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Gender violence revisited: Lessons from violent victimization of transgender identified individuals

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Abstract
Violence against individuals with non-normative gender presentation is an alarming public health problem in the USA. Based on ethnographic research in transgender communities in the American Midwest I demonstrate that the significance of multiple and simultaneous gendered victimization experiences of transgender individuals urges the need to rethink the equation of "gender violence = violence against women." The findings reveal that: First, violence impedes the quality of transgender lives on a daily basis. Second, violent harassment occurs most if individuals visibly transgress gender norms. Third, the sampled transgender individuals respond to violence in diverse ways: Coping strategies range from resignation, depression, as well as constraints in mobility and gender presentation on one side of the spectrum to active resistance through community building, self-policing, and creative arts on the other.

Keywords
Gender violence, qualitative sociology, transgender, transphobia, violence

Introduction

"As transgender you have to take care" says Sylvia,[1] an approximately 60-year-old transwoman referring to her lifetime experiences of harassment and violence. Morgan, a 53-year-old transwoman, nods and says "Yeah, I am observing constantly, I am always aware of my surroundings." Jeff, a 37-year-old transman laughs and says "Us guys have it easier!" I sit in a haphazard circle together with 26 transgender identified individuals in a transgender support group meeting

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hosted by a local LGBT Center. It is a late Saturday afternoon in Belt-town, a medium-sized Midwestern town, in 2009. The group was founded in the mid 1990s when transgender identity politics hit the public policy stage in the USA and created virtual and physical space for a transgender movement. Since the 1990s the category transgender has bound together an abundance of diverse gender identity expressions by a collective transgender rights and community and social service movement in the USA (Broad, 2002; Stone, 2009; Stryker, 2008). Transgender, also referred to as "trans,"[2] denotes an array of individuals whose gender identities do not match their assumed genders based on sex categories assigned at birth. This includes persons who identify as the 'opposite' birth-sex but also individuals who identify as gender-variant beyond the binary gender order who may permanently or temporarily change or bend their gender presentation, with or without surgical or chemical help. Yet transgender is not in itself an identity term, nor a label for a new "minority with special needs," but a descriptive label for being differently gendered that illuminates the complexity of gender for everybody (Currah et al., 2008; Elliot, 2009; May, 2002).

The goal of this article is to give voice to transgender individuals who have experienced violence. By addressing physical violence in a politically repressive environment, my research responds to the call for more materiality in sociological transgender studies (Hines and Sanger, 2010). It also illuminates notions of transphobia, genderism and genderbashing (Hill, 2003). After a brief literature review and presentation of my methods, I structure my findings according to the themes as they emerged from the data. First, my data substantiates the existence of cultural transphobia as transgender individuals clearly perceive harassment and violence as hate-motivated crime, yet there is a lack of legal protection and victim assistance.

Second, I present experiences with transphobic violence. Violence against trans people is often triggered by gender non-conformity and violence is a form of gender policing. Although transgender individuals are frequently targets of genderism and genderbashing (Hill, 2003; Namaste, 1996) because they transgress gender norms (Lucal, 1999; Tomsen and Mason, 2001), many experience more or less violence *because* they pass as their desired gender perfectly. Transwomen are at higher risk for verbal, physical, and sexual harassment in this context.

Third, I interrogate personal safety strategies. Trans folks are often excluded from full citizenship (Monro and Warren, 2004) and cannot use the legal system to protect themselves from violence or seek retribution, because these legal/criminal justice structures are a source of violence to them. However, participants are not only passive recipients but also agents that cope with the hate to which they are exposed. Their strategies range from resignation that expresses itself in depression, limited mobility, and gender presentation constraints to active resistance through community building, self-policing, and creative arts.

I conclude by discussing transgender violence as a lens for gender violence more broadly and argue that we need to rethink the equation of "gender violence = violence against women" in sociology and public policy contexts. The violence against

women paradigm is insufficient to capture all gender-based violence; the inclusion of the experiences of transgender individuals will lead us to a better understanding of gender-based violence.

Literature review

Gender violence as expressed in transphobic hate crime is a major public health, human rights and social justice problem in the USA (Lombardi et al., 2001; Patton, 2007; Wilchins and Taylor, 2008). ''Gender identity,'' however, did not exist in hate crime legislation on a national level until president Obama signed the Matthew Sheppard Act – named after a nationally publicized hate crime victim – into law in October 2009 (White House, 2009). Allen Andrade is believed to be the first offender convicted for a transphobic hate crime for the murder of Angie Zapata in 2009 in Colorado (Tilleman, 2011). Conventional definitions of ''gender violence'' render transgender populations invisible; it is synonymously used for violence against women in the sociological literature and by the World Health Organization (2008). Yet as sociologists we must acknowledge that ''gender involves identities beyond women and needs to be understood as femininity, masculinity, gender queer, transgender, men, women, and beyond'' (Lynch, 2005: 3).

