“Doing Fear.” The Influence of Hetero-femininity on (Trans)women's Fears of Victimization

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ABSTRACT

Through 26 in-depth interviews with male-to-female transsexuals (transwomen), this study examines transwomen's perceptions of safety, pre- and post-transition. The majority reported higher levels of fear and believed they would be unable to fight off an attacker post-transition even though most were large-statured and were socialized as males. Exposure to heterosexual practices and to cultural messages depicting women as physically weak and sexually vulnerable, and transwomen's embodiment of hetero-femininity play a central role in increasing their fears. Their experiences as women are powerful enough to override decades of prior male experiences and expose the socially-constructed nature of fear and bodily agency.

Keywords: transgender; heterosexuality; embodiment; gender and fear; transsexual; femininity

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Heterosexuality is an institution that regulates sexuality and gender by establishing borders and complementarities between men and women. As a system of power, heterosexuality privileges male desires and positions women as passive, willing recipients of male pleasure (Connell 2005; Kavanaugh 2013). Through social interactions and body work, women learn to regard their bodies as weak and vulnerable to victimization, while men learn that their bodies are powerful and protectors of women (Madriz 1997). Simultaneously, women learn that some men will exploit their vulnerability because they feel entitled to women's bodies (Beneke 1983; Pascoe 2007; Tolman 2005).

Not surprisingly, women have higher fears of crime, particularly sexual assault, and employ more avoidance-of-crime-strategies (e.g. avoiding isolated places) than men (May, Rader, and Goodrum 2010; Rader, Cossman, and Allison 2009). This is despite men's higher victimization rates of all violent, personal crimes except sexual assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2010). Yet, no study to date has examined transwomen's perceptions of fears pre-transition (as men) and post-transition (as women). Transwomen are individuals who are assigned male at birth due to anatomical, hormonal, or chromosomal characteristics, but come to identify as and prefer to be socially and publicly recognized as women. This unique perspective of having public experiences both as men and women enriches our understanding of how fear is linked to gendered and sexualized interactions and practices.

Our findings indicate that embodying fear is an elemental aspect of doing and being hetero-feminine. Because transwomen were assigned male at birth, they were socialized and held accountable to male gender norms that stressed bodily control and strength (Kane 2006; Pascoe 2007). Simultaneously, this socialization influenced their views of women and their

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understandings of how other men view and interact with women. Consequently, many transwomen were privy to male privileges prior to their gender transitions, which largely shielded them from internalizing fear of public spaces. However, once they transition to women, they are exposed to contrasting messages that depict their bodies as a central site of oppression. Post-transition, transwomen, similar to cisgender women, encounter frequent objectification cues, such as being touched more frequently or being the subject of the “male gaze” in public.

Since heterosexual forms of femininity are linked to gender-normativity, transwomen are also motivated to embody and practice hetero-femininity to decrease suspicions of gender-inauthenticity. These practices encourage them to de-emphasize bodily agency and can result in a loss of bodily freedom due to wardrobe changes (i.e. dresses/skirts, high heels, etc.) for individuals who were accustomed to unconstrained movement. Consequently, transwomen's post-transition exposure to and internalization of cultural beliefs about female bodily weakness, constraint, and submission override decades of contrasting lived experiences and cultural messages about male bodily strength, entitlement, and power.

Scholars contend that women's smaller statures and gender socialization lead many women to have increased victimization fears compared with men (Goodey 1997; Hollander 2001; Madriz 1997; Pain 2001; Stanko 1995). While these factors are important, the study of transwomen, individuals who were neither socialized as females nor are small-statured, demonstrates the power of widespread processes to affect all persons socially categorized as “female.” Despite possessing characteristics that suggest strength (height, weight, muscles, etc.), transwomen describe their bodies' capabilities post-transition in terms consistent with gendered images of women's bodies as weak, revealing the socially constructed dimension of fear. The

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current study expands previous work on transwomen and exposes broader gender inequalities in public space and the repercussions of “doing hetero-femininity” in a heteronormative culture.

HETEROSEXUALITY, GENDER, AND FEAR OF CRIME

Heterosexuality and Gender

Heterosexuality is deeply entrenched in society. Through ritualized social interactions and social institutions, heterosexuality is presumed and privileged (Ingraham 1994; Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006). Heteronormativity institutionalizes heterosexuality and establishes a social order centering on gender difference and male power. Compulsory heterosexuality, an element of heteronormativity, naturalizes and enforces distinct gendered roles for women and men. This symbolically marks women as naturally oriented to men and vice-versa and subjects individuals who resist compulsory heterosexuality to social control and exclusion (Rich 1980; Jackson 2006).

Heterosexuality is thus an organizing gendered principle of families, schools, peer group interactions, and cultural discourse (Martin 2009; Thorne & Luria 1986). Cultural beliefs about gender are bounded within a system of heteronormativity and heterogender (Ingraham 1994; Jackson 2006); ensuring that conformity with “heterogender” is not just internalized but ensured through acts and depictions of bodily constraint, sexual harassment, coercion, and assault. Male surveillance and rating of women, through “girl watching,” as well as stories and acts of sexual insatiability and conquest stake claims to hegemonic masculinity and reinforce homosocial bonds among heterosexual men. These performative aspects of heterosexuality function as the glue of male subjectivity in which males are sexual subjects and women are sexual objects (Quinn 2002; Pascoe 2007; Tolman 2005).

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Heterosexualized, gendered practices are complemented by controlling images of sexual coercion. For example, force-implied violence is woven into popular romance depictions in movies, books, video games, television shows and media stories about coercion and rape (Hernández, Weinstein, and Muñoz-Laboy 2012). In turn, these practices instill a sense of fear and disempowerment in women. Simultaneously, they maintain heterosexual male power by limiting women's ability to move about autonomously, without the "protection" of a man (Madriz 1997; Snedker 2006).

