

Strategies for Dealing with Cisnormative Discursive Aggression in the Workplace: Disruption, Criticism, Self-Enforcement, and Collusion

Abstract

Despite considerable advances over recent decades in understanding that gender is performative, socially constructed, and neither fixed nor stable, assumptions of cisnormativity—that cisgender is natural and “normal”—persist throughout society and the workplace. As outlined by Stef Shuster (2017), trans and other gender nonconforming individuals are held accountable through various forms of discursive aggression to cisnormative assumptions in the workplace. This study thematically analyzes semi-structured interviews of eighteen trans and other gender nonconforming individuals and develops a four-category framework for categorizing their reactions to cisnormativity and its enforcement in the workplace, with implications for practice. Particular attention is given to the self-protective rationalizations that accompany self-enforcement. These discursive reactions include disruption, critique, self-enforcement, and collusion with cisnormative expectations.

Keywords

Cisnormativity; trans; gender nonconforming; discursive aggression; accountability; non-binary

It has long been understood by scholars working within the realm of gender and sexuality that gender is a social construct enforced by dominant patriarchal, cisnormative, and heteronormative discourses. Foucault's (1979) ground-breaking work examining the role of power in defining sexuality, in particular, strongly influenced Butler's (1990) work on gender identity as performance, and both thinkers have inspired fruitful scholarship on how gender is constructed, enforced, and regulated. Similarly influential have been Connell's (1985) "Theorizing Gender" and West and Zimmerman's landmark "Doing Gender," which considers gender as an "emergent feature of social situations" (1987, 126). Among much more recent scholarship that continues through today, Diamond and Butterworth (2008) demonstrate that gender, far from being fixed and stable, can vary considerably even within an individual's lifetime. Simultaneously, and as these ideas have made their way out of the academy and into culture, there has been some progress in breaking down gender roles in society, and some much-welcomed flexibility in gender identity and gender performance, but the overwhelming pervasiveness of cisnormativity—the assumption that being cisgender is natural and universal—in general discourse proves resistant to change and limits non-cisgender agency.

This resistance to change arises mainly from discursive enforcement in everyday contexts. As noted by Blimes (1986, 187) "discursive sociology focuses on the interpretive systems and practices through which members deal with behavior," thus making discursive (linguistic) systems and strategies of considerable interest in sociological contexts, including the workplace. In general, though for trans and gender-nonconforming people in particular, as with other gender nonconforming people, social restrictions upon non/gendered agency are enforced by gendered *accountability*. If gender is "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 127), accountability is the social expectation and

pressure to do so (cf. Hollander, 2013). Among everyday settings, normative expectations arise with particular consequence within the workplace. As such, scholarly attention has been paid to the discursive enforcement of *heteronormativity* in professional settings (e.g., Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Williams & Giuffre, 2011; Woodruffe-Burton & Bairstowe, 2013), and recently some cogent analyses of cisnormativity have emerged (Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Connell, 2010; Dick, 2015). This study seeks to continue that scholarship and to deepen it while outlining observations of a four-category structure by which trans people negotiated accountability within the workplace. Care has been taken not to pass judgements on these strategies but to gain a greater understanding of how trans individuals perceive and respond to the need for them both practically and ethically. Thus, this framework provides greater clarity on the problem and then suggests avenues by which organizations and their management can better identify and act to remediate cisnormative oppression in the workplace.

This study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eighteen trans and gender-nonconforming individuals regarding their experiences in the workplace, as considered through thematic analysis. To analyze the data, the most relevant framework comes from Shuster (2017), who outlined the prevalence of *discursive aggression* in the workplace, and Hollander (2013), upon whom Shuster drew. Discursive aggression is “a term for the communicative acts used in social interaction to hold people accountable to social- and cultural-based expectations, and subsequently to reinforce inequality in everyday life” (Shuster 2017, 483). This can render trans people “invisible” and undermine their “self-authorship in naming and claiming a gender identity” (2017, 494). In that sense, this study specifically seeks to understand ways in which trans and gender-nonconforming individuals experience discursive aggression, taking particular interest in how they strategized and rationalized their responses in varying contexts.

Discursive Enforcement of Cisnormativity

Despite decades of scholarship showing that gender categories are neither stable nor natural (Alsop, Fitzsimons, & Lennon, 2002; Butler, 1990; Deutsch, 2007; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Friedman, 2013; Lucal, 1999; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; shuster, 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014), the dominant perception of gender is that it is both. This notion is tied closely to biological essentialism and functions as a kind of “biology ideology” (cf. Lorber, 1993), in which biological sex is believed to determine gender, a view that dominates society. The matter is slightly more nuanced than dominant misconceptions indicate, however. Westbrook and Schilt (2014) identify two competing relevant ideologies: biology-based determination of gender, in which gender is held to be dependent on reproductive systems, and identity-based determination of gender, which is based not only on the individual’s identification of their own gender but its acceptance by family, friends, co-workers, etc. Although the former “biology ideology” is dominant, the latter has begun to gain modest acceptance, though these categorizations remain unstable and contextual. As Westbrook and Schilt (2014) discovered, cisgender people can shift between acceptance of either ideology depending on social context. Specifically, cisgender people are much more likely to determine gender biologically in sexual encounters than in non-sexual ones, where identity-based determinations of gender are more likely to be accepted. This leaves trans and gender-nonconforming people in a vulnerable position in which their gender is perceived differently by different people and differently by the same people at different times.

