Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the workplace experiences and access to career-enhancing opportunities of transgender employees and to apprise organization leaders of opportunities to create an all-inclusive workplace environment.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This phenomenological study used semi-structured interviews with transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in the US. Study participants (n = 12) varied slightly in racial and ethnic identities, the highest level of formal education completed and the industry sector they were employed at the time of interviews.

**Findings** – The data reveals a lingering presence of dominant narrative (cissexism) in US organizations and its adverse impact on workplace experience and access to career-enhancing opportunities of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. The participants’ narratives reveal recommendations for effective organizational practices for a transgender-inclusive workplace.

**Research limitations/implications** – The challenge of recruiting qualified participants from the marginalized group along with the selection criteria of English proficiency and legally adult age resulted in a relatively limited sample (n = 12) nevertheless adequate for the study.

**Practical implications** – Results of this study point at the urgent need to increase visibility and acceptance of the represented population and expand workplace diversity policies to create inclusive, just and equitable organizations for all individuals that will translate into job satisfaction and improved productivity.

**Social implications** – This study contributes to developing a culture of inclusion and prevention of discrimination in the workplace thus ensuring respect, safety and agency for gender minority employees.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to a better understanding of workplace experiences, access to career-enhancing opportunities of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals and best practices for a transgender-inclusive workplace.

**Keywords** Diversity and inclusion, Transgender rights, Transgender employees, Gender identity and expression

**Paper type** Research paper

Introduction

A transgender person is someone whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex assigned at birth (Thanem, 2011). By conservative estimates, transgender adults in the
United States comprise 0.6% of its population, or approximately 1.4 million (Flores et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2019; Jones, 2021). Despite being a sizable minority, transgender persons have been subjected to stigma and discrimination leaving them more likely to be impoverished, unemployed, and suicidal as compared to other population groups (Gates, 2017; James et al., 2016; Steinmetz, 2014; Valfort, 2017). However, in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in their social recognition and visibility in the US and worldwide. Voices of transgender actress Laverne Cox, producer Janet Mock, actor Elliot Page, former Olympian Caitlyn Jenner, model Andreja Pejic added unique dimensions to the popular culture narrative, media and everyday life, thus paving the way for more transgender persons to pursue their authentic self (Beauregard et al., 2018; Kleintop, 2019).

Most recent studies indicate that a growing percentage of Americans, particularly in younger generations, identify themselves as transgender, whether binary or non-binary (Wilson and Meyer, 2021). Specifically, according to a 2020 Gallup poll, 1.8% of Generation Z (born 1997–2002) are describing themselves as transgender, compared to 0.2% of Baby boomers (born 1946–1964) (Jones, 2021). President of the United States Joe Biden spoke to the transgender community during the 2021 Trans Equality Now Awards to reaffirm his commitment to “continue fighting for an America that transgender people, like everyone else, can live in and thrive in and succeed.” (NCTE: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2021). In March 2021, US Senate confirmed the first openly transgender nominee Dr. Rachel Levine, as the nation’s 17th Assistant Secretary for Health (Wamsley, 2021). “We are in a place where more of us are living and pursuing our dreams visibly,” - stated Laverne Cox in “The Transgender Tipping Point” article published by the American news magazine TIME (Steinmetz, 2014).

Yet, despite progress, the 2017 Pew Research report revealed that the American public remains fundamentally divided over gender identity issues and whether it is possible to be a gender different from that assigned at birth, with 54% of those surveyed responding against such possibility. Violence against transgender is on the rise (Human Rights Campaign, 2021). A flurry of legislature has been introduced across the nation limiting transgender youth participation in sports and banning their access to gender-affirming health care, thus moving the debate of transgender rights to the state level. It appears that the increased visibility of transgender individuals and growing public support for their rights is yet to fully overcome the lingering transphobia-caused discrimination in a society that has been largely built on a binary definition of gender (Steinmetz, 2014). As pointed out by transgender actor Elliot Page in the article “I’m fully who I am. Actor Elliot Page and the fight for trans equality” published in the April 2021 issue of TIME, there is a mixture of excitement, fear, and anxiety for the future of the transgender community and trans rights that became a “political football in the culture wars” (Steinmetz, 2021).

Gender identity and expression issues are especially challenging in the workplace, where personal and professional dimensions intersect (Elias et al., 2018). Broadly held cultural beliefs may affect the perception of “worthiness” of “others” and serve as a bias for the exclusion that for a transgender employee may mean inability to authentically express oneself, along with inadequate access to job-related resources or mentorship from supervisors, and missed career-enhancing opportunities, all of which are essential to employees’ job performance, satisfaction, and well-being (Cech and Rothwell, 2020; Sawyer and Thoroughgood, 2017). The stigma and discrimination experienced by transgender employees have been sustained by the lack of transgender-inclusive protective federal legislation and by inconsistent public policies and regulations across states (Sabharwal et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2017). The Equality Act passed on February 25, 2021, by the US House of Representatives in the 117th Congress intends to eradicate this injustice by
prohibiting discrimination based on an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, credit, education, jury service, federally funded programs (including health care), and businesses that serve the public. However, at the time of writing this article, the bill faces an uncertain future in Senate (Congress.gov, 2021).

