“Welcome to Womanhood!” The Impact of (Trans) Gender at Work

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

Building on status construction theory and work stratification literatures, this study examines gender interactional processes and status hierarchies at work using a provocative case in point: transwomen’s employment experiences. Through 25 in-depth interviews with male-to-female transsexuals (transwomen) in two mid-western cities, the current study uncovers the ways in which co-workers teach transwomen gender status beliefs after they transition to women and the effect these status beliefs have on transwomen’s subsequent behaviors. Results indicate that many transwomen are assumed to be less competent and less knowledgeable. In addition, they are ignored and harassed more frequently once they transition to women, particularly in male-dominated employment contexts. Findings also indicate a self-fulfilling effect that occurs after their transition in which transwomen become less dominant and assertive, partly due to their co-workers’ differential treatment toward them. This research has important implications for the ways in which gender status beliefs are exchanged at work and the broader impact that gendered interactions can have on men and women’s employment outcomes.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a major institution in American society, the workplace acts as a powerful establishment-an establishment that holds the capacity to reify gender inequality. Feminist scholars have long noted that employment organizations are not just rational, goal-oriented institutions. Rather, they are gendered organizations that privilege certain groups in society, notably and historically European-American men, in the process of achieving their high-level organizational goals (Fiske 1993 et al.; Fletcher 1999; Martin 2003; Ridgeway 2001). Though differential work outcomes between men and women have been extensively documented, research on the gendered interactional processes that take place at work remain under-developed, partly because these micro-processes are difficult to measure and empirically capture (Martin 2003).

These micro-interactional processes are crucial to understanding gender inequality at work because the majority of organizations are comprised of groups in which co-worker interactions are integral to everyday business (West and Zimmerman 1987; Roscigno 2007). Ridgeway’s development of status construction theory (1991; 2006) offers a useful framework to examine gendered processes and mechanisms that connect micro-interactions with both structure and personal belief systems. Status construction theory explains the way in which status beliefs that advantage one group (men) and disadvantage another group (women) spread and become consensual. Building on status
construction theory and work stratification literatures, I examine gender inequality and status hierarchies using a provocative case in point: transwomen’s employment experiences.

Transwomen are individuals who are born biologically male and later transition to women. Because of their unique dual gender employment experiences, the study of transgender individuals offers an ideal opportunity to evaluate the role of gendered micro-interactions at work (Schilt 2009). Prior to their transitions, these individuals experience work from the vantage point of the advantaged, “ideal” male worker; as women, they experience work from the vantage point of the disadvantaged, “non-ideal” worker (Acker 1990). Through in-depth interviews with 25 transwomen in two Ohio metropolis areas, I analyze transwomen’s employment experiences before and after their gender transitions to women.

While research has begun to examine the personal lives of transwomen, it has largely neglected transwomen’s experiences in the employment sphere (for exceptions see Schilt 2009; Schilt and Connell 2007; Connell 2010). Indeed, research has yet to fully unpack the consequences associated with transwomen’s gender transition from a dominant position (men) to a subordinate position (women). Moreover, while some feminist scholars contend that transsexuals either reproduce oppressive gender scripts (Eichler 1987; Irvine 1990) or challenge gender boundaries (Butler 2004; Connell 2010), research has yet to examine whether transwomen, as a result of gender-policing, conform to behaviors that are less valued in the workplace, such as passivity. This study addresses
this research gap by uncovering the ways in which transwomen perceive being treated differently by co-workers’ based on their new status as women and transwomen’s resulting behavioral changes at work, even if these changes may be detrimental to their careers.

The central research questions are as follows: (1) Do transwomen lose status (in the form of authority and assumed competence) at work once they transition to women? (2) If so, how do transwomen perceive that this new status is communicated to them through interactional exchanges with co-workers? (3) How does differential treatment by co-workers affect transwomen’s behaviors at work? My findings indicate that the majority of transwomen report disadvantages in the following four areas: diminished perceived competence and knowledge base, decreased visibility and inclusion with male colleagues, double-standards, and increased harassment. As a result, transwomen become less dominant and assertive, partly due to their co-workers differential treatment toward them. Ultimately, I argue transwomen’s dual gender employment experiences provide compelling evidence that gender inequality - for both trans and cis-women\(^1\) - is partly reproduced and maintained through daily interactions at work.

\(^1\) Cis-women are individuals whose female gender identities match their gender assigned at birth based on biological factors.
Chapter 2: Gender Inequality at Work

A large body of gender stratification research documents that, despite similar human capital, males’ work contributions are more highly rewarded than females’ work contributions. This idea is known as asymmetrical valuation (England 1982, Valian 1999, Altonji and Blank 1999; Budig and England 2001, Budig 2002; Blau and Kahn 2006). Controlling for both education and experience, women continue to be paid less (Petersen and Saporta 2004; Tomaskovic-Devey and Skaggs 2002; Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Castilla 2008) and are promoted at slower rates than men in a variety of work spheres (Petersen and Saporta 2004; Gorman and Kmec 2009). Indeed, gendered promotion gaps are evident in white and blue collar professions (Padavic and Reskin 2002; Byrd 1999), as well as female, male, and mixed-sex employment fields (Budig 2002). In addition to within-job discrimination, ample research on occupation segregation indicates that human capital is rewarded differently between whole categories of jobs; even when controlling for relevant wage factors (education, skill level, etc.), female-dominated positions are paid considerably less than comparable male-dominated jobs (Cohen and Huffman 2003; Crosby, Stockdale, Ropp 2007).

Despite extensive documentation of disparate gender work outcomes, scholars know less about the mechanisms that foster the production and perpetuation of gender
inequality at work. In the past, scholars have used individual-oriented, non-integration theories, such as human capital and gender socialization, to explain gender inequality at work. Gender socialization\(^2\), human capital\(^3\) and statistical discrimination\(^4\) theory are each individual-level theories that seek to explain why women and men develop different personalities, traits, ambitions, and life paths. Although these theories have some merit in explaining differential work outcomes between men and women, explanations remain incomplete.

Later revisions and extensions to these micro-level theories consider the operation and inter-dependence of gender across multiple levels (individual, interactional, and institutional level) that generate inequality at work (Lorber 1994; Risman 2004; Ridgeway 2011). Gender is not merely an internalized state but rather is institutionalized on a broader, structural level and operates through social relations characterized by differential power statuses between men and women (Risman 2004). Despite this acknowledgement in the gender literature, empirical data addressing multiple levels, particularly with a focus on the interactional level, is under-developed. Because

\(^2\) Gender socialization theory argues that socialization leads men to value and develop competitive and authority-related traits and women to value and develop communal traits, such as nurturance and cooperation (Risman 1998). These cultural beliefs lead individuals to pursue roles and activities that complement their identities and “inherent” strengths or avoid trajectories that correspond with their “inherent” weaknesses (Correll 2001; 2004).

\(^3\) Human capital theory rests upon the idea of neutral labor market environments that reward employees based on experience, ability, efficiency, and quality of output. Further, employers are assumed not to base employment decisions on non-productivity related factors because this would be irrational. Hence, inequality between men and women stems from discrepancies in skill, education, and experience, not inequality practices.

\(^4\) Statistical discrimination theory states that employers use recognizable group differences, such as sex or race, as proxies on assumed productivity of workers when making employment decisions. In view of historical private/public labor arrangements between men and women, women are assumed, on average, to be less productive at work due to family responsibilities (England 2005).
employment is comprised of countless interactions, it is imperative that scholars understand how social exchanges reinscribe difference and inequality between men and women. My study helps address this gap in research by studying gender on multiple planes with a focus on how other levels affect interactional exchanges between co-workers. Specifically, this research examines the influence of cultural gender schemas on employee interactions and the impact employment contexts have on either magnifying or ameliorating gender inequality.

Social relations are exchanged through interviews, employee performance meetings, project collaboration, and work social-outings, and are exchanged between all types of workers or affiliates—colleagues, bosses, subordinates, clients, or customers. Although overt practices of sexism and discrimination have been reduced over the past few decades in the workplace, more subtle forms of discrimination continue to manifest in the “non-reflexive practicing” of gender (Martin 2006). Whether intentional or unintentional, Martin (2003) argues that men frequently engage in a number of activities, she terms as “gender slights”, that undermine women’s confidence and feeling of importance. Activities, such as acknowledging and engaging with other men more than women in meetings, or offering men, but not women, protection and support, create difference and inequality between men and women.

Emerging research on transsexuals’ employment experiences provides compelling evidence of the gendered nature of interactions and social exchanges at work. Connell (2010) finds that both transmen and transwomen have an increased awareness of gender
discrimination because of their previous experiences on the other side of the gender coin. Schilt (2006; 2009) leverages the language of “outsider within” from Collins (1986) to describe transmen’s unique gender-position. Since transmen are born and socialized as females, their previous experiences as women make them outsiders to biological males when they transition to men; in spite of this, they are often included as “just one of the guys”. Because of their previous knowledge and treatment as women, they develop a dual perspective that reveals the wizard behind the curtain of gendered interactions and practices of organizations.

Transgender research indicates that gender presentation is often enough to confer employment advantages if a person transitions to a hegemonically masculine man or disadvantages if one transitions to a woman. Schilt (2006; 2009) and Dozier (2005) find that despite their stigmatized transgender status, transmen receive many of the benefits associated with maleness, such as increased authority, economic opportunities and respect, after they transition to men. Schilt and Connell (2007) and Connell (2010) examine both transwomen and transmen’s work experiences. Both studies find that transmen are able to access some aspects of male-privilege; in contrast, transwomen are disadvantaged in terms of assumed competence and increased amounts of harassment.

However, these studies do not fully unpack the interactional disadvantages associated with transitioning from a higher status (men) to a lower status (women). While Schilt’s research on transmen discusses the distinct advantages associated with transitioning to men at work, research on transwomen has yet to provide analysis on the
wide-range of the consequences associated with transitioning to women at work. This may be a result of the smaller samples that both Schilt and Connell (2007) and Connell (2010) studies are built upon: 11 transwomen. Because transwomen transition from a dominant status (men) to a subordinate status (women), it is imperative to understand the interactive processes associated with abdicating power and authority at work versus inferring that process from the experiences of transmen. This study examines these interactive processes and addresses whether a change in transwomen’s power is due to their female status or due to the “devaluation of the feminine”. My findings indicate that transwomen who did not display hegemonical masculinity pre-transition did not experience decreased status at work post-transition. These findings have significant implications for whether a person’s “female status” or the embodiment of “the feminine” conveys disadvantages. This study extends Schilt and Connell’s (2007) research on the lack of commensurate advantages among nonhegemonically masculine transmen.

