

“Too Much Trouble”: Transgender and Nonbinary People’s Experiences of Stigmatization and Stigma Avoidance in the Workplace

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Abstract

Transgender and nonbinary (TNB) people in the U.S. navigate significant employment and economic inequities. Gaps in knowledge about their workplace experiences limit our broader understanding of how social inequality is

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interactionally constructed through employment contexts. We conducted and analyzed interviews with 26 TNB young adults. Routine hiring processes and structural constraints made participants vulnerable to interactional stigmatization and subsequent discrimination, with deleterious consequences for employment as well as mental health. Participants deployed a variety of strategies to avoid or resist anticipated stigma, including exiting the workforce or changing careers. One's ability to avoid stigmatization at work was partially shaped by structural and managerial support, organizational form, and one's gender and gender conformity. Beyond contributing to economic inequality by limiting job and career options, our findings suggest that these social processes comprise minority stressors that diminish the well-being of TNB participants and exacerbate their economic marginalization. In contributing empirical insight into the experiences of TNB people, we demonstrate the salience of stigmatization and stigma avoidance strategies for social closure within organizations and thereby advance sociological understanding of the relational generation of inequality at work.

Keywords

stigmatization, employment discrimination, transgender and nonbinary people, mental health, relational inequality

Approximately one out of every 200 people in the U.S. is transgender or nonbinary (TNB) (Flores et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2017) and little is known about how they experience and respond to discrimination in the workplace. National purposive (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016) and representative survey studies (Carpenter et al., 2020; Conron et al., 2012) suggest that transgender (hereafter trans) people are three times more likely to be unemployed and live in poverty compared to the general population, with the greatest disadvantage concentrated among TNB Middle Eastern, Native American, Multiracial, Black, and Latinx populations (James et al., 2016). How workplace discrimination becomes an employment and professional advancement barrier has been robustly examined for other groups minoritized by structures of oppression (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, and—to a lesser extent—sexual minorities (Cech & Waidzun, 2022; Hearn, 2014; Holman, 2018; Roscigno, 2019; Stenger & Roulet, 2018; Tilcsik et al., 2015; Williams & Giuffre, 2011). We address the gaps in knowledge about the employment experiences of TNB people and continue to broaden understanding of the social factors shaping workplace inequities and their consequences.

Sociologists have examined how trans people “do gender” (Connell, 2009) at work and whether their gendered interactions disrupt or reinforce dominant ideologies and, ultimately, gender inequality (Connell, 2010; Schilt, 2006, 2011; Schilt & Connell, 2007; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Prior interdisciplinary research points to various forms of workplace discrimination and harassment based on gender modality (whether one’s gender is similar or different from that they were assigned at birth; Ashley, 2022; Ashley et al., 2024) as drivers of unemployment and precarious employment among TNB people (Bender-Baird, 2011; Brewster et al., 2014; Budge et al., 2010; Dispenza et al., 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2024; McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016; Mizock et al., 2017; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016; Rosich, 2020). Because of the salience of workplace interactions across these literatures, and our interest in how TNB people become economically marginalized, we leverage Relational Inequality Theory (RIT; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019) to investigate how gendered disruptions may be shaping TNB people’s employment experiences.

RIT posits that socioeconomic inequality writ large is interactionally generated within workplace organizations, helping to explain the social pathways through which groups become minoritized and economically marginalized at work or while seeking work. We use the case of TNB adults to elaborate one of the mechanisms central to the framework, social closure: when people with relatively higher social status (e.g., men) in positions of authority deny people with relatively lower social status (e.g., women) access to jobs and other organizational resources (Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2019; Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). Our findings develop an undertheorized dimension of RIT and employment discrimination (Link et al., 2014) by showing how stigmatization and its mental health sequelae are an integral part of the social closure process marginalizing TNB people from the workforce and preferred career pathways.

Stigma and minority stress frameworks (Brooks, 1981; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003; Testa et al., 2015) explain that the experience and anticipation of stigmatization and harassment based on minority status comprise unique social stressors that result in poorer mental as well as physical health outcomes over time (Bockting et al., 2013; Lick et al., 2013). In the past five years, structural stigmatization (Hatzenbuehler, 2014) based on transgender status—i.e., policies discriminating against TNB people—has exponentially increased, as evidenced by 589 bills introduced and 85 passed in 2023 alone targeting the rights of trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people (Trans Legislation Tracker January 5, 2024). However, within sociological literatures investigating employment

inequality, much less attention has been paid to how stigmatization is shaping TNB people's experiences at work or contributing to their economic marginalization.

To gain insight into the relational generation of employment inequality among trans and nonbinary people, we conducted qualitative interviews with 26 TNB young adults (ages 18–27). Two key findings emerge from our analyses: (1) In response to interactional stigmatization experienced in employment contexts, TNB people engage in a variety of strategies to avoid or resist anticipated stigma at work; (2) Ability to avoid stigma and discrimination is partially shaped by access to intrapersonal and organizational resources related to (a) gender conformity, embodiment, and presentation, (b) organizational form, and (c) structural and managerial support. We demonstrate that interactions between TNB people and their employers are sites where stigmatization, stigma avoidance, and their minority stress mental health sequelae push people out of the workforce, or into mismatched employment (e.g., jobs that do not align with career goals, or underemployment; Kalleberg, 2007; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011) and generate economic inequality. By leveraging qualitative methods and centering the experiences of TNB people seeking work and on-the-job, we extend theories of the relational generation of social inequality within workplace organizations (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019) and contribute urgently-needed insight into the experiences of a minoritized group facing severe social and economic marginalization.

Background

Relational Inequality: The Importance of Workplace Interactions

Developed by Tomaskovic-Devey (2014) and Avent-Holt (Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2019; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019), RIT brings Weberian and Marxist sociological theoretical traditions together to argue that (primarily workplace) organizations are the key contexts through which social and economic inequalities are interactionally—or relationally—produced. They note that organizations are where individuals access money (via income) and power (via status) and identify exploitation, social closure, and claims-making as core relational mechanisms through which stratification occurs. Claims-making, or people's differential ability to make legitimized claims to the pooled resources concentrated within workplaces, is in part determined by macro and local categorical distinctions, including those specific to gender and race (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). Building from Ridgeway's social psychological work

status beliefs, or the human propensity to organize people into groups and attribute cultural beliefs to such groups (Ridgeway, 2000), categorical distinctions shape one's ability to engage in or resist claims-making—yet these distinctions are not fixed (Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2019). RIT's framework embraces Acker's theory (2006) of inequality regimes, or that social processes within organizations are shaped but not determined by larger macro-social forces, instead operating and evolving locally in response to a variety of meso- and micro-social factors and processes. It is the discrimination TNB adults face as a result of their disruption to typical gendered categorical distinctions in the workplace that we discuss below.

We utilize RIT as a framework to examine how gender modality, as a categorical distinction, is negotiated by TNB people within the workplace, and in doing so extend understanding of how intra- and interpersonal psychosocial processes contribute to broader societal patterns of inequality. Despite RIT's social psychological roots, RIT focuses on broad categorical distinctions—e.g., men vs. women—and undertheorizes the micro-interactional processes through which these key mechanisms (like social closure) operate. Understanding stigmatization and its consequences is key to understanding how people with stigmatized identities (such as LGBQ+ people, disabled people, and transgender and nonbinary people) are interactionally marginalized in society. To date, however, the role of stigmatization is all but missing in RIT. We therefore advance theories of the relational generation of inequality by mapping the processes through which interactional stigmatization at work enables social closure—or the denial of jobs and job-related resources by the high-status to the low-status—and the role of stigma avoidance and minority stress sequelae within this phenomenon.