Violent abuse and its mental health consequences are serious, frequent, and lifelong experiences in the majority of transgender-identified populations (Kidd and Witten, 2007; Witten and Eyler, 1999). In the USA, approximately two individuals are murdered every month because they act or look trans. Between 2008 and March 2011 alone, 38 transphobic homicides have been documented in the USA, which means an increase in documented transphobic homicide from previous years (TDOR, 2011; TMM, 2011). Transgender people are often stereotyped as ''deserving'' of violence (Merry, 2006), which makes them a group particularly prone to gender policing through harassment and interpersonal violence perpetrated by ''gender defenders'' (Bornstein, 1994). Compared to victimization patterns of the general population, violence against transgender people can be particularly brutal (Bettcher, 2007; Lynch, 2005). It is twice as likely to cause injury and four times as likely to cause hospitalization (Lynch, 2005). Lombardi et al. (2001) found that 60% of their transgender sample ($n = 402$) had experienced either violence or harassment and 26% had experienced a violent incident. In a sample of San Francisco transgender individuals ($n = 515$), 83% had experienced verbal abuse and 46% had experienced physical abuse (Clements et al., 1999). It also has been found that 46% to 66% of transgender individuals have been victims of sexual violence (Kenagy and Bostwick, 2005; Munson, 2002). An exception to these small-scale studies is the first national Transgender Discrimination Survey published in February 2011 based on the largest transgender sample ($n = 6450$) in the history of transgender studies (Grant et al., 2011). Over half (53%) of respondents reported being verbally harassed or disrespected in a place of public accommodation, including hotels, restaurants, buses, airports and government agencies (Grant et al., 2011). Victims of hate crime experience higher levels of psychological

distress and anxiety than other victims (Iganski, 2001). A staggering 41% of transgender persons reported that they have attempted suicide, compared to 1.6% in the general population, with rates rising for those who were harassed/bullied in school (51%), or were the victims of physical assault (61%) or sexual assault (64%) (Grant et al., 2011).

Hill (2003) suggests a framework of genderism, transphobia, and genderbashing for the study of transgender violence. Genderism is the cultural discomfort with the notion of a gender continuum, transphobia is the emotional disgust towards individuals who do not conform to gender expectations, and genderbashing is the fear manifested in acts of violence (Hill, 2003). Being or looking trans challenges the heterosexist ''gender order'' (Connell, 2002) by expressing a non-normative gender (Gressgard, 2010; Willox, 2003). Gender and hate crime theory suggest that being transgender challenges the gender order even more than being woman or gay (Bettcher, 2007; Gressgard, 2010; Lynch, 2005). Namaste (1996) argues that ''gay-bashing'' really is ''genderbashing'' as the perceived transgressions of normative sex-gender relations motivate most aggressive incidents. ''Effeminate'' men and ''masculine'' women are most at risk of assault, and ''gender [expression] is used as a cue to locate lesbians and gay men'' (Namaste, 1996: 225). Thus, transphobic violence functions as ''gender border patrol'' for a powerful dichotomous gender system (Lynch, 2005). Transphobia has also been conceptualized as a spatialized practice of possession (Moran and Sharpe, 2004) that limits spatial mobility for transgender persons in urban areas (Doan, 2007).

Given the severity and high prevalence of anti-trans violence, we need to understand the meanings of violence in transgender lives. This community has largely been ignored in the gender violence literature and in public policy. With few exceptions (Namaste, 2000; Valentine, 2007) most of the existing research has been conducted in metropolitan areas using quantitative measures. My study adds to the literature on (trans)gender violence by employing an inductive research design in a Midwestern area that is characterized by large rural areas and midsized cities. In order to understand the conditions under which transgender violence occurs and how individuals react to it, we need to examine the untold stories behind the statistics and explore the experiences and priorities of the trans population.

Methods

To unpack the meanings of violence in the lives of transgender individuals, I conducted ethnographic field research in transgender communities in three differently sized Midwestern cities (River Falls has 200,000; Belt-town has 430,000; Half Heaven Hills has more than 700,000 inhabitants). From October 2007 to December 2010, I engaged in participatory observation of support groups at transgender related events such as symposia, movie screenings, social networking gatherings, and annual Transgender Day of Remembrance[3] activities amounting to approximately 800 hours of fieldwork. Over the course of more than two years I documented public events, support groups, transgender related training, and

casual conversations in three transgender communities. My fieldnotes and 15 recorded interviews with transgender identified individuals (average interview length = 90 minutes) were transcribed into digital word-processing files. I established rapport with my interviewees during my fieldwork and selected them for interviews based on two criteria: they have experienced transphobic violent assaults and/or they are professionally engaged in anti-transviolence work. The data pool is complemented by annotated photographs of public events. I have used grounded theory as an analytical strategy (Charmaz, 2006) and utilized qualitative analysis software to help organize and code my data.