While previous research contends that transsexuals replicate oppressive gender scripts (Eichler 1987; Irvine 1990); more recent work shows that transsexuals often challenge gender boundaries (Butler 2004; Connell 2010). Connell (2010) finds that both transmen and transwomen gain a heightened feminist consciousness after transitioning and depending on the context, they are “important constituents in the collect feminist project of dismantling gender inequality” (p 50). Much like cis-people, transsexuals likely replicate and challenge gender hierarchies depending on the environment and
situation. Indeed, this research reveals processes through which gender inequality is recreated in workplaces regardless of trans “heightened feminist consciousness”.

According to Ridgeway (1997; 2006), belief or acceptance in the conventional gender order is not necessary to conform to gendered behavioral expectations. Even if transwomen do not believe in the current gender hierarchy, they are still held accountable to female gender scripts. By policing a transwoman’s gender performance to align with feminine scripts, co-workers are able to maintain the current gender order that would otherwise be disrupted by their gender transition (Schilt 2009). In other words, gender policing allows for transwomen and their acceptance at work to not shatter the gender dichotomy. However, the current body of research, while innovative in its focus on transpeople’s behavioral changes, was unable to examine whether transwomen are gender-policied into conforming to behaviors that are not valued in the workplace, such as passivity and confidence in work-related abilities. This current study builds upon previous transsexual work by identifying specific disadvantages that result from transitioning to women and on-going behavioral changes that occur as a result of gender policing.

Another understudied factor when examining transsexuals’ work experience is the difference in social and human capital accumulated pre-transition by transmen and transwomen. At the point of transitioning, transwomen and transmen have lived their entire lives as the gender typically associated with their biological sex. As a result, transpeople’s accruement of capital has often been guided according to the male and
female scripts associated with their pre-transition gender. Accordingly, transwomen have
the opportunity to accrue benefits and privileges from living as men for a significant
number of years. Thus, on average, transwomen will have higher levels of human capital
compared with transmen, yet transwomen are the group that experiences higher levels of
discrimination / disadvantage – the opposite of what a “neutral” workplace would confer.

While some of the current study’s respondents report defying male norms and
acting in accordance with their female identity pre-transition, the majority of them report
squelching their inner desires to express femininities. Although transwomen often
psychologically identify as or feel female from a young age, because they are biologically
born as males they are held accountable to male gender norms by most, if not all, people
in their lives (peers, family, teachers, church leaders, etc). Research indicates that
families and peers repetitiously teach boys to distance themselves from feminine
qualities, such as emotionality and passivity, and from icons associated with females (e.g.
Barbie) (Kane 2006; Pascoe 2007). If boys choose to resist and are gender non-
conforming, they are typically reacted to negatively and sanctioned by their families and
peers. Thus, many transwomen, before their transition, often adhere and benefit from
traditional male gender scripts that privilege men over women. This research examines
processes that produce downward status/power mobility of transwomen at work and how
male- accumulated social and human capital is rewarded and perceived differently post-
transition as women.
Chapter 3: Status Construction & Gender Inequality

Status construction theory explains the process by which status beliefs that advantage one group (men) and disadvantages another group (women) are created, perpetuated, and dispersed throughout society and become consensual between both groups (Ridgeway 1991). Status beliefs connect social capability and esteem with one group over another on the basis of observed social differences (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway et al. 2009). Ultimately, this theory helps frame and highlight the importance of micro-interactions and cultural expectations in the generation and replication of gender inequality at work.

The majority of empirical support for this theory comes from laboratory experiments (Ridgeway et al. 1998; Ridgeway et al. 2009). In contrast, this research illustrates how status construction theory plays out through interactions between transwomen and coworkers in actual workplaces. The current study demonstrates the repercussions that changing one’s gender has on a person’s status at work and the self-fulfilling effects that occur as a result.

Gender Status Beliefs & Structure

In the case of gender, status beliefs are commonly held values that associate higher levels of competency and worth to one sex over the other. Due to sex-
categorization that automatically occurs in any social interaction (Blair and Banaji 1996), gender status beliefs are activated in a variety of contexts. As status construction theory contends, gender status beliefs play an integral role in inequitable gender outcomes at work (Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway 2001). Although a person’s job or organizational position can, and often does, act as a foreground identity, gender almost always acts as a background status due to the prevalence of automatic sex-categorization (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). In situations where a person’s institutional role is more prominent, people will treat that person in accordance to norms associated with that role; however, a person’s background gender identity still has the potential to bias behavior in more subtle, less overt ways (Ridgeway 1997).

Gender is highly salient during mixed-sex settings and during activities or in environments that have been sex-categorized as either male or female (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Wagner and Berger 1997; Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev 2000). Since the majority of employment settings within the United States adhere to either mixed-sex or a sex-typed environment (excluding instances of self-employment or entirely single-sexed occupations), status construction theory would maintain that gender, and therefore, gender status beliefs, are salient and impact people’s actions toward other contextually-relevant individuals and assessment of others in employment contexts (Ridgeway 1997).

Expanding upon expectation states theory, Ridgeway illuminates how structural factors and micro-interactions act together in forming hierarchies of esteem between people who have recognized differences. Accordingly, hierarchies of influence often
develop when a group of people are united in a goal-oriented task (Stewart and Moore 1992; Ridgeway and Walker 1995). When there are unequal structural conditions between two categorically different groups in goal-oriented tasks, the structurally disadvantaged group will be handicapped in flexing influence and obtaining power. Conversely, individuals who benefit from structural conditions will be advantaged in obtaining power and influence.

Structural disadvantage for one sex (and thus, advantage for the other sex) can arise through male/female imbalances in employee composition within a firm. According to the theory of tokenism, Kanter (1977) argues that minority groups will experience more hostile work environments when they numerically represent small proportions within the company; as numeric representation of lower-status groups increase, the culture will become more inclusive. Indeed, Orzechowicz (2010) ethnographic research on parade performers at a major American theme park demonstrates that numeric dominance of homosexual employees disrupts the workings of heteronormativity; although, it is important to note that the culture still celebrates male homosexuality over female homosexuality. Empirical research reveals that women are more likely to experience social exclusion and closure and sexual harassment in male-dominated employment settings (Mansfield et al. 1991; Roscigno 2007).

Although there are situations, such as caregiving, where status beliefs favor women, they generally benefit men. To that point, characteristics and stereotypes associated with men or masculinity are considered more valuable in society than traits
associated with women or femininity (Broverman et al. 1972; Deaux and Kite 1987). Gender status beliefs suggest that men are considered more competent in gender-neutral and male sex-typed activities while women have a slight gender-advantage in female sex-typed activities. Empirical evidence also suggests that men are even advantaged over women- “riding the glass escalator”- in female-dominated workplace spheres; although this does not necessarily hold for the private sphere, the home (Williams 1992; Budig 2002). Therefore, sex ratios interact with broader, societal gender-hierarchies to either escalate power differentials between men and women, as in male-dominated work, or, in the case of female-dominated spheres, help to at least neutralize oppressive scripts.

As similar structural conditions are replicated on a large scale, such as an unequal distribution of resources between groups, differences of esteem are attributed to categorical group difference rather than structure. In accordance with the expectation states theory, people often make assumptions on how someone is going to act in a social context based on prior interactions with people they find to be similar. In that way, status beliefs alter subsequent future inter-relational behaviors and people transmit and propagate these status beliefs with others (Ridgeway and Correll 2006).

Understanding the macro-elements and diffusiveness of gender, and related status beliefs, is essential for understanding interactions between men and women because an environment has the capability to constrain or amplify the diffusion of status beliefs and gendered behavior of relevant actors. According to status construction theory and previous employment stratification research, transwomen will be held to different gender
standards based on both the type of employment organization in which they work and their profession. The current study evaluates the effect department and company sex-ratios have on transwomen’s experiences. Specifically, I examine whether imbalanced employment sex-ratios either ameliorate or magnify the disadvantages associated with respondents transitioning to women. This research lends further support to the idea that “structural conditions… shape the terms on which people from different categories encounter one another” and, combined with micro-interactions, influence the creation and dispersion of gender status beliefs (Ridgeway and Correll 2006: 435).

**Gender Status Beliefs and Interactions**

With the United States’ labor force consisting of nearly half men (53.3%) and half women (46.7%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010), work settings offer countless, daily opportunities for men and women to interact and flex status beliefs. Status beliefs are opinions that are believed to be held by “most” people, even if individuals do not personally subscribe to the belief themselves. Men (dominant group) are more likely than women (subordinate group) to personally endorse gender status beliefs (Ridgeway et al. 1995); however, both men and women must consider them before constructing their own actions because status beliefs are “consensual” (Seachrist & Stangor, 2001). If people think they will be held to a standard it can alter their behavior to correspond to the belief, thus creating a self-fulfilling effect (Ridgeway et al. 1998). For example, if a status belief characterizes women as reactionary versus pro-active at work, then women may expect that if they do act pro-actively their ideas or suggestions will be met with
resistance or considered as lacking merit. As a result, women will be less likely to volunteer their ideas in the future, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy in which women are less pro-active with their ideas. A number of experiments demonstrate that priming gender or gender stereotypes negatively affects participants’ performances on task-specific activities, depending on which group the stereotype disfavors (see Fine 2010 for a review).

Double standards of competence affect men and women’s perceptions of their own skill levels in comparison with others’ abilities (see Foschi 2000 for review). Status construction theory would argue that since men expect to be considered more competent than women at work, they act more confidently and assertively compared with equally competent women. Women, who are also aware of this status belief, see this display of confidence by men and associate it with competence. Assuming they are considered less competent than men by others, as the status belief indicates, women defer and act less confidently (Wagner and Berger 1997). In accordance with expectation states theory, women and men predict how their own abilities measure up against other contextually relevant characters and modify their behavior accordingly. Through self-fulfilling prophecies, these hierarchical status beliefs have an appearance of being socially legitimate. As rewards, such as pay, promotions, and leadership positions, are assigned differentially to those believed to be the most competent; men will be more likely than women to be in the resource-advantaged positions in mixed-sex interactions. Men and women then carry these gendered beliefs to future social encounters at work, teaching
others that women defer and men dominate. With continuous replication, competence and influence are assigned to the entire category of men, rather than certain male individuals. As status construction theory argues, mixed-sex micro-interactions, constrained by already gendered structural conditions, play an important role in maintaining and fostering gender inequality at work (Ridgeway 1997).