To better understand this complex and unstable construction of cisnormativity, shuster (2017) investigates the role that power plays in upholding it. They find that the connection between power and language is frequently underappreciated and that gender determination and performance is largely decided and regulated by those with the most power—be that managerial power, the power associated with dominant or normative (especially cisgender)

identities, or their intersections. It is in this sense that the inability to understand non-binary gender constitutes a form of what Fricker (2009) entitles *hermeneutical injustice*, in which the body of shared epistemic resources (cf. Dotson, 2014) exclude aspects of a marginalized individual's experience, thus limiting privileged individuals' access to immediate knowledge of oppression. Seen this way, the difficulty experienced by cis people in "categorizing" trans and gender-nonconforming (particularly non-binary) people reinforces the erroneous conclusion that binary understandings of gender which correlate with sex are natural. In fact, however, such gender categories require a great deal of discursive work—that is, effort through which cultural practices and norms are established and maintained through the use of language and its connections to power dynamics—to maintain.

Within the workplace, issues of gender and perception of gender are often significant, and discursive enforcement of gender takes on additional dimensions. Women have long struggled to project a professional identity due to authoritativeness, assertion, and professionalism being culturally understood as the preserve of men (Haynes, 2012). As a result, women often feel pressured to perform their gender according to masculine expectations so that they can be perceived as professionals (Stobbe, 2005), yet they face hostility and ostracism if seen as too assertive. As a result, many women self-regulate and thus restrict their own opportunities and advancement (Haynes, 2012). This gendered minefield becomes even more fraught with danger for trans and gender nonconforming people who wish to project their own gender identity, which may not fit neatly into binary gender constructions or may not be accepted as such.

Particularly, trans and gender-nonconforming people whose gender is binary—male or female—frequently find themselves not fully accepted within the gender they identify with and consequently subject to discursive aggressions as a result. As Westbrook and Schilt (2014) discovered, cisgender perceptions of gender identity vary by environment, especially

in the case of trans women, who might be tacitly accepted as women in an office environment but not in a bathroom space or when dating. They argue that,

Since the panics produced in these moments of ideology collision focus on the penis as uniquely terrifying, “gender panics” might more accurately be termed “penis panics.” ... These fears rely on and reproduce gender binarism, specifically the assumption of strong/weak difference in male/female bodies. (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014, 48–49)

Therefore, trans women are likely to find themselves not only navigating the pitfalls of being trans and of being women but also trying to follow an inherently unstable, penis-centered, cisnormative power structure that enforces different concepts of gender in different spaces. As outlined by Schilt (2006), trans men are less likely to experience this pressure (cf. Dozier, 2005). This is because as *transmen* they were able to avoid many of the problems faced by women in blue-collar settings, while in white-collar ones, “many of them felt that their workplaces guarded against gender-biased treatment as part of an ethic of professionalism” (Schilt 2006, 474).

For those whose gender is non-binary, negotiating a cisnormative power structure can be even more challenging. Despite the instability of gender determination, binary perceptions of gender—either/or—remain deeply entrenched in cisnormative society—and would therefore benefit from interaction with Patricia Hill Collins’ (1990, 221–238) “both/and” conceptual stance that challenges this. Consequently, non-binary and gender-fluid individuals are often subjected to hostility and resentment, which can be understood as a kind of privilege-based “fragility” akin to that experienced by white people (“white fragility”) when asked to step outside of their own experience as outlined by Robin DiAngelo (2011, cf. 2018):

White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. (2011, 54)

The analogous effect on trans and gender-nonconforming people is both frustrating and exhausting.

To understand the additional marginalization experienced by non-binary trans people, an inclusive approach must be intersectional. In this vein, any feminism considering the experiences of trans people needs to beware of co-opting trans experience for the benefit of cisgender women. While most trans people self-report positive associations with the word “feminism,” some feel alienated by feminisms which deny that trans women are women (Abelson, 2016) or that do not accept trans people in the way they want to be accepted (Hale, 1998). Some trans and gender-nonconforming people have been especially critical of forms of feminism that reinforce gender binaries, such as those presenting a simplistic strong man/weak woman dichotomy which disallows trans/nonconforming identities while contributing to fear of trans/nonconforming women (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014, 49). Furthermore, failure to consider the significance of race and to use an intersectional framework have presented a particular problem for considering additional issues faced by trans and nonconforming people of color (Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; de Vries, 2012, 2015; Roen, 2001). Consequently, this study incorporates an intersectional

framework, which in turn informs the selective thematic coding of responses to avoid falsely unifying the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming people with different and intersecting aspects of marginalized identity. It also recognizes that binary notions of gender are neither stable nor natural but socially and linguistically constructed, particularly in language. That is, because trans women, trans men, gender-nonconforming, and non-binary individuals do not suffer from identical forms of transphobia or discursive aggression, trans women do not suffer identical forms of (trans)misogyny or sexism as cisgender women (both conforming and nonconforming, who likewise face different misogynies) (see Serrano, 2012), and as discursive aggression experienced by trans people of color includes racism, an intersectional framework is essential when interpreting participants' responses.

To understand the roles discursive enforcement of gender plays in the workplace, Coates' work on the maintenance of heteronormativity applies equally well to gender:

Heterosexuality, like gender, is performed... in other words, sexual identity has to be repeatedly and interactionally achieved. One of the ways this is done is through the use of language. Everyday conversation is permeated with heterosexual references, since heterosexuality has a well-developed lexicon.