In the meantime, organizations need to recognize that temporal trends of the US population show growth in its transgender proportion and changes in transgender demographics, and that the workforce reflects the composition of the general population (Meerwijk and Sevelius, 2017). Rather than waiting for the legislative protections for transgender employees or acting retroactively on a case-by-case basis, organizations need to proactively build a transgender-inclusive environment along with the capacity to holistically address complex issues related to gender identity and expression in the workplace (Elias et al., 2018; Jones, 2021; Meerwijk and Sevelius, 2017).

Moreover, to be effective, transgender-inclusive organizational practices and policies ought to be informed by the lived experience of the transgender employees (Elias et al., 2018). However, existing research on the workplace experiences of transgender persons is very limited (Brewster et al., 2014; Brower, 2016; Budge, 2010; Fine, 2017; Glicksman, 2013; Köllen, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2012; Thanem, 2011; Yavorsky, 2016). Additionally, while as mentioned earlier, there is an increasing presence of the transgender voice in the entertainment and media, in the more traditional workplace, it is barely audible (Beauregard et al., 2018).

This empirical research explores the workplace experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming employees, to amplify their voices, identify effective solutions for the most prominent challenges faced by this population, and apprise organization leaders of opportunities to create a transgender-inclusive workplace. In the following sections, we highlight studies relevant to gender identities and expression in the workplace that informed the current research, discuss research methodology and findings, offer suggestions for future research, and outline practical implications for organizations committed to the diversity imperative.

Literature review
Existing scholarship on transgender that informed our study can be organized by the following overarching themes: the plurality of gender identities, transgender workplace experiences and transgender-inclusive practices.

The plurality of gender identities
In recent years, sex and gender categories have become more fluid, and our understanding of gender identity continues to evolve (Elias, 2018). Consequently, most of the transgender-focused publications discuss key terms, variance in gender identity and expression, along with the estimates for the transgender and gender non-conforming population. While there is a multitude of documented occurrences of diverse gender identities throughout human history across cultures (Rosario, 2011), the proportion of those identities in the general population worldwide is not well-known, for a variety of cultural and procedural reasons. For example, in the United States gender identity is not a part of official records, so the attempts to estimate the current size of the transgender or gender non-conforming individuals, as well as trends over time, are based on population surveys and therefore differ depending on the number of participants, their age, and location. Thus, Meerwijk and Sevelius (2017) analysis of 12 surveys conducted between 2007 and 2015 suggests that in the United States about 1 in every 250 adults (approximately 1 million) are transgender, while Schiem and Bauer (2015) approximate that as many as 1 in 200 adults may be transgender,
transsexual or transitioned. Williams Institute estimate that “0.7% of adults between the ages of 18 and 24 identify as transgender [. . .] 0.6% of adults age 25 to 64 and 0.5% of adults age 65 or older identify as transgender” (Herman et al., 2017, p. 3). The most recent Gallup poll conducted in 2020 with a random sample of 15,349 adults estimates that 0.6% of the US population aged 18 and older identify as transgender, and 0.2% as other (e.g. queer, same-gender-loving) (Jones, 2021).

One of the complications for accurate data estimates of the transgender and gender non-conforming population is the diversity within the community and conflated terminology (Meerwijk and Sevelius, 2017; Sawyer and Thoroughgood, 2017). Thus, McFadden’s (2015) review of research dated 1985–2014, points to a noticeable shift from an earlier practice of grouping transgender individuals with LGB individuals to the contemporary practice of distinct attention to transgender individuals. While transgender individuals are commonly perceived as a part of a larger LGBT population, they are fundamentally distinct from the LGB individuals who are defined by their sexual orientation (Cunningham and Pickett, 2018). Transgender individuals are defined by their gender identity and expression, and there may or may not be an intersection between the two groups (Beemyn and Rankin, 2011). Here, gender identity is “a person’s own self-conception of gender”, while “gender expression” involves a person’s “performance and enactment of gender” (Jourian, 2015, p. 15).

Tate et al. (2013) define transgender people as individuals who “have moved across or beyond their birth-assigned category to experience their current gender identity” (p. 267). Davis (2009) describes transgender identities as being inclusive of “all manifestations of crossing gender barriers [. . .] to otherwise transgress conventional gender norms and all others who wish to describe themselves in this way” (p. 111). Thinking about identity in a binary sense, Tate et al. (2013) define the identity that stands in the opposite position to transgender as “cisgender”. Cisgender individuals “have a current gender identity that is the same label as their birth-assigned category” (Tate et al., 2013, p. 767). Fundamentally, gender identity and a gender expression of cisgender individuals align with their assigned-at-birth sex and cultural/societal expectations, while identities/gender expression of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals vary from their assigned-at-birth sex and that causes misalignment with cultural and societal expectations. Cissexism is a position rooted in the belief that gender is binary and based on one’s sex at birth (Bilodeau, 2009).