In all of the field contexts I introduced myself as a sociology graduate student with an interest in learning from transgender communities rather than to analyze "them," and as a person who wishes to contribute to social change and gender justice. When appropriate and when asked, I have identified myself as genderqueer and pansexual, which contributed to my interest in this topic. I have also reflected upon my subjectivity as a white female-bodied sociologist with a German accent through a series of memos.

All of the participants in my study identify as "trans" or "transgender." All of them participate in the transgender community by attending transgender support groups, volunteering for transgender organizations, or performing on stage as drag queens, drag kings or genderqueer performers. Most of them identify as working class, yet the majority are unemployed and struggle to make ends meet. An essential limitation, that equally constitutes a finding, is that the transgender support group meetings I attended in the Midwestern area under consideration attract almost exclusively white individuals. I attended the three major transgender support groups in the state, met more than 100 "out" proactive people and trans-movement leaders, but I encountered only one Black activist (and few drag performers of color) among them. I encountered one Native American and a few multiracial people. I will refer to participants with their preferred gender pronoun. I denote their transgender background according to their self identification with MTF (male to female), FTM (female to male), or other (genderqueer, agendered, bigendered). Those who identify as genderqueer (beyond the gender binary) I address with the pronouns "ze" and "hir" as suggested by genderqueer activists (Feinberg, 1993; Fieldnotes Trans[name of state]-symposium, 2009, 2010).

Findings

> *"People like me need to be destroyed"* (Shawn, 32, MTF, Belt-town. From fieldnotes on *transphobia, genderbashing, and the state*)

Because many trans people are visually transgressing gender norms, they often attract rage reserved for people who are perceived as queer, homosexual (Namaste, 1996) or otherwise different from gendered norms. Thus, genderbashing serves as a warning to the entire queer community. This became evident in a

meeting sparked by multiple robberies in a "gayborhood" on the Westside of Belt-town. The emergency meeting in the local LGBT center attracted about 30 concerned participants from the queer community. They discussed the interrelatedness of homophobia and transphobia. Lauren (52, MTF, Belt-town resident), for instance, said "One guy in a bar called me tranny faggot. But I'm not gay! If you gonna be ignorant be an educated ignorant!" (Fieldnotes LGBT hate crime meeting, Belt-town, 26 February 2009).

Belt-town had been struck by an epidemic of hate crime incidents against the queer community. The monthly support group meetings repeatedly highlighted an increasing amount of violent assaults and incidents. A hate crime meeting between LGBT activists and city hall representatives did not yield any effective strategies, because legal federal and state protections for transgender populations were non-existent. The absence of legal protection is meaningful for individuals, because it leaves them feeling helpless and demoralized. A middle-aged couple attended the support group meeting for the first time. One week earlier, they were the victims of a violent property crime. As the woman told their story, her partner, MTF, sat beside her and held her shaking hand. In only four days, several cars on their street were set on fire and several neighborhood gay bars were broken into. She said: "[The state] has no hate crime laws, [The state] sucks. It feels pretty hateful, they really just want our community to go away. Matthew Sheppard was not that long ago" the woman said as she cried (Fieldnotes 12 June 2008, support group meeting, Belt-town).

An overwhelming majority of respondents in my study reported experiencing verbal harassment at least once in their lifetime because of their gender expression. This finding is somewhat shocking, as the studies just cited find lower prevalence rates of verbal harassment. There are several possible explanations. First, the Midwestern area where I conducted my research might be a particularly repressive environment. The Bible-belt notion is referenced frequently in interviews as in this one: "This one guy just wanted to kick my ass. Because I was to him, sick, I was a sick motherfucker. And people like me need to be destroyed. The Bible says so. And we are in the Bible belt. All right?!" (Shawn, 32, MTF, Belt-town). Second, the sample consists of individuals who actively participate in transgender support contexts. That means that they have sought out help because they encountered difficulties – such as violence – in their lives. It also means that these persons are creating advocacy oriented networks and, consequently, have a heightened sensitivity for violence. These participants developed a vocabulary to talk about their experiences, empowered by others who did so before them. Third, many trans individuals are not connected to awareness raising support contexts and/or do not name their experiences as violence. Quantitative studies may thus contain response error. Verbal harassment might not be reported as violence, as Jeff (FTM, 37), facilitator of transgender support groups in Half Heaven Hills explained: "They call me a freak, they make me an 'it,' that is dehumanizing. We experience daily verbal violence and we get used to it. We don't call it violence."