(Coates, 2013, 537)

Coates identifies that “[h]eterosexuality is a cultural construction relying on strictly enforced norms for its continuing dominance”; shows how “closely sexuality and gender are linked” and; indicates that this “closeness is essential to the maintenance of heteronormativity” (2013, 536). It follows that cisnormativity in gender identity is also repeatedly and interactionally achieved, and, indeed, language is permeated with cisnormative themes and tropes: “ladies and gentlemen,” “boys and girls,” “guys and girls,” “he or she,” “pregnant women,” etc. That is, cisnormativity requires constant discursive work and the compliance of trans people to maintain the appearance of its naturalness (see Butler, 2011). This demand to

maintain cisnormativity constrains the agency of all but cisgender people and is primarily enforced through speech and language.

In investigating discursive enforcement of cisnormativity, Shuster (2017) identifies two ways trans people are held accountable for upholding gender norms—accountability by “self-enforcement” and “other-enforcement.” These they identify within professional contexts and categorizes as types of discursive aggression against trans people. As self-enforcement, Shuster includes acknowledging the collective power of an audience, subverting one’s needs for others, and acquiescing to the power structure when an individual holds less power. Other-enforcement includes having the entitlement to ask invasive questions and using a dominant status to define a subordinated identity. Extending from Shuster’s work, which considered ways trans people *experience* discursive aggression, and thus further developing Hollander (2013) in the same line, this study examines emerging themes in responses to it and rationales given for those responses. Following Shuster’s (2017) suggestions that close their article, their paper investigates how language, talk, and discourse operate in specific settings and can meaningfully contribute to trans studies work in sociology. In particular, it looks more deeply into the particulars of how discursive aggression plays out within the particular power dynamics of certain workplace settings. These, it categorizes into four overlapping themes of response to discursive aggression: disruption, criticism, self-enforcement, and defensive collusion and offers practice implications for management professionals.

Methods

This study is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eighteen individuals who identify as trans or gender nonconforming or who have a more fluid understanding of gender. They took place between February and August of 2017 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Responders range from unskilled workers to middle-management and were between 21 and 57 years of

age. Seven self-identified as trans men, six as trans women, and five as non-binary or gender-fluid. Eleven subjects self-identified as white, two black, two mixed race, two Asian, and one as white Latina.

To recruit subjects, I placed a call in a small local newspaper and, having obtained two positive responses, used snowball sampling to recruit the remainder of the interviewees. Interviews ranged in length from one hour to three hours with the average interview time being 110 minutes. Twelve of the interviews were conducted in-person in a public location of the individual's choice, and six took place over Skype. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

As a white, cisgender, bisexual woman, I frequently did not share a common identity with my participants, many of whom have learned to be wary of white, cisgender individuals. Therefore, I endeavored to take a less assertive role in interviews and asked open-ended questions that enabled the subject to steer the conversation to topics they considered to be of significance. Semi-structured interviews of this sort tend to produce qualitative data with the least interviewer bias (although meaning-making is inevitably co-constituted by both parties). Throughout the process, I endeavored to always remain aware of my positionality (cf. Hale, 2009). Nevertheless, because I wanted to draw out evidence of themes including self-enforcement and collusion, I often asked follow-up questions that inquired about their views of specific experience in light of existing scholarship of which they may not be aware (especially discursive aggression). An example of such a question would be, "So, in the literature, these themes you're discussing are often called 'cisnormativity' because they make a cisgender perspective 'normal' and exclude other identities. How would you say this term fits and doesn't fit what you just described?"

During interviews, I often focused on asking participants if they felt pressured by the language of co-workers and managers to conform to gender norms and, if so, how they

responded. I followed up with open-ended, nonjudgmental questions which sought to elicit their rationale. For example, “Could you explain why you replied in that way?” and “Could you explain how wanting to fit in with your work group was relevant to that?” I then used selective thematic coding on the themes derived from Shuster (2017) and Hollander (2013), while remaining open to additional themes, which were open-coded until theoretical saturation was recognized and themes were theorized into the present typology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis methodology thus parallels but does not replicate constructivist grounded theory (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2008). Coding was performed by hand in a word processor on interview transcripts.

Of note, while many trans people prefer not to reveal their trans status, more are “out,” and a minority use “outness” as a form of political activism (Coates, 2013, 37–38) and, along with many gender-nonconforming people, aim to disrupt cisnormativity in this way. The use of gender performance subversively is a particularly Butlerian approach to gender politics and one which Nussbaum (1999) criticised harshly as a way to avoid engaging directly with political structures and injustices. Scholars like Diprose (1994) have argued that even the act of disruption is a form of maintenance, while others like Lloyd (1999) have urged recognition of the transgressive political potential of disruption. Deutsch (2007) argued that if gender is “done,” it can be “undone,” while West and Zimmerman (2009) maintain that it can only be *redone*. Clearly, feminist views on the value and function of disruption vary, and so too did the views of my participants.

Results

Four main themes emerged in the form of strategies which were interpretable along a continuum of challenge/disruption and resignation/self-protection. I termed these “disrupting,” “critiquing,” “self-enforcing,” and “colluding.”

Disrupting Cisnormativity

Two participants, for whom the enforcement of binary concepts of gender is most explicit, actively resist and attempt to disrupt cisnormativity in the workplace. Mal (all names have been changed to protect subjects' identity) is a 34-year-old, white genderqueer individual who uses the pronouns "ze" and "zir." Twenty-six-year-old Ashley is mixed race and described themselves as "genderfluid," and prefers to be asked their pronouns, which are changeable (here, with their consent, they/them/their will be used) (cf. Lubitow et al., 2017, 8).