Scientific terminology evolves along with our understanding of gender identity (Brower, 2016; Jourian, 2015). Recently, the terms “gender variance” (Rosario, 2011) and “gender expansive” (Gender Spectrum and Human Rights Campaign, 2014) have emerged in reference to individuals with non-cisgender identities. Table 1 lists definitions that are presently commonly accepted by scholars.

Understanding a phenomenon implies an ability to consistently measure and predict it. New conceptions of sex and gender identity serve as a foundation for the public sector and business organizations to craft policy and make decisions to protect the rights of transgender and gender non-conforming employees. As pointed out by Meerwijk and Sevelius (2017), current secular trends in society create a somewhat favorable environment for transgender individuals that may lead to a more accurate population estimate in the future. However, data is only one part of the equation. To truly effect informed anti-discrimination and inclusion efforts, the data needs to be accompanied by the narratives of daily experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. Then it will ensure equal standing for this marginalized population at every level of American society.
Transgender workplace experiences

Several studies focus on workplace-related adversity experienced by transgender employees and advocate for effective organizational inclusion policies and practices. Thus, Bailey (2014) states that “transgender individuals face some of the harshest and most far-reaching employment discrimination of any group of Americans,” (p. 209). Fassinger et al. (2010) suggest that in the workplace, gender minorities may experience social conditions impeding their advancement toward leadership positions. Kleintop (2019) points at the challenges transgender persons experience when transitioning at work that may include misgendering, microaggressions, gender policing (ridicule, deadnaming, etc.), anxiety, and passive resistance. Budge et al. (2010) refer to their unattainable careers, along with perceived, potential, and actual occupational barriers at work, while Davis (2009) suggests: “transgender employees often feel that the workplace is not a safe and welcoming place for them” (p.109). Shultz (2018) focuses on experiences of transgender employees in an academic environment that reveal instances of interpersonal hostility and microaggression, along with a lack of policies addressing their specific needs and barriers to advancement. The author points out that while discomfort may offer a “nudge” for individual growth, the survival mode (discomfort taken to the extreme) negatively affects growth, thus the all-inclusive and nourishing workplace is extremely important for employees’ development and wellbeing (Shultz, 2018).

More revealing data comes from national surveys. Thus, in 2011, the US National Center for Transgender Equality surveyed 6,450 respondents about the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming Americans in several areas, including “Employment Discrimination and Economic Insecurity”, with staggering results (Grant et al., 2011). Survey respondents “experienced unemployment at twice the rate of the general population at the time of the survey, with rates for people of color up to four times the national unemployment rate” (p. 3); 90% of respondents reported experiencing workplace, “harassment, mistreatment, or discrimination,” 47% reported experiencing, “adverse job outcomes,” including “being fired, not hired or denied a promotion because of being

Table 1. Common definitions present in scholarly literature
transgender or gender non-conforming,” and 71% reported that they tried to “avoid discrimination by hiding their gender or gender transition” (Grant et al., 2011, p. 3).

According to the 2015 US Transgender Survey, 27% of those who had held a job in the past year reported being fired, denied a promotion, or being passed over for a position because of their gender identity or expression, and 15% reported experiencing verbal harassment, physical violence, or sexual assault at work. Additionally, 23% reported other types of mistreatments, such as being forced to use a bathroom that did not align with their gender identity, required to present as the wrong gender to keep their job, and having a boss or coworker share private information about their transgender status without permission. Of those respondents who were employed, over half shared that they had to hide their identity and nearly half did not ask their employer to use their personal pronouns. 12% of respondents experience violence when accessing the restroom, 39% experienced psychological distress, and 40% had attempted suicide at some point in their life (James et al., 2016, p. 3). Both the 2011 survey and the 2015 study suggest that transgender people, and those perceived to be transgender, continue to be a subject of workplace discrimination.

The most recent 2019 US-based survey conducted by a Public Religion Research Institute, a non-profit, nonpartisan independent research organization, reveals a growing awareness of the general public about the stigma that transgender people face in their communities. Thus, 79% of survey respondents acknowledged that stigma exists, and 38% of those believe there is a lot of it. The survey also showed increasing support for transgender rights: 62% of respondents reported that they have become more supportive as compared to their views 5 years before that survey (Jones et al., 2019). Broad support is demonstrated on a variety of issues, such as transgender serving in the military, child adoption and health care.

Behind every survey number, there is a very powerful personal narrative that needs to be “discovered” through empirical research and brought to light and to the attention of the general public/policymakers to ensure that support expressed by them in a survey transforms into inclusion efforts.

Transgender-Inclusive practices

Studies on transgender-inclusive practices offer perspectives on the legal processes and organizational best practices, yet empirical research on this topic is limited (Collins et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2018; Sawyer and Thoroughgood, 2017). Thus, Collins et al. (2015) suggest that the continued lack of exploration relating specifically to transgender persons in Human Resource Development scholarship reinforces their “marginalization and exclusion” (p. 206). They further suggest that the lack of understanding of the lives and identities of transgender persons, lack of inclusion in employment and non-discrimination law, social “misunderstanding and disrespect” of transgender identities, wage inequality and stunted career growth may magnify this marginalization.

