sexual relationships of short duration, such as the victim and perpetrator engaging in a physical sexual encounter for the first time, or the perpetrator or victim propositioning the other for a sexual relationship (either with or without the exchange of money). Many articles describe the perpetrators and victims as strangers or very recent acquaintances. In these narratives, cisgender men approach or are approached by a woman for sex and the pair immediately go to a place where they can engage in such an encounter. Upon becoming sexual, the cisgender man discovers the transwoman's penis and reacts with physical violence. Articles explain the resulting violence as caused by the perpetrators feeling deceived by the transwomen about their "true gender" and "tricked" into a homosexual encounter.

News articles described the murder of Chrissey Johnson (nee Marvin Johnson) in such a way:



### **Man charged in death of transvestite**

A Baltimore man has been arrested for killing a 29-year-old man whom he had brought home believing the victim was a woman. The police said that Allen E. Horton, 22, went into a rage Saturday night when he discovered Marvin Johnson, who was dressed as a woman, was really a man, a police spokesman said yesterday. (*Washington Times* 1993)

News coverage frames fatal sexual encounters between cisgender men and transwomen sex workers similarly, as this description of the murder of Jesse Santiago (nee Jesus) shows:

### **Man Kills Transvestite, Then Himself, Police Say**

A bizarre case of mistaken sexual identity ended in the fatal screwdriver stabbing of a transvestite Bronx prostitute and the suicide of his killer early yesterday, police said. It began late Friday night when 47-year-old Augustin Rosado propositioned what he believed was a female prostitute in the University Heights section. The two headed to Rosado's fourth-floor furnished room in a transient hotel on Cresten Avenue, police said. Once inside, Rosado discovered the prostitute was a male transvestite and flew into a rage, stabbing the unidentified 30-year-old man repeatedly with a screwdriver and hitting him with a metal pipe, police said. . . . A detective working on the case said it is nearly impossible to tell on sight which prostitutes plying their trade in the area are men and which are women. "Some of these transvestites look sexier than some women," he said. "I could see how someone could be surprised." (Jamieson 1992)

The "deception" in these frames is a dual one; articles portray victims as lying both about their gender and about their sexual orientation. Showing how the sexual context of the relationship matters, reporters never use the deception frame for cases in which there has been no sexual interaction between the transgender person and a cisgender person. This lack of the deception frame in these nonsexual situations highlights the salience of genitalia as the key determiner of gender and sexual identity in sexual situations.

### **Gender "Deception" and the Precariousness of (Male) Heterosexuality**

Accusations of false doings of gender in sexual interactions dominate the news coverage of the murder of transwomen by cisgender men through phrases such as "secret," "lied," "tricked," "misled," "avoid detection," "posed as a woman," "true gender," "really a woman," "true identity,"

“double life,” “fooled,” “deceit,” “pretended,” “masquerade,” and “gender secret.” One typical news story opened,

Gregory Johnson’s friends and a cousin think they know why someone shot the 17-year-old boy and his 18-year-old friend, and then left their bodies to burn beyond recognition inside a blazing SUV. Rage. Johnson, they say, was a sweet and funny young man who liked to dress as a woman, fooling his dates. They suspect one of them became enraged upon learning the truth and killed Johnson and his female friend. (Horne and Spalding 2003)

Journalists, and the people they quote, say that transwomen victims misportrayed their gender through the clothing they wore, the names they used, and often the timbre of their voices. To utilize gender deception as the explanation for violence requires an underlying conception of a true gender that the victim intentionally did not display to the perpetrator. Indeed, the phrase “true gender” is often used in these articles, and the idea of a truth of gender is constructed using other terms; for example, reporters often say that victims had a “gender secret” and were “actually” or “really” another gender. “True gender” in these stories functions both as a synonym for “sex” as well as a reference to the ways that journalists and perpetrators feel that the victims *should* have been doing gender. Although these victims presented as women socially, in the minds of the journalists and perpetrators, they were *really* men for the purposes of sexual interactions because they had penises. Descriptions of the murder of MtF Gwen Araujo, who had not had genital surgery, illustrate this point, as journalists regularly defined her “true gender” as male.