Mal, who works in retail, remarked, "I'm not going to stay quiet when cis people try to impose their gender rules on me. It would make my life a lot easier if I did but why should I? Trans exclusion is not okay, and I don't have to cater to people who deny my existence." Ashley, who works in a customer service call center, said, "I will call out binary language when I hear it. It's all over everyday speech, and the only way to change that is to challenge it *every time*. It's exhausting, but cis people need to think about what they are saying and how it affects trans people—just as white people have to think about how their implicit biases affect people of color."

Both participants implicitly referred to intersectionality in their activism, but Ashley's experience spoke to it more directly. As a trans person of color, they find they experience an often unspecified hostility when talking to cisgender, white co-workers about gender and race, "They shut down the minute I raise the subject, and I find myself thinking, 'What is the real problem here? Is it my gender or my race that makes you so determined not to listen to me? Sometimes I ask, but they just get more defensive and evasive, so I never find out, but it's probably both'" (cf. Collins, 1990).

Notably, Ashley's experience speaks to the essence of the problem Crenshaw (1989, 1991) describes in her development of intersectionality. Crenshaw used the symbolism of intersecting roadways of discrimination in which a doubly marginalized person could be hit by workplace prejudice and discrimination without being able to straightforwardly ascribe it

to either racism or sexism. As a result, a doubly marginalized person suffers not only both forms of marginalization but also the unique problem of being left unable to seek redress for discrimination or even to understand it adequately. Mal, as a white person, while experiencing hostility and resistance to zir challenges of cisnormativity, remains able to be sure that racism is not a factor and so is more able to pinpoint and address the problem.

Despite these differences, both Mal and Ashley described experiencing hostility and ostracism directly related to their identity in their workplaces. Mal, visibly annoyed, said, “People go to great lengths to avoid calling me anything at all just so they don’t have to say my pronouns. How hard can it be? It’s just because they aren’t ‘he’ and ‘she.’ That’s how resistant people are to anything which challenges their binary assumptions.” Ashley commented similarly,

It is really common for people to react poorly to being *politely* told that they’ve misgendered me. I’ve had several people say to me “Why can’t you just keep [your pronouns] the same?” There’s a real sense of entitlement that their convenience is more important than my reality. Even when they don’t say anything negative about it and make the tiny effort to ask me, I see the irritation and resentment about having to do that.

Ashley reported experiencing more direct confrontation than Mal. In this way, Ashley’s gender was more directly policed, and they believe this is because their co-workers, who are mostly white, feel more able to regulate and instruct a person of color. Crucially, both individuals experience hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2009) at work in that their co-workers lack the epistemic resources to understand their gender. Ashley, however, also experiences the pushback from fragility, both cisgender and white (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018).

Within their workplaces, Mal and Ashley also routinely raise the issue of language. Mal described zir practices of breaking down work emails and highlighting the binary

language within them and of compiling lists of discursive aggressions (in zir words, “cis microaggressions”) ze routinely experiences (cf. Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010). These, ze once sent to all 36 members of staff in zir own department and to zir managers. Ze explained zir rationale thusly,

I want to show just how prevalent this is. In one email about taking time off before the holidays, there were eleven binary gender references! “He or she,” “his or her.” Don’t I exist? It would be so easy to make the language inclusive! Once, I listed twenty-six cis microaggressions I had experienced in a single week. Most people ignore my emails or just blandly thank me for raising the issues without addressing the issues!

Although Ashley experiences similar circumstances, they said they only occasionally address the problem in email. They were more likely to raise it directly with the individuals using problematic language.

I feel the one-to-one approach is harder to ignore, even if it gets me accused of creating a “hostile working environment,” as it has sometimes. I am not hostile. I’m blunt, honest, and confrontational. I just say, “When you say ‘ladies and gentlemen,’ you exclude me” or “You should say ‘parental leave’ rather than ‘maternity leave’ because some people who give birth are fathers or don’t consider themselves to be either a mother or a father.” That’s not hostile. It’s an answer to a kind of hostility to who I am when they exclude me.

Ashley describes the responses to their interventions as ranging from “unconvincing apologies” to “saying they didn’t mean anything by it” to “aggressive defensiveness” (cf. DiAngelo, 2011, 2018). They noted their manager has indicated that their confrontational nature makes the workplace a hostile environment on three separate occasions and asked them to “tone it down for the sake of the team.”

Mal and Ashley both find themselves ostracized at work. For Mal, “It’s not ‘in your face.’ If I talk to them, they’ll answer me. I still get invited to work functions. But it’s still really obvious. If I go to join in a conversation, people go quiet and then separate. No one asks me to go to lunch with them.” Ashley reports similar experiences, “They just stop talking when I come into the room, and if I sit with someone at break and start conversation with them, I get one-word answers until I give up. Once, I went to [a nearby bar] after work and four of them were in there and they pretended not to see me.” For Mal and Ashley, their strategy of *disrupting cisnormativity* is socially costly and exhausting and they, of all participants, most clearly show the cultural power of cisnormativity and its deleterious effects upon fostering an inclusive workplace environment.

Critiquing Cisnormativity

Three more subjects were explicit about the ways in which cisnormativity is enforced in their workplace via discursive aggression and how difficult it makes their working lives. However, they reported only rarely raising the issue at work.