Stigmatization

Trans and nonbinary people face discrimination based on gender modality (Ashley, 2022; White Hughto et al., 2015). Such discrimination derives from stigmatization: a psychosocial process through which certain categories of people or traits are devalued or discredited by others in society (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). By labeling minorities as non-normative, deviant, or undesirable, stigmatization enables the exploitation of non-dominant groups by dominant groups and is therefore foundational to inequality (Phelan et al., 2008). Extant work examines how stigma based on sexual minority status operates to marginalize sexual minorities and create structural inequalities by limiting their “rights, freedoms, and resources” (p. 825; Frost, 2011; Herek, 2007; Herek et al., 2007).

The concept of structural stigma further extends Goffman's theory to the meso-level of society, including societal ideologies, norms, practices, and policies that devalue and marginalize non-dominant minority groups—such as the presence or absence of antidiscrimination policies across states (Hatzenbuehler, 2014). More recently, stigma frameworks are being refined to understand and address the mechanisms through which structural-, interpersonal-, and intrapersonal-level stigmatization bars TNB and gender nonconforming people from achieving economic opportunities, health, and well-being (White Hughto et al., 2015). In Western contexts, hegemonic gender ideologies that define social gender based on anatomy underpin the stigmatization of gender minorities (Connell, 2009; White Hughto et al., 2015).

TNB people routinely encounter high levels of interpersonal stigmatization while seeking work and on the job (Bockting et al., 2013; Brewster et al., 2014; Budge et al., 2010; Davidson, 2016; Dispenza et al., 2012; Dray et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2024; James et al., 2016; McFadden, 2020; Miller & Grollman, 2015; Mizock et al., 2017; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). In the U.S., survey data indicate that over a third of TNB adults have had trouble getting a job and almost a quarter lost a job because of their gender modality (Bockting et al., 2013), and that two thirds of trans and gender nonconforming people have experienced discrimination at work (Rosich, 2020). Emergent work examining cisgender people's attitudes support these claims. Dray and colleagues (2020), for example, found that cisgender employees rated fictitious TNB coworkers as less likeable than fictitious cisgender coworkers—a significant finding given that majority-group members' evaluations and emotional responses to minoritized workers contributes to the organizational generation of inequality (Nelson & Johnson, 2023), in part through determining who is and is not a good "fit" for their workplace (Nichols et al., 2023). Unexplained differences between cisgender and trans people in employment and wages point to the economic consequences of discrimination (Ciprikis et al., 2020).

Amid calls for more attention to be paid to the fundamental role group-based stigmatization plays in the generation of social and economic inequality (Link et al., 2014), predominant theories of the production of inequality at work have only peripherally attended to this mechanism of social stratification. Qualitative research into *how* stigmatization is shaping TNB people's employment access and experiences is needed to advance understanding of TNB people's employment outcomes (McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016) and can hone relational theories of how social closure and employment discrimination operate.

Minority Stress: The Mental Health Consequences of Stigmatization at Work

Facing stigma at work can negatively impact health and well-being—which, in turn, may negatively impact work opportunities and earnings. Research with gender minorities using the minority stress model—originally conceptualized by Brooks (1981) and Meyer (1995, 2003)—show that exposure to unique social stressors specific to one’s stigmatized minority status result in poorer mental and physical health outcomes among sexual and gender minorities (Bockting et al., 2013; Brewster et al., 2012; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Lick et al., 2013; Lombardi et al., 2008; Testa et al., 2015). Minority stress theory is rooted in social stress theory, which demonstrates how population health disparities are partially driven by unequal exposure to stressors that overwhelm biopsychosocial coping strategies of socially and economically disadvantaged groups, eroding health and well-being overtime (Aneshensel, 1992; Pearlin, 1989). Minority stressors include acute distal, interpersonal *enacted stigma*—when someone is discriminated against, victimized, or rejected based on a stigmatized minority status—and subsequent proximal, intrapersonal stressors, including *anticipated stigma* (fear and anticipation of enacted stigma) and *identity concealment* (Bockting et al., 2013; Frost, 2017; Testa et al., 2015; Timmins et al., 2017). TNB people report anxiety and suicidality related to workplace discrimination (Budge et al., 2010), suggesting that stigmatization at work contributes to high levels of distress, suicidality, and rates of attempted suicide among TNB populations (Bauer et al., 2015; James et al., 2016). Anticipation of enacted stigma may lead TNB people to take steps to mitigate potential harm, such as choosing not to disclose their gender identities or modalities—a proximal minority stressor (Rood et al., 2017). For example, one survey found that 77% of trans people who were employed in the past year “took steps to avoid mistreatment in the workplace, such as hiding or delaying their gender transition or quitting their job,” (James et al., 2016). Importantly, our work also seeks to extend literature at the intersection of employment discrimination and mental health by better interrogating reciprocal ties between the poor mental health sequelae of stigmatization at work and employment access and experiences.

Strategies to Avoid Stigmatization and Discrimination at Work

Research on strategies to avoid discrimination and improve employment outcomes have produced mixed findings. For example, sexual minorities may conceal their sexual identities and partnerships (Clair et al., 2005; Jones &

King, 2014; Sedlovskaya et al., 2013; Stenger & Roulet, 2018) or racial minorities may “identity shift” at work or “whiten” resumes (Dickens et al., 2019; Hebl et al., 2020; Safi, 2017). While these practices can help minorities avoid discrimination, they come at a cost—limiting opportunities for workplace social connections that can be leveraged for career advancement (Clair et al., 2005; Jones & King, 2014; Stenger & Roulet, 2018) and triggering poor mental and physical health outcomes (Anderson, 2013; Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Pavalko et al., 2003; Velez et al., 2013).

Despite their implications for the role of stigmatization in the relational generation of inequality at work and the economic and mental health of TNB people, the strategies TNB people use to avoid workplace stigmatization and discrimination—and their consequences—are not well understood. Hutchinson and colleagues (2024) analysis of a 2015 national survey of TNB people shows that over three-quarters of respondents working or applying for jobs reported “self-protective behaviors”—such as concealing one’s identity or delaying or hiding gender transition. However, reported engagement in these behaviors did not vary in predicted ways according to status as operationalized by gender and race (Hutchinson et al., 2024). Given that TNB people possess diverse identities, embodiments, and gendered goals (Meadow, 2018), additional factors—such as whether one’s gender presentation aligns with societal norms—likely shape access to strategies to avoid and resist stigmatization at work (Connell, 2010; Paine, 2018; Schilt, 2006). Keeping one’s gender private may require people who are gender nonconforming to express themselves in ways that negate their identities, whereas trans people with gender conforming presentations may be able to ensure coworkers stay unaware of their trans status. Existing research suggests that whether or not a TNB person embodies dominant gender norms shapes how they experience discrimination at work (Connell, 2010; Schilt, 2006, 2011); Miller & Grollman (2015) found that among trans people, those who are “visibly stigmatized” (recognizable by others as gender nonconforming or trans) were more likely to report discrimination than their gender conforming trans peers. Such insight is key to extending theories of how stigmatization and relational inequality is generated—and negotiated—at work.