Embodiment

Gendered bodily movements and discipline are central elements in heterogender performativity. Women's bodies are more constrained than men's; women exhibit less physicality, take up less space, and use their bodies more hesitantly (Martin 1998). These differences signal and reflect embodied inequality. For men, bodies are a source of power and privilege; for women, they are a source of "anxiety and tentativeness" (Pascoe 2007). Hamilton (2007) argues that women learn to produce feminine bodies and to have sexual desires for men, because these allow women to embody gender. Girls are also socialized to fear and control their sexual desires because of asymmetrical heterosexual double standards that may cause them to experience male violence, physically, emotionally, or symbolically (e.g. "slut" stigma) (Tolman 2005).

Cultural ideologies of violence and fear are not just gendered but also "heterosexualized." Violence results from unsuccessful masculinity projects, particular those that reference the feminine (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). For example, boys who adopt behavior typed as feminine are subject to sanction and "homophobic derision" (Dean 2011). Women are socialized in ways that increase vulnerability: they learn that women must be nice and defer to men; that

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women should be grateful for men's hospitality and patronage; and that women gain status through male sexual attention combined with sexual respect. Schooling in femininity reduces women's ability to protest and resist gendered domination, coercion, and violence (Armstrong et al. 2006; Hamilton 2007; Hollander 2001).

Fear is thus a taken-for-granted element of saying and doing heterosexual femininity. Expectations of gendered accountability in public and/or cross-gender environments require women to embody beliefs and practices of what Rader (2005:153) calls "gendered fear," regardless of personal acceptance of cultural beliefs that women are the "weaker sex" (Ridgeway 2011). Elements of gendered fear include "ladylike" displays of attractiveness, subordination, avoidance of isolated environments, reliance on men for safety, and feeling at risk of rape (Rader 2005). Hence, the performance of heterosexual femininity deploys gendered fear as a resource through which women indicate they are "natural women" who expect and deserve male chivalry and protection.

Transwomen, Heterosexuality, and Embodiment

Social interaction requires actors to present and interpret gender displays (Ridgeway 2011). Social recognition as a woman requires conformity to gendered cultural beliefs and practices. As gender is inextricably tied to heterosexuality, this requires that women conform to heterosexual forms of femininity if they are to be thought of as "real women".

Since transpeople are born with a biological body that is incongruent with their gender identity, people may be unable to instantaneously attribute their gender. Gender ambiguity may pose a greater problem for transwomen than for transmen because "gender ambiguity is habitually resolved within a masculinist frame of reference" (Namaste 1996:229). In other

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words, people are considered male by default until they present multiple overt, female cues, such as long hair, breasts, dress, etc. Hence, transwomen must engage in more bodywork than transmen to be seen as the desired cross-sex and are incentivized to adopt normative feminine bodily displays and practices to make it obvious that they are not male. Conformity to heterosexual forms of femininity reduces disruptions to automatic sex-categorization processes. However, transpeople “doing gender” may not suffice in reducing discomfort in heterosexualized interactions.

There are two potential threats that could lead to violence for heterosexually performing transwomen. First, unease by others, particularly by heterosexual men, may occur if they read a transwoman as male because they are a man taking on the feminine – a gender betrayal deeply problematic to masculine heterosexuality that could lead to harassment or violence (Dean 2011; Hennen 2008). Second, heterosexual men may interpret sexual, and perhaps nonsexual, interactions as carrying taint of homosexuality if they discover a transwoman's previous male embodiment and react violently. Schilt and Westbrook's (2009) analysis of media portrayals of transwomen murdered in sexual encounters with men document the ways in which mismatches between biological sex and gender displays are interpreted as “threats to heterosexuality.” For heterosexual men, violence against transwomen is seen as perhaps warranted or acceptable in the cases of “gender deception.”

As individuals who have little leeway in their presentation of gender, transwomen are incentivized to embody heteronormative femininity and comply with heterosexual practices. If they do not, they may encounter violence or harassment (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Despite significant implications for the broader gender literature on heterosexuality and fear,

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transwomen's experiences of heteronormativity in public have largely been unexplored by gender scholars (for exception see Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

The bulk of sociological transgender research has focused on the transitioning process: retraining one's body and gender performativity (Dozier 2005; Rubin 2003; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005), the process of coming out to their social networks (Hines 2006; Schilt 2011), and navigating healthcare institutions (Speer and Parsons 2006; Davy 2011). Other transgender research has focused on social problems, such as HIV transmission and sex work, highlighting a particularly marginalized group of transpeople (Karim and Ramjee 1998; Sausa, Keatley, and Operario 2007). The current study expands this work by leveraging transwomen's dual-gender experiences to expose the power of heterosexual relations, cultural messages, and the embodiment of hetero-femininity to influence perceptions of fear and bodily agency.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

During 2011, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 transwomen in two Midwest, metropolitan cities. All participants had been biologically assigned male at birth and later transitioned to women. To participate, subjects were required to have at least six months of work experience as a man prior to transition and six months of work experience as a woman post-transition. Thus, when interviewed, all participants had lived as women, full time, for at least six months.

Participants were recruited from multiple sources, including LGBTQ newsletter postings, festivals, inclusive bars, community support groups, churches, a transgender conference, snowball-sampling and online postings. LGBTQ-inclusive churches and transgender organizations' events were particularly effective sources of recruitment. Although participants

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with varying interests and social connections were sought, this sample is not representative of all transgender women. The first author completed all recruitment of and interviews with subjects. The author's identity as a normatively, feminine cisgender woman made her an "outsider" to the transgender community. Knowing that interviewees may have held concerns regarding the research agenda, the first author was forthright with her feminist and transgender politics. While responses may still have been affected by the author's cisgender status, many transwomen were eager to participate and tell their story, viewing an interview as an opportunity to raise public consciousness of transgender issues. Of course, transwomen with heightened concerns or suspicions of the author's motives likely did not participate in the first place.