Narratives of participants clearly reveal the embeddedness of physical violence in a social system that structurally discriminates. Missing legal protection, institutional and symbolic discrimination in all areas of life was often referred to by the participants as a "Catch 22," the title of a popular novel (Heller, 1961) that has come to be a synonym for a no-win situation. The Catch 22 presents itself as daily discrimination, marginalization, and stigmatization. If one lives their desired gender, discrimination, medicalization, and violent victimization are often the price to pay; conforming to normative gender expectations, however, often results in individual distress, depression and suicidal ideation. Almost all of the trans persons I met in the field face economic hardship, employment and housing discrimination, and problems accessing medical services. Some of them, like Clara, tried to escape the economically depressed Midwest. Clara attended the support group that day for the first time and in her introduction shared that when she started transitioning she lost her job in Belt-town. She tried to move to Florida and get a job, she had been a security service worker before. She did not get the job in Florida because she was transgender and ended up homeless. She had no money to buy hormones and thought she might find a job as a man, so she went without hormones, with the effect that she ended up in a special "crazy hospital," because she was suicidal and depressed. Now she is living in Belt-town again, where she originally comes from (Fieldnotes 12 April 2008, Belt-town, support group meeting).

Police harassment epitomizes the transgender Catch 22 and lays bare the intersection of individual victimization and institutionalized transphobia at the state level. The state in which I conducted my research does not allow citizens to change the gender marker on their birth certificates. That means that if one chooses to live as a different gender, the ID documents cannot be matched to actual gender identity and expression. This creates problems when dealing with insurance agencies, health institutions, and the justice system. Lilly also addressed her fear of transphobia in the criminal justice system, which leads to her perception of police as a huge threat to her personal safety. She explained:

> If something happens to me, if I get raped, murdered, anything like that, the cops will care less . . . Just one more piece of crap off the street . . . I mean, the average person goes out and hopes they don't blow a stop sign . . . that is nice and dandy, I wish I had those problems. My fear is getting stopped and shot by a cop. My fear is getting pulled over, 'cause I even look like a transsexual. And then they see my driver's license and it is over and out. The cop taking me into the jail, just screw with me, and beat the crap out of me or somth'n. Okay . . . ahm . . . getting in jail I'd surely be raped. Most transsexuals go to prison, usually in the diamond prison, due to the fact they are raped and beaten. All right. And usually not by their fellow inmates, but by the officers. (Lilly, MTF, 43, River Falls)

Over the course of about seven years of living out as trans, Lilly has learned that her visual transgression of gender norms puts her at higher risk for assaults.

She has been pulled over by the police who ridiculed her. She has never been in prison herself but she is friends with several transwomen who have been jailed for solicitation and shared with her experiences of sexual violence (see Jenness, 2009 and SRLP, 2007 for prison experiences of transgender populations).

Jeremy (FTM, 41, River Falls) is the elected chairperson of a transgender support group and knows about the problems his friends have with the police. For years he has been fighting for a policy change in the state that would at least make possible a change of gender categorization on the driver's license. In his role as a service and advocacy person, he always "pushes the people to make police reports, but many of them do not want to be identified and outed. Also, if police reports are made, they are often not followed up by the police because transgender people are seen as freaks and wackos. Many stories remain untold." Jeremy shared with me one of these "untold stories" of four transwomen in Belt-town, as we take the 40-minute ride from River Falls to a support group meeting in Belt-town together. Hannah (28, MTF, Belt-town), whom I met later that night, and her friends were leaving a gay bar and intended to go to the car, which was a block away. Four men were hanging out in front of the bar and kept yelling at them – "We don't want freaks!" They followed and attacked the transwomen, kicking, beating, and stabbing them. Although the police were called, they never arrived. However, the victims were not out as trans and thus did not want to file a police report anyway (Fieldnotes 5 October 2009, Belt-town, support group).

My data substantiate evidence from the national transgender discrimination survey. Almost half of the respondents (46%) reported being uncomfortable seeking police assistance and almost one-third (29%) of respondents reported harassment and disrespect by police. In the national survey, respondents of color reported substantially higher rates (Grant et al., 2011). Transgender and gender nonconforming people may have higher levels of interaction with police. They are more likely to be victims of violent crime and they may work more often in the underground economy due to lack of formal employment. Some face harassment and arrest simply because they are out in public, which is referred to as "Walking While Transgender"(Grant et al., 2011: 158), like Mona: "When I dressed up the first time as Mona – I was 16 at the time – and went out, the police arrested me for solicitation on the street. I wasn't out to my parents then, it was horrible" (29, FTM, Half Heaven Hills). Mona was arrested because she displayed what was interpreted by police officers as exaggerated femininity. The experience of femininity as a threat to personal safety is an experience many transwomen share with her.