Among other socially marginalized groups, additional organizational-level factors that play important roles in employment experiences include workplace composition, managerial support, and culture (Hirsh, 2014). For example, women are less likely to report experiencing workplace discrimination when their workplace is majority women and when their manager is a woman (Stainback et al., 2011). Among sexual minorities, controlling for job characteristics that facilitate concealment of sexuality helps to explain

observed occupational patterns among gay and lesbian workers—e.g., that gay men are overrepresented in jobs that are typically held by women (Tilcsik et al., 2015). Working within “queer” organizations—comprised of large numbers of LGBQ workers, such that queerness replaces heterosexuality as an organizing principle of a workplace (Hearn, 2014)—is associated with affirming workplace experiences. At the same time, multiply marginalized groups (e.g., sexual minority women, LGBQ trans people, and LGBTQ + people of color) often face discrimination and stigmatization in these contexts (Ward, 2008; Williams & Giuffre, 2011). And although industry norms and organizational practices influence the experiences of stigmatized groups (Cech & Waidzunas, 2022; Clair et al., 2005), anti-discrimination policies are not always good indicators of minority experiences, as people of color and women employees often face steep consequences for filing complaints (Ray, 2019; Roscigno, 2007).

In sum, gaining insight into whether, under what conditions, and how social closure and factors shaping inequality for other marginalized groups are perceived to shape the experiences of TNB people can advance knowledge of interactional processes driving employment inequality. The present study maps how TNB participants encounter, respond to, anticipate, and work to avoid gender modality-based stigmatization, discrimination—or alternatively, affirmation—in the workplace. Our rich qualitative data show *how* stigmatization and stigma avoidance facilitate social closure, thus deepening understanding of the mechanisms through which inequality is relationally generated in the workplace (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). Improving understanding of the social processes shaping TNB work experiences also holds specific implications for the economic and overall well-being of TNB people (Collins et al., 2015; Frost, 2017; Hirsh & Cha, 2008; McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016)—a socially, politically, and economically marginalized group in the U.S.

Methods

Parent and Present Study

This article is the result of a sub-study of Project AFFIRM, a multisite, longitudinal cohort study in the United States that investigated mental and physical health among trans and nonbinary adolescents and adults using a minority stress framework. Project AFFIRM participants were recruited in 2016 through purposive, venue-based sampling across a variety of online and offline settings identified through ethnographic mapping. Venues included public spaces and commercial establishments, community events

and groups, social media, trans-specific healthcare clinics, and word of mouth. After recruitment and screening, quota sampling was used to select and enroll participants by age, gender, recruitment venues, race/ethnicity, and geographic area. Respondents in this sample agreed to be contacted for participation in future research and indicated a preferred contact method (email, text, or phone call).

The current study, supported by a grant from the New York Community Trust, was designed to examine barriers and facilitators to employment as well as employment and job-seeking experiences among young TNB adults in New York City. Participants were recruited from the Project AFFIRM sample. First, we identified 48 individuals from the New York City cohort in the 18–27 age group. We reached out to these participants via their preferred contact method to invite them to take part in this study. Of these 48 individuals, 26 were enrolled in the project, 4 declined to participate in the study, 1 was excluded (because sub-study interviews were limited to those fluent in English), and 14 did not respond to three attempts to schedule an interview. Enrolled participants were interviewed by the third and sixth authors at the New York City study site (Columbia University). All 26 interviews were conducted in 2018. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants were approximately 45–60 min, and participants were compensated \$50.

Sample

All participants were 18–27 years old. In terms of gender, 3 identified as women, 4 as men, 4 as transgender women, 7 as transgender men, 5 as non-binary, and 3 as genderqueer. The sample was racially diverse, including 6 participants who identified as Black or African American, 4 who identified as Multiracial, 11 as white, and 5 selected another category (write-in responses to “other” included, for example, Egyptian, Dominican, and Puerto Rican). 9 participants additionally identified as Latino/a/x. At the time of interview, 10 worked for a not-for-profit company, 9 were unemployed, 4 worked for a private company, and 3 were self-employed. Participants reported a wide variety of jobs, including barber, psychotherapist, patient care associate, food delivery driver, direct support professional, and carpenter.

Analysis

Interviews covered a variety of questions related to job-seeking and employment experiences, such as: How did you find your latest job? How did the job

interview go? Are you out as transgender or nonbinary on the job? Please describe your [best/worst] experience in the workforce; and, Were you ever denied a promotion because of your gender identity and/or gender expression? The in-depth, semi-structured format allowed interviewers to ask additional follow-up questions and probe interviewees to expand upon their responses. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. The third, fourth, and sixth authors conducted inductive and thematic content analyses using Dedoose qualitative analytical software, meeting and reviewing coded interviews iteratively to establish intercoder agreement. Theoretically-driven and emergent codes were then sorted into overarching categories, themes and subthemes with the goal of interpreting data to advance empirical and theoretical understanding of the research foci (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Silverman, 2006). Because of variation in the sample resulting in small numbers of TNB participants who share the same gender, racial, and ethnic identities, as well as occupations, our data are not designed to support robust comparative within-group analyses by additional axes of identities of identity or employment contexts; thematic coding instead focused on patterns of shared experiences across participants, with attention paid to emergent dimensions of experiences specific to subgroup (e.g., trans women, TNB people of color) (Maxwell, 2013). After half the interviews had been coded, the third author reviewed preliminary codes with two TNB community advisory board members. Both members confirmed that codes reflected their understanding of employment experiences among TNB people in NYC—although one expressed surprise that sex work was not a prominent topic of discussion. The first author then performed a final round of directed analyses by examining narratives of experienced and anticipated stigmatization and avoidance in connection with emergent themes of gender conformity, embodied gender, managerial support, and workplace context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Findings

Participants described hearing about and encountering—and as a result, anticipating and fearing—gender-modality based stigmatization in the workplace. In participant narratives, stigmatization led to discrimination: getting passed over for jobs, demoted, or fired, and was therefore understood to be a threat to economic well-being. Alternately, some participants relayed experiences of workplace affirmation: when managers addressed and stopped mistreatment, ensured access to gender-appropriate bathrooms and uniforms, and supported employees' gender expressions and preferences related to level of "outness." Participants further reported that stigma in workplace eroded mental health

and well-being, prompting them to leave jobs, avoid future job-seeking, or constrain job-seeking to career paths and organizations known to affirm TNB workers. Therefore, TNB people in this sample deployed strategies to avoid and resist stigma while identifying, applying, and interviewing for jobs and in the workplace. Decision-making about career options and stigma-avoidance strategies revolved around three factors: embodied gender expression and gender conformity at the time of job seeking or employment; organization form; and structural and managerial support. These findings thus illuminate the interactional processes through which stigmatization at work leads to social closure (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019) and diminishing mental health (White Hughto et al., 2015) to ultimately prevent TNB people from accessing desired jobs or careers.

Next, we review the processes through which TNB people became stigmatized and discriminated against in employment contexts, and how they understood these processes to impact their well-being and careers. Then, we discuss strategies and resources (or lack thereof) participants drew upon in attempts to avoid and resist stigmatization. Finally, we review positive workplace experiences to further inform efforts to diminish workplace inequities and improve employment outcomes for TNB people.

Enacted Stigma

Hiring. Stigmatization and discrimination were often explicit and triggered when one's gender status disrupted routine processes that take place during employee hiring and onboarding, or other aspects of workflow organized by binary gender categories. For example, one participant (21, African American/Latinx, transmasculine nonbinary person) was offered a position by a corporate employer. After accepting the job and filling out onboarding paperwork, he¹ shared:

I told them that I was trans, because my paperwork wasn't up to date at the time... They saw my paper and said, "Let me give you a female uniform." I said, "Oh, no. I identify as a male. So you have to give me a male uniform." Then they started telling me how if everybody wanted to wear a male uniform, all the women, then that would be... they just said a lot of crazy, transphobic stuff. Then they said, "OK, we're going to figure it out. We'll call you." They didn't call me, and I kept calling them. They said, "OK, we'll put you on the schedule next week..." But then they never put me on the schedule.

