Journal of Diversity in Higher Education

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Laura Boyd Farmer, Claire K. Robbins, Jennifer L. Keith, and Challen J. Mabry

Online First Publication, June 24, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000129>

CITATION

Farmer, L. B., Robbins, C. K., Keith, J. L., & Mabry, C. J. (2019, June 24). Transgender and Gender-Expansive Students' Experiences of Genderism at Women's Colleges and Universities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000129>

Transgender and Gender-Expansive Students' Experiences of Genderism at Women's Colleges and Universities

Laura Boyd Farmer and Claire K. Robbins
Virginia Tech

Jennifer L. Keith
The Rockbridge Wellness Group, LLC, Lexington, Virginia

Challen J. Mabry
Virginia Tech

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researchers conducted a qualitative exploration of transgender and gender-expansive students' experiences of genderism while attending women's colleges and universities. Genderism is understood as prejudice or bias that results from a binary view of gender. Ten participants shared their experiences of genderism related to gender identity, gender role, gender expression, relationships, academics, residence life, and university policies and practices. Six themes are presented with support from participant extracts. Implications for faculty, staff, and administrators at women's colleges and universities are discussed, along with considerations for advocacy efforts.

Keywords: transgender, gender-expansive, genderism, women's colleges, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Globally, women's institutions remain central to facilitating women's legal, financial, academic, and cultural access to higher education (Renn, 2017). U.S. colleges and universities for woman-identified students (hereafter, women's colleges and universities) have historically been recognized as safe havens for students to engage in self-exploration and educationally purposeful activities, develop leadership skills and confidence, learn to think critically, achieve positive academic and career outcomes, and form powerful social networks (Harper, 2006; Harwarth, Maline, & DeBra, 1997; Kett, 2015; Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach, & Kuh, 2007; Marine, 2011; Miller-Bernal, 2000; Miller-Bernal & Poulson, 2004; Nanney & Brunsma, 2017; Read, 2017; Renn & Lytle, 2010; Sax, Lozano, & Vandenboom, 2015; Wolf-Wendel, 2002). U.S. women's institutions also pride themselves on their small, intimate class sizes and supportive, accepting campus communities for a socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse array of students (Read, 2017; Wolf-Wendel, 2002; Women's College Coalition, 2018). In particular, women's colleges may appeal to students who identify as people of color; first-generation college students; lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBQQIA+); survivors of physical and sexual violence; adult learners; and students who identify with intersections of these identities due to perceived values of embracing diversity and

dismantling oppressive systems (e.g., first-generation adult learners of color; Kett, 2015; Marine, 2011; Read, 2017).

Access to safe and accepting campuses is of dire importance for transgender and gender-expansive (TGE) students because "transgender people face extraordinary levels of physical and sexual violence, whether on the streets, at school or work, at home, or at the hands of government officials" (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018, para. 1). Too often, these realities manifest in deficit-based approaches to studying TGE students (Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017). Fortunately, a growing number of scholars are centering the ways that TGE students persist, resist, thrive, and succeed in college despite multiple forms of oppression (e.g., Catalano, 2015a, 2015b; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Jourian, 2017a, 2017b; Jourian, 2018; Kortegast, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017; Nicolazzo, Marine, & Wagner, 2018; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017). These studies and others highlight how TGE collegians, like all TGE individuals, "broaden commonly held definitions of gender, including its expression, associated identities, and/or other perceived gender norms in one or more aspects of their life" (Goodrich et al., 2017, p. 204). This growing literature also amplifies TGE students' resilient and agentic responses to systems of oppression within and beyond higher education, including heterosexism, monosexism, and genderism-cissexism (Jourian, 2015a; Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017; Robbins & McGowan, 2016).