A 2015 US federally funded study by the D.C. Office of Human Rights examined the potential pervasiveness of bias against transgender individuals in external hiring practices across industry sectors. In the study, researchers submitted job applications with mock applicant information that had indicators that signaled that they might be transgender and candidates with indicators that signaled that they might be cisgender. In some instances, the mock candidates’ qualifications were engineered to appear a superior fit for the position applied. Of the companies involved in the study, 48% seemed to give preference and 33% offered interviews to the less qualified cisgender appearing applicants (District of Columbia Office of Human Rights, 2015). This landmark study points at a potential bias in hiring
practices, but it does not address the impact of transgender status or perception on employees already employed.

Many scholars have offered policy recommendations to improve inclusivity for transgender and gender non-conforming workers. Thus, Elias et al. (2018) examine transgender policies in several agencies of the federal government and conclude that organizations need to create and implement detailed, clear, flexible transition policies that support transgender employees’ transition process and are guided by employees’ needs. Mennicke and Cutler-Seeber (2016) explored US federal and state laws that prevent workplace discrimination and increase employees’ inclusion. The authors highlight opportunities for inclusion of transgender employees at every stage (pre, during, and post) of the transition process, such as gender identity and expression inclusive non-discrimination policies, health-care plans, and diversity training for employees. Brewster et al. (2014) highlight strategies to develop an inclusive workplace culture, such as gender-sensitive practices to decrease the negativity associated with gender transitions, “gender-neutral, single-stall” bathroom facilities, and training focused on awareness and sensitivity (p. 167). At the same time, Murib (2020) argues that the common solution of introducing a unisex bathroom alongside binary gender dedicated ones only emphasizes “otherness”. Instead, bathroom access should be approached through an architectural lens rather than a gender one, by converting gendered into all-access public facilities. Other supportive measures could include nondiscrimination policies, inclusive application process (e.g. open-ended gender space on applications), transgender-inclusive health care, education around gender identity, enforcement of name and/or pronouns changes, development of social networks and mentorship (Mennicke and Cutler-Seeber, 2016).

Shultz (2018) offers suggestions for academic institutions including a holistic review (with equal input of transgender stakeholders among all) of institutional policies and their implementation such as equitable hiring and promotion practices, and nonbinary physical space. Sawyer and Thoroughgood (2017) suggest that in the absence of explicit transgender-inclusive legislative protection, workplace issues related to gender identity and expression could be interpreted through the guidelines of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as gender discrimination or sex discrimination (Title VII). Best organizational practices suggested by the authors include proximal policies and company culture combating discrimination, diversity training that includes information on and the distinction between gender identities/expression and sexual orientation, gender-neutral bathrooms, gender-neutral dress codes, and health-care benefits for transitioning employees. Moreover, the outlined practices should be implemented as a cross-functional organizational effort, so they are woven into the organizational environment and culture.

Diversity and inclusion efforts focused on transgender and gender non-conforming persons vary in their effectiveness. Hur (2020) builds upon the inclusion quotient index, developed by the US Office of Personnel Management, to introduce a multidimensional construct comprised of the following inclusion practices: fairness, openness, cooperation, support and empowerment. Research findings suggest that cooperation, support, and empowerment practices positively affected job satisfaction, while fairness and openness did not. At the same time fairness, cooperation and empowerment showed a strong positive correlation with employees’ commitment while openness and support less so. That means that organizations that aspire to build an inclusive work environment, need to incorporate those practices (especially empowerment that appears to be the most effective) into the organizational culture and to ensure those are reflected in the leadership practices (Hur, 2020). At the same time, effective inclusion practices of one organization may not achieve the
same results in another. To be effective they must be meaningfully tailored to a specific organizational structure and culture.

As demonstrated by the reviewed literature, there is growing awareness about discrimination and marginalization of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in American society, and the bulk of information comes from surveys conducted by various agencies. The inclusion and anti-discrimination efforts are stifled by the inaccurate estimates of the size of the target population, while the powerful narrative of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals is largely missing due to the scarcity of empirical research on the topic. This study continues the exploration and discourse related to transgender individuals’ experiences of marginalization in the American workplace to provide a meaningful context to non-discrimination and inclusion efforts.

Methodology

A phenomenological research approach was selected to capture and extract the essence of the individual experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in the workplace. Phenomenological research is focused on arriving at the common meaning (grasping the nature) of a phenomenon through analyzing the lived experiences of that phenomenon by several individuals (Creswell, 2013). The study was proposed, constructed and executed in the spirit of transformative worldview theory: holding firmly to an assertion that if cissexism is present in the workplace, it suggests the presence of oppression, and that the information revealed in the analysis of collected data will offer a call for action, providing, “a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve their lives” (Creswell, 2013, p. 10). With the overall objective to explore the workplace experiences of adults who identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, or on the gender non-conforming spectrum, this study specifically sought to answer the following research question: What are the workplace experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals.