Having been officially hired, this participant persistently called and asked to be scheduled for shifts. Eventually, management told him they did not have

“space for you here,” and referred him to another location. He continued: “I went to the [other] location... I told them about the uniform again—how I identify as trans. This person says, ‘Oh, I don’t know if that will work out for you because I don’t know if you fit in the marketing...this is a Spanish brand. You know, Spanish people are ignorant...’ in other words, he said, ‘I can’t hire you for being trans.’” In this participant’s case, multiple employees enacted transphobia against him: the person who assigns uniforms, and two managers at two locations—the latter of which relies on a racist trope (“Spanish people are ignorant”) to justify ending the new hire’s tenure before it has begun.²

Participants’ experiences illuminate the way seemingly neutral, everyday aspects of onboarding, structured by hegemonic gender categories (Paine, 2018; White Hughto et al., 2015), such as the reviewal of documents (e.g., passports) and assignment of uniforms, make TNB hires vulnerable to stigmatization that enables social closure as would-be employers and managers judge participants claims to organizational resources (e.g., jobs) as illegitimate (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). As another participant (24, Latinx, trans man) shared, “So when I went to the new job, I gave them my social and everything. And the guy’s saying that it’s coming up as something else... And I got laid off two days later.” Differences in names and gender markers between application materials and the government-issued IDs or background checks that interviewees and new hires are required to share or submit to presented opportunities for employers to discriminate against TNB people. This also allowed employers to avoid disclosing (or perhaps even consciously considering; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019) the gendered basis of discrimination, instead attributing decisions to “fit” or “discrepancies” (Nichols et al., 2023; Rivera, 2016).

Beyond overt comments about mismatching names or gender markers, participants shared how they identified subtler instances of stigmatization from potential or present employers, for example: interviewers’ noticeable discomfort during interviews for positions participants were not offered (despite qualifications). As one (21, White, trans woman) shared:

I would say that discrimination, at least in hiring, definitely still happens, even though it’s illegal and even though it’s not always explicit. The times that I do have to tell the hiring manager that I’m trans, sometimes it’s okay, but sometimes I just see it in their eyes, and I hear it in their reactions, and it’s like, even if they say, “Well we’re really open here,” I can tell that my application is going to the bottom of the pile.

Another participant (25, Black, trans man) similarly described recognizing enacted stigma unfolding during interviews: “A lot of jobs say there’s no

judgment, they say, ‘We have all these protocols,’ they say they can’t *not* give me the job because of discrimination. Things like that. But in the back of our heads, we can feel people’s energy. They might not physically—they might not show you it’s discrimination right then and there, but... I sense how they felt.” These narratives illustrate how participants recognize interactional cues indicating interviewers’ negative reactions to learning that an interviewee is TNB—a moment trans studies scholars call a disruption to the imagined reality where only cisgender people exist (Sumerau et al., 2016)—after which employers stigmatize TNB people in a variety of ways (Mathers, 2017; Paine, 2018; Poteat et al., 2013), including disengagement (e.g., no longer making eye contact or small talk [Paine, 2018]). According to minority stress models, in addition to impacting employment opportunities, these explicit and implicit forms of enacted stigma should also be understood as stressors that erode well-being and beget additional stressors, including anticipatory stigma and identity concealment (Bockting et al., 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

On the job. Once employed, TNB often described navigating ongoing confusion, misgendering, and other forms of gender modality-based stigmatization from coworkers and clients. As one (22, Middle Eastern, trans man) shared:

One of the managers, she saw the [trans-related] tattoo I have... and she knew what it was. She asked me if I was trans. And I told her yeah, I was. And the way I kind of came out [as trans] to my job was because, she kept slipping up and calling me she. It was aggravating because... when she met me, I identified as male. At that point my ID and everything said male. I had my new legal name on it. I had facial hair. I just didn’t understand how she kept calling me a female.

Such ongoing comments and use of the wrong pronouns, regardless of corrections, were common and cumulative stressors for participants. Participants also relayed experiences of being fired after expressing intent to transition or beginning to transition on the job. As one (19, African American, woman) shared: “I actually lost a job because of that. I was working for [fast food corporation]. It was before I transitioned. And the last week before I got fired, and I didn’t do anything, I was doing a perfect job. I told the guy, my manager, I think I’m going to transition. I’m unhappy about my life right now. And he said, ‘Oh, OK. Great.’ Next week, I was fired.” This and other participants’ narratives highlight social and medical transition as a period of increased vulnerability to stigmatization—material repercussions of “coming out” on the job.

In addition to stigmatizing interpersonal interactions, participants were often barred from access to structural forms of affirmation, including bathrooms. As one (25, White, genderqueer person) said:

Guys were complaining when I was in the men's room. I had one guy get so upset that he turned to me to yell—he was still peeing all over his shoes while being angry at me—it was a very surreal experience. So [my employers] didn't want to deal with that any more... it was "Here's the key [to a single stall bathroom] so that you don't keep having [problems]" but it was on the other side of the building... certainly inconvenient, and the men's bathroom was right outside of [my] office. If I felt particularly confident and didn't notice anyone going in I would risk it, but it never felt comfortable, and I always expected backlash, which usually happened.

This narrative exemplifies a pattern wherein participants: 1) faced stigmatization; 2) make claims to their right to what Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt call "dignity and respect" (page 183, 2019) at work, but can also be understood as access to basic structural needs (a bathroom); and 3) employer responses treated TNB employees—not discriminatory environments or coworkers—as the problem to solved, in this case by physically relegating the employee to a bathroom on the margins of their work environment.

Mental health consequences. Experiences of enacted stigma were described as stressful, traumatizing, anxiety provoking, and exacerbating mental health concerns for participants. This same participant (25, White, genderqueer person) described another experience at a different workplace wherein a coworker repeatedly misgendered him. After his coworker expressed surprise at his pronouns (he, his, and him), "he went to disrespecting me very quickly. He would say 'she' to my clients... this got to a point where I heard he had literally said I hadn't earned my pronouns because I looked too much like a girl." The cumulative stress contributed to a mental health crisis, he continued:

I'm someone who has mental health concerns, and under the pressure of this happening at work I had become acutely suicidal. I [recently] checked myself into [a psychiatric care facility] and ended up in their inpatient for about two weeks. Other things contributed to this, but the majority was gender identity being disrespected at [work]. My doctors want to put me on short term disability because they think going back, I'll just hit the same

situation... So now I am currently applying for short-term disability instead of doing my job... and that's terrifying, and it comes down to gender at the workplace.

His narrative illuminates the process through which gender modality-based stigmatization disrupts TNB people's work experiences, compounds mental health concerns, and in turn, limits employment opportunities.

In sum, routine hiring processes and work environments structured by dominant binary gender ideologies make TNB people vulnerable to explicit and implicit forms of stigmatization, which enables social closure and functions to delegitimize TNB people's claims to jobs and respect at work. This phenomenon should also be understood as a form of distal, enacted minority stress that can lead to exclusion from the workforce, undermine health and well-being, and engender another form of minority stress: the anticipation of future stigmatization.

Anticipated Stigma

Participants described strategies for avoiding stigmatization from HR employees, supervisors, and colleagues during interview processes and at work. Some reported disclosing their gender modality during interviews to prevent intentional or unintentional stigmatization based on discrepancies recorded on required documents like passports, IDs, or school records. Others avoided sharing their gender modality with hiring committees and coworkers to protect their jobs or avoid mistreatment. In some cases, participants changed career paths or exited the workforce to avoid stigmatization. All options, however, presented additional challenges. To mitigate anticipated stigma and avoid seeming like "too much trouble," TNB people considered and worked to leverage what intrapersonal and organizational resources were available to them in relation to: 1) their gender embodiment, expression and thus ability to keep their gender modality private; 2) whether a workplace was known to support LGBTQ + people (e.g., a social justice-oriented non-profit, or LGBTQ + healthcare organization); and 3) access to affirming managers and work environments.