As one manifestation of such agency, TGE collegians frequently choose to attend women's institutions as a way to resist physical and sexual violence (Marine, 2011) and to access minoritized student organizations and faculty support (Kett, 2015). Kett (2015) also found that transgender men may choose women's colleges as an environment they perceive as safe in which to explore gender identity and expression. TGE students' presence at women's colleges and universities contributes to the diversity these institutions

Laura Boyd Farmer and Claire K. Robbins, School of Education, Virginia Tech; Jennifer L. Keith, The Rockbridge Wellness Group, LLC, Lexington, Virginia; Challen J. Mabry, School of Education, Virginia Tech.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laura Boyd Farmer, who is now in independent practice in Roanoke, VA. E-mail: laurabfarmer@gmail.com

purport to celebrate. It also represents “a lightning rod for a renewed examination of the mission, history, and future of women’s colleges” (Marine, 2011, p. 1166). However, postsecondary institutions reproduce social structural inequities that constrain college students’ experiences and outcomes (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012), and women’s colleges and universities are unfortunately no exception.

Indeed, scholars have begun to document manifestations of and responses to genderism at women’s institutions by exploring admissions and enrollment policies, as well as alumnae and administrators’ reactions to TGE students (Kett, 2015; Marine, 2011; Nanney, 2017; Nanney & Brunnsma, 2017). For example, in Marine’s (2011) study of student affairs administrators at women’s colleges, reactions ranged from ambivalence to support to advocacy for students who identified as trans men. Meanwhile, Nanney and Brunnsma (2017) examined admissions inclusion–exclusion criteria at women’s colleges with explicit transgender admissions policies, finding that these policies codified “womanhood” through sex, gender, and legal criteria embedded in tradition- and activism-based scripts. These studies illustrate how institutional leaders are both perpetuating and resisting genderism in their responses to transgender prospective and current students.

To date, no studies have examined manifestations of genderism in the lived experiences of TGE women’s college students themselves, despite this topic’s great potential to contribute to safer and more welcoming educational environments, experiences, and outcomes for TGE college students. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to address significant gaps in research by examining the lived experiences of TGE students at women’s colleges. Given the critical nature of development that occurs in young adulthood, including transgender identity development (Bilodeau, 2005), the authors believed an exploration of this topic was both important and necessary.

Conceptual Framework

To frame this study, we considered prior scholars’ conceptualization and application of genderism (Bilodeau, 2009; Farmer & Byrd, 2015; Jourian, 2015a; Wilchins, 2002) and institutional betrayal (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014). We infused these two theoretical frameworks because of their potential to help us understand how genderism contributed to TGE students’ oppressive experiences in women’s colleges and universities—institutions where they had hoped to find a safe harbor for their learning and growth.

Wilchins (2002) first described genderism as “an organizational and systemic oppression” (p. 14) based on gender, defined as “*a system of symbols and meanings—and the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use—for power and sexuality*” (p. 14, emphasis in original). Unfortunately, scholars and practitioners (even, and sometimes especially, those purporting to be concerned with gender-based oppression) have perpetuated genderism by conflating sex and gender and by centering their efforts primarily on cisgender women’s experiences and outcomes (Bilodeau, 2009). The effects of this narrow focus have been far-reaching in higher education because genderism is systemic and ideological (Jourian, 2015a, 2017a) with significant material consequences (Bilodeau, 2009).

Genderism “pathologizes and denigrates nonconforming gender identities through binary sorting and privileging of conforming identities, punishing nonconformity, and isolating gender nonconforming people and identities” (Jourian, 2017a, p. 125). In higher education, genderism often manifests in the form of transphobic (i.e., fear of transgender people) and transmisogynistic (i.e., oppression of trans* women; Serano, 2007) attitudes held by individuals and upheld through institutional policies and practices (Jourian, 2015a). Moreover, genderism reinforces and is reinforced by other systems of oppression, especially heterosexism (i.e., the assumption that everyone is heterosexual) and monosexism (i.e., the assumption that people are “attracted to only one other sex or gender”; Jourian, 2015a, p. 16). All of these systems in turn intersect with racism, classism, ethnocentrism, nativism, and other systems of oppression that target minoritized individuals and communities.

Scholars have explored how genderism influences people with minoritized gender and/or sexual identities both within and beyond higher education settings. For example, Farmer and Byrd (2015) explored recognition of and resistance to genderism among 10 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and allied (LGBTQQIA) community members. Further, several recent studies have illustrated how TGE college students experience and resist genderism. Catalano’s (2015a) study of trans* men highlighted not only supports and challenges but advice to trans* men from trans* men about how to navigate college campuses successfully. Jourian (2017b) studied how trans*masculine students crossed thresholds of dominance as they carved out pathways of masculinity that became sites for individual and collective transformation. Johnson’s (2017) narrative inquiry explored affective resistance to genderism among nonbinary, transgender-identified college students. Nicolazzo (2016, 2017) worked alongside participants to produce a critical collaborative ethnography of trans* collegians’ resistance, resilience, and kinship-building.