After transwomen transition, structural conditions and status beliefs no longer favor them – both because they are transgender and because they are women. This study helps explain the consequences of moving from an advantaged status to a disadvantaged status and the effect it has on individual’s workplace behaviors. This unique case study provides compelling empirical evidence for status construction theory and indicates revisions in theory on status beliefs.

**Status Construction Theory Limitations**

Status construction theory, while useful, is admittedly limited by the fact that it does not adequately address gender status beliefs as they relate to multiple femininities and masculinities. Ridgeway, for example, fails to address how status beliefs privilege certain types of men; rather, Ridgeway (2006) describes gender status beliefs as if they apply equally to all men. As Connell (1987; 1995; 2000) points out, not all men are considered equal in society; furthermore, men achieve higher or lower statuses in society based on the type of masculinity they flex. The most valued form of masculinity is hegemonic masculinity, which integrates class and race into the gender hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity not only subordinates women, and any behavior associated with
“the feminine” but also subordinates non-whites, homosexuals, the un-educated, and men of lower socioeconomic status. Although few men can live up fully to the prescriptions of this type of masculinity, those who come closest to exhibiting the ideals of this identity acquire the most status and “patriarchal dividend” in society (Connell 1995).

The contours of hegemonic masculinity evolve with economic, social and demographic transitions (Messner 1997; Kimmel 2003). Connell (2005) argues that business masculinity is dominant in contemporary society, and this form relies less on overt gender and race dominance and more on rational business practices. Nonetheless, business masculinity privileges rationality, a stereotypically white masculine trait that stands in opposition to emotionality - a stereotypical feminine trait. Thus, like its historical predecessors, business masculinity also devalues the feminine. Research suggests that, depending on the context, men can either resist or comply with hegemonic masculinity, indicating that interactional context matters (Wetherell and Edley 1999). For example, men may position their behavior to align with hegemonic scripts in environments that center on masculine principles, such as a sporting event. Whereas, in other contexts less associated with maleness, men may distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity in order to exhibit other more-valued behaviors.

Varying masculinities can be accepted in the workplace, as long as men do not act feminine, because the latter breaks the underlying pinning of masculinity: distance and/or reject all things feminine (Kimmel 1997). Working under this assumption, status beliefs most advantage men who exhibit hegemonic masculinity or other types of masculinities
that do not break this formidable tenet. Lending support to this viewpoint and contributing a more nuanced version of gender status beliefs, the analysis below suggests that transwomen’s perceived status losses at work are connected with the types of masculinity they exercise before transitioning to women (Schilt 2006; Dozier 2005). Indeed, transwomen who publicly expressed effeminate behaviors as men do not report significant status losses (in regard to authority, assumed competence levels, conversational space, etc) at work after they transition to women. This indicates that gender status beliefs privilege those who conform to male exalted forms of masculinity, not just those who possess a male body.
Chapter 4: Data and Methodology

Between June 2011 and September 2011, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 Ohio transwomen. At the time of the interviews, 23 of the 25 participants worked in the Columbus, Ohio area while the remaining two worked in Toledo, Ohio. I included Toledo participants because of the similarities between these two cities. Both cities have a history of voting democratic, and although Ohio does not have state-wide protection for gender identity, both Columbus and Toledo have local gender-identity protection ordinances pertaining to employment. Furthermore, the Toledo participants’ experiences did not vary significantly from the experiences of respondents who work in Columbus, Ohio.

All participants had at least six months employment experience both before (while identifying as men at work) and after their gender transition (while identifying as women at work); the majority of participants had many more years of employment experience in both genders than the minimum requirement of six months. I recruited both “stealth” transwomen (their transgender identity has not been disclosed to coworkers and as far as they know, they are perceived as cis-women) and “open” transwomen (transgender status has been openly disclosed to coworkers). I included interviewee subjects who have switched jobs since their gender transition as well as those who have
transitioned and remained at the same company, in the same position. Interviews lasted approximately 1 to 2 ½ hours long and were all digitally-recorded. In addition to transcribing all interviews, I wrote field notes on subjects’ dress, mannerisms, behaviors, and conversations that I had with them before and after the interviews (conversations that were not captured on the digital recorder).

Subjects were deliberately recruited from a variety of sources. Sources include internet support groups, LGBTQ newsletter postings, community support groups, a LGBTQ festival, churches, a transgender conference, a LGBTQ-friendly bar, and snowball sampling. Although some of these sources required individuals to actively participate in transgender support groups, others, such as churches or bars, did not. With these particular recruiting methods, I sought to acquire participants who had varying interests and social connections.5 The sample is not statistically representative of all

5It is important to note that my personal identity likely had an effect on who I recruited and the interviews themselves. As a white, heterosexual, cis-woman, I am an “outsider” to the transgender community; as Merton (1972) indicates, “outsider” status generally reduces group access. Accordingly, transwomen with heightened concerns or suspicions of my motives likely did not participate. However, I actually found that many transwomen were eager to participate, despite my outsider status. Many subjects viewed participation as a political opportunity to increase public awareness on transwomen’s work experiences.
transgender women and likely does not include individuals who have severed ties with the transgender community. The latter individuals may have different employment experiences and political agendas than those individuals who are still associated, even if faintly, with the transgender community (Schilt 2006). Nevertheless, respondents vary by work experience, age, education, and socioeconomic status.

In order to capture pertinent demographic and employment information, participants filled out a background survey prior to the beginning of the interview. Table 1 provides aggregate demographic and employment results while Table 2 provides individual-level demographic and employment information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Salary Before Transition ($)</td>
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<td>47,589</td>
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<td>Current Salary - After Transition ($)</td>
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<td>21,137</td>
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Notes: All salaries are in U.S. thousand dollars.

Table 1. Aggregate Sample Characteristics
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<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Total # of Years Working as a Woman</th>
<th>Highest Completed Education Level</th>
<th>Switched Jobs Immediately Post-</th>
<th>Open or Stealth at Work Post-Transition</th>
<th>Before Transition (Man)</th>
<th>After Transition (Woman)</th>
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Table 2. Sample Characteristics
As Table 1 indicates, a major advantage to this sample is the variation among participants because despite the diverse sample, I find similar processes. Participants’ education level ranged from high school graduates to Ph.D. earners and they were employed in a variety of jobs and occupational fields. The youngest participant was 29 years old while the oldest participant was 63 years old. The average age of the sample was 46.5 years old and the average age at which participants transitioned genders was 41 years old. The transition age was often difficult to identify because many respondents felt that emotionally they began transitioning at much earlier ages than the age at which they began physically appearing as women. However, for ease of understanding, transition age was based on the time at which respondents began living full-time as women, including at work (Schilt 2006). Accordingly, I recorded the number of years that they had been working openly as female. The extent of their physical transition varied amongst participants. All respondents had taken some form of hormones in their transitions and approximately half of the participants listed undergoing surgeries, such as breast augmentation, facial reconstruction, and sex-reassignment surgery. All participants identified as white, although one participant listed both white and black as her race on the questionnaire. Therefore, this study largely reflects the work experiences of white transwomen - not those of minorities. With the intersection of race, gender, and sexual minority status, transwomen of color may report different experiences.

My interview guide consisted of a variety of questions centered on transwomen’s work experiences before, during, and after their transitions. Specifically, I asked
questions on the sex composition of their companies and departments, job responsibilities, colleague relationships (including those with their bosses), co-worker interactions, performance reviews, and leadership roles at work. The interview guide was developed to analyze any differential treatment participants experienced as men compared to as women. I did not have a pre-determined number of interviews that I planned to conduct; rather, I stopped interviewing respondents when variation in responses halted and common stories were replicated.

A major advantage of this data is the richness of information that participants are able to provide based on their dual gender employment experiences. Transgender participants are able to comment on what employment is like working as both genders while many of the respondents’ human capital remain relatively unchanged. Gender could be considered a type of ‘treatment’ that they undergo and thus, they are able to experience what is for most people a counterfactual – working as a different gender.

Eight study participants remained employed in the same job post-transition, and an additional three people remained in the same occupational field while holding a different job. In these cases, participants’ work experiences and skills either remained constant or increased because of longer tenure in their job. The remaining fourteen participants report obtaining new employment positions in different occupational fields post-transition. Although their experience in specific job positions or tenure at particular firms changes, other factors such as education, general labor-market experience (non-specific to a particular field), ambition, and work ethic likely remains constant. Economists attribute
gender employment inequality to measurable factors (labor market experience, education, occupation, etc.) and factors that are typically unobserved because they are difficult to measure, like ambition, work ethic, and personality. If one assumes that unobservables remain constant across a gender transition, transwomen’s reports of differential experience support the hypothesis that gendered micro-interactions are a mechanism of workplace inequality.

Regardless, job change or no job change, all of the participants have, on average, approximately 20 years of experience working as men pre-transition. These accumulated years provide transwomen with the invaluable knowledge and experience about what it is like to work and be treated as a man in the workplace – experience that can be used as points of comparison with their post-transition experiences. Leveraging transwomen’s unique perspectives, this research expands on previous interactional work by illustrating the powerful role that gender plays in shaping and influencing employee relations, perceived competence levels, and daily interactions.

**Analytic Strategy**

I examine workplace inequality dynamics with a particular focus on authority, perceived competence, and inclusion. My central research question is do transwomen lose status at work once they transition, and if so, how is this new status communicated to them through interactional exchanges with co-workers? I define status as the perceived importance of their contributions and level of inclusion in conversations and networks at work. I operationalize importance of contributions based on whether they perceive that
their ideas or suggestions gain acceptance from co-workers. I operationalize level of inclusion by the degree to which transwomen report they are included in social and work-related conversations and relationships.

Based on the hypotheses that the following three characteristics affect the way transwomen are treated at work post-transition, I also conducted analysis on respondents’ pre-transition gender-expression, transgender disclosure status, and employment sex ratios. For pre-transition gender-expressions, I asked participants to describe themselves when they were presenting as men. I also asked if they openly displayed effeminate qualities or mis-attributed as homosexual before their transition. Based on their responses, I coded each participant as either effeminate men or men that adhered to traditional masculinity scripts.

As for transgender disclosure status, I asked whether or not they had told co-workers post-transition about their transgender status. I coded those interviewees who reported that their co-workers are aware of their transgender status as “open”. I marked those individuals who responded that to the best of their knowledge people were unaware of their transgender status as “stealth”.