**Passion Blamed for Teen’s Slaying: Client’s discovery of victim’s true gender led to chaos, attorney for one murder suspect says**

A defense attorney for one of three men charged with killing a transgender teen described his client Thursday as a quiet, even-tempered man caught up by ungovernable passions the night he discovered he had unwittingly had sex with a man. “What followed was absolute pandemonium and chaos,” said attorney Michael Thorman, who described the killing as “classic manslaughter,” not murder. . . . The four men met Araujo, whom they knew as “Lida,” in the summer of 2002. Merel and Magidson, according to Nabors, had sex with Araujo, but became suspicious about the teen’s gender after comparing notes. On Oct. 3, 2002, the men confronted Araujo at Merel’s house in Newark, a San Francisco suburb, and demanded: “Are you a woman or a man?” Another woman at the house found out the truth by grabbing Araujo’s genitals. Uproar ensued. The 17-year-old Araujo was punched, choked, hit with a skillet, kneed in the face, tied up and strangled.

Araujo was buried in a remote area near Lake Tahoe; about two weeks later Nabors led police to the victim's body. (Associated Press 2004)

In sexual interactions such as this one, "true gender" is often determined by touching the genitals, showing that truth here is determined by bodily, rather than social, criteria. In sexual relationships, biological sex and social gender are expected to "match." As a result, women with penises are seen as sexual deceivers.

We can see the importance of the shape of genitals, rather than transgender status, in determining "true gender" by comparing journalists' explanations of murders of transwomen who have and have not had genital surgery. Between 1990 and 2005, the mainstream news reported on the murder of six transwomen who had had genital surgery. None of them were said to have been killed because they "deceived" their sexual partner about their "true gender." Journalists do not use the deception frame to explain the murder of postoperative transwomen, as they possess the "correct" biological credentials to do gender as women in sexual interactions. In contrast, journalists portray transwomen who have not had genital surgery as being truly men and, as such, engaging in a double deception—about both their gender and sexual orientation—if they have sex with heterosexual men. Shawn Wilson assumed that Robert Gibson must be a homosexual after discovering Gibson's male genitalia during a sexual encounter:

#### **Man to stand trial in stabbing death of female impersonator**

A 21-year-old man was ordered yesterday to stand trial on a murder charge in the stabbing death of an El Cajon hairdresser who moonlighted as a female impersonator. Shawn Keith Wilson told police after his arrest that he allowed 32-year-old Robert Howard Gibson to perform a sex act on him, then "tripped out" when he realized that Gibson was a man. Gibson was stabbed 25 times late on the night of July 30. . . . Shortly after Wilson's arrest, [Wilson's friend, Laree] Stemen told detectives that Wilson had told her that a homosexual "tried to rape him." (Wolf 1998)

Transwomen who desire men are assumed to be gay men because they have penises and want to engage in sex with other people with penises. Without the biological credentials to prove their desire as heterosexual, they are presumed to be homosexual.

In many of these murder cases, journalists and perpetrators portray transwomen as deceptive gay men, seeking to trick innocent heterosexual men into homosexuality. This "trick" carries a heavy social weight through what we term the "one-act rule of homosexuality." Similar to the

idea that anyone with one drop of black blood is black (Davis 1991), both straight and gay people often believe that engaging in sexual encounters with people of the same sex demonstrates an innate, previously hidden, homosexuality, no matter what sexual identity one may personally avow (Ward 2006). In interviews and court testimony, the accused killers of Gwen Araujo articulate a belief that for a man to have sex with a person who has male-shaped genitals makes him homosexual, even if he were unaware of those genitals at the time. Mainstream news stories describe one of the convicted killers as starting to cry and repeating “I can’t be gay” over and over again when the group of men “discovered” that Gwen Araujo had testicles. The punishment for attempting to “trick” someone into homosexuality is death—the only way to literally destroy the evidence of the violation of the one-act rule. Because the “true gender” for sexual encounters is determined by genital shape, self-identity is not sufficient for deciding either gender or sexuality. Thus, heterosexual men are constantly at risk of losing their claim to heterosexual status—just as transwomen are at risk for losing their claim to their chosen gender identity—because both gender and sexuality are produced in interaction. Individuals alone cannot determine their gender or sexuality and must, instead, prove them through fulfilling the appropriate criteria, including having the “right” genitals and never desiring someone with the “wrong” genitals.

The belief that gender deception in a sexual relationship would result in fatal violence is so culturally resonant that, even in cases where there is evidence that the perpetrator knew the victim was transgender prior to the sexual act, many people involved in the case, including journalists and police officers, still use the deception frame.<sup>3</sup> In one such case, that of the murder of Chanelle Pickett (nee Roman Pickett) by William Palmer in 1995, Palmer claimed that he only discovered that Pickett had male genitals once they were engaged in sex. Countering this, a few news articles include quotes from friends of Pickett’s who said that Palmer was a regular at transgender hangouts and intentionally pursued transwomen who had not had genital surgeries. Despite these claims, journalists usually explain the murder as resulting from the discovery of Pickett’s gender. During the trial, both framings of the violence were told, and the jury found the deception narrative more convincing, convicting Palmer of only assault and battery and sentencing him to two years in jail. Following the logics of heteronormativity and gender inequality, people often ignore counterevidence in these cases and accept the violence as justified.