To gain demographic and pertinent transitioning characteristics, participants filled out a background questionnaire prior to the interview. The sample was comprised of a diverse group of transwomen who varied in class, age, education, and sexual orientation, as shown in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Participants' educational attainment ranged from high school to Ph.D. graduates. Participants' post-transition income levels ranged from \$6,500 to \$94,000 with an average income of \$39,300. The sample included four heterosexuals, four bisexuals, one asexual, one queer, and 11 lesbians. Three individuals wrote "female" and did not otherwise indicate their sexual orientation during the interview. This could mean that they are attracted to females or they could have misinterpreted sexual orientation to mean sex. Two participants chose not to disclose their sexual orientation. Participants varied in age from 29 years old to 63 years old with an average age of 46.5 years. The average transition age was approximately 41 years old. Transition age was determined as the point at which they began presenting full time as women,

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including at work (Schilt 2006). All participants, except one who identified as both black and white, identified as white. These reports, thus, largely reflect the experiences of white transwomen. Transwomen of color would likely report different experiences because of racialized cultural meanings of sexuality and gender and pervasive segregation in daily life (Collins 2004).

The extent of physical transformation varied among interviewees. All participants had taken some type of hormones to aid in the feminization of their appearances, and the majority also reported multiple treatments of laser facial-hair removal or electrolysis. In addition, approximately half reported undergoing one or more of the following surgeries: breast augmentation, oriechtomy, facial reconstruction, and/or sexual reassignment surgery (SRS)¹. While bodily transitions varied among interviewees, it is important to note that most respondents (except two) reported they are consistently identified as women in public (as known by strangers' usage of pronouns or salutations, such as she or ma'am). This suggests transwomen are recognized as women in public spaces when their transgender history is unknown.

Interviews lasted approximately one to two hours. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by two trained undergraduate research assistants. To pinpoint emergent themes, the first author read the transcripts multiple times, inductively developed a coding framework, and coded transcripts accordingly. Importantly, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently; thus, later data collection was influenced by emergent themes from earlier interviews (Rosenfeld 2009). Changed safety perceptions emerged in two of the first four interviews and, thus, a standardized question about fear was included from the 5th interviewee on. This means more data on fear could have been collected on the first four interviewees.

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Notably, a total of ten subjects broached the topic of safety before the question was asked, even after the addition of the standardized fear question.

Findings are based both on transwomen's unsolicited comments made throughout the interview regarding their safety and responses to the question: How do you perceive your own safety, and do you notice any changes in perceptions of safety, post-transition compared to pre-transition? The primary author also asked probing questions on why they experienced changes, such as "what is the source of your fears?" Most interviewees directly responded that either their woman status or both their woman and transgender statuses heightened their fears. The last column of Table 1 displays their responses. Of course, responses were not captured for those individuals with unchanged safety perceptions (3) or individuals interviewed before a standardized question was added to the interview guide who did not broach the topic on their own (3). At the end of the interview, all participants were asked whether they noticed other differences in people's treatment of them as women compared to as men in public spaces. These data provide insight into the impact cultural beliefs and heterosexualized practices have on individuals' safety perceptions and resulting bodily practices and behaviors.

Transwomen's gender expressions post-transition were coded to capture their conformity to hetero-femininity, even if they did not identify as heterosexual. Gender normativity is one element in their recognition as cisgender women by others (Lucal 1999). Twenty-one transwomen described themselves as "girly-girl", "feminine", "gentle", and/or "soft" and were coded as adhering to hetero-femininities. The authors also took into consideration whether respondents described frequently wearing dresses, jewelry, and make-up, since these are signs of hetero-femininity (Gottfried 2003). In contrast, five subjects described themselves as androgynous or retaining masculine characteristics and one described herself as "butch."

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However, four of these five subjects still reported being consistently identified as women in public. While people may perceive their femininity differently, transwomen's perceptions of their feminine identity are significant because they influence behaviors directed at cultivating that identity.

HETEROSEXUAL PRACTICES, FEMININITY, AND FEAR

Madriz (1997:343) contends that "fear of crime is one of the most oppressive and deceitful sources of informal control of women." Fear is used as a mechanism to constrict women's behaviors and maintain beliefs they must depend on relations with men to secure patronage, protection, and thus safety. Prior to transitioning, respondents encounter cultural messages that depict their masculine status as dominant and far less likely to encounter bodily intrusions. After they transition, transwomen encounter the flipside of these beliefs from an embodied feminine subjectivity denied the privileges of masculinity.

Transwomen's Safety Perceptions Post-Transition

The majority of respondents (21 out of 26) report increased fears of victimization in public spaces after transitioning. Only three individuals report no changes in their perceptions of safety. For the remaining two respondents, the question of safety had not been incorporated into the interview guide at the point of their interviews, and they did not broach the subject on their own.

Most report their safety perceptions have changed regarding public spaces, rather than intimate relationships, a more common source of violence toward women than street violence (U.S. Department of Justice 2011). Transwomen frequently characterized crime as likely to occur randomly by strangers on the streets. In addition to expressing general fears, two

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heterosexuals and one bisexual mention they feel less safe in relationships or when engaging in intimate relations with male acquaintances. Transwomen's lack of fear toward romantic partners may be a result of lesbians making up one-half of the sample; thus, they likely do not have male romantic partners. Notably, intimate violence is still present in many lesbian relationships with some research indicating that lesbian partnerships have comparable rates of domestic violence as heterosexual partnerships (see Murray and Mobley 2009 for review).

Although previous victimization has been linked with higher fears of crime (Dull and Wint 1997), most have never experienced any previous victimization. The two individuals, Genevieve and Erica, who report previous victimization (physical assault) by strangers, describe situations in which they were at a bar, early in their gender transition, and they were targeted for being transgender, as indicated by assailants' uses of insults, such as "fag" and other trans-oriented slurs. Indeed, for these two individuals, their previous assaults do heighten their fears of being attacked again for being transgender, despite believing they are now recognized as cisgender women in public.