Gender (non)conformity. Participants who described themselves as capable of "passing" or "going stealth"—e.g., trans men with gender embodiments and presentations that conform with dominant expectations for men, and who are assumed to be cisgender men by cisgender colleagues and supervisors—often chose not to share their gender modality to avoid stigmatizing interactions and their consequences. As one participant (24, Latinx, trans man) shared:

“I’m not going to cause that much attention. Honestly, I’m just trying to be stealth, like stealth mode. I’m just trying to go in there, get a paycheck, do my job, get the fuck out. You know? I don’t want any problems.” These participants typically perceived themselves as more fortunate than their peers who did not have this option (including people with gender nonconforming embodiments and/or who are nonbinary), understanding conformity to grant access to greater opportunity and protect against harassment on the job. As one (24, Dominican, trans man) said:

I’m very lucky that I was young when I came out. By the time I was old enough to work, I was already living in my gender identity. So I’ve sort of never had to experience what it’s been like working as a woman—a lot of the time I’m not out as trans, and I see that difference. And I know that I’m very lucky in that it generally doesn’t come up that I’m trans, which makes me a lot luckier than, say, my friend who’s visibly trans as a waitress and someone looks at her and—there’s a dispute that’s going to happen.

Although this strategy was perceived to increase access to employment, including within TNB-hostile workplaces, going “stealth” introduced anticipatory stress about whether one’s status would be “found out”—and to what consequence. Such stress was related to gender embodiment and conformity. As this same participant explained:

[My] worst experience was when I was working at [corporation]... I didn’t disclose my being trans, but I was really nervous about them finding out. I was early on in transition then and I hadn’t had chest surgery. I remember one of the coworkers, [the owner’s son] that worked there... walked up to me to say hi and just slapped me on the chest. I was like—is this a thing straight guys do to each other? And it made me feel really nervous because I had one person do that to me before in another situation, and after they said: “What the fuck is on your chest?” and led to me being outed. So I was very worried that would happen again with this guy, which I didn’t even know how to address because it was a very non-accepting environment.

In this case, the participant anticipated hostility toward TNB people from his coworkers because they previously harassed him for being a gay man. His experience exemplifies one form of minority stress, identity concealment, that begets further stress—not from internalized stigma, but anticipation of threats in the work environment.

Fewer strategies for stigma avoidance were available to “visibly” TNB participants—whose gender embodiment and/or expression did not

conform with dominant gender norms—and those whose names and genders were not affirmed by legal documents. As one (21, White, trans man) put it: “If you’re not super-binary or you don’t pass, they’ll look at you as sort of *too much trouble* because I think their perception is—and this is maybe based on nothing, but this is what I’ve observed—that you are going to come in and be wanting to change things” (emphasis added). Other participants confirmed that not only were gender nonconforming people unable to “blend in,” many employers also regarded them as suspect. As a result, participants were forced to find ways to avoid being seen as “trouble”—which could leave them jobless—while also needing to ask for certain protections (e.g., from coworker harassment).

Participants further noted the time, energy, and financial burden of achieving a gender conforming presentation for interviews, particularly for gender nonconforming participants, those transitioning, and trans women. As one participant (23, White, trans woman) explained:

I would say people are more forgiving when you’re not trans, or when you pass. I noticed a change directly proportional to when I was able to pass, and passing is really problematic. But when I was able to pass, people took me seriously on interviews. And other than that, if my hair wasn’t right, or if it was raining or something, there’s very little sympathy... People don’t know what it’s like to be a trans woman and present a certain way. A lot of times, we don’t have the same income... if you’re starting your transition, you don’t have money to take a car to the interview, so you don’t mess up your hair... we’re oftentimes just sweating it out in the subway like regular people. But I feel like we’re treated with stricter criteria. There’s less room to mess up. And that alienates a lot of the beginning young trans population that are trying to join the workforce. There are so many barriers. They don’t have the make-up. They don’t have the passability.

Her perspective and experience highlight how—although barriers exist for TNB people across the gender spectrum—one’s position shapes vulnerability to intersecting structures of oppression (Bowleg et al., 2003; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Hirsh & Cha, 2008 Köllen, 2014; Levitt et al., 2016), in this case, dominant constructs of femininity in U.S. society and the intersection of cissexism and sexism place trans women under heightened scrutiny and expectation to achieve gender conformity in the workplace (Connell, 1987, 2012; Connell, 2010; De Vries, 2012; Yavorsky, 2016). She emphasizes the need to pass as “problematic”—presenting a claim to workplace accommodation and rejecting the expectation of trans people to comport themselves to assuage coworkers and supervisors in order for their claims

to workplace resources (e.g., jobs) to be deemed legitimate. She stresses that economic resources are needed to achieve a level of gender conformity understood to protect against stigma and discrimination in hiring processes for trans women in particular. Participants of all genders noted that trans women often face the highest burden to “pass” or conform to avoid stigmatization at work.

Of note, one’s ability to leverage the resources associated with gender conformity to avoid stigmatization was not static, as participants’ gender expressions and embodiments changed over time; participants who were assumed to be cisgender by others at the time of interview had typically experienced periods of embodied nonconformity in the past and shared how their stigma avoidance strategies evolved along with the perceptions of others. Some participants undergoing embodied changes (e.g., resulting from medical transition) chose to exit the workforce for a year or longer until their gender expressions would lead future colleagues to perceive them as cisgender. After the participant (21, African American/Latinx, transmasculine nonbinary person) who was never scheduled because he did not “fit” the company brand explained:

I just felt bad after that. I got traumatized. For a whole year, I didn’t work. I would get interviews. And I wouldn’t show up, because I was scared to show up because I didn’t want this to happen again. And plus, I don’t know what it can escalate to. If I go to somebody else, and what if somebody gets—it could get dangerous... And so now that I’ve transitioned, I’m cis-assumed. People see me and think I’m cis. So they say transphobic stuff around me. I have to tell them why that’s not OK and challenge their perspective a little bit. But yeah. Sometimes, you still deal with stuff.

Exiting the workforce can be understood as an example of what RIT calls a “silenced claim”—when workers do not make claims to workplace resources (like jobs) when they anticipate they will be rejected “or worse yet, will be abused” (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019, p. 164)—but here, claims are silenced specifically to avoid interactional stigmatization at work and the mental health consequences. His experience also highlights how stigma avoidance and resistance strategies shift in relation to gender trajectories—and how, although becoming gender conforming may protect TNB people from being fired, it does not protect against exposure to transphobia at work.

Other participants described suppressing their gender expressions to secure work. As one (27, Puerto Rican, trans woman) shared: “I put on an act. I wanted the job, and I played the role that he wanted me to play. So I conformed. Yes, I did. And once I got the job, then I started becoming me.

I started expressing myself.” Another participant (22, White, nonbinary person) shared:

I did start presenting more femininely at work because people didn't tip well when they [assumed I was] a butch dyke. I started putting on makeup and wearing women's pants and stuff for a little bit because people tipped better there... At the time, my voice was still super high, I wasn't on any hormones, binding [my chest] was really difficult, so I wasn't being read as a dude... I think that it was the fact that I was gender nonconforming. And then when I presented as a feminine person it matched up with what they thought biologically I should be and I wasn't challenging anything. I don't think they thought, “Oh, boy—less tip. Oh, girl—more tip.” I think it was closer to, “Oh, queer—less tip.”