In mainstream news media portrayals, when faced with the discovery of the transgender status of a sexual partner, men and women respond differently. We cannot account for this gap by only attending to questions of

gender. Instead, we must look to the intersections of gender and sexuality. When heterosexual cisgender men and women discover that their sexual partner is transgender, this new information could challenge their claims to heterosexuality, as well as to their gender category of choice. As we saw with the cases of cisgender men, their masculinity is challenged as they feel “raped” and feminized through their connection to homosexuality. To repair this breach, they respond with violence—a masculine-coded act. Because of the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality, cisgender men reclaim their heterosexuality by emphasizing their masculinity. News articles described how when Jose Merel feared that his sexual contact with Gwen Araujo would mark him as gay, his friend Nicole Brown attempted to soothe him through references to his masculinity, saying, “This is not your fault. You were a football player.” By highlighting his participation in a masculine sport, she tries to cleanse him of homosexual stigma.

But while cisgender men can repair the sexuality breach by emphasizing masculinity through violence, cisgender women cannot use the same tactic. To do violence and, thus, do masculinity would further destabilize women’s claims to both femininity and heterosexuality. Given that masculine behavior in women is associated with lesbianism, cisgender women who wish to emphasize heterosexuality must respond differently—either ending the relationship or accepting their partner in one way or another. This gender difference can be seen clearly in portrayals of the life of Brandon Teena. Before he was killed by two men enraged by his sexual encounters with the local women, he had several heterosexually identified cisgender women partners “discover” his “true gender,” but not one responded with fatal violence. Thus, men, not women, can use violence to repair the breach in gender and the challenge to their sexuality caused by the discovery of transgender status in private, casual sexual relationships. The extremity of men’s responses shows the depth of the threat of transgender bodies to heteronormativity within sexual situations and the need to neutralize that threat through hypergendered reactions.

## CONCLUSION

This article examines how responses by gender normals to transmen and transwomen demonstrate the ways gender and (hetero)sexuality are interrelated. The sex/gender/sexuality system rests on the belief that there are two, and only two, opposite sexes, determined by biology and signaled primarily by the shape of genitals. The idea of sexual difference naturalizes sexual interactions between “opposite” bodies; within this logic it seems

obvious, to paraphrase a slang phrase, to “insert tab A into slot B.” Sex between two tabs or two slots, in contrast, is unnatural. Similarly, this sex/gender/sexuality system rests on the belief that gendered behavior, (hetero)sexual identity, and social roles flow naturally from biological sex, creating attraction between two opposite personalities. This belief maintains gender inequality, as “opposites”—bodies, genders, sexes—cannot be expected to fulfill the same social roles and, so, cannot receive the same resources.

The case studies in this article improve our understandings of the workings of a heteronormative gender system predicated on people being clearly categorized as one of two sexes. Much of the literature on violence against transpeople points to gender norm transgression as the cause of violence and assumes that all transgender people are at risk for the same type of violence across social situations. Our two studies complicate this explanation. In public interactions not coded as sexual, self-identity and gender presentation can be sufficient to place someone in his or her gender category of choice—particularly in situations where this new identity is supported by people in authority positions. This adherence reflects the accountability to situational norms in public interactions (Goffman 1966). Highlighting the importance of these public norms, when open workplace transitions do not receive top-down support, cisgender men and women are more likely to express resistance to their transgender colleague (Schilt 2009)—even when they have worked unproblematically for many years with their transgender colleague prior to his or her transition. This resistance is heightened when public interactions become sexualized. In these situations, responses that police heterosexuality are, in themselves, gendered: cisgender women regulate transmen’s sexualized behaviors through talk and gossip, whereas cisgender men police transwomen through aggressive verbal harassment (Schilt 2009; Schilt and Connell 2007).

Examining gender normals’ reactions to private, sexual interactions with transmen and transwomen presents something of a paradox, however. The majority of cases in the textual analysis present cisgender men murdering transwomen after learning that their sexual partner is transgender. Yet although surely interactions occur in which cisgender women “discover” that the transmen with whom they have been sexually intimate were assigned female at birth, there were no reported cases of cisgender women reacting violently to such a discovery. The gender gap in use of violence to repair the breach in gender and (hetero)sexuality occurs because violence can be used to claim masculine, but not feminine, heterosexuality. Although the one-act rule of homosexuality may well apply

equally to men and women, a woman cannot undo the violation by responding with violence.