Except six respondents who either did not report increased fears post-transition or for whom the question of safety had not yet been standardized, respondents mentioned that being a woman was a risk factor for assault and /or as a source for increased fears in public. Fourteen of these individuals also mentioned their transgender status as a source of fear, often due to fears their transgender status was a potential escalator of violence after being initially targeted as a woman. Four of these 14 respondents mentioned narratives of violence against transwomen as contributing to their fears, even if they had not personally experienced violence. Specifically, two respondents mentioned the story of Gwen Araujo, a transwoman who was murdered, as part of the reason for their increased fears. Cassy, a truck driver, states,

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But you do hear a lot about Lacey Peterson, you hear a lot about Gwen Araujo, that trans girl that got killed, murdered. It's never ending. It's just that anyone perceived as feminine is now going to be perceived as a victim. So we're less safe because it's still a male dominated world, according to them, women or anyone that's not a man is not safe.

Cassy insightfully draws upon an important feature of the gender system: masculinity sets the standard by which everyone else is compared to and distinguished by. Attaining the earned status of manhood, not just maleness, enables men to feel safe, strong, and impenetrable (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Everybody else—those who embody, practice, or embrace the feminine—is inevitably vulnerable. Thus, she is suggesting that the direction of her gender transition toward the feminine, not just that she is transgender, increases her lack of safety. Notably, zero respondents state that their transgender status was the sole reason for their heightened fears; rather their fear is entangled with becoming a woman.

A handful of transwomen (six) invoke cultural frames that depict women as the weaker gender and as victims. These cultural depictions, usually referring to white women, lead transwomen to feel they are at higher risk of being targeted and also physically hurt post-transition. For example, Samantha, a waitress, states, "I think people see you as a weaker sex just for being a woman.... And I mean I don't want to be in a situation where I'm a victim of a brutal act and actually wind up dead." Deirdre, an electronic technician with her bachelor's degree, echoes similar views: "So if they [men] perceive you as an easy target the more likely they will attack you or go after you for whatever they want."

While Samantha and Deirdre indicate that *other people* depict women as weak, Rebecca, a maintenance worker with a college degree, seems to have internalized messages that she is, in

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fact, weaker now by virtue of presenting as a woman. When asked whether she walks alone at night, she responds:

I just don't do it. I used to when I was a man. Yeah, I'd be anywhere I wanted to. I didn't fear anything but as a woman, yeah, I'm very cautious. [And why is that?] Because we are victims. We're the type of person that other people prey upon because we're the weaker sex, so to speak.

First, Rebecca states she has constrained her behaviors to avoid victimization. Second, Rebecca appears to legitimize the cultural position that women are victims by using the words "we are victims", as if all women, including herself have little agency in deciding otherwise. These statements suggest she has adopted these messages and now, despite her male-originating body, views herself as the weaker sex. This conforms to research that women's "images of victims" typically consist of white middle-class women (Madriz 1997), which many of these transwomen have become. When women believe they are at greater risk of crime, they also think victimization is more likely to occur (Shippee 2012).

Multiple transwomen cite the potential of rape as the impetus of their increased fears. Indeed, research suggests that rape frequently operates as a "master offense" for women (Ferraro 1996; Hilinski 2009). Because other types of victimization, such as being mugged, could lead to sexual assault, rape is an omnipresent fear for (trans)women. For example, in response to why her safety perceptions have changed, Erica, a software programmer who is a lesbian, communicates just that: "There is always the fear of rape." Erica, in her 6 years of living as a woman, has come to understand that rape is a constant threat. Laura's statements similarly capture this belief:

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So if somebody sees me and they see “Oh, there’s a beautiful woman,” who’s going to say they’re not going to kidnap me...What if somebody sees me walking and they try to kidnap me or they try to rape me or mug me because I live by myself and I thought “Well, what if somebody breaks in and sees ‘Oh, look. We’ve got a girl living all by herself’? They could rape me.”

Laura’s fears seem to derive from not only her female status, but also her appearance, as a “beautiful woman”. According to field notes and her self-descriptions, she conforms to hetero-femininity, which she interprets as increasing the likelihood of being raped. Further, her comments suggest that if she did not live alone that rape may not occur, presumably because she would have a man’s protection. Rape is a powerful mechanism of social control that keeps women in fear, cautious in public and private spaces, and in need of men’s protection (Hilinski 2009). Further, fear of rape is a recognizable display of expected and acceptable femininity (Rader 2005). Although Laura has undergone SRS, for those who have not (Erica), the fear of rape may operate differently because unlike cisgender women, rape would likely reveal their transgender status; thus, placing them at risk of additional violence. In this way transgendered women’s fear of violence is distinct from cisgendered women’s fear, however, arguably, both are occasioned by internalized narratives naturalizing violence as a justifiable response to gender deviance.

As a result of respondents’ heightened fears, the majority of respondents (19) report employing avoidance-of-crime strategies. For example, many mention creating self-imposed rules, such as not going to bars “beyond eight o’clock” (Sara), going anywhere alone, “be it a bar, a club, or to any event” (Amanda), or “staying in well-lit areas” (Tara). Caitlyn reports that she has lost “male entitlement” to “go out late at night” by herself; as a woman, she must be

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more careful because “things could happen”. Although she does not articulate what those “things” are, she suggests victimization is always a possibility. These constrictive changes, although similar to cisgender women's behaviors, may also be due to their heightened fears stemming from their transgender status.

Not all of the transwomen in the sample report changes in their perceptions of safety. Indeed, three respondents, all lesbians, report no changes in their perceptions of safety after they transitioned to women. Andrea, a computer systems administrator with her PhD, states, “It's probably because I was raised male and my mother never taught me to be afraid to go out at night like she probably should have if she'd known I was a woman.” Andrea recognizes that male-oriented socialization has shielded her from messages that encourage women to be fearful and consequently, constrict their behaviors. Interestingly though, Andrea, later states that her lack of fear as a woman is “probably stupid on her part.” This comment suggests that, despite her professed lack of fear, she may still perceive herself as more vulnerable to an attack post-transition. The other two transwomen, Jenny and Haley, indicate they were already fearful of men pre-transition due to prior bully incidents experienced in their youth.