This narrative underlines the overlapping layers of perceived stigmatization and the salience of embodied gender nonconformity, and how certain occupations (e.g., tip-based jobs) can increase one's vulnerability to homophobia or transphobia (with consequences for income). Other participants delayed beginning transitions while working in unsupportive environments.

Strategies that required gender nonconforming and nonbinary participants to stray from their preferred gender expression and conceal their identities, however, were understood to diminish mental health. Many participants expressed high levels of fear, PTSD, and anxiety about having to navigate finding work and experiencing transphobia on the job that became barriers to seeking or staying in a job. As one participant (26, Black, genderqueer person) shared, “It caused a lot of anxiety and stress on me looking for jobs... I'm going to have to deal with being called this if I want money to save up for what I want in order to feel more comfortable with myself,” referencing the catch twenty-two of needing money to pay for gender affirming care to achieve well-being and avoid transphobia yet having to endure transphobia at work to make money.

Limiting career options. Participants also discussed their or their friends' choices to seek lower-paying positions in more supportive environments, or contract work where they would not have to spend too much time with the same coworkers. As one (24, Dominican, trans man) shared about his choice to go into construction, despite other career aspirations: “I didn't stay with the same company. I didn't have to deal with people like actually seeing me transition. Because I switch jobs like every three to four months, you know what I'm saying. Because jobs don't last long. In construction, your first day on the job, you're working yourself out of a job. You

understand? So this is why I wanted to get into construction.” Amidst transitions, participants commonly reported leaving jobs or seeking new positions that could be affirming. As one shared (19, White, genderqueer person) about a friend who transitioned while working a corporate job:

People continued to use her dead name and male pronouns. And there was a lot of harassment to the point where she left her job, started working at [a large food service company] instead, and is earning less than half and is happier at this job because she’s not facing that discrimination and harassment that was going on at the previous job. Her boss actually got her a tag with the correct pronouns on it, and so she’s working in a much more inclusive environment now.

This relayed story, wherein stigmatization led a trans woman to give up a high paying position in a more prestigious industry to access workplace affirmation—suggests the application of alternative metrics and logic to determine a “good” job (Valentino, 2021) and the key role stigma avoidance plays in TNB people’s evaluation of job prospects and employment decisions, with consequences for earnings and mismatched- or under-employment (i.e., being overqualified for a position; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011).

Participants also commonly discussed putting aside career aspirations to find work at LGBTQ-specific or other social justice-oriented not-for-profit organizations known to have TNB-competent staff and affirming environments. LGBTQ+ or “queer” organizations, such as LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations and LGBTQ+ healthcare organizations wherein large numbers of workers are LGBTQ+ (Ward, 2008; Williams & Giuffre, 2011), were sought-after workplaces. In interviews with such potential employers, participants commonly felt positive about sharing their gender identity and TNB status. As one (23, African American, trans woman) participant shared:

To be honest, I aim to work only in queer-centered spaces. I don’t like dealing with society at large and I don’t feel like I have to explain my identity. I feel like it helps to work with people who have a shared identity; it makes my day much smoother. I really don’t want to be bothered, because there’s always someone curious, and it could either go one of two ways. Either they’ll be curious and respectful, or they’ll be curious and then hostile. You just get really tired of explaining... if it’s not work-related, I don’t want to have to deal with it in my social life, or at work.

Her emphasis on how exhaustion from navigating stigmatization led her to constrain job-seeking to LGBTQ+ organizations illustrates the broader impacts of discrimination and minority stress on TNB people's well-being and career choices, as well as the importance of ascertaining local organizational cultures (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019) as a stigma avoidance strategy. Another participant (21, Multiracial, trans and nonbinary person) shared how they switched focus to LGBTQ+ social justice work in part to avoid anticipated stigmatization in the educational sector:

I think it pushed me more towards social justice work because those experiences were generally more positive and I could identify as queer and trans in those cover letters, and the job postings were specifically looking for queer and trans people. It made me feel more comfortable in those environments, which is unfortunate, because I'm still interested in education and doing that type of work doesn't feel as accessible, especially because when you're working with kids, a lot of adults don't want trans people [working with kids].

And another participant (27, Puerto Rican, trans woman) shared, after not being hired by a typical (non-LGBTQ+) organization:

I don't like rejection. It hurts so much, that's why I don't apply or look for jobs that I know I feel I might get rejected from. I try to stay away from retail and supermarkets. I try to stick to [LGBTQ+] nonprofit and advocacy because that's my community. And I feel like that's where I feel most needed, I feel most accepted. I don't feel accepted out in the real world. I really don't.

Together, these and other participant narratives show how the hyper-localized cultures of LGBTQ+ workplaces offered community, purpose, and normalization and affirmation of trans and nonbinary identities—and yet, participants were largely driven to these organizations to avoid stigmatization prevalent in typical workplaces.

At the same time, LGBTQ+ workplaces presented other forms of stigmatization for some participants. Some participants sensed that LGBTQ+ organizations felt the need to hire TNB people because of their organizational missions but did not always value TNB people once hired or ensure a supportive work environment. Participants noted that LGBTQ+ workplaces are often led by White LGBQ+cisgender people, and some Black, African American, and Latinx participants did not see themselves reflected in LGBTQ+ organizational cultures. One participant (23, African American, trans woman) explained how trans people of color become tokenized—in

this case, used to demonstrate an organization is racially and gender diverse, without giving racial and gender minorities respect or power—in LGBTQ+ organizations. She shared: “I’ll always observe the leadership cultures. They usually look the same. They’re very White, cis gay... and maybe there are a few token people of color (laughs). Just there for the racial diversity... I think a lot of people seem to think that queer people can’t be transphobic, and no, it’s very possible.” She emphasizes that although one may access gender affirmation at LGBTQ+ employment contexts, TNB people—especially TNB people of color—typically do not see people who shared their positionalities in relation to intersecting structures of oppression occupying positions of power, and often reported intersectional marginalization and little chance for career growth.

In sum, TNB participants selected into and out of jobs, occupations, and organizations to avoid stigma and attempt to mitigate the toll of cumulative minority stress, prioritizing stigma avoidance over job prestige, wages, and preferred career paths. Even LGBTQ+ organizations, however, sometimes fell short of ensuring affirming environments or promising career prospects.

Affirming Experiences: Creating Supportive Environments

Many participants, however, experienced affirmation within LGBTQ+ organizations (where TNB identities were well-understood) and at typical workplaces. Based on positive and negative experiences, participants offered a variety of suggestions for employers wishing to create or maintain supportive workplace environments. As one (25, White, genderqueer trans man) shared: “My one partner is an AFAB [assigned female at birth] nonbinary person, and they work at [Corporation] and it was very easy for them. [Corporation] is very supportive of that, and they were able to change their name in the system. [Corporation] has always had trans-inclusive benefits and because of that, a lot of trans people end up working there, so people are fairly used to that.” Like LGBTQ+ organizations, typical workplaces that create affirming cultures for TNB people became known and sought-after employers within TNB networks. Respecting TNB people’s gender, names and pronouns in workforce systems and interactions, and consistently hiring TNB people (such that co-workers and clients are “used to that”) was understood as foundational to creating a supportive environment. To destigmatize TNB gender modalities, participants recommended organizations implement the practice of regularly asking, sharing, respecting and “normalizing” all employees’ gender pronouns (e.g., within email signatures; using pronoun buttons). Other key forms of support included ensuring access to gender-inclusive bathrooms, uniforms and dress codes, understanding and

supporting that some TNB people may need periods of medical leave to receive gender-affirming surgeries, ensuring that health benefits cover gender-affirming care, and allowing applicants to provide references from people other than prior employers (to avoid forced disclosure).

