Exploring nonbinary people's mechanisms and processes for navigating gender norms

by

Katelyn Olivia Coburn

B.S., Truett McConnell University, 2015

M.S. Valdosta State University, 2017

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Applied Human Services
College of Health and Human Services

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

Nonbinary people encounter gender norms resulting from the gender binary on a day-to-day basis and can experience depression and anxiety at higher rates than cisgender and transgender people as result of gender-based discrimination. Using constructivist grounded theory methods and analysis, this study sought to understand and identify processes nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms internally and interpersonally, paying attention to contextual factors, in order to inform helpful, inclusive therapeutic interventions and to counter the negative mental health impacts of gender-based discrimination. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 racially diverse, nonbinary people to answer research questions related to the active processes nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms in their daily lives. Results from this study indicate that the contextual factors of societal and cultural expectations of gender; community and being seen; and the contextual impact of multiple identities inform nonbinary peoples' internal processes of reclaiming ways of being and creating affirmation and authenticity as well as processes in interpersonal relationships by navigating the complexity of visibility and creating space from non-affirmation. Based on the results of this study, family therapists should engage in self-education about the gender binary, practice from intersectional frameworks to embrace the multiple identities nonbinary people may hold that inform their relationships to gender norms and work with clients to deconstruct the impact of the intertwined nature of cissexism, heterosexism, classism, and racism on nonbinary peoples' lives. Additionally, family therapists should work with nonbinary clients to construct ways they can affirmatively connect to themselves and communities with shared identities as well as plan for ways nonbinary people can navigate interpersonal relationships in ways that affirm their authentic selves.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

People of Color	POC
Assigned Male at Birth	AMAB
Assigned Female at Birth	AFAB
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer	LGBQ
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer	LGBTQ
NB	Nonbinary

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<center>xi</center>

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nonbinary people (people with gender identities that are outside the categories of men/women and male/female) experience discrimination and stigma as a result of not always conforming to societal gender norms, and can experience depression and anxiety at higher rates than their binary transgender and cisgender counterparts as a result (Budge et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2012; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). For example, in the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, nonbinary people (49%) were more likely to report experiencing serious psychological distress than binary transgender people (39%; James et al., 2016). Importantly, scholars have found that nonbinary people understand and experience gender in unique ways compared to binary transgender and cisgender people, and that nonbinary peoples' lived experience of gender contributes to their overall well-being (Bradford et al., 2018; Bradford & Catalpa, 2019; McGuire et al., 2019).

Although queer theory offers a theoretical framework to understand and deconstruct how socially sanctioned gender norms operate as binary constructions (e.g., men/women, femininity/masculinity; Butler, 1990; Tilsen, 2013), it does not explain the active internal and relational processes used by nonbinary people to resist, construct self-defined meanings, or navigate gender norms in ways that positively impact their sense of self and the relationships with people in their lives. Accordingly, using constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006), this study aims to understand and identify mechanisms nonbinary people use in their day-to-day lives to navigate societal gender norms that foster resilience to discrimination and that assist in cultivating affirmative, supportive relationships. In order to understand these processes, the following research questions will be explored: : a) What contextual factors inform the processes nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms internally and interpersonally? b) How

do nonbinary people navigate gender norms internally? c) How do nonbinary people navigate

gender norms in interpersonal relationships? Increasing knowledge of nonbinary peoples'

strategies for navigating gender norms within themselves and in relationships will improve

clinical strategies family therapists can utilize when working with non-binary clients to

contribute to positive mental health outcomes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Nonbinary Gender Identity in Context

Nonbinary gender identities are broadly defined as gender identities that do not fall

within the gender binary (i.e., men and women are the only two genders, Chang et al., 2018;

West & Zimmerman, 1987). Nonbinary people may experience gender as completely outside of

the gender binary, somewhere between man and woman, both man and woman, or not

experience themselves as having a gender at all (American Psychological Association, 2015;

Chang et al., 2018). Transgender communities, including nonbinary communities, have

historically been under-represented in family therapy scholarly literature (e.g., Blumer et al.,

2012). Although some scholars have done important work on understanding the needs of

transgender people and how family therapists can be competent and helpful to this population

(e.g., Benson, 2013, Coolhart et al., 2013, Edwards et al., 2019), there is much work to be done

in addressing and understanding the needs of nonbinary communities.

The available literature focused on nonbinary populations in social science disciplines

demonstrates that nonbinary people experience gender in unique ways and face differential

experiences of discrimination compared to binary transgender and cisgender people based on

societal binary understandings of gender identity and gender expression (Budge et al., 2014;

Harrison et al., 2012; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Nonbinary people are faced with developing

their gender identity and existing in a societal context that assumes binary genders are the norm. Thus, nonbinary people may have to navigate external expectations to perform gender in a binary prescribed way and/or wrestle with internalized messages of what "normal" cisgender or "normal" transgender identities look like (Bradford et al., 2018; Bradford & Syed, 2019). For example, in available studies, nonbinary people report pressure to medically transition to conform to binary gender norms as well as a lack of representation in societal discourse and media of nonbinary people highlighting an increased importance of being in community with other nonbinary people (Bradford et al., 2018; Bradford & Syed, 2019; Fiani & Han, 2018).

These pressures and lack of representation point to the constructs of transnormativity (i.e., an ideological framework that legitimizes transgender people who medically transition and uphold binary gender norms; Johnson, 2016) and cisnormativity (i.e., guiding societal ideology that assumes all people are/should be cisgender; Bauer et al., 2009). Transnormativity and cisnormativity have been documented as shaping experiences of nonbinary people by enforcing binary gender roles and the binary idea that gender expression has to be stable and align with gender identity (e.g., feminine people should wear dresses, masculine people should wear pants, and nonbinary people should be androgynous) as a way to confirm legitimacy of one's gender identity (Bradford et al., 2018; Bradford & Syed, 2019; Fiani & Han, 2018). Nonbinary participants have expressed that these binary gender norms do not capture their experience of gender identity and that feeling de-legitimized by both cisgender and binary transgender people may be part of their experience (Bradford et al., 2018; Bradford & Syed, 2019; Fiani & Han, 2018). Thus, some studies have found that nonbinary people place a significant emphasis on being in community with similarly-identified peers, especially when nonbinary people have multiple marginalized identities (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Fiani & Han, 2018).

3

Gender Norms in Interpersonal Relationships

Gender norms and expectations can affect how nonbinary people interact with others in interpersonal relationships that range between positive, negative, and neutral experiences (Bradford et al., 2018; Conlin et al., 2019; Fiani & Han, 2018). Due to lack of understanding for identities outside of the gender binary, nonbinary people have reported having to explain their identities to others, which can be frustrating, invalidating, expected, and mentally taxing (Bradford et al., 2018; Fiani & Han, 2018). Some interpersonal relationships can be sources of positivity and support such as when family members, friends, and/or romantic partners affirm nonbinary people's gender identities and experiences (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Conlin et al., 2019). Although previous research has explored the effects of gender norms on nonbinary people's individual understandings of their gender identity development and how interactions with others affirm or invalidate their identity, little is known about internal and interactional processes by which nonbinary people navigate these relationships.

Impact of Gender Norms on Nonbinary Individuals Mental Health and Resiliency

The construct of gender minority stress—that transgender and nonbinary people experience additional stress and discrimination in daily life as a result of living in a society that privileges cisgender people (Testa et al., 2015)—is helpful for contextualizing how nonbinary people may respond to, and be affected by, the expectations of gender norms and discrimination based on gender identity. Studies have found that gender minority stress is associated with suicide attempts and depression (Brennan et al., 2017; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016; Valente et al., 2020) in nonbinary samples, highlighting the impact that having to navigate a society that privileges cisgender people and binary gender norms has on nonbinary people. Scholars have also found that nonbinary people may avoid situations in which they could be discriminated

against or think about what negative events might happen in public settings as a way to prepare for discrimination (Lampe et al., 2020; Rood et al., 2016).

In line with intersectionality theory, nonbinary people's experiences of discrimination are unique and more frequent when they hold multiple minority identities due to various systemic structures of oppression operating simultaneously (e.g., both racism and sexism; Crenshaw, 1991; Lampe et al., 2020; Rood et al., 2016). For example, nonbinary People of Color (POC) in qualitative studies have expressed that they are more vulnerable to discrimination and have greater experiences of overt discrimination in public spaces because of race and racism compared to White people (Rood et al., 2020); in the same vein, White nonbinary participants have expressed an awareness of racial privilege, which can afford them more safety even though they have a marginalized gender identity (Conlin et al., 2019; Rood et al., 2016). There is a need to better understand how various social identities inform how nonbinary people navigate gender norms, discrimination, and minority stress so that clinical interventions are inclusive and appropriate.

Understandably, many existing studies have focused on exploring and demonstrating the negative effects of gender minority stress on nonbinary people, but it is important to note the findings some scholars have documented illustrating the joy and freedom associated with being nonbinary. For example, nonbinary people mitigate the negative effects of minority stress in multiple ways including getting social support from friends; being connected to a nonbinary community; and feeling proud, comfortable, and affirmed in their gender identity (Brennan et al., 2017; Puckett et al., 2019; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). Nonbinary participants in qualitative studies have commented on the freedom and authenticity they feel from being nonbinary and the possibilities created for all people that come from diverse gender

expressions and gender identities (Bradford et al., 2018; Bradford & Syed, 2019). More research is needed to further understand how nonbinary people experience joy and freedom in their gender identities and how that may inform their experiences of navigating gender norms.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on a queer theory perspective with an attention to the reality and influence of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and the lasting impacts of colonization, systemic racism, and eugenic scientists (Bederman, 1995; Carter, 2007; Somerville, 2000). Queer theory fundamentally challenges binary and essentialist conceptualizations of gender and sex, and calls into question the ideologies that center cisgender, heterosexual, and monogamous people as "normal" (Butler, 1990; Tilsen, 2013; Warner, 1990). Through queer theory, gender is seen as discursively socially constructed through relationships in historical and cultural contexts (Butler, 1990). Central to this study, queer theory offers a framework to understand the active process of resisting, constructing, and navigating gender and gender norms as the essence of queer theory is the questioning of what's deemed as normal and who has the power to define what is considered normal (Butler, 1990; Doty, 1993; Tilsen, 2013). In using constructivist grounded theory, this study aims to theorize about and explain *how* these active processes are engaged in by nonbinary people, expanding on the theoretical ideas of queer theory.

Importantly, many scholars have articulated that queer theory must be understood with an intersectional analysis as identities and experiences cannot be understood outside of their political nature and through the lens of societal structures of privilege and oppression (e.g., racism, classism, ableism; Allen & Mendez, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Hammonds, 1997; Munoz, 1999). Munoz (1999) describes "disidentification" as a way queer People of Color survive and live in oppressive systems that do not support their identities in multiple ways (e.g., racism,

cissexism, heterosexism) by navigating, negotiating, and creating lives that allow for the re-working of queer theory to encompass the realities of holding a racial minority identity. Munoz (1999) states, "It is my contention that *the doing* that matters most and the performance that seems most crucial are nothing short of the actual making of worlds" (p. 200). Thus, by using constructivist grounded theory, this study will be sensitive to the multiple marginalized identities nonbinary POC hold and aim to explain how nonbinary POC may negotiate, resist, and question the gender binary in a both/and way that allows for identifying with what is helpful or useful in creating affirmative worlds and/or disidentify with what is oppressive, constricting, or does not acknowledge the reality of racism and the need to organize around racial identity for collective action (Munoz, 1999; Tilsen, 2013).