While Andrea (the only respondent to report no fears of safety post-transition) identifies as a lesbian, there are seven other lesbians and 3 individuals who indicated “female” as their sexual orientation who report increases in fear levels. The remaining individuals who report higher levels of fear are of varying sexual orientations, including heterosexual, bisexual, queer, and asexual. This suggests that fear of assault and/or rape is experienced by transwomen of varying sexual orientations.

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Embodiment of Heteronormative Femininity

Feminists contend that oppression and inequality materialize, in part, at the body level. Although many transwomen report muscle mass decreases due to hormones they have taken, most respondents still embody other physical characteristics of power in terms of their height and/or weight. Yet, most view their body and strength much differently than they previously did as men or compared to other men. As non-biological women, transwomen are incentivized to adhere to dominant forms of femininity (i.e. white heteronormative femininity) that minimize bodily displays of strength and emphasize sexuality. The underlying logic is if they conform to heteronormative body adornment, their gender will less likely be questioned by others (Schrock et al. 2005).

Part of embodying heteronormative femininity means wearing clothes that are sexually appealing to men – clothes that often constrict movement. Although the majority of the sample does not identify as heterosexual, many transwomen still abide by heteronormative dress codes – i.e. dresses/skirts, tighter clothes, heels, etc. As Deirdre attests, her wardrobe plays a role in safety perception changes. She asserts, “I don’t feel as safe as I did before especially when I wear heels and a dress and stuff. It’s a little less than you would normally. [Why is that?] Maybe the constriction of the clothes, the more difficulty in running, the less physical strength.” So in addition to diminishing strength (whether real or perceived), some transwomen also encounter a loss in movement because of wardrobe changes. One part of women “doing gender” is displaying bodily submission (West and Zimmerman 1987; Dworkin 2001); transwomen “do gender” by adhering their dress to hetero-feminine norms that produce bodily vulnerability.

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Diminished Strength and Fighting Capabilities

Approximately half of the sample considers themselves less capable of fighting off an attacker, post-transition. Transwomen now interpret their bodies through female-oriented messages that depict their bodies as weak and vulnerable. Although many respondents point to hormone treatments as the culprit of muscle loss, their statements suggest that there is more to the story. This is not to suggest that their muscle losses are not real, but rather their perceptions of strength are also influenced by feminine constructs of bodily disempowerment. For example, Katie, a truck driver, states that,

If someone attacked me there's nothing I can do. In becoming a woman I became very weak. Unless I start taking some classes and stuff...It's the hormones. The hormones they just take all the strength from me.

While loss of strength due to the hormones may be one contributing factor, Katie's statement suggests that she has zero strength, rather than a diminished strength. Yet, Katie is approximately five feet eleven inches tall, stocky, and broad shouldered. Her physical stature suggests that she has bodily attributes of strength; in spite of this, she describes her body as not having *any* strength—consistent with gendered images of women's bodies and gendered fear (Madriz 1997; Rader 2005).

To further explicate this point, Laura, a slender, nearly six feet tall transwoman, describes being previously confident in her abilities as a man to defend herself due to training in martial arts. However, post-transition, she interprets her fighting capabilities as significantly diminished because of muscle loss. Interestingly, martial arts training centers around the acquisition of fighting skill and technique, rather than acquiring strength or any other physical attribute. Thus,

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even if she has experienced a loss of strength from hormones, she should not have lost the skills learned in martial arts to fight an assailant. However, part of her confidence in using those skills rested upon her understanding of the male body as strong and capable. Now that she embodies hetero-femininity, her skills have been reframed as powerless. Transwomen are incentivized to align their strength capabilities (both real and perceived) with feminine norms in order to appear gender-authentic. Indeed, physically strong women are perceived as threatening because it questions males' seemingly innate strength capabilities, one of the few remaining male-female distinctions (Boyle 2005).

Tara, on the other hand, compares her body not to her previous male-self, but rather to the strength of her new boyfriend. Tara is approximately five feet and ten inches tall with a medium build and muscular legs.

I'm not a physically imposing person and my boyfriend is quite bigger than me and he helped me realize that I'm not that strong and if somebody decides there's a smaller figure, they could throw me around. And I worry about that. Maybe not so much because of my [trans] status, just being a target as a woman.

Tara uses her boyfriend's larger stature as a frame of reference to assess her own body's capabilities. She describes him as "helping" her to realize her strength limitations, presumably by showing his superior strength or dominance over her. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012), the average male height is 5 feet 9.3 inches, and the average female height is 5 feet 3.8 inches. Tara is considerably taller than the average woman and is approximately the height of the average male; however, because her boyfriend has a larger stature, she conceptualizes her body as weak in comparison. Perceived dominance of men's

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bodies is one way men control and instill fear in women (Rader 2005). Simultaneously, it suggests that women need protection from their stronger male partner and that they are unable to defend themselves (Gardner 1990; Rader 2005).

Importantly, not all respondents conceptualize their strength or fighting capability differently post-transition. Seven transwomen report either no change in their ability to fight off an attacker or that their fighting capability has actually increased due to better preparation for conflict. A few of them point to the fact that they still have advantageous body characteristics. For example, Andrea asserts that along with her tall height, she displays assertive body language, which she believes deters potential attackers. She suggests that men likely pick on another person (a woman) who is "blubbering and tentative". She reasons that these male-associated traits, which she translates to her female body, lessen her chances of victimization. Similarly, Rebecca states, "I'd kick the shit right—like I said, I'm still the same person." Because she perceives little bodily difference, she draws upon male-typed constructs of aggression and self-defense to describe her potential reaction to an attack.