Overwhelmingly, participants also suggested employers offer regular, mandatory trainings about how to be respectful of TNB colleagues and clients—e.g., use correct names and pronouns, do not ask inappropriate or stigmatizing questions, treat them with the same respect offered to others—and the consequences for transphobic behavior, as well as training for managers and human resource officials on how to enforce antidiscrimination policies. In terms of the severity of consequences for enacted stigma from colleagues, participants generally differentiated actions understood as “uninformed” from those understood as malicious and intentional. To address the former, as one (22, Multiracial, trans man) participant expressed, “I know a lot of jobs [have] mandatory trainings, like quarterly trainings or whatever, and I think that gender and sexuality needs to be included in that.” As another (19, Multiracial, nonbinary) person shared, “Not just a one-off thing...[but] conversations about gender, literally monthly, 30 min, you know... That could totally happen.” Widespread knowledge about and adherence to processes for managing transphobic harassment was understood as necessary to create a supportive workplace. Altogether, participants expressed the importance of multiple levels of change to ensure that antidiscrimination policies were effectively communicated to staff and that supervisors were equipped with the knowledge and tools they needed to address stigmatization of TNB people in the workplace.

Managerial support. Subsequently, interactional managerial support—wherein managers explicitly express support for a TNB employee, protect their privacy, and consistently respond to any transphobic hostility or disrespect in the workplace—was a core component of perceived supportive workplaces. One (25, White, nonbinary) participant shared:

I’ve gotten to a point where I realized I can only work somewhere where at the very least my supervisor respects me. I understand that transness is new to a lot of people. Not every coworker is going to accept that, just like not every coworker’s going to like each other. I’m OK with that, but I need to at least know my supervisor or the person above them supports me, respects me, so that if I don’t feel comfortable to [respond] to somebody directly, I can at the very least go to [my supervisor] and say, “Look, I need—we need to do something about this.” ...I don’t think I could stay somewhere anymore where the

person above me didn't respect my identity. I think my response would just be to find another job.

This participant's prior experiences led them to the conclusion that—particularly given the dearth of supportive workplace environments—supportive supervisors are key to managing stigmatization at work. Supportive responses noted by participants included managers speaking to employees or clients that stigmatized, misgendered, or harassed TNB employees, and if mistreatment continued, terminating or removing the offending employee or client—akin to what is expected to ensure other protected minority employees' right to a safe workplace environment.

Managerial support was viewed as especially important because in non-affirming environments, TNB people did not perceive Human Resources or workplace policies alone to provide recourse against mistreatment. As one (21, Multiracial, nonbinary) person explained:

I would say for almost, if not every, incident I had relating to transphobia on the job, I would always take the proper steps to report it and go through the right channels, and nothing was ever done about anything. And people would always be like, "Oh, why didn't you go to Title IX?" I did go to Title IX. "Why didn't you see this supervisor?" I did see that supervisor. "Why didn't you talk to this office?" I did talk to that office. So even when I did everything according to the books, there were no actual consequences for the people who were perpetuating transphobia.

As this quote illustrates, although antidiscrimination policy was seen as necessary—and participants actively made claims to their right to protections from harassment—managerial actions were framed as more important than written policy given that policy must be upheld by people with authority in the workplace. Insight into whether support could be expected from an employer or supervisor was difficult to ascertain, however, before accepting and starting a job; in the absence of explicit cues from the job ad (e.g., trans and nonbinary people are encouraged to apply), participants often relied on whether interviewers asked their gender pronouns during the interview process as a signal as to whether a workplace had knowledge about TNB identities and experiences. Once on the job, managers asking about pronouns was interpreted as an important, early signal of support. As one (23, Multiracial, trans woman) shared, after explaining that she didn't disclose her TNB status at a new job: "I mean they know, because they've seen me with box braids and all that. And one of the managers asked me, 'What

pronouns would you prefer?" I was like, "She." And I didn't expect that, you know?" She interpreted this as a positive and affirming experience.

Even when receiving early support from managers, however, TNB people who had faced hostility or violence in other workplaces or contexts often found it difficult to believe that they would be safe if their gender modality was known by colleagues and/or clients. One (22, Multiracial, trans man) shared his experience of disclosing his TNB status at an LGBTQ-oriented not-for-profit organization:

One of my mentors actually works [at my job] and she just told me, "Everyone here is accepting, just come out, you'll feel better." It still took me a really long time. I told one of my supervisors before I actually told my boss. She eventually came to me and said, "I know." And, "I'm not going to treat you any different than anyone else... it's safe with me."... It was kind of gradual. Then I think my supervisor sent an email letting everyone know to refer to me as he/him. Because she had asked me, "Are you comfortable with me sharing this?" First I said, "Eh, like I'll do it," and then I said, "No, I need some help." ... everyone's reaction was calm, like, "OK, like how can I support you." It was a very positive experience at work. That wasn't my experience at home so I'm actually thankful for my experience at work because I know like that's not what it is for everyone. I know people who are trans and they don't work so I'm lucky that I was able to maintain my job and be who I am.

Although this participant found this supervisor was true to her word, and he worked in a context wherein people were knowledgeable about TNB people (part of their organizational mission was to support TNB people)—his decision about "coming out" was not easy—evidence of the long shadow cast by previous stigmatization. In typical workplace organizations, participants often reported that even when managers and coworkers wished to promote a supportive environment, they did not know how and lacked structural support to succeed. This participant's narrative exemplifies participants' emphasis on the importance of supporting TNB employees as they navigate decisions, in their own time, about sharing or keeping private their gender modality and identities—even in "ideal" environments—with respect for their past experiences across contexts, given the minority stress sequelae of stigmatization and past experiences of discrimination.

Discussion

Transgender and nonbinary people in the U.S. navigate significant employment and economic inequities as well as high levels of structural and

interpersonal stigma. This study provides rich qualitative insight into the processes through which TNB participants became marginalized in and from the workplace. We advance knowledge of the relational generation of inequality by showing the key roles stigmatization and stigma avoidance play in the enactment of social closure against employees with a stigmatized status. Findings further demonstrate how facing stigma at work and engaging in strategies to avoid stigma to maintain or obtain a job are significant minority stressors that likely contribute to poorer health and economic outcomes among TNB people over time. Participants' affirming experiences also highlight the importance of managerial support and affirming environments to improve access to work—and its economic benefits—for TNB people, who face severe economic, social, and political marginalization.

TNB people in our sample overwhelmingly faced stigmatization and discrimination at work, commonly introduced during routine hiring processes or by structural constraints that disadvantage TNB people. Our results underline the work of previous scholarship documenting high levels of workplace marginalization experienced by trans people. We extend understanding of the mechanisms producing this marginalization by mapping moments of disruption evoked by quotidian workplace practices that make TNB people vulnerable to enacted stigma—for example, when TNB people had to ask for uniforms congruent with their gender or explain discrepancies between name and gender markers on identification documents. Such incidents allow hiring managers or employers to dismiss TNB people as “too much trouble,” thus obfuscating bias—or, in line with RIT (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019), allowing it to proliferate with or without the intentionality of in-group actors.