Lastly, for work context, I asked about sex composition of their workplace unit and the company as whole for both their departments and total company. Based on their responses, I coded each participant as either working in a female-dominated (ratio of 60% females or higher), male-dominated (ratio of 60% males or higher), or mixed-gender work environment. Typically sex ratios were consistent; however, when they differed, I
classified participants by their department sex ratio since the majority of interactions occurred with other departmental employees.

In addition to pinpointing differential employment interactions pre- and post-transition, my second research question aims to understand how transwomen respond to their new status as women. On one hand, previous research suggests that transsexuals reproduce oppressive gender scripts (Eichler 1987; Irvine 1990); on the other hand, more recent research indicates that they challenge gender boundaries in their daily actions (Connell 2010). In order to assess this question, I ask subjects to describe how, if at all, they act differently as women than as men and whether transwomen change their behaviors in response to status changes, such as a loss of authority. Through the rich text of these interviews, my analysis provides vital information on the ways in which gendered interactions, particularly by dominant actors (male colleagues), shape and constrain transwomen’s behaviors at work.
Chapter 5: Findings

More than twenty years ago, West and Zimmerman (1987) noted the importance of understanding the construction of gender in interactional exchanges and the impact “doing gender” has on maintaining and legitimating society’s sex hierarchy. Indeed, people’s everyday social exchanges aid in perpetuating gender status quos at work. Although overt forms of gender discrimination still occur at work, indirect forms of gender discrimination are even more common (Martin 2003). As research indicates, men’s work contributions are more highly rewarded than women’s contributions (Gorman and Kmec 2007; Lyness and Heilman 2006). Recent research on transmen indicates that it is not just cis-men\(^6\) who experience male privilege. Schilt (2006) indicates that some transmen gain advantages at work after transitioning despite holding a conflicting, stigmatizing status of being transgender. This suggests that the presentation of gender is often enough for a person to receive gender-related advantages or disadvantages. Thus, it would be expected that transwomen’s work and ideas would be devalued once they transition to women. Indeed, my findings corroborate previous research in that approximately two-thirds of transwomen (including both open and stealth subjects) report disadvantages post-transition. My results indicate that transwomen

\(^6\) Cis-men are individuals whose gender identities match their gender assigned at birth based on biological factors.
experience status loss in the following four areas: diminished perceived competence and knowledge base, decreased visibility and inclusion with male colleagues, double-standards, and increased harassment. Consequently, this status loss spurs some transwomen to change their behaviors to conform to their new female status at work.

**Competency and Knowledge-Base**

In spite of maintaining constant human capital (educational background, work experience, intelligence, etc), several of my interviewees (10 out of 23) report that co-workers perceive them as less competent and less knowledgeable post-transition. Interviewees describe experiences in which co-workers “dumb down” explanations, assuming that they do not have the necessary knowledge to understand the conversation, often despite years of work-related experience. Laura, for example, who is an engineer technician for a medium-size manufacturing company, describes situations in which conversations or presentations are simplified because her colleagues do not expect her to comprehend technical terms or concepts. Prior to her transition, Laura had accumulated 3 years of experience as an engineer technician and continues to be employed in the same position at the same company post-transition. Laura has completed some college but has not yet attained a degree, and she makes approximately $24,000 a year. Because Laura continues to occupy the same job position post-transition, her human capital (job experience and related skills and abilities) actually increased post-transition because of her additional experience. Yet, Laura states that both co-workers who are aware of her
transgender status and outside clients who are unaware of her transgender status “dumb down” explanations when speaking with her.

For example, when we were looking at getting brand new software for the engineering department, we’re upgrading our software. And the gentleman that came in was talking about it and he started talking about VB. He’s like ‘Oh, you can do it easily if you use VB.’ And the way he was talking to me, he was talking to me like I had no idea what it was and I said “Oh, visual basic.” And then he kind of stopped and looked at me. He was like “You know what it is?” And I said “Well, yeah. I’ve used visual basic before. I’ve programmed in it.” “Oh, ok.” And then it was just like completely different. Then he’s like “Oh, well then you know what we’re talking about. Ok.” Where before, he was talking more to everybody else, thinking that I didn’t really know and then that’s when I cut in. So yeah, definitely where they just—they change how they’re talking or their information. For most people, they’ll just like here’s the bullet points, we’ll skip right through. And it’s like “Oh, wait. We got a girl. Ok, wait a minute. We’re going to have to go through and make sure she understands and explain it step by step.” And it’s like “You don’t have to do that. I know what you’re talking about.”

In this example, an outside client, unaware of her transgender status, assumes that Laura has rudimentary knowledge on the subject and thus she requires more explanation than her male counterparts. Despite unchanging human capital, co-workers and clients assess Laura’s technical knowledge as being lower than they previously did when Laura presented as a man. In other words, co-workers rely on gender and associated status beliefs as proxies for judging other employees’ competence and knowledge in technical concepts and abilities. Laura, who works in a male-dominated and male-typed occupation, is now disadvantaged by status beliefs that deem men generally more competent than women in technical arenas. Indeed, the presentation of gender is so compelling that even co-workers aware of her previous experience as a man change the way they interpret her potential mechanical knowledge.
Likewise, Amanda, a stealth transwoman, reports similar experiences working as a customer representative for an alternative energy company. Amanda switched companies post-transition, but remained in the same occupational field as a customer representative.

They [male colleagues] feel like they need to explain everything much better or a little bit more, more descriptive. I’m not an idiot, I got it. Ok, yes you’re smart; you’re a man, whatever. So yeah. Sometimes they water things down, they feel like they have to dumb it down and it’s kind of insulting how they feel like they—it may be over-reacting, but it’s almost like they’re talking to a little kid.

Amanda indicates that co-workers simplify conversations to a point where she is treated like a child. Through these social exchanges, transwomen come to understand that their colleagues assess their intelligence levels lower as women than previously as men and lower than other male counter-parts.

In another example, Deirdre, an electronic technician for a telecommunications company, encounters surprise from male colleagues when she reveals mechanical knowledge to a colleague in a conversation.

Yeah as a male they assumed I knew more about what I was talking about. As a female I’m not as smart and I don’t know what I’m talking about until I prove them wrong and then they usually kind of back down. One of the engineer guys I’ve worked with him for a while and he helps fix our test equipment when it goes down and he makes a few comments here and there and then one of them was asking me something and I went into this equation of how this thing worked and he just got this stark look on his face like, ‘how do you know that?’
Even though Deirdre’s job is technical in nature and therefore requires her to possess technical skills, Deirdre feels that she must prove her mechanical knowledge to her co-workers. Another transwoman, Bethany, reports a similar story. She is an open transwoman with her bachelor’s degree, and she works as a long-haul truck driver.

Yeah they [male colleagues] try to dumb it down a little bit until they realize that my brain didn’t fall out of my head when I started taking estrogen, it doesn’t make me stupid. They try to use very simple words or I’ve noticed that they try to keep it at like a high school education level conversation instead of getting really...you know into the mechanics of the truck and they will be like, ‘well you know the engine and it does this and there is a box on the side like a turbo…’ and I’m like ‘yeah the turbo where the exhaust comes in and then this way and that’ and they are like ‘you understand this?’ A. Yes I have one in my truck that I deal with. I’m an owner and operator and B. I was a diesel mechanic for several years. And that’s when they start to realize that women aren’t stupid.

Bethany describes leveraging her previous credentials as a diesel mechanic and current employment as a truck owner and operator to gain credibility among other truck-drivers. As men, many transwomen are assumed competent until proven otherwise; as women, they are assumed incompetent until they prove that they have the necessary credentials and work-related knowledge. Because she can no longer rely on her male gender to be used as a proxy for credentials, Bethany must state her credentials as a way to verify her skills and knowledge to other co-workers. Notably, Schilt (2006) finds that many transmen, in contrast, report increases of perceived competence at work, particularly in male-dominated contexts.

Elizabeth, an open transwoman, demonstrates the repercussions of being perceived as less competent or less credible than male co-workers. She is a fire captain
who transitioned on the job after working approximately twenty-five years in the fire department. Elizabeth reports that pre-transition she was respected and her leadership was frequently sought out by firefighters; however, post-transition, her experiences tell a different story.

And just yesterday at work, I noticed as normal, they [male subordinates] don’t listen to me as much. When we are on runs, I’ll say, “let’s move the patient this way” and they will just almost always want to do it a different way and the guys are more apt to go ahead and take charge themselves and they don’t look to me for the guidance that they used to on things. That part of it is starting to get a little frustrating.

Despite the formal authority that accompanies her position as fire captain and her accumulated twenty-five years of experience, Elizabeth’s commands are frequently challenged and her leadership often goes unsought. Moreover, the firefighter occupation is a strongly male-typed position – a position characterized by physical fitness, bravery, and authority; as a woman, Elizabeth’s gender no longer aligns with these male-typed characteristics. Transitioning to a woman calls into question her inherent maleness and thus, her fit with this position. Consequently, she experiences difficulty gaining credibility as an authority figure among men who are “inherently” more fit than her for the job. These findings correspond with Britton’s (2003) research on the gendering of prison guard positions. Britton finds that women prison guards struggle to gain credibility as authority figures because the traits associated with prison guards are inextricably tied with maleness.
Co-worker statements and actions such as those described above subtly and sometimes overtly question and challenge transwomen’s abilities. In a domain that values and rewards competency and intelligence, these interactions have the potential to not only become self-fulfilling but to also hinder transwomen’s careers by negatively affecting their performance assessments. Notably, all ten of the transwomen who report a loss in perceived competence or knowledge in this study are employed in numerically male-dominated settings. In these, gender is highly salient, and men are advantaged by status beliefs that deem them more skilled than women (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). So although transwomen have gained the necessary human, physical, and social capital required for their jobs, structural components, such as gender status beliefs and imbalanced sex ratios, constrain their ability to flex this capital in the same manner as they previously did as a men and minimizes the availability of resources (social networks, male privilege) in this employment context.

While these findings are consistent with previous gender inequality research, this study sheds new light on the ways in which co-workers leverage status beliefs to judge others’ competencies and work-related knowledge. In fact, status beliefs are communicated both up and down the work chain. In the case of Elizabeth, subordinates, who have less institutional power, use their higher social status as men to challenge, either overtly or subtly, her authority. Men of subordinate statuses, such as racial or sexual minorities, experience similar challenges to their authority (Roscigno 2007). In the other cases (Laura, Amanda, and Deirdre), men of equal or higher structural status
have both institutional and social power, which yields them considerable authority over transwomen.