This study will also be sensitive to the impact of colonization, racism, and eugenics science (e.g., sciences practices that were based on "proving" that White people were the superior race and that queer people, gender non-conforming people, and People of Color were inferior and "primitive") and their role in upholding the gender binary resulting in differential experiences for nonbinary people, especially nonbinary People of Color compared to White cisgender people (Bederman, 1995; Carter, 2007; Somerville, 2000). When delving into the roots of privilege and marginalization, it is seen that colonization and eugenics were key vehicles through which structures of racism and cissexism developed (Bederman, 1995; Carter, 2007; Somerville, 2000). As White, European settlers colonized the United States, the White race was seen as superior and the procreation of White people depended on White, gender-conforming, cisgender men and women being in relationship (Somerville, 2000). Those who fell outside of these categories (e.g., queer, gender non-conforming people, people of color) were seen by scientists as deviant, "primitive," and "less than" compared to White, cisgender men (Bederman,

1995; Carter, 2007; Somerville, 2000). Further, through colonization, White settlers—who brought with them Christian beliefs that everyone should be heterosexual and cisgender—discouraged, criminalized, and participated in the genocide of Native peoples who were androgynous, transgender, and same-sex partnered (The Guardian, 2010). The impact of colonization and these harmful ideologies can still be seen in multiple areas such as unequal access to civil rights for transgender and nonbinary people, disproportionate rates of violence against transgender People of Color, and higher rates of discrimination experienced by nonbinary and gender non-conforming people compared to binary transgender people (James et al., 2016).

The Present Study

As nonbinary people diverge from prescribed gender identity and norms and may also subvert norms in multiple spheres based on various marginalized identities, this study seeks to generate a theory to explain the unique strategies nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms that are based in the context of a society rooted in racism, developed from colonization and eugenics sciences, and that perpetuates binary gender norms. By being sensitive to these constructs and drawing on the practices of interrogating norms central to queer theory, this constructivist grounded theory study will provide a framework to understand nonbinary peoples' processes of navigating gender norms in these contexts through their lived experiences.

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study is to better understand and identify the processes nonbinary people use to navigate societal gender norms and construct mechanisms to resist gender norms that do not fit as well as affirmative ways of moving through a cisnormative world. This study seeks to understand how these processes may foster resilience in the face of discrimination and assist in cultivating affirmative, supportive relationships in the lives of nonbinary people. Understanding these processes will inform competent and ethical

8

clinical strategies used by mental health professionals when working with nonbinary clients. In order to understand processes of resistance to gender norms among non-binary people, the following research questions will be explored: a) What contextual factors inform the processes nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms internally and interpersonally? b) How do nonbinary people navigate gender norms internally? c) How do nonbinary people navigate gender norms in interpersonal relationships?

Chapter 3: Methods

Grounded theory methodology seeks to understand processes and answer "how" questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Often, grounded theory is used when a theory does not exist to explain a phenomenon or experience among a group of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Constructivist grounded theory follows flexible principles that rely on interpretive portrayals of data allowing for understanding a process that is found in the data. Through co-constructing theory in interviewing participants and interpreting the data, constructivist grounded theory methods can be used to identify moments of change that can have implications for practice (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is a useful methodology for understanding a theoretical process present across participants and thus doesn't seek to gather in-depth understandings of phenomena, but intentionally uses the data to understand the process that is happening among participants (Charmaz, 2006).

Participant Recruitment

This study was part of a larger project conducted on nonbinary people's relationships to gender norms, worldviews, and therapy preferences. Purposeful sampling through social media (e.g., Facebook, Reddit) was used to intentionally seek out non-binary participants, followed by snowball sampling because nonbinary communities can be well-networked and participants may

be connected to others who would be interested in participating (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I posted a recruitment flyer with information about the study on my personal Facebook page and allowed for Facebook users to share the posting to their own personal pages to broaden recruitment. I also posted the recruitment materials in a Facebook social group for transgender and nonbinary POC as well as Reddit sub-thread for nonbinary people. To be eligible for participation, participants needed to identify with a gender identity that is not cisgender or binary (e.g., non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid), be between the ages of 18-65, live in the United States, and speak English. Cisgender people and binary transgender people were excluded.

Procedures

As part of the recruitment materials, participants were instructed to click on a Qualtrics link. Interested participants gave informed consent before being able to access a set of demographic questions (Appendix A) which served as a screener for eligibility. The Qualtrics survey included a place for participants to provide contact information at the end if they were interested in participating. The initial recruitment materials and Qualtrics link resulted in 55 people expressing interest in participating. Because nonbinary POC are underrepresented in scholarly research, I intentionally focused on interviewing as many POC as possible. I contacted all of the POC who expressed interest in participating to schedule an interview and 15 of the 27 people I contacted responded and scheduled an interview. To reach a sample size of at least 20-30 people recommended for grounded theory studies, I contacted the first 10 White people who responded to schedule an interview; 6 out of the 10 people responded resulting in 21 total interviews.

The 21 participants in this study ranged in age from 19 to 38-years-old ($M = 23.24$; See Table 1 for participant demographics). For racial identity, 6 participants were Asian American, 3

participants were Black, 2 participants were Latinx, 4 participants were Multiracial, and 6

participants were White. For gender identity, 11 participants were Nonbinary; 1 participant was

Genderqueer, Nonbinary, and Genderfluid; 1 participant was Genderqueer and Nonbinary; 1

participant was Graygender; 1 participant was Genderfluid; 1 participant was Bigender; 2

participants were Nonbinary and Agender; 1 participant was Nonbinary and Genderfluid; 1

participant was Demigender/Demigirl; and 1 participant was Nonbinary/Nonbinary Femme. For

sexual orientation, 1 participant identified as Gay, 4 participants identified as Lesbian, 5

participants identified as Bisexual, 7 participants identified as Queer, 2 participants identified as

Pansexual, 1 participant identified as Androsexual, and 1 participant identified as Asexual-

Sapphic. For relationship status, 13 participants were single, 4 participants were living with

partners, 1 participant was married, 2 participants were dating, and 1 participant preferred not to

answer. For highest level of education, 8 participants had high school degrees, 1 participant had

an associate's degree, 6 participants had bachelor's degrees, and 6 participants had master's

degrees. Participants identified that they had an awareness they were not cisgender and/or that

the gender binary did not work for them from between 1 year to "since childhood," which was

approximately 27 years for this participant ($M = 8$ years).

Data Collection and Interview Protocol

This study involved individual interviews with participants that followed a semi-

structured interview guide (Appendix B). Interviews were conducted through online video calls

via Zoom. Participants chose private locations to conduct the interview and I conducted the

interview in my private home office. The interview questions were constructed based on the

existing literature as well as my own personal experience as a nonbinary person and as a

therapist who works primarily with transgender and nonbinary clients. The interview guide was

pilot-tested with the initial interview and adapted for flow and clarity of questions for the remaining interviews. Grounded theory allowed for adapting the interview guide as needed as I interviewed participants and gained more insight on the developing theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In line with the grounded theory practice of simultaneously collecting and analyzing data, as I conducted interviews, I reviewed the transcripts and debriefed with one member of the coding team to aid in theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006). In constructivist grounded theory, theoretical sampling is a strategy used to refine and deepen the categories that are tentatively being formed through the process of going back and forth between analyzing data being collected and then intentionally collecting further data for the purpose of filling out categories (Charmaz, 2006). For example, after interviewing several participants, I attuned to the importance and emerging category of community connection and nonbinary representation in participants' lives and how being connected to nonbinary community aided in participants embodying affirmative experiences of gender and navigating gender norms in authentic ways. I employed theoretical sampling by asking more questions about participants' experiences with nonbinary community and the meaning that nonbinary friendship held for participants to further saturate this emerging category of "creating affirmation and authenticity" through the process of experiencing community (Charmaz, 2006).Throughout the interviews, I was attuned to working towards theoretical saturation—gathering data with the intention of creating robust, distinct categories to conceptualize emerging theoretical explanations of the data (Charmaz, 2006). After the 21 interviews, I determined that I had sufficient theoretical saturation based on the concepts and categories forming through data collection, reached through theoretical sampling, that could be further refined through analysis and coding (Charmaz, 2006).

At the beginning of the interview, I reviewed the informed consent information with participants and answered any questions about informed consent and the study before I began the recording. Before starting the recording, participants chose a pseudonym and were given the option to change their Zoom name to their pseudonym for further anonymity and confidentiality. After asking if the participant was ready to start the interview (consent having already been obtained through the online survey), I turned on the Zoom recording and began with the interview guide. Interviews ranged from 37 to 82 minutes. Participants were compensated with a $25 Amazon gift card for their participation in the interview. This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board at Kansas State University.

Analysis

Initial, Open Coding

A team of 6 coders, including myself, who were diverse in race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation analyzed the data to answer the research questions. Throughout the analysis process, we attended to queer theory ideas of resisting and critiquing gender norms as well as the influence of colonization, racism, and the gender binary on ideas of what are considered to be gender norms through memo writing and discussion (Bederman, 1995; Butler, 1990; Carter, 2007; Somerville, 2000; Tilsen, 2013; Warner, 1990). Each coder individually coded the first two transcripts by reading the entire transcripts and conducting line-by-line coding to become immersed in the data, tune into participant language and meaning, and develop an initial coding scheme (Charmaz, 2006). After each coder completed coding the first two transcripts, we met as a coding team for peer-debriefing to discuss our experience with the data and the coding process, codes that were salient and consistent across each coder, and talked about how our identities informed how we were making sense of the data. We discussed until we

reached consensus on a coding scheme to code the remaining transcripts through focused coding (Charmaz, 2006).

Focused Coding

For focused coding with the agreed upon coding scheme, I assigned each coding team member 6 transcripts to code individually. Transcripts were assigned based on social identities participants and coders held, so that each transcript would be coded by someone with both insider and outsider experiences in relation to the participants to ensure diverse perspectives on the data; Through bringing these insider-outsider statuses to the analysis process, the coding team utilized constant comparisons of transcripts to ensure the codes fit across transcripts and to ensure we were understanding the emerging theory across participants (Charmaz, 2017; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Each individual transcript was coded by at least two different coders to bolster credibility of the analysis. Throughout this coding process, each coding member engaged in memo writing to keep note of how they were making sense of the data as a whole to contribute to theoretical coding—finding connections between categories of data that have emerged from the focused coding process (Charmaz, 2006).

Theoretical Coding

Once all of the transcripts were coded, the entire coding team met again to discuss if the data were accurately represented by the codes across participants. Through discussion, we reached consensus that the identified coding scheme represented the data well and moved on to discuss ideas that were captured through memo-writing for the purpose of identifying categories through theoretical coding—grouping of ideas that have shared meanings and finding connections between categories (Charmaz, 2006). For example, through these discussions, the coding team realized, and talked through, how processes such as having to do emotional labor to

educate others about nonbinary gender identity and to navigate norms in family relationships was evident across all participants but also held nuanced differences in the meaning of emotional labor when considering racial and ethnic identity and cultural norms in families which resulted in the categories formed to answer research question number one. Theoretical coding was used to identify how these formed categories about contextual factors informed and were connected to the processes nonbinary people used to navigate gender norms internally and interpersonally.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To increase trustworthiness of the data, the coding team engaged in self-reflexivity and peer debriefing to discuss how our social identities and biases were informing how we were analyzing the data (e.g., Bermúdez et al., 2016). I intentionally sought out people who held social identities similar and different to those of the participants in order to bring multiple perspectives to the coding and analysis process. In coding with people who held and represented various diverse identities, myself and members of the coding team worked to be aware of our insider-outsider stances and "the space between" these positions as we all had some experiences that made us insiders as well as some that made us outsiders in relation to the participants in this study (e.g., racial identity, ethnic identity, gender identity; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). By acknowledging our insider-outsider statuses, we sought to be honest and transparent about our biases and how our personal experiences—both similar to and different from those of participants—impacted how we analyzed the data (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Additionally, throughout the research process the coding team and I engaged in memo-writing, which served as a space to explore how any biases we held influenced the coding and analysis processes. Lastly, an outside peer reviewer was invited to review the identified categories and to ask questions about how I and the research team arrived at our findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Overall, the experiences of participants were characterized by the essence of being congruent and authentic in their gender and constructing space outside of the Western gender binary both internally and in relationships. Through analyzing participants' experiences, we identified a theoretical explanation of the processes nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms in their day-to-day experiences. These processes for navigating gender norms internally and interpersonally were deeply informed by three categories of contexts: a) societal and cultural expectations of gender; b) community and being seen; c) and the contextual impacts of holding multiple marginalized identities. Within these contexts, we identified that nonbinary people use internal processes characterized by a) reclaiming ways of being that connected them to their authentic gender identities and b) creating affirmation and authenticity through active steps that were affirming of their gender and selfhood. In interpersonal relationships, categories identified to explain how participants navigate gender norms included a) navigating the complexity of visibility with being nonbinary in various relationships and b) creating space between self and non-affirming people and places (See Table 2 for categories and subcategories organized by research question).