Participants were recruited through snowball methodology. An electronic call for participation was distributed through organizations and electronic communities serving the target population in the State of Maine, United States. Participants were also recruited through the University of Southern Maine Center for Sexualities and Gender Diversity Pride Listserv and Facebook page, and through social media. Study participants were of diverse gender identities, both binary and non-binary. They represented varied professional backgrounds: from community ministry to information technology. The industry affiliation and gender identities for the twelve participants selected and scheduled for interviews are presented in Table 2.

During individual semi-structured interviews (30 to 90 min long), participants answered a series of reflective questions about past and present workplace experience, aiming to clarify (a) how their gender identity/expression has impacted their leadership development and career enhancement opportunities and (b) their experience with cissexism. Questions were specifically focused on (A) hiring, (B) advancement and professional development and (C) participants’ perspectives of their experiences compared to those of cisgender individuals. The interviews collected narratives related to gender identity, leadership and career development, along with current career/job information. The identifying information (e.g. use of a person’s or company’s name, etc.) was scrubbed from the final summary and papers. Additionally, aliases were used in coding and all descriptions of subsequent findings.

The analysis involved the process outlined by Leedy and Ormrod (2013),

“1. Identify statements that relate to the topic […]"
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Sex Assigned at Birth</th>
<th>Sex Assigned at Birth</th>
<th>Primary Industry</th>
<th>At Time of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>I describe myself as a man in a way. I describe myself as not a complete man because I do not have all of the parts a normal considered man would have. In quotation marks. But I am a man with my heart, mind, and soul</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Finance/Accounting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>She/Her/Hers</td>
<td>I casually identify as female</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Finance/Accounting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ari</td>
<td>They/Them/Theirs</td>
<td>Definitely more on the genderqueer variety of things</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corey</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>I am a transmale</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan</td>
<td>They/Them/Theirs</td>
<td>Non-binary and genderfluid and transmasculine experiencing more masculine leanings and experimenting with more masculine identity stuff. Weird spot right now, I guess, genderfluid, transmasculine</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Broadcasting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eden</td>
<td>She/Her/Hers</td>
<td>I identify as a transgender woman</td>
<td>AMAB</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franki</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>…I identify as male, but not strongly as male. So I go by male pronouns, but I’m not what I would consider as the typical male if that makes sense</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Non-Profit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>I identify as male.</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Non-Profit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>…I usually check off the M box when given a binary choice, but I am a transmale. FTM or assigned female at birth but identifying as a male person</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevie</td>
<td>She/Her/Hers</td>
<td>I identify as genderfluid.</td>
<td>AMAB</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toby</td>
<td>He/Him/His, She/Her/Hers, They/Them/Theirs</td>
<td>[Participant 11 responded, “I actually use he, she, or they,” when asked what pronouns that the researcher should use for the interview. We use the gender-neutral pronouns “they/them/their” when discussing Participant 11 in the body of this paper]</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>She/Her/Hers</td>
<td>I would call myself genderqueer, is the word that I use most often. I shift between gender expressions, but I do not feel like my core gender changes, which is why I don’t use genderfluid as often as I use genderqueer</td>
<td>AFAB</td>
<td>Community Ministry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Diverse and complex gender identity of study participants

Exploring workplace experiences of transgender
2. Group statements into ‘measuring units’ […]

3. Seek divergent perspectives […]

4. Constructing a composite […]” (p. 146).

Dedoose software for data management and coding was used for transcript content analysis and to identify emergent themes. After a review of the demographic question results, coding qualitative narrative, and identification of qualitative narrative that supports/explains trends established in the interviews, the following core themes were identified: 1) the impact of gender identity/expression on transgender experiences in the workplace 2) the effect of dominant narrative (cissexism) on transgender experiences in the workplace 3) best practices for transgender-inclusive workplace.

Findings
Data analysis indicates that participants’ gender identity and expression had an impact on their workplace experience and that this impact may be indicative of the presence of cissexism as the dominant narrative in the workplace.

The impact of gender identity/expression on transgender experiences in the workplace
The experiences of study participants are consistent with the results of the 2015 NCTE Transgender Survey where 19% of all respondents reported adverse outcomes of their gender identity or expression, including being fired, denied a promotion, or not being hired for a job they applied for (James et al., 2016). Thus, many respondents felt they experienced retribution for disclosing their gender identity in their job searches and in seeking advancement opportunities. Stevie shared that when she searched for jobs:

Sometimes I’d get a first interview and then never hear from them again […] How do you get beyond the initial interview, and then initial contact is made and then all of a sudden nothing. That’s happened way too much to me in my opinion to be a coincidence.

Andy disclosed that when she had interviewed for a store management position at a well-known retailer, she made it through four different interviews: “I was told that I had the gig as long as my background check came back fine, and then I just never heard anything back.” She was fairly certain that her background check revealed the fact that she was transgender, and that fact had ended her candidacy.

Mizock et al. (2018) refer to the challenges in the workplace for transgender employees when they begin the transition process. When stigma and rigid gender expectations make interactions with co-workers or customers uncomfortable, many transgender individuals feel their only choice is to seek new jobs. The experience of participants in our study is similar. Thus, during Sam’s transition, he appeared “gender-ambiguous,” and wondered if it may have affected his standing for positions:

I can’t prove this, but I’m pretty sure that I wasn’t hired because of how I looked, that I was very gender-ambiguous and sometimes people would mis-pronoun me and I would say: ‘Oh, by the way, I go by he and his,’ and then they would get completely uncomfortable.