These results advance knowledge of how stigmatization and stigma avoidance (or affirmation) at work operate as fundamental relational processes shaping employment and well-being among TNB people. The participants in our study deployed various intra- and interpersonal strategies to avoid or resist gender modality-based stigmatization and obtain and maintain employment. Stigma avoidance strategies ranged from changing one's gender presentation or concealing or disclosing one's gender, to selecting into professions or forms of organizations known to be less stigmatizing—to leaving the workforce for long periods of time. One's ability to avoid stigma and its consequences for one's mental health and job prospects was shaped by structural and managerial support, workplace type, and one's own gender and gender conformity. In sum, our rich qualitative data provide a detailed view into the implicit and explicit interactional crystallizations of the relational generation of inequality, extending knowledge of the process through which a stigmatized group becomes marginalized.

Conclusion

Our contributions also hold implications for sociologists studying workplace inequity, including gender inequity and TNB people (Connell, 2009; Connell, 2010; Hutchinson et al., 2024; Schilt, 2006, 2011; Schilt & Connell, 2007) by centering focus on how TNB people's experiences avoiding or resisting stigma connects to career choices, with presumed consequences for long-term economic well-being. For example, given that employment gaps are known to negatively impact one's future job prospects in racialized and gendered ways (Pedulla, 2016; 2018; 2020), that TNB participants commonly exited or were forced out of the workforce for short and long periods of time amidst gender transition and as a consequence of—or to avoid—enacted stigma suggests that TNB people are facing compounding employment and economic disadvantages stemming from stigmatization at work. Additionally, based on the findings of studies with other minority groups (Clair et al., 2005; Jones & King, 2014; Stenger & Roulet, 2018), TNB people's attempts to keep private their TNB status to avoid stigma may limit access or ability to leverage informal resources, such as social networks, that bolster career opportunities. That TNB participants noted the importance of workplace composition and managerial support above and beyond the presence of antidiscrimination policies further contributes to debates about discriminatory workplace environments; namely, our findings support the position that neither stand-alone workplace policies nor interventions that fail to limit managerial discretion are likely to substantially improve employment equality (Ferguson, 2015; Hirsh, 2014; Ray, 2019; Roscigno, 2007; Stainback et al., 2011). Together, these findings contribute insight into the processes through which TNB people in particular are not only marginalized from the workforce—but make decisions to resist marginalization—that can help explain current employment and economic inequities among TNB populations (Carpenter et al., 2020; Ciprikis et al., 2020; Conron et al., 2012; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Paine et al., 2024), advance knowledge of mechanisms driving the relational generation of inequality, and point to promising areas for intervention.

The key role stigmatization plays in marginalizing TNB people from their preferred occupations, higher paying jobs, or work altogether also extends knowledge about minority stressors constraining gender minorities' access to health and well-being. Many participants did not feel safe sharing their TNB status at work. To avoid stigmatization, participants chose from a set of options partially constrained by their gender embodiment and expression, the type of workplace, and structural and managerial support. As a result, the strategies they used to avoid anticipated stigma and fear of being "outed" in

employment contexts must be understood as unique TNB minority stressors, the presence or absence of which likely contribute to TNB people's health outcomes (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Rood et al., 2017). Findings demonstrate that participant choices to exit the workforce or limit job searches to LGBTQ-oriented organizations or workplaces known to support TNB people can be understood as *resistance against* stigmatization and suggest that affirming employment environments may contribute to TNB people's ability to weather minority stressors faced across social contexts (Bocking et al., 2013). Therefore, future research on TNB mental health and well-being should also examine the salience of workplace stigma, stigma avoidance and resistance, and affirmation (Brewster et al., 2012; Velez et al., 2013). At the same time, we encourage future researchers investigating economic and employment outcomes of stigmatized groups and groups with concealable stigmatized statuses to examine whether and how negative mental health consequences of enacted stigma and anticipated stigma act as intervening mechanisms. Past work has examined how people stigmatized on the basis of mental illness engage in resistance against stigmatization (Thoits, 2011), however sociological research into employment inequality less often takes up examining stigma avoidance strategies as potential drivers of economic inequities (Link et al., 2014). Research focusing on the reciprocal relationships between mental health and economic stressors—e.g., the mental health impacts of job loss (Grace, 2023)—in particular, should attend to the salience of minority stressors in shaping the mental health and economic trajectories among stigmatized groups.

Study findings point to promising avenues for employment policies, practices, and interventions. Homing in on and addressing interactional moments that introduce vulnerability to discrimination may reduce opportunity for interpersonal biases to influence hiring decisions, such as rejecting applicants based on “fit” (Nichols et al., 2023). Once hired, providing a baseline living wage is necessary to protect TNB employees from the economic consequences of client biases in traditionally tip-based positions (e.g., in food service). Feeling affirmed at work was also described to depend largely on managerial support, key types of which included ensuring: gender identity, names and pronouns are respected by staff and clients in the workplace; access to appropriate bathrooms, including group and single-stall gender-neutral bathrooms; access to uniforms that affirm one's gender; and respect for however one wants to express, share, or keep private their gender modality. Participants overwhelmingly suggested that workplaces implement TNB cultural competency trainings for staff. Trainings that increase employee understanding of the experiences of marginalized minority groups—and that equip employees with interactional behavioral skills necessary to

affirm marginalized coworkers and interrupt discrimination (Kim & Roberson, 2022)—remain key parts of efforts to cultivate positive workplace experiences and opportunities (Onyeador et al., 2021). These could supplement broader organizational-level interventions, such as formalizing recruitment practices, adopting affirmative action approaches, and the presence of formal infrastructure to increase workplace diversity (e.g., a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion [DEI] office) along with organizational DEI goals and accountability structures to reduce inequality at work (Hirsh & Cha, 2008; Onyeador et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study point to additional areas for research. Although our sample was racially and ethnically diverse, further work is necessary to understand how TNB people navigate workplace experiences related to multiple and intersecting axes of oppression, such as racism, cissexism, and classism (Cho et al., 2013; Sumerau & Grollman, 2018), and how these experiences are impacting economic well-being and employment outcomes of Black and Latinx trans women in particular (Carpenter et al., 2022). Prospective research with TNB people is also warranted to establish the impacts of these phenomena on career trajectories and economic outcomes. Likewise, scholars should examine the health-related impacts of workplace minority stress and associated forms of economic marginalization among gender diverse populations over time. Future work should also focus on how different types of jobs, firms, and sectors may shape TNB experiences of stigma and inequality in the workplace—and whether, for example, even in progressive cisgender organizations, tokenization becomes an “inclusion tax,” = similar and different to that borne by Black women working in White organizations (Melaku, 2022). Finally, we spoke with TNB young adults living in New York City, a politically progressive and heavily Democratic city where gender modality-based discrimination has been illegal since 2002 (Office of the Mayor of the City of New York, 2015). As such, it is likely that our findings offer a conservative account of the stigmatization and discrimination faced by TNB in other areas of the United States. Future research is warranted to understand what additional mechanisms may be shaping the experiences of TNB people at later stages of the life course, including those who transition after establishing a career, and in different geopolitical regions, such as states that have recently passed or are seeking to pass legislature constraining the rights of TNB people.

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Notes

1. Pronouns reflect those used by each participant at the time of interview.
2. Of note, although some participants of color reported experiencing racial discrimination in the workplace, gender modality-based enacted stigma was not explicitly described to be racialized. Nonetheless, this and other narratives from participants of color—e.g., a Puerto Rican trans woman who described facing backlash from her employer at a “conservative, white” store after getting hair extensions—suggest they may be facing intersectional stigmatization (Bowleg et al., 2003; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1990; Hirsh & Cha, 2008; Köllen, 2014; Levitt et al., 2016)—in this case, racialized cissexism (Sumerau & Grollman, 2018).

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