"Us guys have it easier" – (trans)gender violence revisited

The narratives of individuals in my sample provide clear evidence for heightened victimization risk in periods when individuals "transition" or are read as gender-ambiguous. Female to male transgender individuals (FTM) find it easier to "blend in" and "pass" as male. Male gender markers, such as the adam's apple and a large physical build, are less easy to hide. Lillith, a tall, blond, young woman who

considers herself a "perfect pass" nowadays, shared her experience of early transitioning and stated that "... when I started transitioning I got people yelling at me, and that was tough, you know, scary at times. I had some incidents then, of people insulting me as I walked down the street, or when I was in a bar" (Lillith, MTF, 25, Half Heaven Hills). For Morgan, who started transitioning in her late 30 s and at times struggles to afford hormones, passing as a woman is more difficult. She is often read as a non-normative gender rather than as a woman. When I first met her she worked in a gas station with high customer frequency in what she considers a "seedy" neighborhood: "I get at least five remarks a day during work. I also have to take care off work in public, every minute a car could come by and shoot me" (Morgan, MTF, 53, River Falls). One morning Morgan called me and said "You wanna know about transphobia, right?" She was still upset when she shared that while she was working the night before, a man pulled up to the gas station, walked up to the window, and when he realized she was transgender while she handed him some items, he "threw all the stuff on the floor and screamed: 'oh you are a sick motherfucker, I am coming back here no more, you need to be killed, I am taking your ass, when you come outside!' And this is not the only one; stuff like this happens all the time!" (Phone conversation 5 June 2009, Morgan, MTF, 53, River Falls).

The perpetrators the participants in my study encountered are exclusively male (as Wilchins and Taylor, 2008 point out as well), and all participants report a higher risk for assault because they "look trans," indicating violence as gender border patrol (Lynch, 2005) based in genderism (Hill, 2003). But transgender individuals also have a unique social location to experience shifts in victimization patterns as they change their gender presentation. Their stories offer valuable insights into gender violence more broadly. Transgender individuals, some of whom pass as their preferred gender perfectly (as seen from a heteronormative perspective), are prone to physical and structural violence as well. This is especially true for transwomen, Lillith explained, as men are a threat to her differently than before her transition:

> Maybe I can explain. When walking down the street now, by myself, no matter where I am, and I see a group of guys, even if there are girls with them. As I walk and pass them I kinda tense up ... I am ready for them to say something to me, insulting, insulting me as a woman ... and that is completely different from when before I transitioned. Before that, like, I would not think about that at all. You know. I wouldn't think to get worried, you know, by men. And so, yeah, all the people who have been insulting me have been men, you know. So its like, ahm, it would be stupid to kind of not pick up on that and realize that men are a threat to me in a way that they weren't before. (Lillith, MTF, 25, Half Heaven Hills)

Many transwomen in my sample told me that they are more exposed to sexualized harassment such as men grabbing their butt in bars, and yelling sexual slurs at them in public spaces. It has been noted in the literature that violence rates vary across perceived gender of victim: self reports of victimization to a national LGBT advocacy institution rose 20% for MTFs, from 174 in 2005 to 208 in 2006, while reports of

violence against FTMs remained level at 25 in both years (Patton, 2007). Serano (2007), a transgender woman and activist, stated that most of the anti-trans discrimination she faces is probably better described as misogyny. Transgender women face disadvantage because they choose to be feminine in a world in which women and men devalue femininity (Connell, 2002; Serano, 2007). Indeed, the transmen I spoke to would often say "us guys have it easier:" their exposure to interpersonal violence decreases and perceptions of personal safety increases. This shift has its flipsides and complexities, as a conversation with Nathan, a 27-year-old transman in Half Heaven Hills shows. He said he feels a lot safer as a male, because he is male but also because he blends in perfectly now. People take him more seriously as a male. As a woman he was very butch and got lots of remarks, which have stopped completely now. But he also thinks "it is more complicated" and not always easier as a man, since "the likelihood that you get attacked on the street if you get into an argument is higher if you are a guy. Also it has the flipside that women change street sides if they see you, a guy, coming across. This is a new experience" (Fieldnotes, research dinner with Nathan, 8 March 2008, Half Heaven Hills).