Miranda, a 29-year-old white trans woman, who works as an eye doctor’s receptionist, said that while her colleagues “weren’t too bad” and that her manager is “actually really supportive, usually,” she has experienced a significant degree of discursive aggression from patients and found herself professionally expected to accept this treatment (subverting one’s needs for others, a form of self-enforcement under shuster [2017]). Miranda’s experience highlights another intersectional consideration within the trans community around “passing” as a particular gender and the greater oppression and aggression experienced by trans people perceived as “not passing.” She said,

Because I’m tall and quite big-boned, I don’t “pass” [as a woman] and this makes people feel like they have the right to ask personal questions. I get patients who ask me “Are you a man?” or “Why are you wearing a skirt?” [Miranda’s gender

performance is intentionally femme.] Sometimes, they just smirk at me or outright laugh, or they'll refer to me as "he" or call me "miss" very sarcastically. Sometimes, this hurts.

One of Shuster's (2017) subthemes is the other-enforcement when cis people feel they have the right to ask intrusive questions. As indicated, Miranda suffers regularly from this treatment. Although it does not come from her colleagues directly, Miranda often finds them unsympathetic, adding an expectation of self-enforcement to the ways in which she is held accountable to cisnormativity at work. She feels an expectation to cope and that her supervisors have very little comprehension of the harmful effects of being repeatedly subjected to discursive aggression. In her own words, "[My manager] said she knows it's hard but it's part of the job. She talked about the drunks and druggies we get in who are abusive or just really, really unreasonable people who yell at us and said, 'We all have to deal with upsetting incidents and can just support each other.'"

Miranda's manager shows apparent unawareness of the difference between an unpleasant encounter experienced by a person who is not a victim of systemic injustice and the oppression of a marginalized individual whose identity and existence is being denied and denigrated by repeated discursive aggressions (cf. Dotson, 2014; Shuster, 2017). As a white, cis woman, Miranda's manager retains the privilege of remaining oblivious to power imbalances which affect trans people who become the victims of cisnormative policing (Crenshaw, 1989; de Vries, 2015; Shuster, 2017). The practice nurse in Miranda's office was similarly ignorant:

[The nurse] said I need to think about it in the same way as mentally ill people. I've got a reputation for being patient with mentally ill patients who say inappropriate things. I can deal with that. She said I need to get into that mindset with transphobes.

We had an argument about it, and she said I was being aggressive, but I was just so hurt and frustrated because I thought she was my friend and she didn't get it.

The nurse, a cis black woman, although subject to intersections of multiple oppressions including on the grounds of race and gender, has cisgender privilege and, like Miranda's manager, is able to ignore systems of power which affect trans people. She entirely neglected the power dynamics inherent in transphobia and, like the manager, policed Miranda's feelings instead, using her dominant status to effect other-enforcement and expecting Miranda to engage in self-enforcement by acquiescing to a power structure in which she is disadvantaged.

Two other interviewees, Iona, a 44-year-old white trans woman, and Tom, a 28-year-old white trans man, work in office environments and report similar experiences of discursive aggression. Both have been misgendered, particularly on the phone, due to cisnormative expectations of what men and women "should" sound like, and both encounter gender-role expectations frequently (cf. Schilt, 2006). Iona stated, "When I have to call another department and I give them my name, I still often get people misgendering me. They'll ask me to repeat my name and they'll sound confused and then they'll call me 'he.'" She also remarked, "I get told how to be a woman properly by both cis men and cis women. I've had women give me tips on fashion and make-up like I'm a novice, and one man actually said to me 'Women don't sit like that.' Cis women have also acted weird when I've been in the bathroom with them, but they don't say anything."

Tom, who expressed great frustration with "the whole pronoun thing" and thus "[prefers] people don't replace [Tom's] name with third-person pronouns," similarly finds that people become confused about Tom's gender over the phone, and that this manifests in long pauses or stuttering. Tom revealed the epistemic gap in cisnormativity when Tom said, "It's like their brains can't process a conflict between my voice and my name; you know, like

they can't think outside the gender binary box." Tom, like Iona, also finds Tom's gender policed but more by men than women. "Men want to tell me how to be a man. They really think they're helping. Well, some are just assholes, but more think I'm like their apprentice and they can teach me about how men are supposed to speak and what they're supposed to like. It is clear they don't think I already am a man or that I'm not as 'real' a man as they are."

Within their workplace environments, Iona and Tom suffer discursive aggression which stems from cisnormativity—the assumption that everyone is or should be cisgender or conform to cisnormative expectations of gender performance and expression—which leads to confusion about their voices. In agreement with Schilt's (2006) work on trans men in the workplace, they also suffer ostensibly benevolent "teaching" from cisgender individuals on how to perform their gender "properly." This other-enforcement is experienced as intrusive, and their use of the words "novice" and "apprentice" show they feel unaccepted as "real" women and men. It is significant that only Iona experiences (poorly-disguised) fear or discomfort when sharing the bathroom with other women—the "penis panic" as identified by Westbrook and Schilt (2014). Tom, as a trans man, is not regarded as threatening by cis men so much as Tom is treated as a curiosity, an impostor, or a "weirdo."

Regardless of their observation of the problem and their familiarity with the concept of cisnormativity and discursive aggression, Miranda, Iona, and Tom self-enforce accountability to cisnormativity and do not consistently raise issues within their workplaces in the ways that Mal and Ashley do. Miranda remarked, "There's no point with the little things. I feel like I've got to pick my battles and if I can't get anyone to take explicit abuse seriously, they're not going to care much about binary language." Iona expressed a similar sentiment, indicating awareness that it would be professionally damaging to challenge cisnormativity at work: "It's not a huge deal. I mean, it's annoying and sometimes I have to

say something, but people mostly mean well. I don't want to ruin my working relationships.” Tom expressed Tom's reticence differently but still revealed self-enforcement under cisnormative dominance: “I should speak up more. I used to, and I still do sometimes but I need to work with these guys and some of them are my friends. They're not bad people, just stuck in a cis mindset and maybe it's not always my job to free them?”