This constructivist grounded theory study identified that initially, participants had experiences of internal moments of noticing gender norms that did not fit for them and embodying nonbinary identity in affirming ways. These initial experiences of noticing and resisting gender norms led to participants engaging in the active internal and interpersonal processes identified in the participants' responses. The internal and interpersonal processes participants used to navigate gender norms mutually informed one another in that participants described experiences in which when they felt connected to their authentic sense of gender, this

informed how they affirmatively created space from situations in which they were not celebrated

in their gender identity; similarly, experiences in which participants navigated interpersonal

relationships in affirming ways bolstered participants' internal processes of embodying their

authentic selves. The results are organized around the research questions for sake of clarity, but it

is important to note that these categories were not linear in actuality but instead were dynamic,

interrelated processes. Throughout this section, modifiers such as "majority" (75% of

participants), "most" (about 50% of participants), and "some/several" (about 25% of

participants) are used to denote about how many of the participants touched on the ideas within

categories.

Research Question 1: Contextual Factors that Inform Processes of Navigating Gender Norms

Participants described several salient contexts that informed how they navigated gender

norms in their day to day lives, including: a) societal and cultural expectations of gender, b)

community and being seen, and c) contextual impact of multiple identities.

Societal and Cultural Expectations of Gender

The context of the societal and cultural expectations of gender was experienced by

participants on a daily basis as participants talked about being aware of how cisgender people

perceived them. Participants described how they encountered societal and cultural expectations

of gender roles and gender expression. This context impacted safety and comfort as well as

experiences of feeling authentic and seen. Jin shared:

> I think very much something I've been aware in my transition is that, to be perceived as a
>
> masculine girl is far less violent than to be perceived as a feminine guy. It's really
>
> unfortunate that that's how society is, and it's all very much rooted in misogyny. It's

17

weird. The more masculine presenting I've been perceived as and the more aligned I feel

in my body with my medical transition, the more comfortable I am being femme, but the

less comfortable I am being femme outside. Yeah. When quarantine first started, I was

like, "Oh, wonderful. I don't have to be perceived by cis people anymore.

Emerson also commented on the interplay between being perceived by others and what gender

presentation feels authentic:

Especially as I was starting to appear in public in dresses and heels and makeup, would

go through like, "Oh my gosh, people are going to stare at me, they're going to confront

me, I'm feeling unsafe in this moment, but I also feel like I want to do this."

Similar experiences of considering how people in public were perceiving them were expressed

by Lil:

I will say that I'm working at a grocery store right now, and it's my first time interacting

with a lot of strangers. Sometimes people think I'm a sir because I have short hair and I

have a mask on. I don't know. It's weird. Whenever that happens, I'm always so curious. I

try to imagine how they see me. I'm like, "Okay, you're looking at the hair. All right. Are

you listening to me talk? Are you watching me move?" I'm very curious. I'm like, "What

do you see?"

The majority of POC participants directly commented on how these societal and cultural

expectations of gender exist because of colonization and the creation of the gender binary and,

accordingly, the influential intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and culture. For example,

Daya spoke to how the history of colonization impacts visibility and language for transgender

and nonbinary POC:

18

But usually, queerness and trans is reserved for White people and the language

surrounding it is English and other European, Eurocentric descriptions. And so those

navigating it, as someone who's grown up in the United States, but has a different cultural

background is really uniquely difficult. Because technically, religiously and culturally

within my culture, there's a lot of gender fluidity, but because of colonization and

Eurocentric values placed on Asian families and other countries' families, there's like

this forced binary and it gets me angry because my parents have this idea of

cisnormativity and heteronormativity, but it's from colonization. It's [cisnormativity and

heteronormativity] not particularly from our culture, but we related it to our culture.

Willow expressed a related notion by considering how White supremacy has perpetuated harmful

stereotypes of Black people:

A lot of gender stereotypes concerning Black people hold us in a non-binary light, I guess

with... like Black women are, they're women, but also very much masculinized and seen

as holding two gender spaces, whereas Black men are seen as hyper masculine, but also

sometimes they need to be brought down to a level that is seen as emasculating to men or

whatever. So, these are all negative things, but I guess trying to reclaim those narratives

back from White supremacy is one way that I can conceptualize my gender identity.

The salience of these societal and cultural expectations of gender informed by colonization, the

gender binary, and Whiteness cannot be understated in the lives of participants in this study as

this context impacted safety, experiences of feeling seen and congruent, as well as

understandings of self that cannot be separated from the context in which participants live. These

experiences with coming up against these expectations and norms had significant impact on

community spaces that felt affirmative and needed for participants.

Community and Being Seen

The importance of being in community with peers who provided emotional support and who understood the experience of participants on an experiential level was articulated by every participant. While most participants identified being in community with peers who shared similar identities, many participants talked about some complexities with finding community such as having lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer (LGBQ) friends, but not nonbinary friends or having White transgender and nonbinary friends but not having friends who are also nonbinary POC. Participants described the positive impact community has on their overall well-being. For example, Silver shared:

> And to be in that space and have a keynote speaker who was a Vietnamese trans woman was also really validating...it's a sense of community. There's an unspoken meaning of understanding this is hard and other people have gone through it, and there is a sense of solidarity and understanding... Just understanding there are people that have very similar intersectionalities as you, it creates a sense of comfort and understanding.

Amihan expressed the feeling of being in spaces where they are able to be seen authentically:

> I just make friends with other non-binary people, and trans people who understand it, and hang around in spaces that are conducive to that, like my poetry group, when we were meeting in person, we'd always go around the circle and introduce with names and pronouns, and I was never the only they there. There are plenty of queer folks in that group. So just trying to be in queer spaces is where I can find that solace, and that just being able to be seen.

When participants experienced being seen and understood in transgender and nonbinary communities, they expressed a feeling of being freer to just exist as they are with shared

20

understanding from other nonbinary people without having to worry about gender norms or how they are perceived.

> It's like having a baseline. And there's just an immediate understanding of being like, oh, okay. Like I had a friend...So I was just like, "Oh hi, I'm Ouran." And she was like, "Hi, I'm Jay." "I'm non-binary." "Oh. me too." And then it's like that cool immediate connection and it makes being friends really easy and you can talk about other things that aren't necessarily gender or sexuality related. But when you do have the gender and sexuality relations talking, it feels deeper. Because you already have that base understanding. You don't have to re-explain, this is what this feels. The very surface level stuff. You can get into more deeper theory and understanding and it becomes a much easier thing, I guess. (Ouran)

Participants also described complexity in community contexts when all of their identities weren't affirmed or they weren't safe:

> I still find White queer folks that are, I don't think, still have a lot of anti-racist work to do themselves. I'm grateful for the spaces that are only queer/trans POC...I struggle with that, because I think a lot of spaces are, they seem really great, but they're just so very full of White people. I'm like, "I don't know if I want to enter this space. I don't know if this space will be affirming for me." Sometimes I feel like I do have to choose between, do I enter a queer space, but maybe experience racial microaggressions, or do I enter this POC only space, and maybe deal with some of that gender dysphoria, some of the microaggressions and misgendering? (YR)

21

Specific to broader LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) communities,

participants commented on experiencing transnormativity, which impacted their experiences of

navigating gender norms.

> It was something that I hadn't even necessarily felt [belonging in LGBTQ and
>
> transgender communities], and I think I worked up a little bit of fear around it too, being
>
> online and seeing that there were some trans binary people sometimes in forums who
>
> would talk about how nonbinary people were ... I don't know, making their situation
>
> worse by existing, because they destroyed their legitimacy within the gender binary,
>
> which was awful to read, so I was afraid there wasn't a place for me. (Michelle/Michael)

Similarly, Emerson shared about navigating community contexts which may reinforce

transnormativity by expecting nonbinary, assigned male at birth (AMAB) people to only express

femininity as opposed to the validity of embracing fluidity in gender expression:

> The assumptions of how I should present based on what people assume my, gender-wise,
>
> that I was assigned at birth... That's not fun, but then also within the nonbinary
>
> community, or just the queer community in general. Am I any less nonbinary when I
>
> have a beard? When I dress in a more masc[uline] way?

Overall, experiences within community contexts informed how participants navigated gender in

different circumstances as they experienced both belonging and being seen as well as

transnormativity and White nonbinary spaces that are not always safe for nonbinary POC

because of racism.

Contextual Impact of Multiple Identities

Consistent with intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), participants described

throughout each interview how their multiple identities informed their experiences of navigating

gender norms, especially regarding experiences of privilege and oppression and how participants decided to navigate norms. While the quotes in this category do speak to participants' personal experiences of holding multiple identities, this category developed as a contextual factor rather than internal or external processes of navigating gender norms to illustrate how holding multiple identities creates a context in which participants are navigating norms in specific, nuanced ways in relation to the identities they embody. Most of the POC in this study described how the intersection of their race and gender impact their level of safety in presenting in gender non-conforming ways and how sometimes their race is perceived first and erases the visibility of their gender. Jinx described how they are aware of how they're perceived as a Black, nonbinary person who was assigned male at birth:

Especially as a Black assigned male at birth. Growing up when you are a Black male you're assumed to be tough, bottle up your emotions because if you show any kind of emotions you're weak. If you like soft things you're weak. This that or the other, it's something like that. And I didn't like sports, I liked soft things and stuff like that. So I was breaking norms before I even knew what was going on... I feel like I'm more approachable [when presenting as gender nonconforming] if that makes sense. I was like, I had a nice scruff beard going on and I was all hairy and I was scowling all the time. So people were looking at me and I feel like being a Black male they were like, I felt like they think they couldn't approach me. But now that I toned it down and I'm more I feel like I guess the word I'm looking for is more soft looking. I'm more approachable and I'm more like they can come to me and ask me something and won't feel scared. I also feel like I get more opportunities to explore different types of clothing and different types of things.

Daya described their experience of erasure at the intersections of gender, race, culture, religion, and being a child of immigrants:

> I know I say this to my partner a lot, but we always talk about how you could tell when there's a White queer person walking around, but you cannot tell, or other people like the general public cannot tell when there's a Person of Color that's queer, gender queer. And so this idea of existing it's gone. It's erased, the moment I stepped out of the door, it's erased. No matter what I do, it's erased. So it's the idea of not being seen, like being a Person of Color and being queer and non-binary, but also it's been enforced, through either the United States regulation of it, through my parent's cultural and religious background, my parents are extremely religious. And although it's coded as an Eastern religion, it still was colonized. And there's a huge aspect of they're all you have, like this immigrant narrative of like the family that you come here with to the United States is all you have. So it's like this immigrant narrative that you have to be conforming. If not, you will not have family. But also there's religion culture and also this mix of being in the United States and not being seen. So you're erased in all kinds of ways and it's out of my control. So they just kind of very much... I can't talk about a separate one [identity] on its own, they're very much just like together, but it just results in all this erasure and like you don't matter, I think.