Invisibility and Exclusion

More than half of the respondents in my sample communicate clear differences in visibility and inclusion at work post-transition. Elizabeth, the aforementioned fire captain, describes that she is often excluded from social conversations at the firehouse and that when she is included, she is allotted significantly less conversational space.

One of the things I’ve noticed almost from the very beginning was that and it was even with women not just men, but especially with men in conversations, I no longer was given as much time to speak… I share my thoughts and then I work things out, out loud and people used to just listen and suddenly people started interrupting me. I would be prefacing something and I never got the chance to say, “but, this is how I really feel about it”. You know, ‘cause I’m always like, “on one hand this, on one hand that”. And it was just starting to frustrate me because people would cut me off and I’m like, “no, no, no, wait a minute, you don’t understand, I was gonna say more if you would let me finish.”

In this statement, Elizabeth describes that as a man, co-workers allowed her to finish developing her thoughts; post-transition, she is no longer granted the same amount of time to speak. As a result, her statements are often misconstrued. She indicates that women, although not as often as men, also interrupt her more frequently after transitioning. As interruptions are often used as a “device for exercising power and control,” co-workers’ increase in conversational dominance when engaging with her indicates a decrease in Elizabeth’s perceived status at work (West and Zimmerman 1983, p. 103). Indeed, Smith-Lovin and Brody (1989) find that men more frequently interrupt
women than other men. As a token (trans)woman in an extremely masculine-typed occupation, co-workers may think that they have more authority to interrupt Elizabeth and bestow less value on her opinions because she is no longer considered a dominant actor as a woman.

Erica, an open transwoman, also reports being interrupted more frequently and recounts how she is now frequently ignored at work. As a software engineer for a major computer company, Erica earns approximately $94,000 a year and has over twenty-five years of experience in the computer industry. Despite being in a very male-dominated field, her department has a sex proportion that leans female (60% females; 40% males).

It was very noticeable. I mean, I thought it was very interesting because here I was, they had known me for; I had worked in that department for about five or six years. They [male colleagues in Erica’s department] knew me very, very well, they had known me as a male, but that quickly they started treating me like a woman. Like I said, when I would, I call it my prior existence, I would make statements about this is what I see we should be doing, this is what I think is important for us to do and it would be brought up and everyone would start talking about it. And after I transitioned, I would make the same statements and people would sort of ignore me. And even cut me off and I would be starting to make a sentence and someone else would start talking and then one of the guys would start talking, as if what I was saying didn’t count.

In spite of the 5-6 years of rapport she has built with her colleagues, co-workers begin “treating her as a woman”. To her, this means that the privilege and respect she once received as a male vanishes, and her co-workers now frequently dismiss and interrupt her suggestions and comments. In this way, co-workers are teaching Erica her new gender status by allowing her less conversational space in meetings and by insinuating that she

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should defer to men when they begin speaking. From years working as masculine-acting men, many transwomen lack the knowledge of how to navigate mixed-gender settings as women; correspondingly, men, who have the most incentive in preserving the gender order, provide them with indirect gender instructions on how to act as women in the workplace. These gender instructions correspond with schemas that assert that men dominate and women defer in mixed-gender settings (Ridgeway 1997).

Interestingly, Erica’s female status conflicts with capital she has accumulated pre-transition when she presented as a man who conformed to traditional masculinity scripts. Pre-transition, Erica’s maleness vouched for the credence of her ideas and enlarged conversational space. As status construction theory suggests, replicated positive responses and interactions build individuals’ confidence levels and incentivize them to continue to lead and be pro-active, rather than reactionary, with suggestions or ideas (Ridgeway 2001). Thus, Erica, who has worked 25 years as a male, has gained the necessary capital to be pro-active with her ideas and act “male” in work environments. However, as a woman, interactional / symbolic conditions no longer favor her, and as a result, co-workers react negatively when she exercises male-accrued capital.

Reanne, a copy editor who has earned a Ph.D. in English, describes frequent occasions in which male clients visit the office and she, along with the other women, are excluded in formal introductions.

Reanne: I am inconsequential if there is another man. At my current job, when I have visitors come from an energy company or an oil company or something like that, I won’t even be introduced to them.
Interviewer: Will all of the other men be introduced?

Reanne: Yes. My role would be to get lunch orders, go get the lunch and bring it to them.

In spite of the fact that she has a doctoral degree and her job is an integral part of the business, Reanne is ignored in the face of other men and is burdened with secretarial duties even though she is neither an assistant nor a secretary. Regardless of their professions, women are expected to comply with heterosexual norms (MacKinnon 1982), which in this case, entails ordering and fetching men lunch. While this treatment could be a result of her transgender status (she is an open trans-woman), the gendered nature of secretarial responsibilities suggest that this maltreatment is a product of being perceived as female. Research indicates that this type of experience is not atypical of women professionals and that heterosexual norms persist at even high employment levels (Martin 2003).

Regardless of the context (mixed-gender or male- or female-dominated) in which they work, transwomen report they are regularly excluded from male social-circles. Indeed, many interviewees declare that they are excluded from conversations in which men are denigrating women or talking about stereotypical male-typed subjects, such as sports or cars. Stephanie, a former attorney who is currently a teaching instructor at a community college, states,

Sometimes they [male colleagues] want to talk about sports and they seem to think I wouldn’t know anything about sports or have any interest in sports like some ladies and people think that just because you live life as a woman that
you’re not going to know anything about sports and I’m like “but, I like sports.” I still enjoy watching and those types of things sometimes.

Stephanie asserts that men automatically assume that she either will not want or will not have sufficient knowledge to participate in conversations about sports, despite the growing role sports play in many women’s lives. Laura, an engineer technician, reports, “Also, there’s times where I knew I would normally be included in a conversation, like if all the guys are standing around discussing something, normally they would include me in on it. But the way they stand, I just get the feeling that’s a guy only conversation…” In this quotation, Laura describes that pre-transition she used to be included in men’s social conversations; however, post-transition, men physically close off their stances toward her and block her from participating in their conversations. Interestingly, when I question Jenny, a stealth library associate, on whether she ever feels excluded from male circles at work, she responds “This is an interesting question because I don’t know that I’m necessarily excluded. I’m just treated as any other woman would be treated.” Jenny implies that although she is not specifically singled out and excluded, she suggests that women, as a group, are excluded from male social circles at work. This statement reflects a crucial distinction that male co-workers are excluding transwomen not because they are “trans” but rather because they are read as women: this has important career implications for both trans and cis-women. As informal socializing often leads to accessing vital knowledge needed to perform duties and is a route to upward mobility in
firms, (trans)women’s careers are potentially hindered through these exclusionary mechanisms.

Notably, all of the transwomen who report being excluded or devalued in conversations, report that these “gender slights” are much more likely to occur when in the presence of multiple men, rather than while engaging in one-on-one conversations with a man. As Martin (2006) notes, because women occupy a subordinate status in relation to white heterosexual men, masculinity is mainly directed toward other men, not women. Men often practice masculinity to bond with other men and do not consider how their actions affect women (Martin 2001). As a result, women are frequently excluded or used as a mechanism of achieving higher status among other men (ex: sexual objectification of women, leveraging women’s ideas) (Martin 2006).

**Double Standards**

An abundance of research affirms that women must perform at higher levels to be equally assessed with comparable male counter-parts (Castilla 2008; Lyness and Heilman 2006; Gorman and Kmec 2007). My research supports previous findings and contributes additional knowledge on the ways double standards influence judgments about employees’ workplace performances. Despite unchanging human capital (experience, education, intelligence, etc), several of my participants report that post-transition their ideas no longer hold the same merit and their work performances are regularly held to a higher standard than they previously had been as men. As I demonstrate, transwomen experience a double standard in a variety of occupations (professor, factory associate,
retail bicycle mechanic, engineer technician, prep cook) and when people are both aware and unaware of their transgender status.

Multiple transwomen report that their ideas are judged more harshly and do not elicit the same positive responses they once did from co-workers when they were presenting as men. Deirdre, an open transwoman who is employed as an electronic technician, provides compelling anecdotes of this phenomenon.

I was the go-to person and then after the transition not so much anymore, not the go-to person but one of the guys that I talk to a lot is the go-to person now and I’m not and if I say something then they won’t listen to be but if someone else says the exact same thing I did two seconds ago they listen to them so that’s happened a few times. I came up with a few ideas that they shot mine down and then not even a week later, or a day later, they came up with the same idea I told them and changed one minute thing that doesn’t even matter and they go, ‘oh, it’s my idea’ and that happened a few times.

Remaining in the same job and interacting with the same co-workers post-transition, Deirdre attests that co-workers suddenly reacted differently to her ideas after her transition, despite unchanging human capital. Likewise, Reanne, a copy-editor at a small energy company, indicates that her ideas are frequently not acknowledged and given lower credence post-transition. “As a female, I was talked over, I was interrupted, I would say things and they would be totally ignored and later in the day someone would have the same idea that I had just said. The men would take my idea.” In both Reanne and Deirdre’s cases, co-workers use a different standard (a higher one) to evaluate transwomen’s ideas than they do with other male co-workers. Several transwomen suggest that when male colleagues propose an idea (their idea) they receive positive
recognition and the group is influenced by this idea. In contrast, when (trans)women propose their ideas, co-workers fail to acknowledge the suggestion as a good idea—employing a different set of evaluation standards, a higher one, for (trans)women than men. In other words, ideas are judged not by their content or merit, but rather by the status of the person who proposes them. Status beliefs that judge men as more competent and status-worthy in male-dominated or mixed-gender contexts lend credibility to men’s ideas, making their suggestions seemingly more valid (Ridgeway 1997).

Another notable account of a double standard occurring is with Reanne during her time as an English professor at an accredited university. While Reanne had disclosed her transgender status to fellow colleagues, she had not revealed her transgender status to students.

At [blank] university as a male I would teach Margaret Atwood and various female writers and I would advocate for feminism and work the material into the literature courses or writing courses. The student responses from the women were wonderful. When I worked at [blank] university as a female, the exact same course and same notes, my student evaluations called me a ‘Femi-Nazi’ and a ‘bitch’. It totally shocked me.