In all three cases, the individuals tried to address cisnormative assumptions but found their colleagues so deeply entrenched that they could not realize the problem (Dotson, 2014; Fricker, 2009). Ultimately, the epistemic system that centuries of discursively constructed cisnormativity has produced is so resilient that critiquing it from a marginalized trans perspective made no impact upon it (cf. Dotson, 2014). As a result, these subjects ultimately became exhausted and often engaged in self-enforcement (shuster, 2017) to avoid conflict. Moreover, all three voiced a fear of implicit or explicit professional repercussions if they fought workplace cisnormativity too vigorously, increasing their self-enforced cisnormative compliance. shuster found the same phenomenon in their interviews, “Some... may at first attempt to address the mistakes that are made. But most of the interviewees eventually acquiesced to the power structure. In being aware of others' expectations for how interactions should unfold, trans people may engage in self-silencing to uphold the social order” (2017, 494).

Self-Enforcing Cisnormativity

While Miranda, Iona, and Tom were aware of the structures of power around them and that gender was being enforced discursively (even though they often felt pressured to go along with it), most subjects seemed unaware. Because I did not want to dictate their experience (Hale, 2009), I asked simple questions about whether they felt pressured to comply with gender norms by the way people spoke in their presence. Eleven people revealed countless

ways in which they self-enforced and maintained highly prevalent cisnormative cultures within their workplaces. Five examples stand out.

Holly, a 54-year-old white trans woman, Stephen a 30-year-old black trans man, and Dan, a 24-year-old genderfluid white person all originally said “no” to being under any pressure to conform to gender norms, but this changed subsequent to clarifying my questions. He responded almost identically to Holly, for example, when she said, “Oh! You mean the whole ‘ladies and gentlemen,’ ‘boys and girls,’ ‘he and she’ thing? Yeah, that’s totally normal at my work. They do assume you are one or the other and that you are the same as your genitals. That assumption is made a lot.” Though neither Dan nor Holly seemed concerned by it, this is the essence of cisnormativity being discursively maintained, which raises questions about why it isn’t recognized as such. Holly responded by stating, “Well, it’s normal, isn’t it?” Stephen’s experiences were slightly different. As he indicated,

No, I’m not really under any pressure. No one tells me I shouldn’t present as a man or anything. They do assume I have a penis though. I mean, we don’t talk about penises a lot [laughs] but it has come up a few times when we’re joking around. Sometimes they make fun of other men by saying I have the biggest dick at the table, especially because I’m, you know, black.

This behavior is not only racist and masculinist; it is also an explicit reference to the ideology of biological essentialism underlying cisnormativity. Furthermore, it reveals the discursive work undertaken by Stephen’s co-workers so that they might accept him as a man. Male genitalia and even (racist) penis-centric discursive themes are intrusively forced upon him, and he self-enforces to maintain the social approbation of coworkers. Indeed, his acceptance and the advantages conferred by camaraderie in the workplace seem predicated on his willingness to accept cisnormativity. This theme is reflected by Dan, who said at first that there is no pressure to fit in with any gender norms but on further elaboration, revealed that

they themselves uphold cisnormative assumptions in the way they address their colleagues. When asked why, they said, “I just think people understand better if you use the language they are used to.”

In all three cases, self-enforcement is manifest. Holly, Stephen, and Dan accept dominant cisnormative language and assumptions as being normative, thus appropriate, and do so to the extent that they did not immediately recognize them as cisnormative. As a result, they tacitly comply with cisnormativity in their workplaces by not challenging or correcting false assumptions and even adopting the language which other trans people often find exclusionary. Upon explaining the concept of “discursive aggression,” however, all three agreed that they can see how the term would apply. As Dan phrased it, “Okay, yeah, that kind of makes sense as a kind of aggression. I can definitely see that.”

Leah, a 21-year-old second-generation Asian-American non-binary femme software engineer privately mentioned when asked about *tāde* preferred pronouns that *tā* prefers the Mandarin pronouns “*tā*” and “*tāde*” for *tā zìjǐ* in order to honor *tāde* Chinese heritage but “[does not] mention it because [*tā*] live[s] in Michigan.” (When asked whether Leah preferred the male or female variant of Chinese character for *tā*, *tā* indicated the female and remarked that *tāde* parents will only use the male.) Like Holly, Stephen, and Dan, *tā* did not recognize *tāde* own engagement with self-enforcement as problematic. When first queried, *tā* said, “No, it’s pretty cool. I’ve got a good team. They don’t really put pressure on me” but when asked to elaborate on how gender is discussed around *tā*, *tā* revealed that *tāde* team, which was otherwise male, largely speaks in a way that projects maleness onto *tā*. Nevertheless, despite presenting as femme, Leah experiences and even enjoys a strong sense of “being one of the guys” and is often referred to as part of a collective with the word “guys.” This sense of fellowship, however, runs at odds with *tāde* presentation and identification as femme. *Tā* has also been called “dude” several times and once, “bro.” When

discussing this, *tā* indicated “it’s kind of annoying sometimes, yeah,” and then quickly added, “but I don’t really mind. I think it’s meant in a kind of gender-neutral way. It would be nice if they acknowledged my femininity or my Chinese heritage sometimes, but it doesn’t really come up. It might seem weird if it did. I don’t know.” Thus, to feel like “one of the guys” (a full part of the team), Leah accepts when *tāde* colleagues address *tā* in a way which assumes the gender identity that *tā* rejects as unfitting to keep from making the workplace dynamic become “weird.”