The extremity of the violence cisgender men use to punish transwomen in private, sexual situations highlights gender inequality in the forms of the cultural devaluation of femininity, homosexuality, and, particularly, males choosing to take on characteristics coded as feminine. The violent reactions from men illustrate the real-life outcomes of gender socialization that requires men to demonstrate their own masculinity and heterosexuality through the devaluation and ridicule of male homosexuality and any presentations—by men or by women—of femininity (Hennen 2008; Pascoe 2007). Similarly, the intense harassment of transwomen by cisgender men in the workplace derives from the valuation of masculinity over femininity. Whereas transmen may face less censure because they are adopting the socially respected traits of masculinity, transwomen are understood as committing the double sin of both abandoning masculinity and choosing femininity.

These gender differences further suggest the importance of the context of interactions (nonsexual/sexualized/sexual; public/private). Sexual and nonsexual situations require different degrees of “oppositeness.” Heterosexual interactions entail both opposite genitals as well as opposite gendered behavior. By contrast, nonsexual heterosocial interactions only require opposite gendered behavior, so self-identity can be accepted without biological credentials. As genitals are not visible in nonsexual situations, and are not needed to engage in any of the expected behaviors of the interaction, they are not required to establish membership in a gender category for nonsexual relationships. By contrast, genitals are a central part of the social interaction of a sexual encounter, and so are used both to determine the genders of the people involved as well as the sexual orientation of the encounter. Thus, the criteria for gender membership are different in social versus (hetero)sexual circumstances; only in sexual situations is there a requirement that gender (self-presentation) equals sex (genitals). Accepting transgender people’s self-identity in nonsexual situations does not threaten cisgender people’s claims to heterosexual status. Men can be *homosocial* with other men, including those who lack the biological credentials for maleness, without being *homosexual*. In sexualized circumstances, however, heterosexuality is threatened by the one-act rule of homosexuality. Cisgender men stand to lose not just their sexual identity but also their standing as “real” men.

Illustrating the connection between gender and sexuality, gender normals react most strongly to transgender people who become, via gender



transitions, part of the “opposite gender.” The content of these reactions, however, is mediated by the context of the relationship (public/private) and the degree of sexualization of the interaction. In the public context of the workplace, cisgender men and women can incorporate transmen as men into interactions coded as gendered—lifting boxes, backslapping. When interactions become sexualized, however, men emphasize their sameness with transmen while women reject their new oppositeness. These patterns suggest that when a transgender person is not a potential sexual partner, biological credentials (the “right” genitalia) are not required to claim membership in a gender category. By contrast, when the transgender person is in theory part of a potential pool of sexual partners, the criteria for gender membership becomes much more strict—cultural genitals are no longer enough and biological genitals are a necessity.

Examining the reactions of cisgender people to transgender people helps to illuminate the mechanisms that uphold the heteronormative sex/gender/sexuality system and illustrates the lengths to which gender normals will go to maintain a gender/sexual order that occurs “naturally.” However, it would be a mistake to assume cisgender sexual desire for transgender bodies “must be paid for in blood,” as Halberstam (2005) has argued. Some cisgender people—men, women, gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual—seek sexual and romantic partnerships with people they know to be transgender. Under a heteronormative system, this open desire for transgender bodies typically is framed as pathological or fetishistic (Serano 2009). Future research should examine the purposeful sexual and romantic relationships between cisgender and transgender people outside of this pathological frame, as these relationships have the potential to create (hetero)sexual trouble within a heteronormative gender system.

## NOTES

1. *Cis* is the Latin prefix for “on the same side.” It compliments *trans*, the prefix for “across” or “over.” “Cisgender” replaces the terms “nontransgender” or “bio man/bio woman” to refer to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity.

2. Of the reported murders in which both the gender of the victim and perpetrator were known, 94.9 percent (149 of 157 cases) were instances of cisgender men killing transwomen. The remaining cases included three in which a cisgender woman killed a transwoman (1.91 percent), two in which a transwoman killed another transwoman (1.27 percent), and three in which one or more cisgender men killed a transman (1.91 percent).

3. Perpetrators may claim deception, even when none occurred, to try to reduce both legal and social castigation. As desire for opposite gender transgender bodies is culturally understood as *homosexual* desire, following the belief that genitalia determine gender in sexual interactions, perpetrators may claim they were deceived to try to cleanse themselves of the stigma from the one-act rule of homosexuality. They may also make such a claim to attempt to reduce criminal charges from homicide to manslaughter.

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