Other transwomen report that they feel more capable to fight off an attacker due to better preparation. Jenny, a library associate who is 5 feet 11 inches tall, says that she is well-versed in Aikido, a non-violent martial art technique, and thus feels better equipped to hedge off an attack. Bethany, a six feet tall truck driver, states, "For me personally there is very little difference because I've done training to prepare for those events and now I'm just more conscious of the possibility of it." Her pursuit to be better prepared and her greater awareness of victimization stems from either her transgender or female status (or both). She attests that there is little difference in her capabilities not because of the lack of bodily difference, but because of her

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increased training and greater awareness. The remaining six participants did not mention any changes in strength or ability to fight off an attacker.

Transgender Status and the Escalation of Fear

Although many transwomen reframe their bodies in alignment with feminine constructs, respondents simultaneously recognize bodily variation from biological female-ideals. Because heterosexual principles rest upon the connection between a biological man and a biological woman, they understand that their bodies conflict with standard, heterosexual definitions. The embodiment of heterosexuality has relevance even for those who do not identify as heterosexuals because of the risk of a man uncovering their male genitals in a physical or sexual assault. Indeed, embodied heterosexuality becomes increasingly important when engaged in a sexually charged interaction with a heterosexual man (either willingly or forced), especially if they have not undergone surgical reassignment surgery (SRS) (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). However, some respondents who have undergone SRS still report fear of becoming a target of a hate crime due to their transgender status. Their previous male history precludes them from ever embodying “true womanhood” biologically; consequently, they fear men may still inflict violence if they were to find out about their previous male status.

Accordingly, multiple respondents believe that their transgender status adds an additional level of vulnerability. Even if they are, at first, targeted due to their female status, an attack may escalate if the assailant discovers that they are transgender. Because men's heterosexuality centers on the repudiation of homosexuality, having a sexualized encounter with a transwoman poses a challenge to men's masculinity and claim to heterosexuality (Hennen 2008). Amanda, a transwoman who has undergone an orchiectomy and breast augmentation surgery, suggests

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that she comprehends that men's sexual engagement with a transwoman is considered a breach of heterosexuality.

Once they [men] get closer to you or interact with you more, you just have to be careful as far as what you say, how you react, and that really goes for any woman. But more so for me because you never know if the switch is going to go off or not and again that can happen to any woman but if a man feels that their sexuality has been threatened by someone who used to be a dude, that can be very, very bad.

Amanda, a bisexual, suggests that although cisgender women must also exhibit caution around men, they do not potentially challenge men's sexuality, like transwomen may. Similarly, Caitlyn states that in a situation in which you were "just going to get harassed before, could escalate to being beat up or killed". Accordingly, many transwomen are cautious when engaging in sexualized (or even non-sexualized) interactions with heterosexual men. Some respondents fear that their mere presence in public could elicit violence from heterosexual men. Madeline asserts that "straight guys freak me out. I'm never more guarded than I am with straight guys."

Transwomen must consider how their actions will be interpreted through a heterosexual framework that excludes individuals whose gender does not align with their assigned sex. Schilt and Westbrook's (2009) research indicates that when encounters are sexualized, people are less likely to accept transpeople's transitioned gender and, for transwomen, this can result in violence. According to a comprehensive transgender survey about violence in specific situations, transwomen report levels of assault, ranging from 9% to 43% for physical assault and 8% to 26% for sexual assault, depending on the context (National Center for Transgender Equality 2011).

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While SRS does not diminish fears for all transwomen who have undergone the surgery, a couple of heterosexual respondents mention that it helps to alleviate victimization concerns. Before surgery, transwomen's genitalia do not match the genitalia typically associated with the female sex. However, after surgery, transwomen's bodies align with gender and heterosexual expectations that they have a vagina. Laura states that she used to be concerned that men she was dating would find out that she had a penis; however, after the surgery, she states, "they'll never be able to tell. They'll never know the difference unless I tell them." SRS provides some transwomen with control over disclosure of their transgender status and allows them to engage in heterosexual encounters that center on vaginal penetration or touching. In other words, they now embody female heterosexuality in that their primary sex organs, as far as people can tell, align with their gender. Of course, transwomen of different sexual identities may view SRS only in terms of sexed embodiment, and not sexual embodiment, especially if they engage in other forms of sex beyond penetrative vaginal sex.

Heterosexual Cues

The previous section detail the ways transwomen perceive fear and likelihood of victimization post-transition. Transwomen describe diminished strength, the looming presence of sexual assault, and greater female vulnerability as reasons for their changed perceptions. While these factors play an important role, there are multiple other social cues, centered on heterosexual practices, which take place on a daily basis that spur (trans)women to be more fearful in public.

After transitioning, respondents report an increase in attention, particularly being looked at more (i.e. the "male gaze") in public. Some label it as "unwanted attention"; others welcome the attention because it affirms their identities as women. Amanda, a customer representative,

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states, "If I'm walking down the street or at social events and it's a mixed crowd... it's those looks where they go head-to-toe or stay fixated on one particular spot." As a man, Amanda reports that people did not look her up and down in public. Sara, a college professor, interprets these extra looks as compliments to her figure – affirming that her body aligns with her preferred gender. Like many cisgender women, respondents become more than just other people walking down the street; rather, their bodies (or body parts) are now "valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997:174).

Reanne, on the other hand, states that this attention makes her feel uncomfortable. Of note, Reanne identifies as a lesbian while Sara identifies as bisexual. In response to why she has had changes in safety perceptions, she states, "I think what I am reacting to is unwanted attention from men. I have never had that as male and if I did, I was not aware of it. I think if I were a heterosexual female interested in men it would not bother me as much as it does being gay." Because Reanne is not heterosexual, this attention does not serve the same function of affirming her attractiveness to men, as it does for Sara. Regardless of whether transwomen interpret male gazes as wanted or unwanted, their gazes heighten transwomen's awareness that their bodies have taken on new meanings.