In contrast, Ari felt that they had been fortunate in most of their job searches but acknowledged that it may have been that they never presented as “genderqueer” in an interview, “I always pick a side to make it as easy as possible for getting the job.” They recognized that they actively felt the need to hide their gender identity and that it may have helped secure positions. In comparison, Sam wondered if his openness and gender
expression negatively influenced his ability to get jobs. While in this case, Ari appeared to be successful in blending in, Cech and Rothwell (2020) argue that tactics to “pass”, however successful, expose transgender employees to informal interactional inequalities and emotional/cognitive costs.

Some participants reflected on the ways their gender identity and/or expression may have affected their opportunities for career advancement, compensation, title, professional development, and mentorship. Thus, Corey had been employed and promoted several times at the same workplace for years when he started to transition:

I was not treated as well at all, in direct proportion to my gender presentation [...]. The boss, male boss, was very friendly to me in the beginning, was less friendly to me the more masculine I looked. Same with my manager.

Corey found that once he started to dress in a more masculine way, promotions stopped and that he was treated differently by supervisors.

Eden also noticed a change in her advancement opportunities depending on how other people perceived her gender. In the first career discussed, she had initially been perceived as a man and then came out as a transgender woman. In her workplace at the time of the interview, she was known as a transgender woman, “When I presented more masculinely for much of my career, I think I was able to move and advance pretty easily [...]. But once I started transitioning and was seen as trans, it negatively impacted upward-mobility, and even at my job now [...].” Eden felt that it was easier to advance when people believed she was a man.

Other participants that transitioned noticed a difference between being perceived as one binary gender or the other. For example, Jamie transitioned from female to male (FTM). When asked if his gender identity or expression had impacted his ability to advance in any way, Jamie reflected, “ [...]. because I present as male, I think I’ve been afforded more opportunities [...].”

Another theme to emerge was the attempted erasure or silencing of an employee’s identity as transgender or gender non-conforming. Two participants shared that they faced disciplinary action after disclosing their gender identity or attempting to offer support to another transgender or gender non-conforming person at work. In both instances, participants left the organizations.

While employed at one particular social services organization, Sam felt that disclosing that he was transgender to the clients could lead to negative consequences. He ended up working with a transgender youth who would ask him about resources and community. One day, the youth asked him why he knew so much, and Sam came out. After his disclosure, he felt that whenever he gave updates his supervisor was not supportive of gender-related discussions. Sam ended up working with another transgender youth. When the youth requested permission to go to a gender-related event, Sam helped connect him to staff at his group home to take him to the event. Sam’s supervisor was not pleased that he had not run this by her, and he was then told that the youth could not go. Consistent with his supervisor’s directive, Sam told the group home staff that they could not take the youth. Regardless, the group home supervisor brought the youth to the event. As a result, Sam was formally reprimanded. Eventually, he chose to leave the organization, “ [...]. for a lot of reasons, but almost everyday something would happen that would trigger for me, like ‘Ugh, my identity is invalidated here.’” He shared later his worry about how the formal reprimand would impact his job searches.

When employed by a social services organization, Alex was repeatedly disciplined for disclosing that he was transgender. He had legally changed his name and was read as a
cisgender male. In an attempt to build, “connection and feel comfortable,” he came out. Shortly after, he was pulled into the supervisor’s office and informed that his disclosure was considered “sexual harassment.” He was placed on probation. As a result, he was not eligible for promotion for the duration of the probation. He also felt that he was not compensated equitably for performing the same work as fellow employees. Alex consulted an attorney, wishing to approach the company to offer an opportunity for some gender-related education. The opportunity never came. While on probation, Alex was fired.

The effect of dominant narrative (cissexism) on transgender experiences in the workplace
All study participants experienced various degrees of cissexism as a dominant narrative that negatively affected their working environment. In other words, they have experienced discrimination. One of the most common challenges (reported by eight out of 12) is access to workplace bathrooms. In a study mentioned in the Literature Review section, Murib (2020) points at the harmful effect of attempts to “administer biology” that criminalize and stigmatize transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in public spaces. It also carries health risks, both physical and emotional. Similarly, participants in the current study experienced anxiety when restricted to restrooms in which they were not comfortable.

After coming out, Andy was required to use only approved restrooms. While she had legally transitioned, she had not had surgery that would have legitimized her as a woman in the eyes of the company. As a result, she was permitted to use only “family” or unisex facilities. She had “a mandatory meeting with the Human Resources representative who walked me around my place of employment, identifying bathrooms I was allowed to use […] I just hadn’t had surgery yet, and that was a sticking point for them.”

Some participants were forced to advocate for themselves to access the bathroom earmarked for their gender. Jamie was required to use the women’s restroom, “because they believed that I should still use the female bathroom even though I had legally changed my name but hadn’t legally changed my gender.” Forced to make a case to his supervisors “I cited the law which basically said I had the right to use whichever bathroom I chose and that was kind of the end of it.” Jamie had to make a case to gain permission to use the restroom consistent with his gender: the men’s room.