Familial Cultural Understanding of Gender. Further highlighting intersectionality and the contextual impact of multiple identities co-existing, multiple participants talked about how cultural understandings of gender in their families intersect with racial, ethnic and gender identities to create specific experiences of navigating gender norms. Some participants described how understandings of gender vary in different cultures and families of origin and how this

impacts how they may navigate interactions with family members and their understandings of themselves:

> My dad is an immigrant from Mexico, so that can be a little hard... It's hard to explain how having someone who learned English as a second language, and not formally, like picked it up through a living here when he was like 19...I'm not going to have a conversation about gender with my father. He knows because he follows me on Facebook, but I'm not going to police his pronoun usage. He has a hard enough time doing it with cisgender pronouns. It's already hard enough to understand language norms of America, of the United States, to understand cultural norms. It was hard enough for him to understand that I don't want kids, or hard enough for him to understand that I don't cook at home, because his mom did and his aunts do. I love cooking, but that's not my job. That's something that's just a cultural difference. (Reese)

Jomar described how Filipino culture influences their parents' level of acceptance and understanding of their gender identity as a masculine presenting nonbinary person. This participant spoke about how their family is influenced by colonial binary understandings of gender and sexuality, which limits their conceptualization of nonbinary gender identity and the fluidity of masculinity and femininity:

> I think Filipino culture is really steeped in Catholicism, for one, and colonial mentality in the other which is... Originally, the Philippines was a matriarchy and there's still remnants of that but because of the church, very patriarchal and...In the Philippines and Filipino culture, it's fine if you're gay and it's fine if there are women who people are like, "Oh, that's a gay boy" or something but they're actually transgender women. I've noticed in a lot of Filipino culture it's okay if you're gay and it's okay if you're a trans

woman if you're goofy and funny and if you're really entertaining and you really take it to that next level of performativity...and I think that also carries these heavily ingrained norms or it reinforces these norms of what it means to be feminine, what it means to be masculine where it's okay, women are super crazy and loud and all this stuff and men are more brooding and that machismo really comes out.

Being White and Nonbinary. White participants expressed an awareness of how their racial privilege afforded them more physical safety and accessibility in professional spheres, while simultaneously experiencing marginalization and microagressions related to their gender identity and/or gender expression.

> As far as my race, I think that being White lets me get away with a lot more, and not just as apparently a White man, but also being White and androgynous is a lot safer than being Person of Color and androgynous. I feel like I got a lot of leeway because I wasn't considered threatening. (Rusty)

Similarly, Emerson described being aware of racial privilege while also noticing discrimination from other White people based on their gender identity:

> I also think, of course, being White in this country allows me to walk into many, many spaces and feel comfortable. And then I think, I mean I would assume, just my interactions with other folks, the privilege that I carry as a White person means that they're probably not going to confront me in the same that they would a Person of Color. I'd also say that within the queer community, the places that I've had the least acceptance are with White cis[gender] gay men. And some acceptance on like surface level, like, "Oh yeah, that's cool." But even, my partner and I are polyamorous, and even

26

changing my profile on Grindr, the people that would talk to me before who now won't

speak to me because I use they/them pronouns and I'm genderqueer.

Education. Adding the privileged status of education and the space to explore gender

that education provides was described by many participants. The majority of participants

discussed how having access to education provided space to explore their gender as well as

language that reflected their experiences.

So I think it's difficult navigating those norms, but I think my... also my academic

experience with theory about... like gender theory and queer theory and stuff has been

really helpful in consoling me or formulating my stances on certain things and how I

practice certain things. (Willow)

Another participant described a similar experience of being exposed to helpful ideas and

language for gender in college:

When I was in college, all of a sudden there were words for these things, and people were

talking about it, and I was involved with the social justice sphere. I was a sociology

major, and we talked about race, class, and gender all the time, and sexuality. Yeah, the

conversation just kind of came about, and I was like, "Oh, wait. I think I might need to

look into this a little bit more." (Michelle/Michael)

Social Class. Multiple participants talked about how their class informed their ability to

buy gender affirming clothing, access medical transition, and impacted their flexibility to be out

as nonbinary in professional spaces.

So I also want top surgery and it's costs so much. I don't have a therapist and I prefer not

to have to go to a therapist to validate who I am and say that because I identify this way, I

need to get top surgery. I know I need top surgery. So I don't have a therapist and top

surgery cost so much through an informed consent [model] that I just get down

sometimes. (Jayce)

Some participants commented on needing the financial means to be able to access gender affirming clothing and presentation:

The other element is I know there's a part of me that because of financial means with

gender norms, I would like to dress differently but right now I'm a grad student, I'm kind

of living on loans right now and I don't think I can present the way I want to, which

might be what wearing maybe ties or something more, whatever that means in terms of

that's, I don't really see that as a guy thing, but yeah. Or wearing suits more or something

like that it's something I'm kind of interested in, but yeah. (Bea)

Similarly, Sawyer said:

And it's like, "Well, there's certain things where I'm going to have to make do with it",

such as for instance there's certain parts of my wardrobe where it's like, "I'd change that if

I could, but I don't really have the resources to do so right now, but that's okay because

I'm still me, even if I look weird. But even if I look like some grungy weirdo in 50 torn

up flannels, it's cool."

Intersectionality and the nuances that exist with holding multiple identities were evident throughout the data. These various contexts of societal and cultural expectations of gender, the context of being seen in community, and the contextual impact of multiple identities informed how participants navigated gender norms internally and in interpersonal relationships.

Research Question 2: Processes of Navigating Gender Norms Internally

The internal processes participants described to explain how they navigate gender norms were primarily characterized by choices participants made to connect and stay connected to their

authentic selves as nonbinary people, whether that was in response to affirmation or non-affirmation. Participants navigated gender norms internally by (a) reclaiming ways of being and (b) creating affirmation and authenticity. The majority of participants described reclaiming ways of being as an initial process that then enabled them to create affirmation and authenticity in being nonbinary. However, once participants initially reclaimed ways of being that were congruent for them in their gender identity, the internal processes of reclaiming ways of being and creating affirmation and authenticity mutually informed one another in participants' day-to-day lives.

Reclaiming Ways of Being

Participants reclaimed ways of being that were congruent with their gender in several ways, including (a) reclaiming self-knowledge, (b) reclaiming ancestral knowledge, and (c) critiquing gender norms.

Reclaiming self-knowledge. Several participants reflected on remembering knowing how they wanted to do gender when they were younger even if they weren't given the space or language to claim these ways of being. Participants talked about memories of dressing and acting in ways that were congruent to them but that adults around them deemed nonconforming or abnormal, and that part of navigating gender norms in their current life is connecting back to this knowledge of themself and reclaiming affirmed ways of being. For example, Michelle/Michael explained:

> Then going from there, I think I started trying to express in different ways that I hadn't
> sort of given myself permission to before, and to like things about myself I think growing
> up, I was sort of taught by my home community ... Not my family, but my home
> community to be a little ashamed of certain physical features I have, like that I'm tall or

have a deeper voice. It was the time for me to finally be excited, and embrace it, and feel

comfortable in it too.

Participants talked about knowing that they have always wanted to express gender in certain

ways such as Jomar's and Michelle/Michael's identification with Prince Eric in Little Mermaid

as children:

I want to say I was five years old. Five or six years old. I was really into Little Mermaid

because seeing Prince Eric, I was like Prince Eric has black hair, he's kind of tanner, and

I remember I was wearing a white open shirt once and I was like, "I am Prince Eric." My

mom was like, "No, because Prince Eric is a boy." I think that was one of the first times

where I was like, "That doesn't match up with what I was imagining in my mind."

(Jomar)

Another participant similarly explained,

My parents always tell this story now, of when I was a kid. I would dress up as Prince

Eric from The Little Mermaid, almost just as much if not more than Ariel. I would want

to go in costume to Walmart and things. I don't know, it's interesting now that my parents

always kind of remember it as part of the mythology, of my parents, is that yeah, that's

just part of my expression. But I try to remember those moments of, yeah, it's always

been there. It's always been part of me, and trying to remember a time where ... I don't

know, it didn't feel like I had left the nest yet, and all these societal expectations kind of

started hitting me. (Michelle/Michael).

Reclaiming self-knowledge also was described by participants noticing what felt affirming and

congruent. For example, Ouran and YR described noticing what fits for them in terms of

pronouns and how they view their body:

And that was when I started to realize that also she/her pronouns were starting to bug me in 2017. I started to [cringe] a little bit every time I heard it when I was hearing it from teachers and student and then my friends. And I'd be like, why does this feel weird all of a sudden? Why is it starting to bother me? Yeah. It was just a sudden moment of, "oh, this isn't right". (Ouran).

Also, I don't know if I see my parts of my body as being gendered. They just are. So, when people are categorizing or making assumptions based on my body, or how my expression is, that's where I resist, where it's like, "This is just me. You may identify in some other way, and that resonates with you, but I don't see that as, because of this, I am this." (YR).

Reclaiming Ancestral Knowledge. Many of the POC in this study described that learning about gender knowledge that has existed for centuries in their family's culture but that was erased through colonization has been an important part of navigating gender norms in affirmative ways. This was sometimes described broadly by talking about the gender binary at large and how clothing is policed through the gender binary as well as specifically by reflecting on personal cultures and histories that celebrate gender expansiveness and did not have the language of the gender binary until they were colonized.

But now I understand that the gendering of clothing is really part of a colonial project of the gender binary. So, I really follow folks like Alok Vaid-Menon in saying that clothes have no gender, it's fine ...So yeah, I think, at least in my experience, and what I've heard from so many people sharing their experiences, and from the research is that we are inculcated into the gender binary before we even exit the womb. And so, there's always this really intense lens of gender that we're taught to read everything through. So

unlearning that for me has been really important to take things, to just look at everything

through different sociological lenses, to look not just at gender, but class, and race, and

geography, and all of the other specific factors that make up the intersections of people's

identities. And to read with a broader context, as opposed to just through the very

conditioned and colonial projects of the gender binary. (Amihan).

Another participant talked about learning about the history of the Philippines and connecting to

ancestral knowledge:

I think also just rooted in learning that history about pre-colonial Philippines without

romanticizing it for sure but just the acknowledgement that this has existed for centuries,

centuries before all these different countries came in to colonize the Philippines and it's

in my blood. It's something that my ancestors have experienced and that's been truly

nice. (Jomar).

Critiquing Gender Norms. Another mechanism participants used to navigate gender

norms was to notice what the gender norm they were encountering was, critique it, and reclaim

what was affirmative for them outside of forced gender norms. One participant talked about

encountering norms for people who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) to wear make-up as

well as norms for nonbinary people to present androgynously, and how as a nonbinary person,

they wear make-up in a way that affirms them but that isn't based on the gender norms for

AFAB or nonbinary people:

So I have been into makeup a little bit for a couple of years now, but I've really gotten

into it over the summer and this year. And sometimes I wonder if... I used to get a little

worried if I was... if people would be like, "Oh, that person is faking [being nonbinary],"

or whatever, "since they like to do makeup and stuff." I have my own boundaries with

32

makeup that have helped me feel more comfortable fitting that norm as an AFAB person.

I love doing eyeshadow and I always like doing bright... I'm not trying to do a natural

look or whatever, something... I like exploring different ways to do it and stuff, and I also

don't use foundation, which is my F*** you or whatever. (Willow).

Other participants talked about gendered norms for ways society may expect them to act or look.

Specifically, participants described an internal process of noticing gender norms being prescribed

to them which made them uncomfortable, critiquing the norm, and affirming themselves through

this process:

I do some community organizing and someone was helping me with a bunch of stuff and

they were like, "On the day, don't worry about it. I'm available to help carry stuff." I was

like, "I'm gay. I carry stuff." It's a kind of like more being like, "No ..." Just the

assumptions kind of make me uncomfortable. I do do, and enjoy, a lot of activities that

are typically feminine coded. I do a lot of cooking and baking and when my roommates

are here, which they're not currently, I cook for everyone. But then it's like when the

things I like doing or when the assumptions are made about what I can do are connected

to the gender people perceive me as I'm like, "I'm immensely uncomfortable right now.

Can we not?" (Rumra)

Similarly, Sawyer shared:

It's generally just like, "I just don't fit in either of these categories." But there's points

where I really feel like a huge resistance to it, are when people really try to classify me

into certain gender norms or just be like, "You were born this so you can't do that." Or try

to turn my body into their object, in a way. I don't like being objectified. And that's

something where it's like, "No. Well you're wrong. Get wrecked. Absolutely not. I'm not

33

your toy, and I will fight you on this. If my gender presentation makes me your toy, then

you can get lost."

Creating Affirmation and Authenticity

Participants described processes of (a) creating affirmative ways of self-presentation, (b)

pursuing medical transition, (c) cultivating spaces at home and chosen community, (d)

experiencing community and (e) embodying gender in ways that connected them to their

authentic sense of self in their gender identity.