As a man, Reanne is praised for being an advocate for women; as a woman, teaching the same curriculum, she is demonized. Men have the authority to advocate for gender equality because they are privileged by the current gender hierarchy; thus, their support is viewed as benevolent and not self-serving. People of higher status have the authority to deem certain activities appropriate for one group, but not appropriate for groups of lower

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7 To maintain anonymity, I have inserted the word “blank” to conceal Reanne’s employer.
statuses (gender, race, sexual minorities) or even transgress gender boundaries (Fiske 1993; McGuffey and Rich 1999). In this case, as a white, heterosexual, non-effeminate-acting man, both Reanne’s gender and institutional position as a professor provided her (him at the time) with the esteem to transgress traditional hegemonic norms that typically devalue feminism. In contrast, after she transitions to a woman, her institutional power as a professor fails to trump her female gender status when discussing feminist-related subjects. As a result, her credibility is challenged and she is considered biased.

Genevieve’s employment experiences communicate similar double standard themes: she is a bicycle mechanic who works in a small retail shop that consists of seven people (three women, including herself, and four men).

Yeah, actually I think that it’s funny that you’re sort of asking the other set of questions about my job as male because certain appearances became a bigger issue, especially when I was a mechanic. All of the sudden like if I had some grease on my t-shirt, all of the sudden that became like an issue where I had never seen anybody else like get yelled at about having like getting grease on their shirt and that was like a big deal.

Pre-transition, Genevieve indicates that she never experienced comments on her appearance; post-transition, she is reprimanded for having grease on her shirt and is required to uphold a higher standard of cleanliness than male co-workers. Genevieve also mentions that her mechanical work is scrutinized at a higher level post-transition, even though her job and place of employment have stayed constant.

Yeah, sometimes they [male co-workers] will question what is wrong. I definitely get called out on things a lot more that sometimes are genuinely like me not
knowing something but also my, everything that I sort of send back there is like
definitely scrutinized more than it was previously.

This quotation refers to situations in which Genevieve is working the front counter. In
this capacity, she is responsible for diagnosing a customer’s bicycle problem, relaying the
diagnosis to the service counter, and transporting the bicycle to the service counter
technicians. In these cases, she suggests that her work, as a woman, is evaluated more
critically and questioned more than it previously was as a man. Moreover, Genevieve
notes that her bicycle-related requests are often prioritized below those of similarly-
qualified male co-workers.

Examples, such as Reanne’s experiences, demonstrate that people who are
unaware of their transgender statuses (in this case, students) exercise a harsher standard
when judging their performances as women. Likewise, people who are aware of
respondent’s previous male selves also subject respondents to harsher performance
standards. This research complements Schilt’s (2006) work on transmen: she finds that
many of her respondents report that their ideas are taken more seriously and elicit more
attention as men than previously as women. In these cases, gender, or at least the
presentation of gender, is used as a proxy for assessing the merit or worth of people’s
statements or actions. Because transwomen’s human capital is relatively controlled (or
perhaps even higher because of increases in experience post-transition), these accounts of
double standard performance evaluations offer compelling evidence that differential
treatment is likely the result of their female status.
Harassment

Several transwomen, post-transition, provide accounts of harassment at work. Environments that previously were inviting soon turn hostile once transwomen begin presenting as females. Notably, interviewees who report harassment are concentrated in male-dominated occupations, such as trucking and manufacturing.

Consider the case of Katie, who experienced frequent on-the-job harassment during her time as a truck driver. Although her boss knew of her transgender status, many of the other truck drivers were unaware.

Katie: They [male truck drivers] would let the air out of your tank or switch your glad hands to see if you could figure it out you know, things like that.

Interviewer: Did they do this to other men?

Katie: I don’t remember them doing it, they probably do but I don’t remember them doing it.

Interviewer: Did you see it happening to the women?

Katie: Oh, I had seen it happening to the women, yeah.

Based on Katie’s testimony, male truck drivers would purposely disassemble trucking parts in order to test her capabilities - making her job more difficult and time-consuming to perform. Although she states that this type of activity potentially took place with men’s trucks, she had seen it occur multiple times with women truck drivers, even though women reflect a small proportion of truck drivers. In addition, male truck drivers often made demeaning comments toward her and other female co-workers. In one instance, Katie was told by a male truck driver, “you shouldn’t even be here, your place is in the
bed and behind the sink washing dishes and having babies.” Interestingly, this same individual asked Katie out on a date later that day. Furthermore, Katie states that it was not just male truck drivers who beleaguered her. She was also the target of at least one female guard who would frequently play humiliating games and tricks on her.

Other transwomen report being called denigrating names at work; notably, these names are tied to female statuses and not transgender slurs. Jackie, a factory associate, reports repeatedly being called a “bitch” and a “ho” by a male co-worker after her transition.

Jackie: Every time he would—it was back when I was still running the stitcher, he would pass by or walk by and he’d say how’s Jackie [inserted pseudonym] doing? That’s my girl right there, that’s my—and then he’d say that’s my bitch.

Interview: Would he ever use any other derogatory female slurs towards you, like when he called you his bitch?

Jackie: Sometimes ho and—just bitch and ho mostly.

Although Jackie firmly asks him to stop calling her names, she states that he still “occasionally slips”. Later in the interview, she reports that this same individual tried to grope her and stick something down her shirt. Another transwoman, Bethany (a long-haul truck-driver), reports that people from the trucking dispatch office regularly refer to her as “dragon bitch.” In fact, when she dials into the office, she often has to call from another colleague’s phone, and thereby mask her number, so that her co-workers will answer her phone call. At first, Bethany states she took a softened, “nice” approach toward them; however, truck dispatchers often took little or slow action to her requests.
Consequently, she has adopted a more aggressive and direct approach when interacting with them on the phone - likely an approach more stylistically appropriate for men, not women. Although she finds this strategy more effective than her previous “nice” approach, co-workers equate her aggressive behavior with a demeaning, female-oriented slur.

Harassment is a common form of employment sex discrimination, and women are in large majority the victims (Roscigno 2007). Often when women are the numerical minority, as is the case in the trucking or manufacturing industry, they experience significant degradation and harassment as a result of their token status (Kanter 1977). The examples listed above demonstrate the ways in which dominant actors [men] exercise domination and control over lower status actors [transwomen] through daily acts of harassment. Women working in male-typed positions are perceived as more threatening by males in those positions because it questions task-differentiation: one of the few remaining male-female distinctions in work.

In contrast, research on transmen indicates that they do not experience the same levels of harassment that transwomen experience at work (Schilt 2009; Connell 2010). While this study attests that some transwomen report being called slurs usually reserved for women, previous research does not report that transmen are called male-oriented slurs post-transition. This phenomenon may be explained by the fact that there is a plethora of slurs that denigrate women but few slurs that denigrate men (Schultz 1975; Braun and Kitzinger 2001); transmen may not report being called male insults because co-workers
simply lack the language structure to insult transmen based on their new gender status. More importantly, transmen transition from a lower status to a higher status; thus, co-workers likely refrain from insulting the end status of transmen because they would be insulting the higher gender group in society. In contrast, transwomen transition from a dominant position to a subordinate position; thus, when co-workers insult their end position (women), co-workers preserve the current gender hierarchy.

**Pre-Transition Masculinity and Status Loss**

My findings indicate that the degree of status loss among women is correlated to the type of masculinity they adhered to as men. In this study, the majority of transwomen who display hegemonic forms of masculinity before transitioning report losing the most status when they begin presenting as women. Conversely, the majority of transwomen who adopt non-hegemonic masculinities before transitioning - which includes displaying stereotypical feminine behavior - lose less status by becoming women because comparatively, as men, they reaped a smaller “patriarchal dividend” than other higher-status men (Connell 1995).

Based on the question, “how would you describe yourself while you were presenting as a male?” I obtained data on whether my interviewees acted according to dominant masculinity scripts. Eight out of twenty-five participants describe themselves as “flamboyant” or “effeminate” and/or state that they were often misattributed as homosexual or called a “fag” by others due to their female-typed behavior. These terms, either as self-descriptions or said by others, indicate that their behaviors are
interpreted as womanlike or womanish. Hennen (2008) describes effeminacy “as a tension between the ‘reality’ of biological sex and the prescribed gender performance” which “is transformed into a personal failing” (p 35). Although there is an understanding that men who act effeminately are not actually women, effeminate men are considered inferior because they fail to live up to traditional masculinity standards that distances the feminine. Homosexuality, although different in term (characterizes one’s sexual identity versus gender performance) has historically been linked with effeminacy; thus, these terms are often used interchangeably to indicate men who display subordinate, female-typed behavior (Hennen 2008).

Six of these eight participants (75%), working in a variety of workplaces, report little to no status loss post-transition (see Figure 2)\(^8\). My findings suggest that in the cases of pre-transition “effeminate” transwomen, this lack of status loss is not associated with these participants’ workplace sex ratio - whether male- or female-dominated or mixed-gender workplaces - as participants report similar stories across a variety of environments. However, as indicated earlier in my findings, male-dominated contexts magnify disadvantages for pre-transition masculine-acting men. In sum, the data suggests that transwomen who acted effeminately pre-transition receive fewer advantages than other men in a variety of contexts.

\(^8\) Workplace type, whether female or male-dominated or mixed gender was determined by interviewees’ self-reports of sex ratios for either department or company.
Table 3. Sample Workplace Type and Pre-Transition Persona

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Male Persona</th>
<th>Workplace Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>Male-dominated</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
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The majority of effeminate transwomen report that they were never a part of the “boys club” at work pre-transition. Frances, a truck driver, states,

Well they [co-workers] didn’t know exactly how to figure me as far as—they knew I was married and stuff like this but they couldn’t figure out why I was married because they thought that I was maybe ready to grab their butt and stuff like this, thinking that I was a homosexual and stuff and I wasn’t at that time but they just—they tried to avoid me whenever possible as far as close quarters and stuff like that. They had a lot of phobia.

In this case, men avoided contact with Frances pre-transition because they misattributed her feminine behavior as homosexual behavior. Moreover, she says that, as a man, co-workers would play tricks on her: “the other guys would—other truck drivers would try and play jokes and tricks and stuff like that, hide the keys and hide the orders and stuff like that.” This example mirrors the anecdote of another transwoman, Katie, who had co-workers play tricks on her (i.e. dismantle her truck’s parts). However, in Katie’s case she was post-transition and presenting as a woman; Frances, was presenting as an effeminate male, and receiving similar harassing treatment in the trucking industry.
One transwoman, Jenny, reports not being hired pre-transition because of her feminine appearance as a male. A potential employer said “you’re fully qualified for the job, but we don’t want one of you working for us.” The statement “one of you” implies difference from other gender-conforming males and is used to “other” and discriminate against her. Accordingly, individuals who display effeminate behavior are seen as inferior men because they deviate from traditional masculinity models and because their effeminate behaviors are often conflated with homosexuality – a subordinated sexuality. Thus, male effeminacy is devalued by both gender and sexuality scripts (Miller, Forest, and Jurik 2003). Consequently, Jenny is degraded as a potential worker because her appearance does not align with the ideal masculine, heterosexual image of the male worker and as a result, the hiring manager chooses not to hire her.