Samuel, a 31-year-old white trans man, initially denied that gender was ever discussed at his workplace, a warehouse where he worked as a forklift operator. When probed if gendered pronouns were used and gender norms assumed, however, he replied, “Oh, yeah, we say ‘he and she’ and we talk about ‘the girls in the office’ and ‘the men on the floor’ although there is one man in the office and the cleaners on the warehouse floor are mostly women.” Samuel felt this cisnormativity and binary understanding of gender roles did not equate to discursive aggression because he is “a man on the floor,” that is, because he performs a masculine gender. Samuel’s case is not uncommon; studies have shown trans men benefit from an elevation of status after transitioning (Dozier, 2005; Schilt, 2006). The most in-depth look at this phenomenon was by Abelson who identified attitudes among some young trans men, which closely resembled those of the Men’s Rights Movement.

Like many men, this group was not particularly interested in feminism or taking on a feminist identity for themselves... Although some agreed with some basic feminist principles, they characterized feminists as man-hating, angry women who did not understand what it was like to be a man... While this was a relatively small group, the views of these men should be of particular concern for feminist and trans politics.
(2016, 18)

That is, Samuel benefits from cisnormativity because he is advantageously socially positioned, thus he did not recognize the linguistic conventions surrounding cisnormativity.

Colluding with Cisnormativity

Of course, trans individuals cannot be expected to carry the burdens of disrupting cisnormativity in their workplaces or in culture more broadly, so it isn't surprising that some choose to benefit from it. Thus, an attitude of colluding with cisnormativity, far exceeding the mere acceptance of benefit exhibited by Samuel, presented in two of my subjects, though it manifested differently in each case. Peter, a 27-year-old white, trans man, was directly antagonistic to anything falling outside of "biology ideology," cisnormativity, and their enforcement. Although I asked open questions to allow Peter to guide the conversation, his efforts to dominate the discourse were largely successful. He spoke over me repeatedly and redirected the conversation. He sat with legs spread taking up as much space as possible, spoke aggressively, and frequently leaned forward, as if to intimidate.

When I asked Peter, who worked as a lab technician, if he felt any pressure to comply with gender norms at work, he revealed a degree of sophistication in his understanding of scholarship and activism around gender: "Nope. No microaggressions and no need for safe spaces, trigger warnings, and diversity training. I can 'perform' [sarcastic tone] my gender any way I want. And call me 'he/his/him,' god damn it; I'm a man." His hostility was immediately apparent. Although smiling, his sneering mockery of "safe spaces and trigger warnings" recalls a common and ascendant anti-inclusion trope used to disregard the safety and well-being of marginalized and traumatized people. When I asked him to elaborate, he responded, "I come to work, and I do my job, and I get on fine with people. Language is not violence. Nothing is forced on me. People talk in terms of male and female because this is how the species is perpetuated. It's not a conspiracy." When asked how he responds to people

who might falsely insist that he, as a trans man, is really a woman, he replied, “I tell them to go fuck themselves.”

Peter’s paradoxical appeal to biological essentialism and the “biological imperative,” which assumes that heterosexuality and cisnormativity is “natural” while being a trans man himself, remains the dominant ideology and forms the basis of Lorber’s (1993) scientific “biology ideology.” This can only be explained in terms of a strategy of collusion with cisnormativity to deal with cisnormative discursive aggression. I asked Peter if he thought language had any power over marginalized individuals, and he responded scientifically by citing both popular and scholarly sources in evolutionary psychology—without recognizing the validity of opposing scholarship demonstrating that evolutionary psychology is largely a pseudo-scientific offshoot of evolutionary biology frequently used by white supremacists and (trans)misogynists to “explain” the inferiority of people of color and women (Samuels, 2017). “Gender theory? Doing gender? Hormonal folklore? What a lot of shit! Those people aren’t ‘scholars’; they’re insane!” he replied when I asked his opinion about relevant gender-studies scholarship. He then dominated the conversation for several minutes.

The interview with Peter ultimately proved contentious because he refused to consider the role of socialization within gender identity or the part dominant discourses play in maintaining structures of oppression. He became upset at the suggestion that he could be marginalized or constrained as a trans man and presented himself with an expectation to verbally dominate me (as a woman) and explain gender to/over me. This performance of masculinity is toxic, actively colludes with cisnormativity, and its rise among trans men is alarming to social justice scholars working on issues affecting trans people (Abelson, 2016). Although Abelson is careful to point out that many trans men respond to the increased status afforded them by being recognized as men through using their new power and authority to

support trans women, some take advantage of the privilege afforded them by their maleness and perpetuate it by upholding cisnormative and patriarchal power structures.

John, a 26-year-old Asian office worker, also resisted the idea that cisnormative language at work constitutes discursive aggression and that social-justice scholarship that studies this is worthwhile. His manner and tone, however, were more fearful than hostile, possibly indicating elements of self-enforcement through acquiescence to a dominant cisnormative workplace power structure. His first statement was, “Most people are straight, and most people are cis. This comes out in their language. It doesn’t need fixing. Besides, most people are really accommodating and give me very little problem. If you get in their faces, that will change. You’ll just make life harder for trans people.” It was revealing that John immediately blamed the people interrogating cisnormative discourse for making his life difficult rather than the people reinforcing cisnormativity. His deflection from the problem and his accusation that it would cause hostility to address discursive aggression affecting trans people made it reasonable to infer that his anxiety was rooted in fear for his safety.