Creating Affirmative Ways of Self-Presentation. The majority of participants talked

about how they have paid attention to ways of self-presenting that feel most affirmative and

authentic and created space to present themselves in these ways. It's important to note that while

many participants discussed dressing and presenting in ways that could be considered gender

nonconforming, not all participants did present in nonconforming ways, but all participants did

talk about feeling authentically nonbinary in whatever clothing they chose to wear. Jinx

described how clothing expresses the balance they feel in their gender and being nonbinary:

> And I remember I was walking in Old Town by myself wearing a T-shirt, some short
>
> shorts, fishnets, and Converse and everyone was looking at me because they saw the
>
> scruff of my beard and I just held my head up high because I just felt more confident that
>
> they were discomforted...Because when I put on makeup, it's interesting, because when I
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> put on makeup and when I put on feminine clothing I feel more—I wouldn't say
>
> dominatrix— but I feel more confident and finessed and fabulous. And then when I'm
>
> wearing masculine clothing I feel more humble. It's a nice balance of me. I think it's just
>
> because I'm breaking the binary by existing that gives me the confidence.

Other participants talked about how they noticed what kinds of self-presentation and expression felt most affirming and authentic such as Rumra:

> As I got more into the queer community, I was kind of like, "I'm dressing more for myself and if I'm picking what I want to wear and if I have a community where how I want to dress is validated, I feel better about it." …I was like, "I hate wearing skirts and dresses. I hate the middle of my legs touching. I love having a ton of pockets" and that expanded to being like, "Yeah, I like pants and I like fun button downs because they capture that aspect of individuality and bright colors but print." I just expanded to the point where now I'm entirely ... I own like 12 suits. Full suits. Yeah. My wardrobe is mostly printed t-shirts, lots and lots and lots of pants and just utility pieces like this coverall I'm wearing today.

Jayce described a similar experience of noticing how their clothing choices felt affirming and authentic:

> Well, I recently realized, I feel my most self when I'm wearing a feminine top and masculine bottoms. I just feel like, "Man, I feel like my gender identity right now." Or vice versa, I might be wearing a skirt with a male's button up or something and I just feel so beautiful. And so that's my really affirming moment or even doing drag. I just feel great when I do drag. And that feeling lasts through the day until the next day.

Many participants further elaborated on how affirmative and authentic self-presentation gave them more confidence and created more of a sense of feeling connected to themselves:

> But then also, you know, I really enjoy having a beard in the fall and the winter. It's warmer, it's a lot more comfortable, but it's also something that is assumed to be a masculine trait. And so even accepting this thing, and saying, "Yeah, but actually, it's

queer to me." I'm actually continuing to queer gender by having it. Like, have that... Throw on some lipstick, wear some fabulous clothes, and I'm just queering it all around. So even appropriating some of those norms and trying to say... I guess what I'm trying to say is, in those moments that I'm taking on one of those gender norms that is assumed as masculine, I'm trying to queer it in some way...I love it. And it really allows me to affirm myself, and... I mean, it also puts me out there more, which also, if I have pushback then I just want to show up even queerer and then I just affirm myself more. It's like a happy little affirmation circle. (Emerson)

Pursuing Medical Transition. Some participants talked about how pursuing medical transition was something they want to do or have done to feel most authentic in their gender identity. Jin described what medical transition meant to them as well as how this impacts them feeling affirmed through other's perceptions as well as within themself:

I think one of the things for me was getting comfortable in my own body very literally. I started testosterone about two years ago, and I got top surgery about a year ago. So, that was really important for me to just feel like I was aligned in my body and feel like I was being perceived in a way that was at least closer to how I wanted to be perceived. I think it's really unfortunate that, as a nonbinary person, I don't really get to be perceived as nonbinary upon first glance by most people in society. Most people will probably just assume I'm a man or a woman or just assume people are men or women. But I think for me it's more comfortable to be misgendered as a man than misgendered as a woman, if that makes sense.

Cultivating Spaces at Home and Chosen Community. Most participants talked about the affirming experience of not having to navigate societal and public ideas of gender, and that

cultivating spaces in their homes and with chosen friends was important to feeling affirmed and authentic. This experience was especially highlighted as many participants talked about working from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic and how they noticed a sense of peace and relief from not having to worry about navigating societal expectations.

> And based on where I've lived, I'm not sure, but I've had this rule to when I come home and nothing, and that's brought me more peace than other things have. And the validation of my chosen family, not just validation, just not acknowledging it in the best way, just existing with chosen family in a way that I feel at home…I kind of get to exist. I could be in the most cis[gender] looking outfit, but I would not be mis-gendered or perceived a certain way. I'm just seen as like another human body and not in a non-personal way, but more just I'm just another human and there's not expectations to who I'm supposed to be and what I'm supposed to do. (Daya).

Reese spoke specifically to implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and not having to think as much about gender norms in their day-to-day life because their home is an affirming space:

> My day to day has been a lot better for navigating gender norms, not that I'm never leaving my home, versus when I was. I think about it less. I think less about how people are going to perceive me because the only people perceiving me are the people in my own home.

Experiencing Community. Every participant in this study spoke to the feeling of affirmation and authenticity they experienced from being in community with other nonbinary people, especially with nonbinary people who shared similar other marginalized identities, as well as seeing themselves represented in various spaces. Experiencing community was identified as a sub-category within internal processes of navigating gender norms because this was a

distinct process of identifying with these experiences internally through creating and noticing self-affirmation. Participants talked about how experiencing community created space to feel free, experience joy, and live authentically.

> I think some of the joy that I experience, how people have also created a community and identity within themselves. So, I'm thinking about neuro-queer, and what does that mean for neuro divergent and autistic folks who are queer and see their queerness and disability as enmeshed in this way of, you can't separate one from the other. Seeing how other people are experiencing joy, and also creativity, it's like I don't have to fit myself into one box, or certain boxes. I could say, "Fuck you," to all that, and be who I am, and be all these things, and be one, or nothing, and it's just who I am. I don't know how to explain that level of freedom and level of validation that I felt with all of that. It's like I'm finally coming into myself in a way that I was unable to when I was younger. So, I don't know. I'm getting teary eyed just thinking about it. (YR).

Jin expressed similar sentiments about the importance of seeing their identities represented:

> I think for me visibility has been really important, seeing other Chinese, trans, nonbinary people has been important to me. I didn't really see a lot of representation of trans people of color when I was questioning. I really mostly just saw White binary trans guys, and that was difficult, because obviously the kinds of people who put their stories out on YouTube or whatever, those people are the ones who are out and are safe being out. So, I didn't have that flip side representation of people in situations like mine. (Jin).

Later Jin explained how being in community with other transgender and nonbinary POC feels freeing and affirming:

I always think about queer and trans people of color. That's definitely the community I feel most at home with and very affirmed and ... It's nicer, because we just kind of can cease to view gender in this gross, Western binary way that's very restrictive and honestly quite violent for some people in their experiences of gender. We can just be very free and fluid with it. That's my ideal ... Just I would like to exist there and not have to deal with anything else.

Embodying Gender. As an experience on its own as well as somewhat of a result of creating affirmation and authenticity, participants described how they feel when they embrace and embody their gender in ways that feel most affirming. Participants described internal feelings of confidence, freedom, possibility, and creativity.

I feel this validation that I've never…I could never feel from somebody else. It feels like this endless possibility to me, like this idea that it's like a step closer to who I am. And so it's like that's the kind of possibility it brings me. Also this idea that I can do it and it's totally fine. And it's more of a validation, that's the kind of possibility it brings to me. It's good. It's fine. Especially if there's no negative consequences to it, I'm like, "Okay, this is good." It's like validating internally. (Daya).

Other participants spoke to feelings of authenticity when they embody gender:

I think when I finally do it and I'm owning it and not worrying about other things going on, which is hard for me to do, I think ... I don't know. It's exciting. It feels somehow like real comfortable for me, not the manufactured me that I feel like I was playing out in high school, where I was just hyper-performing being a woman. I don't know, was trying to fit in as best as I could figure out in addition to all my other difficulties with doing that. It feels like I'm embracing how ... I don't know, how I'm interesting or compelling or ...

Yeah. Experience as a human being on several levels. Yeah. Something about it just feels

more real. (Michelle/Michael).

Research Question 3: Navigating Gender Norms in Interpersonal Relationships

Participants described their processes of navigating gender norms in various interpersonal

relationships including in day-to-day interactions with strangers, with friends, in family

relationships, and in work contexts. These processes comprise two categories: (a) navigating the

complexity of visibility and (b) creating space from non-affirmation. One participant summed up

the essence of these processes as a whole:

So, it feels like role of either ignoring it, of being completely validated, or pushing to

educate people. Those are kind of the three that I constantly kind of manage. But I'm

constantly changing [roles] based on who I'm around, like person to person and it's tiring,

but that's what happens a lot. (Daya).

Navigating the Complexity of Visibility

The participants in this study described experiences of navigating the implications of

being seen as nonbinary in interpersonal relationships. Participants spoke of the emotional stress

and negative feelings when they are not affirmed in their gender, while also balancing the reality

of risks to emotional, physical, and financial safety if they are seen as nonbinary in non-inclusive

spaces and relationships. Processes participants used to navigate the complexity of visibility

included (a) ways to be seen, (b) messaging from family about visibility, and (c) considering

risks in workplaces.

Ways to be Seen. Participants explained how they consider ways that they can be seen in

their authentic gender and also how they have to consider how other people will respond to their

ways of being seen. These processes involved participants navigating their own comfort and how

much visibility they wanted in various interactions. This process was frequently navigated by participants in using pronouns and chosen names.

> I mean, pronouns are definitely a thing there and that's the way things have to be navigated. There's always a sense of self-consciousness there when you're the only person who might change that. I used to use they/them, but now I just feel a little more comfortable using they/she, not exactly like, yeah. So, it's just a kind of comfort thing of related to my social anxiety of like, okay, I don't want, I don't feel comfortable correcting people at that point in front of others... My thing is sometimes I feel like if I don't share that, that's, I don't know. It doesn't really, no other person can know, nobody would notice and that's kind of okay but also not really on some level, because it's just the desire to be seen as who you are (Bea).

Another participant spoke to a similar sentiment with wanting to be seen authentically and navigating these interactions by considering how they can give visibility to their authentic gender:

> I feel like maybe the hardest part of navigating being bigender specifically is that I feel like the LGBT friendly spaces just want to go all, I'll just talk about it in terms of my names, all Michael. Accepting the man identity, and I think maybe sometimes there's been a sort of implicit assumption that it's a transition identity, and then one day it's just going to be Michael. But that, yeah, leaves me feeling kind of sad on the Michelle end, because I want that to be kept too. Then yeah, I don't want to be siloed into where I'm in predominantly straight and cis[gender] spaces, and I'm only a woman, and then I'm in predominantly LGBT friendly spaces and I'm only a man. (Michelle/Michael).

Messaging from Family about Visibility. Some participants explained how navigating visibility is complex in family relationships. Participants described being aware of how their family made meaning of the visibility of their gender identity while still doing gender in affirmative ways.

> When I came out as trans or when I cut my hair, it was like, "Oh now other people can see that." For them, it's like as long as the decision can't be perceived by others than it's fine but as soon as others can perceive it and that means others can judge you, which means other can judge our family, which is the umbrella of shame that percolates down. Yeah. I think my dad took it especially hard when I told him I was going to be on T [testosterone hormone replacement therapy] because he's like, "Wow. Not only can other people see that but some of that is irreversible" and all of this stuff. The visibility of it is really important. (Jomar).

Considering Risks in Workplaces. Multiple participants put words to having to consider risks to their financial security if they were discriminated against because of being visible in their gender identity as well as considering risks to emotional safety from having to do emotional labor in the workplace. These risks were especially tied to White ideas of what's considered professional in workplaces and participants' racial identities.

> And with people that I work with and refuse it [affirming nonbinary identity], it's just acknowledgement of like, I usually, that happened in my head [challenging gender norms] because safety. A lot of these people might be higher up, your reputation really matters where I work. So, if I come off as this fighter and combative. Already being a Person of Color in work, is already this reputation that I don't belong there entirely. So,

adding that on [challenging non-affirmation], I'm not able to question as much as I think I

would if I was more privileged in certain identity. (Daya).