Multiple transwomen also describe a decrease in body privilege (i.e. the amount of space their bodies are given in public). Respondents report that both strangers and people they know, such as co-workers, touch them much more frequently post-transition. According to respondents, when the touching occurs by strangers, in contrast to co-workers, it appears to have sexual intent. For example, Rebecca states that she has "been pinched at the bar and felt up and *accidentally* been bumped." Similarly, Caitlyn says that since she has transitioned, she has been groped twice while out at the same bar on two different nights. Genevieve states that being

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touched is a common occurrence while she is riding her bicycle, which is her main mode of transportation.

I definitely have had my fair share of people yelling out their window, people like touching me, because they usually read me as female especially when I'm riding from behind and that just makes me concerned for my safety.

Pre-transition, Genevieve states that she was not heckled or touched by strangers; rather that this behavior is connected to her status as a woman. Stranger harassment aimed toward women is quite common and can turn "public spaces into an everyday hostile environment for women" (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997:353). At work, however, transwomen describe more subtle invasions of space that are less sexually overt. For example, respondents note that men frequently touch their lower backs or arms or rub their shoulders. Regardless of sexual intent, transwomen learn that men feel they have the authority to touch (trans)women's bodies at will.

Transwomen also encounter a number of other cues, centered on chivalry, that suggest they are not as strong as they once were as men and that they need men's assistance and protection. These are ritualistic public practices done by men and women. In response to the question "Do you notice any differences in public from when you presented as a man to now as a woman?" many transwomen report that men now initiate chivalrous behaviors toward them. For example, the majority mention that men now hold doors open for them or offer to carry heavy objects for them, despite their capabilities of being able to do both for themselves. For example, Genevieve, a bicycle mechanic and retail associate, states that both male customers and fellow co-workers will often rush over to help her take down a bicycle from a rack while she is working. Although she admits the bicycles are heavy, she is capable of lowering them herself; in

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fact, as she states, lowering bicycles is part of her job. Despite men's positive intentions, these seemingly innocuous gestures preserve gender relations; they send a message to (trans)women that their strength and competence is inferior to men. Accordingly, this may contribute to transwomen's feelings of increased risk of physical harm by men. Alone these chivalrous acts may not be enough to induce higher fears among transwomen; however, along with the other social cues experienced, they represent one more indicator that transwomen are now dependent on men and/or at the mercy of men's restraint.

DISCUSSION

Due to transwomen's dual-gender experiences, they are able to offer a unique perspective on perceived safety and fear in public spaces. This study demonstrates that fear is learned behavior resulting from presentation and social recognition of feminine bodies, in addition to the treatment and regulation of feminine bodies. Pre-transition, respondents paid little consideration to their own safety. Post-transition, their accounts differ.

As women, respondents report higher levels of fear in public spaces, and they impose strict avoidance-of-crime strategies, such as not going out at night alone. The majority of respondents point to their woman status as the key reason for their heightened fears. They report feeling that they are more likely to be the victim of an attack and less able to defend themselves as women; although notably, seven respondents report no changes in their bodily capabilities. Additionally, transwomen assert they now fear being raped, and, for some, rape is the central source of their heightened fears. Many also recognize that their transgender status poses an additional risk for them and may escalate the physical violence of an assault.

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Although some transwomen expressed fears related to their transgender status, most of their more-detailed responses centered on fear as it related to them as women. Despite stories of violence against transwomen being well-known within the transgender community, only a few mentioned these accounts. Transwomen may be incentivized to highlight fear aspects associated with being women, rather than trans, because this better aligns with and / or confirms their identity as women. Also, respondents have been living as women for, on average, approximately six years. Had they been interviewed nearer their transition point their narratives may have revolved more around their transgender statuses. As transwomen's gender transformation becomes more complete (longer usage of hormones, completion of electrolysis / laser treatment, etc.), their transgender status is less likely to be recognized by strangers and perhaps less salient to transwomen themselves.

These findings have important implications. Interviewees have lived on average 41 years as men and yet, in as little as six months' time in some cases, they adopt fears consistent with cisgender women. Some scholars emphasize differences in women's socialization and smaller statures as explanations for their higher fears of crimes than men (Goodey 1997; Hollander 2001; Madriz 1997; Pain 2001; Snedker 2006; Stanko 1995). However, socialization and smaller statures are neither necessary nor sufficient in explaining (trans)women's heightened fears.

In this study, respondents were not socialized from birth as females. Because transwomen were assigned male at birth, they were held accountable to and socialized according to masculine gender norms by most, if not all, people in their lives. Indeed, the majority of respondents report not openly expressing femininities pre-transition due to fear of sanctions. Similar to cisgender men, their gender training likely emphasized and reinforced bodily control and strength (Kane 2006; Pascoe 2007). Despite male-socialization, their post-transition

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experiences as women are powerful enough to override years of prior gender lessons. Furthermore, their post-transition experiences are able to invalidate bodily characteristics that would otherwise suggest power and strength. The majority of respondents are five feet and eleven inches or taller; in fact, many interviewees are well over six feet tall. Yet, approximately half perceive higher vulnerability to assailants' abilities to inflict physical damage. While smaller frames may indeed explain some women's fears, in the case of transwomen, their larger frames do not diminish fears of victimization. Importantly, seven respondents, who range in their expressions of femininity, report no change in their ability to fight off an attacker from pre- to post-transition. This suggests that, for some, physical strength and capability does not conflict with a feminine identity and their transition does not lead to bodily subordination in this regard.