When I asked John what he feared could happen if dominant gender narratives were challenged, he answered, “It makes cis people wary of talking to trans people if they think they’re gonna be called out on their language every five minutes. We just want to be accepted as colleagues and friends. I don’t want my whole identity to be a political statement, and my experience has been that I don’t need it to be.” John’s approach is precisely opposite of the disruptive approach of Mal and Ashley, whose persistent challenge to cisnormativity was met with hostility and ostracism.

John’s fears are not unfounded. Despite his attempts to refocus blame on the people troubling cisnormative narratives, they show how pervasive and powerful discursive aggression was in his workplace. As trans people should not be considered to bear the twin responsibilities of being blamed for producing or having to overcome cisnormativity in the

environments, especially the workplace, a closer look at cultural and institutional structures is necessary in cases like John's. He is well aware, in fact, that standing up for his identity and demanding equal status would have high social, thus professional, costs, and so he self-enforces cisnormativity, colludes, and perpetuates it while misdirecting his anger at those attempting to address the problem.

Discussion

It is significant that all 18 subjects identify cisnormativity and discursive aggression in their workplaces as outlined by Shuster (2017) and Hollander (2013), but they differ widely in how they choose to address it. Two subjects make consistent attempts at its *disruption*. They experience hostility and ostracism for their refusal to allow cisnormativity to be discursively constructed by others, with this being explicitly verbalized to Ashley because of their race. The three *critics* of cisnormativity address the problem explicitly but have become resigned and self-enforce most of the time—despite remaining cognizant of the problem and criticizing it to sympathetic listeners. These subjects have been worn down by their failure to penetrate the cisnormative epistemic system in which they are forced to operate.

Eleven subjects feel forced to *self-enforce* cisnormativity and discursive aggression to the extent that they are not consciously aware of its existence. However, when asked explicitly about certain discursive aggressions, they recognize their prevalence and acknowledge these to be burdensome. They are willing to accept discursive aggression at work to avoid the inevitable conflict that would ensue if they challenge cisnormativity. This was, by far, the most common response and comports with their need to communicate and interact within an epistemic system that does not include their experience (Dotson, 2014; Fricker, 2009).

The two men who were defensive and hostile towards social justice activism differed in attitude. Peter exhibits an aggressive form of masculinity to protect his identity as a man,

and John reveals his fear of the very ostracism and hostility that the disrupters reported experiencing. Peter's overt hostility may indicate a form of self-protection through performing his masculinity in an aggressive, masculinist way so that it might be accepted as genuine by other men and their female sympathizers. John's implicit denial of the scope and significance of the problem and entreaty to those working within social justice scholarship and activism to stop challenging cisnormativity is perhaps the most poignant indicator of how ingrained cisnormativity is and how one can be coerced into *collusion* with it.

Limitations, Practice Implications, and Conclusions

One significant limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size, which may have proven too small to have clearly derived this four-part typology for strategies used to endure and navigate workplace cisnormativity had those not been previously outlined in Hollander (2013) and developed by Shuster (2017). As such, future studies would benefit from a larger sample of trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming individuals that may reinforce these data and conclusions while potentially broadening the spectrum of workplace-relevant discursive strategies. This could be of particular use in carefully delineating the different experiences and discursive strategies employed by both transgender and cisgender individuals who are either conforming or non-conforming (esp. non-binary). It is also recommended that future research on this topic include trans researchers (cf. Hale, 2009).

In practice, these findings are relevant in many organizational and professional contexts in which trans and gender-nonconforming people work. Of particular importance for management is bearing in mind that these individuals, who are already marginalized by their identities, should not be expected to bear the burden of remediating cisnormativity and trans-exclusion in their workplaces. This four-part typology of discursive strategies therefore can be useful in helping managers better identify and intervene upon problematic cisnormativity in the workplace that may otherwise have gone unnoticed, especially against trans women.

Managers who identify these patterns within their organizations would be encouraged to investigate and then shoulder the responsibilities of minimizing cisnormativity and transmisogyny in their departments and organizational cultures. This could include trans- and gender-sensitivity training for management and cisgender employees who, lacking sufficient awareness of trans- and gender-relevant issues, create and maintain cisnormativity.

In conclusion, this study looked at different ways in which trans and gender-nonconforming people manage (mostly) unwelcome cisnormativity in their places of work and the rationalizations they give for doing so. These reactions can be categorized as “disrupting,” “critiquing,” “self-enforcing,” and “colluding” and are rationalized through a scale ranging from challenge/disruption to self-protection/collusion. What comes across most saliently is that, because cisnormativity is vigorously enforced throughout society and in the workplace, the need for self-protection considerably outweighs the fortitude needed to politically challenge discursive aggression and disrupt the dominant system. Cisnormative entrenchment is so profound, the epistemic system so resilient, and the amount of emotional labor required to deal with it so great that acceptance and resignation proved the most common reactions, even despite significant expressions of anger and exhaustion. Further studies could build on this scale and further nuance these overlapping categories with a view to strengthen and support trans and gender-nonconforming people in overcoming the cisnormative assumptions which oppress them.

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