Toby shared that, in their current job, they feel forced to use the women’s restroom. They would prefer to use a single-stall bathroom or the men’s room but felt, “It would make my colleagues really uncomfortable if I used the men’s room.” When Toby attempted to offer feedback about restroom access, they found senior leadership had “no comprehension that it might be an issue.”

Several participants were also subjected to deeply personal questions about their bodies and gender identities by co-workers or supervisors who asked about gender-related medical treatment. They made comments about their bodies, or “outing” them without permission or warning.

Eden has felt tokenized as a transgender woman in one of her workplaces. She felt bound to disclose information about transition-related medical procedures to get approved for time-off, “[…] I felt like I had to share some really deep, personal stuff with folks at work that I probably shouldn’t have to do, to get the health care that I needed.” She went on to describe a time where she had to sit through a group meeting, as an out transgender woman, while organizational leaders discussed the value of purchasing a transgender-inclusive health-care policy for the organization:

The director at the time, at our staff meeting and said, ‘Well, we could go with this new plan, and it’s trans-inclusive, and it costs more money, or we could go with this other plan that doesn’t cost as much. What do you think we should do?’ And she asked the staff this question. . . I was in the
room, and I had to hear people talk about whether they would or would not pay for trans-inclusive health care.

Another manifestation of the dominant narrative was the organizational policing or enforcement of strict, binary-gender-based cultural expectations. In these instances, participants felt pressured to change their appearance or behavior.

In one of Dylan’s previous jobs, they were scolded for wearing the same clothing that men in their workplace were permitted to wear. They were only selectively out to other non-cisgender folks at this workplace and were perceived by others to be a woman or a “tomboy.” One day Dylan wore knee-length, jean cut-off shorts, “Some of my other male coworkers had been wearing the same style jean shorts for plenty of workdays and never had anyone say anything to them [...]” This workplace did not have a formal dress code, but the message was clear: management-imposed policies that limit what workers were permitted to wear based on perceived gender.

Alex also experienced discrimination based on dress code requirements. He had worked at a hospital that required men and women, in the same position, to wear different uniforms. Alex identified and presented as a man but was required to wear the women’s uniform. When he approached a supervisor to request permission to wear the men’s uniform, he was told that once his name was changed, it could be discussed. Alex’s employer forced him to wear a uniform inconsistent with his gender until he achieved a benchmark that they considered valid: a name change.

Participant experiences point at the discriminatory nature of the dominant narrative in the workplace, which is inconsistent with the contemporary organizational focus on inclusion and equitable work environment.

**Best practices for Transgender-Inclusive workplace**

As pointed out in Webster et al. (2017), all employees could benefit from a supportive work environment, yet authors emphasize the importance of visible representations of inclusive and welcoming values that do not tolerate discrimination or mistreatment of gender minorities. Supporting relationships include coworkers and supervisors, as well as tangible support (resources, instruments). They increase employees’ commitment and job satisfaction, as well as reduce voluntary turnover (Sabharwal et al., 2019).

Several participants indicated that organizational policy, culture, and physical location could play a deterring factor when even applying for a position. For example, Andy, Corey, Franki, and Val each mentioned that when searching for work if the community did not seem welcoming to gender minorities, they may have chosen not to apply for positions. While Dylan explained that workplace climate and policy related to gender expression would always influence their job search:

> I am probably going to always be choosing my workplaces based on how accepting of an environment they feel like [...] If a place has very strict regulations on gender stuff, clothing, presentation or identity, whatever, you know it’s not something I’m going to subject myself to [...]

Participants’ experiences demonstrate that supportive leadership is critical for employee well-being. Alex felt that his current workplace was very inclusive. Alex came out to her supervisor who helped connect him to company resources and the LGBTQ community. His supervisor represented the organization’s equitable and supportive culture.

Franki said that after conveying his discomfort with sharing gender-specific restrooms with coworkers, his supervisor quickly converted existing restrooms into single-user all-gender facilities. His supervisor’s willingness to find a solution helped create an
environment where Franki felt more comfortable. Now all employees at his workplace enjoy privacy in the restroom.

Andy observed that throughout her employment her gender had negatively impacted her career development. She offered, “I’ve had leadership opportunities, but they’ve been limited in scope. And I feel as though there are two situations where my status did not affect, where it really was sort of based on ability.” Andy commented that only those supervisors who were also gender and/or sexual minorities seemed interested in supporting her career development.

**Discussion**

Participants’ workplace challenges substantiate Grant *et al.*’s statistics on experiences of “adverse job outcomes” (2011, p. 3) and validate Collins *et al.*’s assessment that a lack of understanding contributes to marginalization (2015). Consequently, some of the participants in their workplace were fully out to peers and/or supervisors, while others were out only to a select few. Some remained closeted, while others indicated that they intentionally remained “stealth,” or passing as cisgender. In some situations, participants had little control over their level of outness due to workplace restrictions and/or the nonconsensual disclosure or inquiry by supervisors or coworkers. For some participants, the level of outness shifted while employed at the same workplace or during hiring.