Nathan's experience substantiates genderism and transphobia. First, Nathan was sanctioned for not being feminine enough; once he transitioned, he experienced male privilege. Schilt (2006) found a similar dynamic when researching transmen in the workplace. Many of the respondents in her study found that they received more authority, reward, and respect in the workplace than they received as women, even when they remained in the same jobs. Transmen blend in easier as men, "because there is a lot of short guys out there, and ladies are often betrayed by their height and their large hands" (John, 24, FTM, River Falls). Schilt's data (2006) demonstrate that tall, white FTMs see more advantages than short FTMs and FTMs of color. I also find racialized victimization experiences among the scarce data that I was able to collect on trans of color. The founder of the International DragKingExravaganza, Luster DeLa Virgion, a genderqueer performance artist of color worked (one of) hir victimization experiences into the one-person stage play *Paint!* which was performed over the course of the Third Trans[Name of state] Transgender-symposium in August 2010. Luster shares hir experiences during a Lesbian conference in DC when ze explored female masculinity, dressed as a man, strolling down the street, accompanied by a graduate student:

> My grad student and I got physically bothered by three – maybe four stocky tall fratish lookin' white boys. The white chick with them just stood there and laughed. My grad student got felt up. I got beat down. OH, I left a few stingers – 'course, I still ended up on the ground – fucked up. I yelled after them to get their asses back and fuckin' finish this! Please Gawd-Ughhhhhhhh!! . . .
>
> What saved me was being a girl-empowering . . .
>
> I mean it just didn't fit in my spoon-fed, book-led, narrow-minded vision of how patriarchy informs and operates . . .

> I hear "it's a girl, come on man" I hear my head hit the cement. Was it because I was a Black man? Is it because I am Black? 4 White Pricks thought they wuz beatin' down a niggah – putting coonie in his place . . .
>
> . . . No a she who is a he? We accept all freaks but you must be like we.
>
> (Excerpt of *Paint!* script, courtesy of Luster de LaVirgion)

The complexity of gender unfolds as we explore Luster's different, yet intertwined experiences of safety and victimization. While most (white) transmen experience enhanced safety and less harassment, becoming a Black man may be an increased health and safety risk (Hernandez, 2008). Luster chose a proactive way of artful activism to cope with hir multiply jeopardized social location. Ze has been active as artist, community organizer, and facilitator in the queer community in Half Heaven Hills for more than 15 years now, unlike many other respondents, as I show in the next section.

"As Transgender you have to take care" – Responses to genderism and genderbashing between resignation and resistance

Trans individuals are not only passive receivers of violence but also agents that actively cope with the transphobia, genderism and genderbashing to which they are exposed. In my sample I find coping strategies and reactions based in resignation, like self-imposed constraints of mobility and limited gender presentation. I also find proactive resistance such as self-policing and intimidation, community building, and resistance to violence through creative arts.

Constraints of mobility and gender presentation. My data confirm that spatial mobility of trans individuals is limited in daily life, as Doan (2007) suggests in her theoretical piece. Morgan for instance stopped traveling long distances completely, and does not drive her car after 9 p.m., because she does not know the night shift of the local police and is afraid of getting harassed. She has gone "back and forth" between male and female gender presentation for several years because she felt safer as a man. Also Tara (45, MTF, Belttown) changes into male presentation by wearing hoodies, hats, and no make up whenever she has to travel on the highway for more than 50 miles. Tara feels not only unsafe in her car but also in her home. She started transitioning in 2009 and was considering moving from River Falls to Half Heaven Hills at the time of the interview because she felt threatened by her male neighbors since she began dressing as female:

> In the last 6 months, since I am going out as Tara, I am constantly getting harassed on my street. People yell at me and laugh, they behave like little boys. My house got broken into twice and I have been living in this hood since 10 years with no incident! I cannot take this anymore! I am totally broke, but I need to get outta here.
>
> (Tara, MTF, 47, River Falls)

Low social class exacerbates the problem of trans violence because transgender individuals with more resources can choose to live in safer neighborhoods and can afford facial surgeries for enhanced visual conformity (Keisling, 2004). The participants in my study do not have the money for facial surgery or gated neighborhoods. Despite the lack of material resources to enhance personal safety, I encountered several individuals who practiced active resistance to verbal and physical assault.

Self-policing. Lacking the opportunity to move, getting dogs and guns for self protection are strategies most frequently reported by the participants in my study. Sofia smiled confidently while she shared how she solved "the neighbor problem:"

> First moved in, bought this house. Fixed things up. In the meantime it was starting the summer, so neighbors did see me. And of course, long hair, blahblahblahblah, the style I dressed, the way I acted . . . I got a lot of crap from the kids and from neighbors. Not all of them. I have had threats, my windows started getting busted. My car started being vandalized. This kept costing me thousands of dollars. Okay . . . I let it be known around the neighborhood that . . . ah . . . several weapons were purchased . . . there is ways to let people know without telling them . . . that several weapons have been purchased, and that that I have also gotten out of prison. I purposely did this. It is not true, but . . . I said I just got out of prison for murder. Somebody gave me some shit, so I shot 'em. Since then it is calmer.
>
> (Sofia, MTF, 65, River Falls)