We suggest that multiple gendered processes are responsible for transwomen's increased fear levels and diminished views of their bodies' capabilities. First, transwomen report consciously adopting and embodying heterosexual-femininity. This requires bodily submission, constraint, and the appearance of sexual availability to heterosexual men. And even though lesbian transwomen are not actually available to heterosexual men, they may appear to be through their performance of hetero-femininity. Because of their past, transwomen feel pressure to "do gender" to eliminate suspicions of sex and gender incongruences; at the same time, for many, expressing hetero-femininity also aligns with their gender identity. In this way, their actions are similar to many cisgender women's adherences to heterosexual female practices and the maintenance of hierarchal relations with men. Indeed, many respondents dress according to heterosexual dress standards (dresses, heels, etc.) irrespective of their sexual orientation and describe their bodies' strength in accordance to heterosexual female scripts of disempowerment. Reconceptualizing their strength allows them to identify with other women and to be on the

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receiving end of chivalrous acts by men. This, in turn, validates their acceptance by others as real women – a validation that many respondents report desiring since they were children. At the same time, it simultaneously preserves the gender order. Notably, transwomen of color may report different perceptions regarding their physical capabilities post-transition due to varying conceptualizations and expectations of femininity by race. Due to historical ties to manual labor, black femininity is less linked to bodily weakness and vulnerability (Collins 1990; Schipper 2007).

Second, perhaps more than cisgender people, respondents observe subtle relational hierarchies between men and women due to their shift in social positioning and insider-outsider knowledge (Schilt 2011). Prior to their transition, they received messages that depict their masculine status as physically and sexually dominant and encourage the use of women's bodies to prove hetero-masculinity (Fair 2011; Pascoe 2007). Even if, as men, transwomen did not adopt this gender performance, they were likely aware that these beliefs were widely held among other men. Thus, respondents have inside-knowledge on what it is like to be men and to interact with (subordinate) women. When they transition, they have a greater understanding of how other heterosexual men may view them as women in objectifying terms. It is this realization, in part, that leads to a heightened awareness of vulnerability that they now may face. It also means transwomen – like cisgender women – use displays of gendered fear to signal femininity.

Supplementing their insider-outsider knowledge, the attention transwomen newly receive in public spaces contributes to their increased fears and vigilance. Transwomen report that men frequently look at them “head to toe” in public and encroach on their body space. This finding supports previous research which indicates that stranger harassment and female objectification increases women's fears (Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Macmillan, Nierobisz, and Welsh 2000).

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So in addition to “doing fear”, transwomen receive concrete signals through heterosexualized relations that their body is more vulnerable to assault.

Despite the uniqueness of transwomen's perspectives, there are several limitations to this study. The generalizability is limited due to the small sample size and that it includes transwomen from only two metropolitan areas. Future research should expand the sample and explore other residential areas, such as suburban and rural areas. The current study indicates the need for further examination of the connection between fear and transwomen's sexuality. Our data suggests that there may be a distinction between lesbians' and heterosexuals' ideas about the male gaze and other objectification practices, but the sample is not large enough to examine differences between transwomen of different sexual identities. Along those same lines, future research should explore how heteronormativity affects gendered fear among heterosexual, bisexual, queer, and lesbian women.

Transwomen's unique gender insights offer a rare opportunity to examine individuals who have both male and female experiences. Despite their male-originating bodies, they report female-victimization ideologies upon transitioning, exposing the significant, feminized social construction of fear. This study highlights the distinct ways in which gender presentation, not biology, is a determinant of bodily agency and fear of victimization. It further emphasizes the importance of embodiment of heterosexualized gender norms in people's perceptions of threats. In conclusion, the institution of heterosexuality is central to the regulation and constriction of all women's bodies and the maintenance of the current gender order.

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NOTES

1. SRS is the dominant terminology used, but some transpeople may prefer other terms, such as gender-confirming surgery or genital realignment surgery.
2. Cisgender refers to individuals whose assigned birth gender matches their assigned biological sex and "replaces the terms 'nontransgender' or 'bio man or bio woman'" (Schilt and Westbrook 2009: 461).

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TABLES

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Pseudonym	Sexual Orientation	Age	Age of Gender Transition:	Highest Education Level:	Increased Levels of Fear - Y or N?	Source of Fear - Woman, Trans or Both Statuses
Whitney	heterosexual	30	28	Some college	Did not specify	Did not specify
Stephanie	lesbian	51	47	Doctorate	Y	Did not specify
Elizabeth	lesbian	51	49	Technical / Associate	Did not specify	Did not specify
Laura	heterosexual	31	24	Some college	Y	Both
Erica	lesbian	63	50	Technical / Associate	Y	Both
Caitlyn	asexual	52	51	Technical / Associate	Y	Both
Samantha	heterosexual	45	42	High school	Y	Both
Tara	bisexual	37	32	Some college	Y	Woman
Amanda	bisexual	40	36	Some college	Y	Both
Kelly	lesbian	57	53	GED	Y	Both
Rebecca	heterosexual	56	51	Some college	Y	Both
Andrea	lesbian	55	45	Doctorate	N	N/A
Katie	female	56	45	High school	Y	Woman
Jenny	lesbian	60	60	Bachelors	N	N/A
Sara	bisexual	43	32	Doctorate	Y	Woman
Jackie	female	42	39	High school	Y	Both
Madeline		38	30	Bachelors	Y	Woman
Sandra	bisexual	30	26	Bachelors	Y	Both
Bethany	lesbian	38	33	Bachelors	Y	Both
Cassy	lesbian	48	41	High school	Y	Woman
Deirdre		30	29	Bachelors	Y	Both
Frances	lesbian	56	40	High school	Y	Both
Genevieve	queer	29	25	Bachelors	Y	Both
Haley	lesbian	56	51	High school	N	N/A
Reanne	lesbian	56	43	Doctorate	Y	Woman
Rhonda	female	59	56	Technical / Associate	Y	Both

Notes: 1. Two participants chose not to indicate their sexual orientation on the survey. Their responses were left blank above. 2. Three participants wrote female for the sexual orientation question. They may have either been referring to their sexual preference or misinterpreted the meaning of sexual orientation with their sex. 3. The interviewer did not inquire about safety perceptions during the first four interviews. In cases where the subject was not broached on their own, we note above they "did not specify" whether their safety perceptions had changed.