In contrast, Samantha, a waitress both before and after her transition, reports an increase in status upon transitioning. Pre-transition, she was a server at a sports bar that, as she states, had a “very masculine environment” despite most of the staff being women (with the exception of managers, who were mostly males). She recalls that as a man she was frequently mocked for displaying feminine behavior. She remembers that one male manager told her “to improve being a lot more masculine and drop the femininity because you do have a cock between your legs.” Despite feminine characteristics traditionally being positively associated with success in server positions, as a man, Samantha is violating one of the central tenets of masculinity: men should repudiate and distance themselves from all things feminine (David and Brannon 1976). Moreover, an
An effeminate man may be doubly obtrusive in the case of a sports bar where female waitresses often serve a dual purpose — (1) serving food and drinks (2) and being sexually available to male patrons. Since effeminate men are often misattributed as homosexuals, they can be interpreted by male patrons as blocking their access to sexually available waitresses and exposing them to homosexuality in a sexually-charged environment.

These anecdotes demonstrate that men who demonstrate differential gender norms, like Jenny and Samantha, are often stripped of their “masculine heterosexual privilege” (McCarl Nielson, Walden, and Kunkel 2000). These men, having reported that they never were part of the “boys club,” had not acquired the social status needed to transgress gender boundaries. As a result, their deviance from traditional masculinity models is met with resistance and harassment from other co-workers, particularly men who have a vested interest in maintaining the gender order.

In contrast, interviewees that describe themselves as particularly “macho” or “a regular guy” while presenting as male, describe considerable differences in the way people treat them at work after transitioning. Out of seventeen transwomen who report conforming to stereotypical male behaviors pre-transition, thirteen, or 76%, describe some sort of status loss in the following areas: diminished perceived competence and knowledge base, decreased visibility and inclusion with male colleagues, double-standards, and increased harassment. Of the remaining four transwomen that report little to no status loss, two of them state that they do not consistently pass as women and have
openly transitioned at work without switching jobs. Their co-workers could, potentially, still be reading their gender as male, and thus, not treating them differently.

This study provides persuasive evidence that gender status beliefs do not advantage all men equally. Instead, this analysis indicates that effeminate males report less status change upon transitioning to women because their male status conferred less privilege and esteem than that of their “macho” counterparts. These findings suggest that effeminate transwomen pre-transition were already experiencing many of the disadvantages described post-transition by masculine-acting transwomen. Therefore, their co-workers likely did not significantly alter their behavior or expectations of them because as effeminate men, they were already of a subordinate status. As suggested by Schilt and Westbrook’s (2009) research, co-workers may perceive transwomen’s transition as a natural transformation, if their pre-transition behavior did not fit typical, or valued, masculinity norms. In other words, co-workers may justify transwomen’s transition by believing that they were already women in the first place because they demonstrated femininities as men. This suggests that future work should examine workplace experiences of gender-normative and gender non-normative cis-men and women.

In contrast, transwomen who did not display femininities pre-transition have considerable status to lose because they transition from a higher position on the hierarchal gender ladder. Men who are white (of which all of these respondents are) and align their own personal identity and behaviors with characteristic(s) valued by the
majority of workplaces – masculinity and associated male-typed traits – are most advantaged by the gender hierarchy (Connell 1995). Consequently, respondents who conform to these standards possess more privilege pre-transition, making their status loss more apparent and overt when they transition; this is, at least in part, because they have many more dominant behaviors to unlearn and are sanctioned post-transition for exhibiting masculine-oriented dominant behaviors. Interviewees who acted effeminately pre-transition already experienced a subordinate position at work compared to other masculine-conforming males and as a result do not report a significant change in status when they transition to women - another subordinate status. Either these individuals are accustomed to the lower status they possessed or they have adopted subordinate, reactionary behaviors that do not provoke as many sanctions as other respondents who developed dominant behaviors as masculine-conforming men.

**Transwomen’s Behavioral Responses to Status Loss**

In the previous section, I detailed the ways in which co-workers critique transwomen’s work and abilities more harshly post-transition. As status construction theory predicts, several transwomen report changing their behaviors in response to co-workers’ lower expectations of their abilities. In this way, co-workers teach transwomen how to act in accordance with gender status beliefs that deem females less competent and worthy of respect; with repeated exposure to female status beliefs, many transwomen alter their actions to conform to corresponding female behaviors.
The majority of transwomen who report status loss at work also report decreases in displays of assertiveness or confidence at work. Genevieve’s story represents a particularly persuasive case in the ways that status beliefs are communicated to women and the effects they have on transwomen’s professional lives. Genevieve is a bicycle mechanic who transitioned openly on the job; however, she reports that customers refer to her as “she” and “her”- indicating that she passes well as a woman. She describes the impact increased scrutiny by co-workers and customers have on her confidence and performance as a mechanic.

Like, more people are questioning my work so and the people that are questioning my work aren’t even really even my bosses, they are coworkers and they are customers. And the more people question my work, my work feels more scrutinized so I think the result of that is me feeling less confident about how I’m doing despite the fact that I have a ton, at this point, a ton of experience working as a mechanic and compared to my coworkers, there are a couple people that have worked longer than me but I’m probably, I fall right in the middle as far as the mechanics. I mean I have a pretty well rounded amount of experience I still feel less sure of how well I’m doing because I feel like all the feedback that I do get from my coworkers and stuff like that is typically not positive. I think that I mean with less scrutiny I think that I was definitely doing better, I was more confident about what I was doing as a man despite having less experience if that makes any sense?

In response to increased scrutiny of her work, Genevieve says she is less confident in her abilities as a mechanic, even though she has gained additional mechanic experience since transitioning. Moreover, Genevieve reports that customers now stand over her while she repairs their bicycles and frequently inquire about her mechanical credentials and ask her to detail her repair choices; in contrast, pre-transition customers quietly waited behind a designated line on the floor. As a result of customers’ hovering over her and indirectly
questioning her abilities, she states that she becomes nervous and loses confidence in her abilities. This spurs a chain reaction, which she states negatively impacts her mechanical skills. In this way, customers and co-workers’ lower expectations have a self-fulfilling effect; people expect her to perform worse than her actual capabilities and Genevieve’s performances suffer accordingly. This case provides compelling support for status construction theory and the self-fulfilling effects status beliefs can have on people’s abilities.

Stephanie, a lecturer at a community college with her Juris Doctor, describes a change in her assertiveness at work. In response to how she handles confrontations with colleagues, Stephanie states,

And now, I am a little bit more passive and a little bit more willing to listen and not be as confrontational. If that makes any sense, some of this sometimes you’re tentative when you talk it out. I don’t know, I don’t know. I would say no, because now I’m not assertive. I seem to be more subdued in approach. And I don’t know if that’s just caution, I don’t know if that’s –what. Or that I’m expected not to be that person but to take a more subdued approach from a feminine perspective. The longer, yeah, since all the transition and the longer out of life and interact on a day to day basis. So in the beginning when I feel as like picking up a little of the social acclimation that I would have if I had been raised all through childhood as a woman.

As a woman, Stephanie describes taking a more subdued, passive approach when engaging in confrontations at work. In fact, she states that as time passes, she is becoming increasingly more passive because, as she suspects, she is continuing to pick up on social cues that likely reward passiveness rather than aggressiveness or assertiveness. She alludes to the fact that she would have already developed a more
passive, or “feminine”, approach had she been raised as female. Stephanie later states that she does not lead or initiate conversations with co-workers like she previously did as a man: “Now I kind of wait to respond to a conversation that has already been initiated. I don’t know. It just seems maybe what I’m supposed to do.” Again, Stephanie alludes to her recognition of gender status beliefs that prescribe that she, now presenting as a woman, should respond to conversations, rather than initiate them. As research indicates, people who initiate conversations or change conversational topics are considered to hold more power in groups than those who wait to respond to conversations.

Interestingly, many of the transwomen in this study that do not communicate status loss at work do, in fact, describe behavioral changes that would otherwise indicate that they are picking up on social cues that signal, as women, they do not command as much status as their male colleagues. For example, Samantha, a waitress that communicates few disadvantages at work upon presenting as a woman, says, “I think as a man I always saw it as you’re the stronger sex so you could say things and get away with more than as you could as a woman so…” Samantha implies that as a woman, she does not think she can “get away” with as many things as a man; as a result, she is not as confident as she was previously was as a man.

Andrea, a computer systems administrator who also communicates no status loss at work, states, “I think I learned that the anger is not appropriate and it kind of was accepted for a guy, but it’s not appropriate because people don’t like it and that its way better to keep my mouth shut. If I do find myself overloaded, then I find that I can mostly
just keep my mouth shut and I’ll be upset and I’ll be somewhat angry, but I guess I’m handling it.” She feels that she no longer carries the authority to openly express anger, and thus, resorts to stifling her anger and dealing with it silently.

Madeline, a marketing installation coordinator, is another transwoman who describes altering her behavior to align with new gendered expectations, despite otherwise reporting little to no status loss at work. The following quotation is illustrative of this behavioral change: “Because I mean it’s hard I think for guys to see a strong woman, it’s like oh, she’s a bitch and so I kind of balance it out by being nice. It’s like I can be strong and I can be good at my job if I’m nice. It kind of softens the blow that I’m good at my job.” In order to avoid being labeled a “bitch”, Madeline must cover competency and strength in a veil of niceness. As she later states, “it is something extra” that she has to do to garner respect and influence at work.

Research by behavioral psychologists attests to the ubiquity of the belief that women cannot be simultaneously “nice” and agentic at the same time (Eagly and Karau 2002; Rudman and Glick 1999). Because agency and the female gender role are incongruent with one another, women are frequently sanctioned for exhibiting qualities that are generally considered advantageous in achieving success at work, such as social dominance, authority, and agency, unless they appose these qualities with communal characteristics (Eagly and Karau 2002; Foschi 1996; Rudman and Glick 1999). In response to sanctions and these pervasive beliefs about agency, women learn to gender-police their own behavior and adopt “softened” agentic behavioral-styles; through these
modifications, women are able to minimize gender sanctions and become more influential among men than they otherwise would be if they did not adopt these softened strategies (Carli 1999).