Sofia's strategy to intimidate her neighbors suggests that she voluntarily self-imposed the stigma of being a convicted murderer to outweigh the stigma of being a gender transgressor. Kate (MTF, 48, Half Heaven Hills) resorted to martial arts since being beaten up by four men – "because cowards always run in groups." Her male voice, which is not trained or hormonally altered, is a gender cue that does not match a feminine outfit, which puts her at heightened risk for violence as described earlier. But Kate continues to actively fight (back) in order to protect her identity because she'd "rather have somebody beat the shit out of me than not recognizing myself in the mirror. It is a battle with yourself every day, be who you are or be at risk that you might get beat up. The one is a 'might' but the other is a definite." Sandi does not practice martial arts but considers herself a "big girl." She is a stocky, blond, energetic woman who laughs a lot and often cheers up the support group circle with her humor and positive attitude. She also giggled during the interview sharing that she had to actively fight off aggressors twice:

> I was getting out of a bar with a friend and there was this drunk. He was outside waiting, and asked us for a ride. I said 'Listen, my friend is gay and I am trans and he

> said 'Fuck, OK.' So we gave him a ride home, but as he gets out of the car he jumps on the front seat, and shouts 'you want to be a woman? I make you one!' But I am a big girl, I jumped on him and I broke my nail in his cheek (laughs loud) . . . The other time a guy attempted to rape me in his apartment, I kicked holes in his wall. I finally told him 'it is dirty, let me wash it' and called the police in the bathroom. The police was nice, but I hadn't changed my name yet, so I was afraid to press charges.
>
> (Sandi, MTF, 35, River Falls)

Sandi was a singular example in that she reported a positive experience with the police although the documentation issue discussed earlier hindered her from reporting a crime. Rather than perceiving the criminal justice system as support, the transgender individuals in my study feel oppressed by the state, and that evokes anger against structures that need to be changed.

Building community. Lillith funnels her frustration and anger into communal support. She "decided to use my head in activism, you know, and in many situations I need to . . . to . . . hold my anger inside me, you know. But, in activism, I lay it out in other sorts of ways." (Lillith, MTF, 25, Half Heaven Hills). Her friend Jeremy (FTM, 41, River Falls) has organized and maintained transgender support groups in several cities and also serves on the board of a state-wide transgender advocacy organization. For more than 10 years Jeremy has tirelessly lobbied politicians and fought to include gender identity in anti-discrimination ordinances of city councils. He has brought back national advocacy information to support groups and given hundreds of classes, workshops, and lectures for the broader public and service providers. Community building as resistance to violence and discrimination are most important strategies to him, yet he encounters a lack of trans people who want to volunteer time and energy for the local transgender movement: "The fact that people want to blend in, don't come out, leave the support group once transition is done is especially bad for young guys. They have no one to talk to." Together with other activists, Jeremy has been successful in his long struggle and eliminated one of many risk factors for violent victimization. In late 2009, a statewide policy was put into effect by the state's Bureau of Motor Vehicles to enable individuals to change their gender marker on the driver's license which has enhanced the livelihood and increased the safety of several hundreds of transpeople so far. Still, there is a long way to go on the road to full quality of life for transgender persons in the American Midwest. Jeremy has worked with the artist-activist Luster De La Virgion, mentioned earlier, for fundraisers and trans community celebrations and also collaborates with Adam, who founded one of the first drag king troupes in the northeast of the state, yet is now performing as a solo-artist.

Art as resistance. Art and performance are creative coping strategies that are shared and spark communication and awareness in the transgender community. In an autobiographical silent performance at TDOR in 2010 in Belt-town, Adam, a

FTM drag king, walked onto stage. He turned his back to the audience and removed his nightgown. Next he pulled out silver duct tape and began ''binding'' his breasts in order to flatten them. He proceeded to put on blue jeans and a shirt, and then walked to a mirror and fixed his mustache. When his transformation was complete, he grabbed a stack of posters. One by one, he revealed the posters, and his experiences, to his audience (excerpted as transcribed from photographic material):

> I should have been careful what I asked for
> This is what my family sees me as (with a photo of a girl)
> Even though this is me I don't recognize her (with a photo of a girl)
> I am an actor and artist
> I've been a drag king for 11 years
> I am stranger than you might think
> I am not afraid to die
> A bullet just missed my head
> I am human
> I've been stabbed and beaten with crowbars, bats, and wood
> I have always hated looking in the mirror because I was born in the wrong body
> I have a big heart
> There are days where it just hurts to walk after all the abuse my body has taken
> I have been raped
> The police said I deserve it
> Yet I am glad I was raised female, and I won't forget it, because it helps me being a good man
> (Performance, TDOR, 2010. Adam Apple, FTM, 32, Belt-town)