Another participant described similar experiences with navigating what professionalism means in

work contexts and decisions they make to navigate gender norms:

I think the context where I have the least amount of freedom is the work context because

there are a lot of ideas about what is professional, and what is appropriate for work, and

all that stuff. And oftentimes, those things have influences from bigotry and all that stuff,

so that's one of the places where it's harder for me to feel comfortable breaking certain

gender norms because I feel like I have to... Even from the work I'm doing right now,

when we have team meetings and stuff, I feel like I have to wear a feminine shirt, a nice

shirt, to look professional. (Willow)

For some participants, challenging gender norms and seeking to be affirmed in their gender

identity meant considering their financial security:

In White professional spaces it's when my financial viability is threatened...I think

physical endangerment can also be tied to financial viability where I'm like, "Wow. I

could put my career at risk if I continue to question this professor" or things like that and

that's when I get...That's a sobering hit. (Jomar).

Considering these risks sometimes meant that participants made decisions about how to navigate

gender norms based on the emotional energy they had for any given situation:

But I also need to survive the workday without feeling like the space is very antagonistic

towards me. So, I may just go with the flow and handle that stress. Sometimes I think it's,

I'm going to handle this stress versus this stress, because I don't know, this one feels

extremely invalidating, and this one is the better of the two, in some ways. I think a lot of

people, cisgender people don't understand that as much, all these little levels of

aggression and anxiety that comes with all of that. (YR)

Creating Space from Non-Affirmation

The second category of processes participants used to navigate gender norms in

interpersonal relationships centered on ways participants created spaced from non-affirming

experiences and relationships in order to feel affirmed and stay connected to their authentic

selves.

Boundaries. Participants described processes of creating boundaries—physical and

emotional—between themselves and non-affirming people and ideas. Participants weighed

decisions based on how much emotional labor they wanted to do to educate others or not, their

safety, and the salience of relationships. Some participants talked about challenging people's

transphobic ideas as well as creating physical distance from non-affirming people:

> I think it's still hard to see some of the ways that they are transphobic, and really enforce,
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> or internalize the gender binary. I think the way that I resist is sometimes pushing back
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> on the things that they're saying, or slowly distancing myself from them. That's
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> something huge that I've been working on with boundaries and stuff, and recognizing that
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> my safety, and my own wellbeing is a priority for myself. So, if I need to distance myself
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> from them a bit, or leave the room, or whatever that means, then that's just what I'm
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> going to do. (YR).

Participants also drew boundaries with people based on how much others would respect and be

inclusive of their gender identity as well as how much emotional energy they had or didn't have

to educate people about gender identity:

But I still don't always come out [to non-transgender people] at first, because I don't always like pressure to do certain gender affirming things. I don't know. I just like to do it on my own and surround myself with people who I'll show up and be like, "Hey, use this name for me today, or this pronoun," and they'll just do it, without questioning it, without feeling the need to have a heart to heart. Like, "Now let's talk about your name. Would you consider a legal name change?" Like, "No, I pick a new name every day. Why would I do that?" (Reese).

This participant further explained:

That can be a really hard thing to balance, especially when you're working with people who don't think about it [affirming nonbinary gender] as constantly as my friends do. Not only do you have to make the decision for how much you're going to do and what the balance is going to be, but part of what has to factor in is how much you want to educate them. Every time you're like, "I'm a woman in STEM," people are like, "I thought you weren't a woman." I'm like, "I guess now we have to talk." (Reese).

Most participants described a flexibility in their boundaries based on the importance of different relationships to them and that part of navigating gender and gender norms was making these decisions based on various factors:

In my friend relationships, if anybody is unwilling to acknowledge me for who I am, and to refer to me in the way that I want to be referred to, I cut them out. I have no time for that. But that shifts for my family. I still will push them and still really don't have time for it, but also want to continue to be in a relationship in some capacity...So I don't talk about gender with my parents, for example. We just leave that out and we talk about weather. We talk about gardening and catch up on some of the other things. (Emerson)

Unpacking Transnormativity. Many participants talked about unpacking the transnormativity they encountered in interpersonal relationships and through messaging from society about what it means to be transgender or nonbinary "enough". Participants described noticing messages of transnormativity and unpacking them by rejecting any legitimacy to them.

There's some people who it's like, "Non-binary's just a trend. You're just trying to jump on the bandwagon." And I'm like, "But... no. I genuinely don't get that." Or, "You're definitely a woman. You're super feminine." And I'm like, "Well thank you. I'm glad that you think so. You don't know my brain. Get out." There's just stuff like that where it's just like, "No." And there's certain points where I've had to be my own advocate and overcome a fair amount of internalized non-binary phobia. I'm not sure if that's a word but... It's a lot of internalized crap that I've had to work through a bunch of it, where it's like, "You know, I could just be. I shouldn't have to fight to just be. Nobody's getting hurt. Nobody's getting hurt if someone else uses 'they' pronouns or something." (Sawyer).

Another participant described a similar process:

When I was 16, I actually realized that I was definitely nonbinary. I'd been thinking about it for a while, but there's certain some internalized transphobia in thinking that other people are valid as nonbinary. I will absolutely accept other people, and they're incredibly valid. But for some reason, I just thought that I wouldn't be trans enough unless I was a binary trans person, which is absolute bullshit, because nonbinary people are trans too. They use that label. (Jin).

Some participants were also navigating normativities in nonbinary communities:

I'd also say, just within the NB [nonbinary] community, navigating it as an AMAB

person, sometimes it feels like the nonbinary community has a focus more on AFAB

folks, which... Also, let's get rid of our assigned gender was... We don't want that

anyway. But also, like, how do I show up in a nonbinary circle, and what does that look

like? (Emerson).

Seeking Out Affirming Relationships. A final important way that participants navigated

gender norms in interpersonal relationships was by seeking out relationships and communities in

which they were affirmed and could do gender in preferred ways. Participants spoke about

friendships that offered support and affirmation when they were encountering discrimination or

not feeling valid:

I have really bad anxiety and sometimes there's moments where mentally I'm just like,

"Well, maybe I should just conform and just go back to being this normal person again,"

because sometimes it is hard being genderfluid and having to explain myself to people

over and over about who I am and why I do what I do. And just battling that mentally is

really draining. And sometimes I just want to just stop and just not be me anymore. But

then I just remind myself, I look through my pictures, I look through my posts, I'll even

talk to my friends or my cousins and they'll snap me back into it like, "Hey stop that. It's

okay. Whoever's making you feel this way they shouldn't, and you have a right to just be

you." And I'll go like, "Yeah, you're right." And I'll just stop that. (Jayce).

Participants talked about seeking out relationships, often within LGBTQ+ communities where

they could exist as their authentic selves:

Honestly, just being able to reach out and meet other people within the LGBTQ+

community has been absurdly helpful, because it's just like, "Hey, they don't care if I

47

look weird. They don't care if I talk weird. They don't care if I act weird." And they'll at least attempt to be like, "Maybe I don't understand you, but you know what? We can at least work towards an understanding." It's a place where it's like I'm free. I'm finally free, and I can get rid of a lot of BS, and just be. (Sawyer).

Another participant described that they are looking for relationships in which they are truly seen and loved for who they are:

Because it's like the way that I experience my own gender, it's not something external. Passing is not important to me. It's much more about it exists much less so in the space of will a stranger see me and think I'm non-binary, but more like are the people who are really important to me going to see me in the way that I want, and love me in the way that I want to be loved? (Lil).

Similarly, a different participant explained that they want and look for relationships in which people understand that their gender identity is a positive experience and also not the sole aspect of who they are as a human:

I think also something that helps is people recognizing that me being trans, there are some negatives, but I am happy that I'm trans. It's not something that is the core of all my mental health issues or anything. It's just another part of me that really enriches my life. (Willow).

By creating space from non-affirmation through boundaries, unpacking transnormativity, and seeking out affirming relationships, participants navigated gender norms in interpersonal relationships in ways that worked best for them in any given situation.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This constructivist grounded theory study focused on identifying and understanding the internal and interpersonal processes nonbinary people used to navigate gender norms as well as exploring the contexts that informed these processes. Analysis of the data yielded findings that expand the scholarly literature on the lived experiences of nonbinary people, especially nonbinary POC. From the participants' responses, I theorized a process model of how nonbinary people navigate gender norms in context (See Figure 1). The participants in this study demonstrated the significance of understanding that the processes of navigating gender norms are nuanced, cannot be separated from multiple identities one holds, and center on nonbinary people embodying gender in ways that affirm their worth, validity, and existence outside of colonial, racist ideas of the gender binary.

The Importance of Context

The results of this study demonstrated that important contextual factors— societal and cultural expectations of gender; community and being seen; and the contextual impact of multiple identities—inform the processes nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms. As indicated in Figure One, all three of these contexts impact both internal and interpersonal processes. The arrow from "societal and cultural expectations of gender" to "the contextual impact of multiple identities" demonstrates that expectations of gender from society inform how participants encounter different expectations of gender based on the multiple identities they hold. The arrows from "societal and cultural expectations" and "the contextual impact of multiple identities" pointing towards "community and being seen" illustrates how these two contexts inform the needs participants have that were met in community as well as their experiences in communities based on the identities they held.

It is evident from the participants in this study that the very nature of having to navigate societal gender norms in the United States exists because of Western society's perpetuation of the gender binary. The lived experiences of the participants demonstrate that the history of colonization in the United States as well as the colonizing practices European settlers used to enforce binary gender ideas on cultures around the world continue to impact the daily lives of nonbinary people. Namely, nonbinary people in this study described coming up against binary expectations of gender in various relational and professional contexts that reinforce binary gender norms through seeking to categorize nonbinary people into binary genders, enforcing ideas of binary gender expression, and privileging masculinity. Further, in line with scholars and historians who have detailed how the dominance of Whiteness relied on policing gender conformity (Bederman, 1995; Carter, 2007; Somerville, 2000), results from this study highlight the experiential impacts of racist and cissexist structures that inform how nonbinary people navigate gender norms. Participants described how their racial and cultural identities influenced how they are perceived, levels of emotional and physical safety, and the degree to which they felt understood.

These societal contexts that privilege gender conformity and cisgender identities, understandably heightened the importance of community contexts with similarly identified peers. Expanding on existing literature that demonstrates the benefits of being connected to nonbinary community and friends (e.g., Bradford & Syed, 2019; Fiani & Han, 2018), this study found that nonbinary people find solace in relationships with other nonbinary people as these community spaces run counter to the pervasiveness of the gender binary and all of its limitations and harmfulness. This is particularly true for nonbinary POC and nonbinary people from Eastern cultures as being in community with queer and nonbinary people with similar racial and cultural

backgrounds provides moments of freedom from racism, cissexism, and Eurocentrism (i.e., privileging Western ways of being). Notably, this study highlighted that even in communities where nonbinary people may have relationships with similarly-identified peers, these spaces can still be impacted by cissexism and enforcing norms as evidenced by participants' reflections on encountering transnormativity as well as what participants voiced is considered valid/visible nonbinary presentation in society and in some nonbinary communities (e.g., White, AFAB, masculine-presenting). Overall, this study underscored the importance of people understanding the contexts nonbinary people exist in as these contexts have direct influence on how nonbinary people navigate gender norms in their own understanding of self as well as with other people.

Internal Processes Focused on Personal Authenticity

The internal processes nonbinary people in this study used to navigate norms in these contexts were centered on connecting them to their authentic selves through (a) reclaiming ways of being and (b) creating affirmation and authenticity. The one way arrow from "reclaiming ways of being" to "creating affirmation and authenticity in the figure of the process model illustrates how for most participants, the process of reclaiming ways of being that were congruent with their gender came first and then opened space for participants to create affirmation and authenticity regarding being nonbinary. After this initial process, participants then engaged in mutually influential processes of reclaiming ways of being and creating affirmation and authenticity as demonstrated by the double arrow in the figure.