Several other transwomen also report displaying additional communal characteristics at work due to new co-worker expectations. For example, Andrea, a computer systems administrator, states,

One of the things I saw happen, birthdays tend to get recognized in the job that I’m in now and for whatever reason, that’s seen as the women’s responsibility. So somebody decided that we needed to get all the women together to decide how to handle birthdays and I was absolutely included in that. They were like Andrea [inserted pseudonym] get in here; we’re having an all-women on deck meeting.

As a woman, Andrea is now responsible, along with her fellow female colleagues, for recognizing and organizing birthday celebrations. Although many transwomen welcome these supplementary responsibilities as it suggests being accepted as women, these tasks indicate the gendered nature of personnel-related duties at work.

My findings indicate that co-workers teach transwomen how to appropriately “do gender” after their transition – ensuring that transwomen adhere to behaviors that correspond with female gender status beliefs. Colleagues communicate to transwomen their abased status by granting them less conversational space, more easily dismissing their ideas, holding them to higher performance standards, and excluding them from conversations. Providing empirical support for status construction theory, this study
provides evidence that co-workers’ enactment of female status beliefs have subsequent self-fulfilling effects on transwomen’s behaviors.

Despite previous male socialization and years of being formerly advantaged by status beliefs (at least for those who conform to valued masculinity scripts), transwomen begin to adopt behaviors that are more consistent with female status beliefs, such as passiveness, decreased confidence, reactionary (versus agentic) behavior, and communal qualities. Even if transwomen do not subscribe to gender status beliefs (many subjects express feminist viewpoints during the interviews), they are still held accountable to them by others; therefore, they must consider them when acting. Subordinate actors’ (transwomen in this case) behavioral conformance to gender status beliefs, even if they do not personally endorse them, gives rise to the apparent consensus of these beliefs; thus, making them appear socially valid (Ridgeway and Correll 2006).

It is important to note that some participants express that they never personally identified with male-typed characteristics (dominance, authority) even if they displayed them as men to keep gender-sanctions at bay. Thus, regardless of gendered interactions intended to influence (consciously or unconsciously) their behaviors, they may choose to display passiveness or communal qualities after transitioning because they more personally identify with these qualities. Also, transwomen may have more incentive to adopt and adhere to behaviors that align with female status beliefs as a way to decrease scrutiny on the authenticity of their gender. In other words, if they continue to display male-typed characteristics it may “out” their transgender status.
This research sheds new light on how gender status beliefs are effectively spread at work and as a consequence, alter people’s behaviors. Transwomen experience a multitude of gender pressures and cues that, after replication by multiple workplace actors, become difficult to battle against. As several of them report, they feel they have no choice but to accept certain gender slights in order to maintain a peaceful working environment. These stories attest to the difficulty of changing the gender order, particularly in employment contexts where organizational goals rest upon the harmonious cooperation of mixed gender individuals. Due to societal pressures at and outside of work, transwomen often end up recreating the gender binary through their conformance to traditional gender scripts (Schilt and Connell 2007).
Chapter 6: Discussion

Due to their employment experience as both men and women, transwomen are in a unique position to offer insightful commentary on gendered interactions at work. Their stories of differential treatment post-transition highlight the importance of micro-interactions and cultural expectations in the generation and replication of gender inequality at work. Moreover, these interviews provide persuasive empirical support for the status construction theory – illustrating the ways in which structural factors and micro-interactions act together in forming and cementing hierarchies of esteem between people who have recognized differences, such as gender.

While the majority of research supporting status construction theory has been conducted in laboratory settings, this study provides compelling evidence that the theory’s central tenets hold in real-life settings such as the workplace. First, I find that transwomen are assumed to be less competent than they previously were as men; through various social cues, transwomen come to understand that their work or opinions are not as valued after their transition. These various cues collectively teach transwomen to align their behaviors with female status beliefs that deem them less capable. Second, my findings indicate a self-fulfilling effect that occurs in which transwomen actually become less dominant and assertive, particularly in gender-salient contexts. Third, transwomen respondents report a higher level of devaluation (i.e. they are considered less competent,
are less influential, are given less authority, etc) after their transition in employment contexts where males dominate power and resources.

While some transwomen report status loss in female-dominated or mixed-gender employment contexts, disadvantages are most pronounced and flagrant in male-dominated contexts. Several central factors contribute to this phenomenon. First, men control the majority (if not all) of the resources and power within male-dominated organizations; thus, men appear to be more skilled in these environments because they occupy higher-level positions. Status beliefs are attributed to their categorical sex rather than the structure that advantages them. Second, the occupations in these contexts are gender-typed as male. Consequently, men are assumed to be “naturally” more competent than women in these jobs; as a result, when transwomen transition, they are no longer privileged by male-associated competencies and are assumed as inherently incapable of doing a male-typed job (Britton). Third, gender is highly salient in these contexts because these occupational fields have been sex-typed as male (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). As a result of the saliency of gender, culturally held status beliefs are more readily accessible and shape co-workers’ expectations of transwomen’s competencies. I argue that these unequal structural conditions between men and women and the saliency of gender in these contexts aid in the perpetuation and promotion of gender status beliefs that handicap women and benefit men in these organizations.

Importantly, this research also advances status construction theory by providing a more nuanced version of status beliefs that distinguishes between gender conformity and
non-conformity. My analysis indicates that higher gender status beliefs are not simply conferred to those who possess a male body but rather privileges men who conform to highly regarded forms of masculinity. Hence, the majority of transwomen who acted effeminately (gender non-conformance) as men report little to no status loss post-transition; in fact, pre-transition, many of them report exclusion from male social circles and harassment at work. Comparatively, the vast majority of transwomen who previously as men conformed to traditional masculinity scripts report either some or significant status loss post-transition. Thus, it is imperative for male status beliefs to distinguish between masculinities of gender conformance and non-conformance because these types of men reap different degrees of the patriarchal dividend. Accordingly, future employment research should consider varying gender expression as a part of its analysis, rather than only examining the experiences between men and women as general categories. Although I only examined masculinity in this case, future studies on transwomen should also examine whether different expressions of femininities post-transition elicit varying levels of assumed competency and status at work.

While the study of transwomen work experiences offers many advantages, there are also limitations to this study. First, these data reflect only the experiences as told from the vantage point of transwomen. It would be useful to interview respondents’ co-workers in order to gain their perspectives and confirm transwomen’s experiences. However, it is important to note, that other co-workers, particularly male co-workers, may not recognize their own differential behavior toward transwomen post-transition and
are likely not incentivized to report their own discriminatory behavior toward others. People who are at the receiving end of discrimination are typically the ones most conscious of this behavior rather than those individuals who are enacting discriminatory behavior (Martin 2006). With that said, the inclusion of co-workers in the study may still offer valuable perspectives on social exclusionary processes at work (Schilt 2009).

Second, the question remains on whether this differential treatment is a result of their transgender or female status. These data are limited by the fact that they do not include the experiences of biological women who work for the same employers as transwomen. The inclusion of biological women could either confirm or deny the experiences of transwomen. However, this is a minor limitation; this case study provides ample amount of evidence that points to transwomen’s female status, not trans status, as the root of negative experiences described in this paper. Both stealth and open transwomen communicate differential treatment by their co-workers and these differential experiences align with well-documented gender stereotypes and status beliefs about women- not trans people.

Notably, three separate open transwomen voluntarily mentioned that they had discussed their frustration about being considered less competent and intelligent post-transition with biological female co-workers. All of the female co-workers responded similarly to transwomen’s observations: “Welcome to womanhood!” (or with a comparable phrase). This suggests that cis-women are experiencing similar
disadvantages at work and are acknowledging that status loss accompanies womanhood and not just trans-womanhood.

Furthermore, respondents’ experiences of lowered expected competency-levels, decreased visibility, double standards, and increased harassment corroborate previous research that cis-women experience similar difficulties. Indeed, a plethora of research asserts that women must perform at higher levels to be equally assessed with comparable male counter-parts (Castilla 2008; Lyness and Heilman 2006; Gorman and Kmec 2007). Women also experience high levels of isolation in male-dominated spheres and are harassed more frequently in a variety of employment contexts (Roscigno 2007). Lastly, this research complements Schilt’s (2006; 2009) research on transmen. Schilt’s work demonstrates that the majority of transmen in her study gain advantages post-transition in many of the areas that transwomen, in this study, report disadvantages. Together these studies compellingly illuminate the gender hierarchy in action – a hierarchy that rewards (trans)men over (trans)women.

This analysis has broad implications. The gender change that transwomen undergo bring to light the differential treatment that men and women experience in regard to perceived competence and ability at work. Under the assumption that workplaces allocate rewards based on individuals’ competencies and skills, lower performance assessments have the potential to translate into real-life repercussions and career hindrances. In other words, if women’s performances are consistently judged as less valuable than their male counterparts, these daily assessments have the potential to
convert into lower rewards and less upward mobility for women. Accordingly, micro-interactions that foster assignments of differential value to people’s performances based on their gender are one mechanism of gender inequality.

Another important element of this research is the examination of the self-fulfilling effects of status beliefs. This study provides empirical data that status beliefs have the ability to influence behavioral changes among subordinate actors in the workplace. Interestingly, some transwomen report altering their behaviors in as little as six months to one year after transitioning at work. That is to say, even a short amount of exposure time to co-workers flexing female status beliefs can be enough to spur individuals to alter their behaviors and beliefs about their own capabilities. Imagine the effect that a lifetime of exposure to female status beliefs, as is the case with cis-women, can have on a person’s personality and actions. It is not hard to conceive that these replicated interactional experiences can have profound effects on women’s abilities and beliefs about themselves. As status beliefs are considered consensual, repeated exposure to them further solidifies the formation and spread of gender schemas that elevate men and devalue women.

In order to be able to dismantle inequality, we must first comprehend the interactive mechanisms that help to create and maintain inequality (Risman 2004). The analysis undertaken here demonstrates the power of gender and its ability to permeate situations in which it should not be relevant but yet remains very deterministic of the perceived value of person’s skills and abilities. Through the unique experiences of
transwomen, this research identifies important interactive mechanisms that contribute to the creation and persistence of the current gender hierarchy at work.
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