In a compelling, creative, and concise way Adam sums up the transgender experience of violent victimization. Being about 5 feet 4 inches tall, and of lean stature, he often did not pass as male (this performance took place before he started hormonal therapy) but as ''too masculine for a girl.'' He – as many others in my study – did not find support in the criminal justice system, and has suffered from depression for long periods in his life. He lived below the poverty line when I met him, generating income from occasional painting and construction jobs. He still struggles to make ends meet but, after periods of resignation, has resorted to art and community building as strategies of resistance against a state and social structures that have caused him so much harm. Adam's performances, and the narratives of the portrayed trans persons in this article, tell a story of gender violence that differs from the ''violence against women'' paradigm. These stories urge us to rethink both the concept of violence and the concept of gender violence. The lived trans experiences suggest that our understanding of violence needs to move beyond interpersonal violence to include institutional, legal and state-perpetrated discrimination. They also suggest that gender violence as a concept needs to be radically revisited in order to include gender-variant populations.

Conclusion

Findings from my ethnographic research in a Midwestern state in a transgender support group context show that violent victimization of transgender individuals is a severe threat to public health and quality of life. Transphobic violence is clearly perceived as a hate crime and genderbashing exists in the lives of trans individuals as both a daily potentiality and a vivid memory. Transgender is also a strategic research site to illuminate dynamics of gender violence, as the narratives of the predominantly white working- and lower-class study participants show that gender violence is more than violence against women. We must broaden our view and understand gender violence not only as violence against women, but as violence that targets victims because of their real or perceived gender, gender identity, or gender expression (Hill, 2003). The findings urge sociologists and gender advocates to rethink how the fallacious equation of ''gender violence = violence against women'' may reify one of the very causes of gender violence. The dichotomous gender order, and the policing of the boundaries between the boxes 'men' and 'women' have been identified as main causes of transphobic violence and discrimination (Bornstein, 1994; Hill, 2003; Kidd and Witten, 2007; Lynch, 2005). If we as researchers and gender advocates do not account for lived gender reality and transphobic violence, we become perpetrators of gender violence ourselves by misrepresenting or not representing social reality (Valentine, 2007).

Data reveal that not only do trans individuals experience transphobic violence as a negative sanction to gendervariant presentation, but participants also have a higher sensitivity for gender violence and an altered sense of safety within the binary gender system when they pass as their preferred gender perfectly. Male privilege is at work, as individuals get victimized as ''trans,'' but also as ''women.'' They are less often victimized as ''men.'' This finding is important because it suggests first that gender violence is ubiquitous, but it also suggests that gender violence is patterned by patriarchal structures and the transgender lens may be a unique tool to assess it. We thus need to open the sociological eye to these complex victimization patterns of transgender individuals, and research on gender identity needs to be included in mainstream sociology of violence.

Last, the findings highlight the multidimensional nature of violence. Victimization through interpersonal violence and harassment occurs in legal and social environments that are structurally violent towards transgender individuals. Structural violence is not a new concept in sociology, and has been referred to as the violence that kills slowly (Galtung, 1971). Data presented here were collected in a state that does not allow for changing the gender marker on birth certificates and does not acknowledge birth certificates of other states that have done so. Despite the work of local transgender advocacy organizations individuals report that police violence and discrimination in housing, health services, and labor market are rampant. Individuals are indeed killed as it is not possible for them to live and express their gender identity in all contexts. They are killed slowly as most of them live in poverty, without steady income and without health care, all of which are known

factors to decrease life expectancy and quality of life in general. Many trans individuals have given up on the justice system – in place to protect all citizens – as demonstrated in my data but also in the national transgender survey (Grant et al., 2011). These findings suggest that we need to refocus on the multidimensionality of violence in transgendered lives and how it plays out along the lines of race, class, and gender – a task I could not accomplish in this article because of my almost exclusively white sample. It is nevertheless my hope that this study will spark more research with an intersectional lens employing qualitative or multiple methods that reach beyond numbers to reveal lived trans experiences.

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Notes

1. I use pseudonyms for individuals and places. Participants chose a pseudonym for themselves; in the cases of the two discussed performers I use real stage-names of artists to honor creative authorship.
2. Transgender advocates and scholars have recently moved to denote trans* with an asterisk to signify the fluidity and openness of the category. I refrain from using the asterisk in this article for better readability.
3. *The Transgender Day of Remembrance* was set aside to memorialize those who were killed through anti-transgender hatred or prejudice. The event is held in November to honor Rita Hester, whose murder on 28 November 1998 kicked off the "Remembering Our Dead" web project at http://www.gender.org/remember/ (accessed 27 August 2013) and a San Francisco candlelight vigil in 1999. Rita Hester's murder – like most anti-transgender murder cases – has yet to be solved.

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