Study findings: the importance of supportive leadership and supportive company culture as well as the adverse effects of the dominant narrative (cissexism) in the workplace, align well with the US D.C. Office of Human Rights study (2015), which indicated frequent discrimination during in-person interviews and in the workplace, and provide further evidence that government, the private sector, and community organizations must develop comprehensive solutions against transgender individuals’ workplace discrimination.

Throughout interviews, study participants offered suggestions on how to help improve the work environment for transgender and gender non-conforming employees. Those suggestions are consistent with inclusive practices and policy recommendations in previous studies (Brewster *et al.*, 2014; Lubitow, *et al.*, 2017; Mennicke and Cutler-Seeber, 2016; Platt and Milam, 2018; Sabharwal, 2019).

The most consistent piece of advice was to improve education and training. Robinson *et al.* (2017) point out the need to better educate leaders and managers on experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, and on issues of gender variance, so they are well prepared to address the unique needs of their diverse employees. Likewise, participants encouraged organizations to offer opportunities for employees at all levels to learn more about gender diversity. They also urged leaders to maintain a commitment to their personal education, specifically to dispel myths about gender minorities and binary gender. They stressed that it would be important to involve transgender and gender non-conforming persons in the development of training.

Additional suggestions included:

- access to gender-neutral bathrooms;
- holding staff and management accountable for policy enforcement and violations;
- eliminating gendered language in the workplace (e.g., through the integration of gender-neutral pronouns); adapting forms, letters, applications, and software to be inclusive;
- respecting a person’s gender as presented or articulated; and
- offering trans-inclusive health care.
Stories shared by this study participants illustrate the presence of the dominant narrative (cissexism) in the workplace and point at the discriminating nature of normalizing cisgender identity as inherently natural, thus fueling feelings of isolation and invisibility among transgender/gender non-conforming individuals (Aultman, 2014; Jourian, 2015). Thus, many individuals would regard inquiry or nonconsensual conversation about their genitalia as a form of harassment, yet gender minority workers are too frequently subjected to direct questions and comments about their bodies. Requiring that cisgender workers use restroom facilities allocated to “opposite” binary genders would be an unusual and inappropriate mandate from an employer and yet experiences of study participants reveal being forced to use a restroom inconsistent with their gender identity. Cisgender employees would not be expected to wear a uniform worn by the “opposite” binary gender, likewise, gender minority employees should be allowed to wear the uniforms that align most closely to their gender identity. It is therefore important to fully consider the impact of an organization’s decision to implement restrictions based on the expectations of binary gender. In the workplace, cissexism expands to organizational health-care policies where premiums and procedure coverage is based on the notion that legal gender indicates a person’s biological sex, and consequently body parts, hormones, and identity, while gender-affirming treatments are often considered elective.

There are many ways to be transgender and/or gender non-conforming. Not all gender minority people wish to identify as a binary gender, nor do they all plan to have gender-affirming medical treatment, change legal names or gender markers. Organizations should ensure their practices accommodate the broadest range of identities and expressions possible. Rather than emphasizing medical care and “legal” transition as cornerstones in their policy, organizational leaders who wish to address cissexism should support workers regardless of their intent to transition medically or socially (Mennicke and Cutler-Seeber, 2016). As suggested by Köllen (2016), a true organizational commitment to inclusion imperative in the workplace would mean an integrative approach where allocation of organizational resources and opportunities is based upon individual capabilities, contribution and experience, rather than on manifestations of diversity dimensions, but that ultimate goal is still far away.

To sum up, this study explored experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in the US workplace. The findings of this study provide a meaningful narrative indicating lingering discrimination, marginalization and stigma that gender minorities face in the workplace. This narrative aligns well and supports data presented by scholars between 2011 and 2021. We hope that the unique stories of study participants will offer insights into the needs of transgender and gender non-conforming employees as well as the best practices of creating a supporting and inclusive environment for all employees regardless of their gender identity/representation.

Limitations and directions for future research
The challenge of recruiting qualified participants from the marginalized group and the selection criteria for legal adult age and English proficiency impose limitations on this study sample (n = 12). Yet this sample size is adequate for the methodology used in this study. Future research may include a more diverse representation of the population and could focus on creating inclusive organizational cultures and leadership development opportunities for gender minorities. It would be beneficial to analyze costs related to recruitment, training, retention, job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover of gender minority employees, along with related productivity loss, thus illustrating the impact that culture of cissexism may have on the organizational bottom-line.
Conclusion

Diversity and inclusion are integral to the moral imperative of humanity. Transgender and gender non-conforming workers deserve respect, safety, and agency. They deserve the right to make a living and do their jobs free of oppression. It is critical to continue unraveling the workplace and development experiences of gender minority employees. This study offers a powerful narrative of workplace experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming employees. The narrative provides useful framing for eradicating discrimination and marginalization of gender minorities and context for the organizational effort in diversity and inclusion.

References


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Further reading
American Psychological Association, Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance (2009), Report of the Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance, Washington, DC.

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