In the face of gender norms that communicated to participants that they needed to conform to binary gender identities and expressions, participants engaged in processes of reclaiming knowledge about themselves that reflected their authentic gender identities and expressions as well as ancestral knowledge that empowered some nonbinary POC to connect to

cultural wisdom about gender expansiveness. These processes were mutually influencing in that

when participants created affirmation and authenticity through self-presentation or creating safe

spaces at home, for example, these practices re-affirmed the importance of the ways in which

nonbinary people reclaimed ways of being such as by connecting to ancestral knowledge that

affirmed the ways they expressed their authentic gender. Further, the internal processes of

navigating gender norms were active in that participants reflected on times when they

consciously noticed norms that did not fit for them (i.e., reclaiming ways of being) and then

engaged in ways of doing gender that experientially felt affirmative and authentic (i.e., creating

affirmation and authenticity), thus operationalizing the intellectual underpinnings of queer theory

(Butler, 1990; Doty, 1993; Tilsen, 2013).

In line with this study's objectives, participants described practical ways that they

navigated gender norms internally by creating affirmative and authentic ways of self-presenting

through gender expression and sometimes medical transition, cultivating personal spaces at home

and in relationships that allowed them to exist authentically, and connecting to an embodied,

authentic sense of gender within themselves and in community with other nonbinary people.

These results expand on existing literature by underscoring the active processes nonbinary

people use in their day to day lives to navigate gender norms in ways that positivity impact their

mental health and well-being (Brennan et al., 2017; Puckett et al., 2019; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016;

Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). It is important to note that all participants in this study were adults

and had completed high school, with some participants pursuing or having completed higher

education; education and social class were salient contexts that informed these processes of

navigating gender norms internally in that participants in this study reflected on different levels

of access to affirmative ways of presenting their gender as well as gaining language over time or

through higher education to identify and connect to their authentic gender identities. At the same time, although most participants remarked on processes of how they expressed their gender identity in affirmative ways, often in gender nonconforming ways, these processes of navigating gender norms in line with participants' preferences went beyond self-presentation for all participants and more so encompassed nonbinary people's knowledge of and connection to their authentic gender identity regardless of how they were presenting or being perceived.

Interpersonal Processes Focused on Well-Being

In addition to connecting to their authentic selves through internal processes used to navigate gender norms, participants in this study also found ways to prioritize their overall well-being when navigating gender norms that were present in interpersonal relationships. This study found that by navigating the complexity of being visible as nonbinary or not, as well as creating space from non-affirmation, nonbinary people navigated gender norms in interpersonal relationships through considering risks based on identities they held and creating boundaries needed to honor their own well-being. Results from this study significantly expand on the current literature that has illuminated how nonbinary people experience emotional labor around having to explain their gender identities (e.g., Bradford et al., 2018; Fiani & Han, 2018) by identifying processes used by nonbinary people to navigate these kinds of interactions. Interpersonal processes used by nonbinary people to navigate gender norms highlight the interplay between one's own affirmed sense of self and existing in a society that is not inclusive for nonbinary people.

Nonbinary people in this study engaged in various decision-making processes that centered on what would be best for them in any given scenario by considering aspects such as levels of emotional and financial safety related to the intersection of racial and gender identities

and if the relationship they were navigating norms within held value to them. Practically this looked like participants making decisions around whether to share the pronouns they used or not as well as whether or not to overtly challenge gender norms in both professional and personal contexts. Nonbinary POC in this study voiced important considerations when navigating interpersonal relationships in professional spaces that center Whiteness and are hostile to both POC and gender nonconformity as well as navigating family relationships in which cultural understandings of nonbinary gender may be limited. Nonbinary people may mentally prepare for scenarios in which they may face discrimination and/or lack of being seen in their gender identity to maximize their safety and well-being (Lampe et al., 2020; Rood et al., 2016) and the nonbinary people in this study emphasized the emotional labor that comes with navigating gender norms within these interpersonal relationships.

Given the reality of encountering non-affirmation in interpersonal relationships as well as living day to day in contexts that do not support nonbinary people, participants in this study described processes of navigating these situations that were helpful in creating space from non-affirmation. These processes involved setting boundaries with non-affirming people as well as creating mental and emotional space between themselves and non-affirming ideas about their gender identities (e.g., transnormativity). Additionally, nonbinary people in this study engaged in important processes of seeking out affirmative relationships and communities for solidarity, support, and being seen. Understanding these active processes of seeking out affirming relationships expands on existing literature by highlighting processes nonbinary people can use to access the positive benefits of inclusive communities and friendships (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Conlin et al., 2019). By consciously seeking out affirming relationships, nonbinary people were able to stay connected to their authentic selves and bolster their overall well-being.

Implications

There are several implications from the results of this study for the work family therapists do with nonbinary clients. Initially, based on participants' experiences, it is evident that family therapists need to learn about, and be knowledgeable of, the creation of the gender binary and how the gender binary was and is enforced through colonization, racism, and Eurocentrism (e.g., Bederman, 1995; Carter, 2007; Somerville, 2000). Family therapists need to share in this awareness of the impact of the gender binary on nonbinary people in order to engage in helpful, informed conversations with nonbinary people to unpack gender norms and to minimize reinforcing the gender binary.

Family therapists should educate themselves about differential impacts of the gender binary based on the multiple identities nonbinary people may hold. Although all nonbinary people in this study discussed ways that they were negatively impacted by gender norms enforced by the gender binary, nonbinary POC had unique experiences connected to the intertwined nature of racism, cissexism, and the gender binary. This finding reinforces the need for family therapists to be mindful of the role of intersectionality in the lives of nonbinary clients and how holding multiple marginalized identities might impact clients' experiences of gender minority stress, as well as the therapy process (Crenshaw, 1991; Lampe et al., 2020; Rood et al., 2016; Testa et al., 2015). Moreover, therapists need to be aware of how they receive and celebrate each of their client's marginalized identities; providing inclusive therapy to nonbinary clients is not only about deconstructing the influence of cissexism and the gender binary, but also about deconstructing the influence of racism, classism, heterosexism, etc. (McGeorge et al., 2020). Thus, family therapists should seek to understand each nonbinary client's specific meanings of gender within their cultural context and unique experiences with gender norms.

Scholars have found that family therapists may be more likely to receive training on issues relevant to LGBQ populations in recent years compared to in the past (Carlson et al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2014; McGeorge & Carlson, 2016), but there seems to be a significant lack of education and research in regard to training related to working affirmatively and ethically with transgender and nonbinary communities (e.g., Benson, 2013; Blumer et al., 2012; Blumer et al., 2013). This may mean that family therapists need to seek out their own self-education resources and trainings focused on nonbinary communities through continuing (e.g., workshops, conferences, etc.) and self-education (e.g., reading books, watching documentaries, etc.). Some scholars have suggested that starting this educational journey to become an affirmative therapist for transgender and nonbinary clients includes doing self-of-the-therapist work (e.g., McGeorge et al., in press), learning how to conceptualize the therapeutic needs of transgender people from an ecological perspective (e.g., Edwards et al., 2019), and providing ways to think and practice beyond binary ways of being (e.g., Barker & Iantaffi, 2019; Tilsen, 2013). There is limited literature within family therapy focused on clinical work with nonbinary adults specifically, but other disciplines have provided some resources that include considerations for nonbinary people that family therapists could explore to inform their practice (e.g., APA, 2015; Chang et al., 2018). In addition to this need for ongoing education, the findings of this study also suggest that family therapists need to help nonbinary clients (a) connect to themselves and their communities, and (b) develop supportive interpersonal relationships.

Connecting to Self and Community

Based on the results of this study, family therapists should work with clients to connect to their authentic sense of self through remembering moments of affirmative gender congruency and if appropriate, by learning about and connecting to ancestral wisdom of gender

expansiveness. Because of the pervasiveness of gender norms tied to cisnormativity and transnormativity evident in this study, family therapists may need to normalize multiple narratives of being nonbinary in these processes of clients connecting to their authentic and affirmative selves as there is no one way to "correctly" be nonbinary. Therapists may work with clients to name and de-construct these normative narratives of gender identity and their impact on clients as well as construct with clients how they would like to navigate norms and embody their gender. Strategies identified in this study that could be helpful for therapists to explore with nonbinary clients include gender expression and clients' preferred meanings of gender expression/self-presenting, how to make a client's home an affirmative space that is safe and free from the norms and pressures perpetuated by society, and working with clients to notice how they feel in community with people who share similar identities as them. It could be useful for family therapists to assess for the presence of gender affirming strategies that nonbinary clients are already using at the beginning of treatment, as well as to seek out opportunities to intentionally construct these practices over the course of treatment.

Family therapists should also work with clients to identify ways that they can connect with nonbinary peers and communities. Therapists should not underestimate the importance of nonbinary people seeing, and being in community with, other people who share similar identities as it is a basic human need to experience safety and connection with others (e.g., Dana, 2018). Through a trauma-informed, neurobiological perspective, it is evident that participants in this study had their needs for safety and connection met in relationships with other transgender and nonbinary people who shared common experiences, language, and understanding that provided unique access to feelings of safety, belonging, and solace (Dana, 2018). Thus therapists should explore if nonbinary clients have relationships with other nonbinary people, especially nonbinary

people who share multiple similar identities (e.g., nonbinary, Black, disabled) and strengthen the resources these relationships can be by bringing their voices into therapy sessions if clients are struggling to affirm themselves. For example, the act of bringing the voices from supportive relationships into therapy could look like inviting these individuals to write affirmative, supportive letters to the client that can be read and discussed in therapy. If nonbinary clients are not connected to this type of community, therapists could assist in connecting clients to community and/or drawing on expansive ideas of community such as nonbinary representation in television shows, movies, documentaries, and books.

Interpersonal Relationships

Family therapists should also work with nonbinary clients to identify and acknowledge what they need in various interpersonal relationships in their life. Therapists could work with nonbinary clients to process and plan for how they want to navigate relationships in the various contexts of their lives (e.g., family, work) depending on clients' preferences for how, if, and to whom they want to disclose their gender identity and pronouns based on levels of safety and risk. It may be important for some nonbinary clients to create boundaries to distance themselves from non-affirming people or places and therapists could assist clients in identifying relationships in which they may need to create boundaries and work with clients on what healthy boundaries may look like. Further, family therapists should explore the people in clients' lives who can offer support and reassurance if/when clients experience non-affirmation and discrimination to positively contribute to nonbinary clients' mental health and well-being.

When processing family relationships or when doing family therapy with families with nonbinary members, family therapists should attune to cultural understandings of gender identity. Knudson-Martin and colleagues (2019) provide a framework for attuning to clients'

sociocultural contexts, which could be helpful in working with nonbinary clients and their families. Therapists need to recognize and honor that nonbinary adult clients may engage with their families to varying degrees based on their family's level of understanding and acceptance of their gender identity. Moreover, therapists need to discuss with nonbinary clients the degree to which the client wants to be out to their family and what names and pronouns the client wants used in the context of family therapy, which may be different from what is used in individual therapy sessions. Therapists may also need to work with families to develop rules or guidelines to follow during family therapy sessions that help to promote the safety of the nonbinary member.

Limitations and Future Research

A few factors were limitations in this study; all participants in this study self-selected through social media recruitment which limited the sample to people who had access to the internet. Additionally, interviews were conducted over Zoom which excluded people who did not have access to a computer or smartphone. The majority of the sample had completed higher education which potentially limited the ability of this study to identify what processes of navigating gender norms looks like across various educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Future research should focus more on how diverse education experiences and socioeconomic statuses inform nonbinary people's experiences of navigating gender norms. Interviews were also conducted at a single time point; longitudinal research examining processes of navigating gender norms over time would be useful in understanding how these processes may change at different life stages. To further theory development on the processes nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms, future research should focus on understanding these processes over the lifetime at different developmental stages.

Conclusion

  Nonbinary people in the United States live in a society that perpetuates binary gender norms, which impacts nonbinary people's daily experiences when these norms get enforced in various contexts and relationships. Using constructivist grounded theory methods, this study identified a process model by which nonbinary people navigate gender norms in their internal relationship with self as well as in their relationships and interactions in society. In contexts of societal and cultural expectations of gender norms; experiences of being seen (or not) in communities; and holding multiple social identities, nonbinary people use internal processes of reclaiming ways of being that are congruent with their gender as well as processes to create affirmation and authenticity in their lived experiences. Further, in interpersonal relationships, nonbinary people find ways to navigate the complexity that can come from being perceived as nonbinary (or not) and create space from people and places that are non-affirming of their gender identity.

  This study has important implications for family therapists to do their own self-of-the-therapist work and self-education to understand the nature and impacts of the gender binary on the lives of nonbinary people. Participants in this study demonstrated the joy and freedom that they experience in being nonbinary, thus, family therapists can support nonbinary people by attuning to their agency and self-worth and helping them create plans for how they want to navigate gender norms in their day-to-day lives. With intentional practices of resisting binary gender norms and assumptions as well as working with nonbinary people to cultivate inclusive environments and relationships, we can all embrace and create the more just, equitable, and affirming daily experiences that nonbinary people deserve.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics (n=21).

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Race	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status
Alex	22	Non-Binary	White	Gay	Single
Amihan	23	Genderqueer, Non-Binary, Genderfluid	African American/ Black, Asian American/ Asian ,Biracial/Multiracial	Lesbian	Single
Bea	25	Non-Binary	Asian/Asian American	Bisexual	Single
Daya	24	Non-Binary	Asian/Asian American	Queer	Living w/ Partner
Emerson	32	Genderqueer, Non-Binary	White	Queer	Living w/Partner
Fall	28	Graygender	White	Bisexual	Single
Jayce	26	Genderfluid	African American/Black	Bisexual	Married
Jin	20	Non-Binary	Asian/Asian American	Bisexual	Single
Jinx	24	Non-Binary	African American/Black	Pansexual	Single
Jomar	25	Non-Binary	Asian/Asian American	Queer	Single
Lil	20	Non-Binary	Asian/Asian American	Lesbian	Single
Michelle/ Michael	25	Bigender	White	Androsexual	Engaged to be Married, Living w/ Partner
Ouran	25	Non-Binary, Agender	Asian/Asian American, White	Asexual-Sapphic	Single
Reese	22	Non-Binary,Genderfluid	White, Latinx/Latino(a)/Hispanic	Queer	Living with 2 partners and dating
Rumra	23	Non-Binary	African American/ Black, Asian American/ Asian, Biracial/Multiracial	Queer	Single
Rusty	38	Non-Binary	White	Bisexual	Single
Sawyer	19	Demigender/Demigirl	White	Lesbian	Prefer not to answer

Silver	23	Non-Binary	Asian/Asian American	Pansexual	Dating
Stef	24	Non-Binary	Latinx/Latino(a)/Hispanic	Queer	Single
Willow	20	Non-Binary, Agender	African American/ Black	Lesbian	Dating
YR	25	Non-Binary, Nonbinary femme	Latinx/Latino(a)/Hispanic	Queer	Single

Table 2

Categories and Subcategories Organized by Research Question

Research Question 1: What contextual factors inform the processes nonbinary people use to navigate gender norms internally and interpersonally?	Categories	Subcategories
	Societal and Cultural Expectations of Gender	
	Community and Being Seen	
	Contextual Impact of Multiple Identities	Familial Cultural Understandings of Gender
		Being White and Nonbinary
		Education
		Social Class

Research Question 2: How do nonbinary people navigate gender norms internally?	Categories	Subcategories
	Reclaiming Ways of Being	Reclaiming Self-Knowledge
		Reclaiming Ancestral Knowledge
		Critiquing Gender Norms
	Creating Affirmation and Authenticity	Creating Affirmative Ways of Self-Presentation
		Pursuing Medical Transition
		Cultivating Spaces at Some and Chosen Community
		Experiencing Community
		Embodying Gender

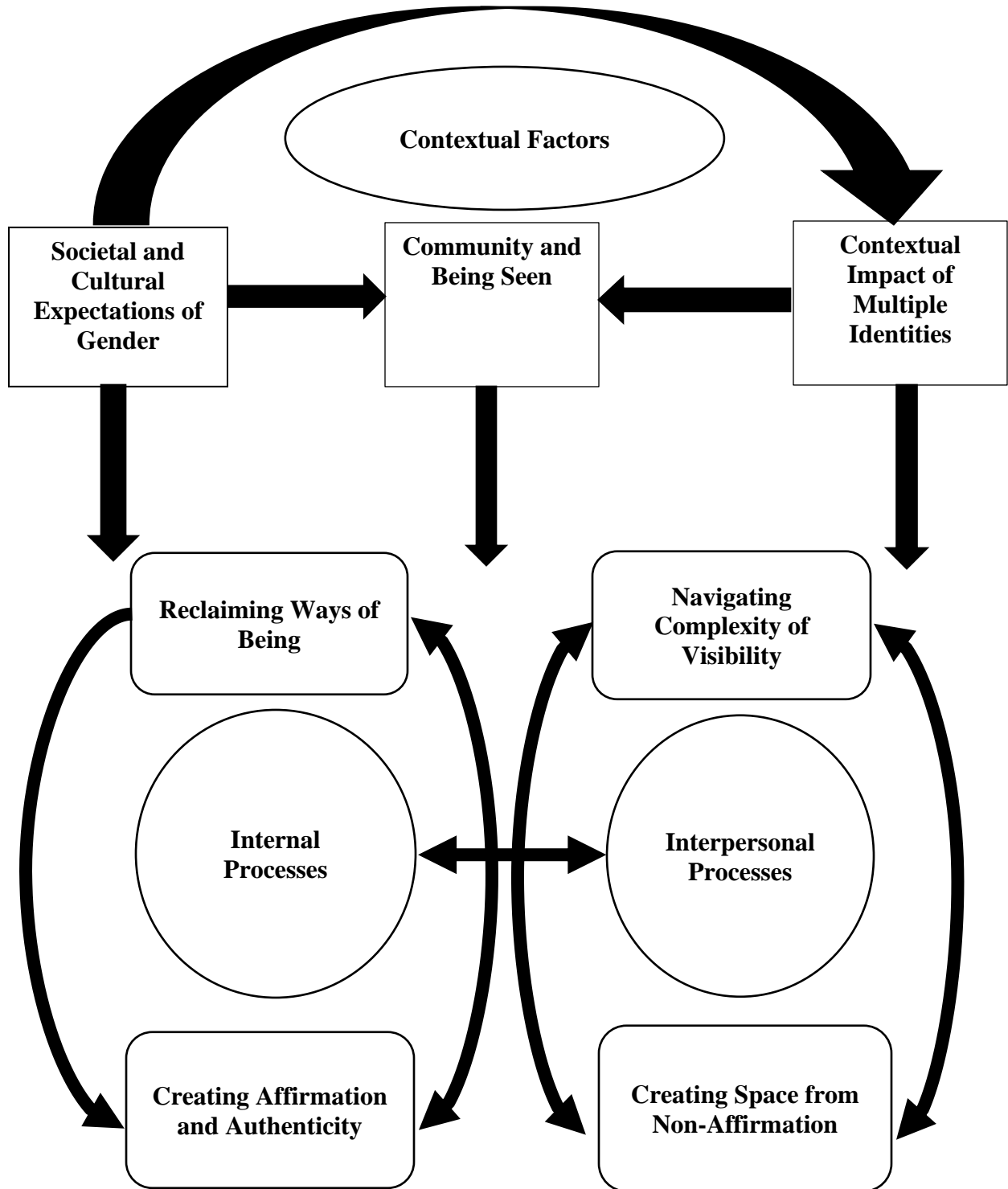| Research Question 3: How do nonbinary people navigate gender norms in interpersonal relationships?	Categories	Subcategories
	Navigating the Complexity of Visibility	Ways to Be Seen
		Messaging from Family about Visibility
		Considering Risks in Workplaces

	Creating Space from Non-Affirmation	Boundaries
		Unpacking Transnormativity
		Seeking Out Affirming Relationships

Figure 1

Process Model of Nonbinary People Navigating Gender Norms

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What best describes your gender identity (Check all that apply)?

    a. Genderqueer
    b. Non-Binary
    c. Bigender
    d. Pangender
    e. Genderfluid
    f. Write-In: _____

2. How long have you known or had an awareness that you were not cisgender and/or that the binary didn't work for you? _____

3. What is your age? _____

4. What best describes your ethnicity/race?
    a. African American/Black
    b. Asian American/Asian
    c. White
    d. Latinx/Latino(a)/Hispanic
    e. Middle Eastern
    f. Native American/Alaskan Native
    g. Pacific Islander
    h. Biracial/Multiracial (please specify)_____
    i. Write-In: _____

5. What best describes your sexual orientation?
    a. Asexual
    b. Gay
    c. Lesbian
    d. Bisexual
    e. Heterosexual/Straight
    f. Questioning
    g. Queer
    h. Write-In: _____

6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    a. Less than a high school diploma
    b. High school degree or equivalent

    c. Bachelor's degree

    d. Master's degree

    e. Doctoral degree

    f. Write-In: _____

7. What state do you currently live in? _____

8. What state(s) did you grow up in? _____

9. What is your current relationship status (Check all that apply)?

    a. Single

    b. Dating

    c. Committed union

    d. Engaged to be Married

    e. Married

    f. Living w/ Partner

    g. Divorced

    h. Widowed

    i. Write-In: _____

    j. Prefer not to answer

10. What is your annual household income?

    a. Below $10,000

    b. $10,000-$50,0000

    c. $50,000-$100,000

    d. $100,000-$150,000

    e. Over $150,000

    f. Prefer not to answer

11. Do you identify as religious or spiritual?

    a. No, I do not identify as religious or spiritual

    b. Yes, I identify as religious or spiritual (please specify your religion and/or religious denomination and/or spirituality and/or belief system): _____

Appendix B

Interview Guide

This purpose of this research study is to better understand how non-binary people navigate gender norms in society and in relationships. It may be that you're still figuring out what gender norms fit and don't fit for you, and that is perfectly okay. It's our hope that better understanding these processes will inform competent and ethical clinical strategies used by mental health professionals when working with non-binary clients. Everything you say in this interview is kept confidential, and you may stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time.

Experience of Gender Norms and Resisting Gender Norms- Questions and Prompts:

1) How did you first recognize that you wanted or needed to navigate societal expectations about gender norms (e.g., gender identity, gender expression, expectations for your assigned gender at birth) in a different way than you may have been expected to or taught to?
   a. First experience of resistance
   b. First experience of questioning if gender norms fit or don't fit, or need to be created in a specific way for you
2) How did you create space to resist gender norms and/or navigate gender in a way that works for you?
   a. Was this emotional space?
   b. Physical space?
3) What helped you resist and/or respond in an affirmative-to-you way to gender norms and expectations for the gender you were assigned at birth?
   a. Internally
   b. Externally
   c. Who in your life?
4) What has your experience (e.g., emotional, cognitive, day-to-day) of navigating gender norms been like?
   a. How often do you feel like you're going against what society may expect for you based on your gender assigned at birth? How has this changed over time, if at all?
   b. Are there certain circumstances that lead to you resisting and/or accepting gender norms more often than others?
5) What happens when you resist and/ or accept gender norms?
   a. What possibilities open up when you resist and/or accept gender norms?
   b. How does resistance and/or acceptance open up space for different possibilities of your experience of gender? Preferred experiences of gender?
6) How does resisting gender norms and/or creating gendered experiences/roles that fit your experience of gender impact your relationships?
   a. Friends
   b. Family
   c. Romantic partners
   d. Work

7) What contexts are most difficult to resist gender norms within and/or embody gender the way you want to, and why?
    a. Relationships
    b. Work
    c. School
    d. Public
8) What contexts provide the most support for resisting/support resisting/being yourself regarding gender?
    a. How do the people/places around you reinforce or support gender norms?
    b. How do people support you in embodying your gender and experience of gender?
    c. How would you like people to support you in your experience of gender?
9) How do the identities you hold inform your experiences of navigating gender norms?
    a. Sexual Orientation
    b. Race
    c. Religion