Because genderism regulates and pathologizes people’s bodies and identities with punishing and isolating consequences, understanding this system of oppression and how it operates in institutions is essential to the investigation of TGE students’ experiences in women’s colleges and universities. However, the institutional dynamics of these experiences also warrants attention. According to Linder and Myers (2018), *institutional betrayal* is a phenomenon rooted in trauma theory (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014) with origins in betrayal trauma (Platt, Barton, & Freyd, 2009). Specifically, institutional betrayal “highlights the ways organizations perpetuate betrayal trauma by perpetuating or remaining ignorant to instances of trauma experienced by members of their community” (Linder & Myers, 2018, p. 2). Betrayal trauma theory suggests that betrayals within close relationships may be more traumatic than those in more distal relationships because individuals tend to believe they can trust and depend on those closest to them (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014). Further, institutional betrayal occurs when trusted and powerful institutions act in ways that cause “harm upon those dependent on them for safety and wellbeing” (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014, p. 575). In our study, institutional betrayal provided conceptual framing for TGE students’ experiences of genderism at women’s colleges and universities where they had hoped they would find acceptance, safety, and support.

Method

The authors selected interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the qualitative approach to data analysis for this study. The IPA method adopts a psychological interest in the ways that people make sense of their experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). It is particularly advantageous when a phenomenon has been identified that matters to a specific and purposefully selected group of participants who are asked to describe their own unique perspectives of the phenomenon of interest (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA has been identified as a research method that is aligned with studying the experiences of sexual and gender minority populations (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Griffith et al., 2017).

Procedures

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, researchers used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants at three different women's colleges and universities in the southeastern region of the United States. An initial recruitment e-mail was sent to key contacts with permission to share the invitation and directions with those who wanted to participate in the study so they could contact the researchers directly. For inclusion criteria, participants had to be at least 18 years of age with capacity to consent; to be currently attending or had attended within the last year a women's college or university; and to self-identify with one or more of the following identities: transgender, gender queer, gender nonconforming, gender-fluid, non-binary, or a gender on the gender spectrum (other than cisgender). Participants were given the option to respond to five open-ended interview questions via e-mail or to have a face-to-face interview with the option of using a web-based program (e.g., Skype, Zoom).

The researchers collected demographic information and described the purpose of the study: to explore TGE students' experiences of genderism while attending women's colleges and universities. We provided participants with Farmer and Byrd's (2015) definition of *genderism* as "prejudice or bias that results from a binary view of gender (there are only two options of gender)" (p. 293). Based on this definition, the interview included the following open-ended questions:

1. In what ways have you observed or been personally impacted by genderism at your college or university?

2. What other ways have you experienced genderism as it relates to gender identity, gender roles, gender expression, and relationships while enrolled at your college or university?
3. What has your experience been with genderism in academics?
4. What has your experience been with genderism in residence life?
5. How do you understand your university's policies and practices as they relate to genderism?

Two reminder e-mails were sent to collect e-mail responses or set up interview dates and times. For written responses to the interview questions, the researchers conducted up to two follow-up e-mail exchanges to seek clarification or elaboration on responses and, if necessary, asked for an illustrative example of what the participant experienced. These e-mail exchanges helped to establish thickness of the narratives and allowed for a collaborative process toward constructing and understanding knowledge (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Participants

Ten individuals, all identifying as transgender or on the gender spectrum and ranging in age from 19 to 24, participated in the study. All attended one of three private women's colleges and universities in the southeastern region of the United States for at least one year. Each of the three colleges and universities represented in the study had a different policy guiding the enrollment of transgender students, ranging from highly inclusive to highly exclusive using a range of legal-, biology-, and identity-based criteria (Nanney & Brunsma, 2017). Participants' self-described identities and chosen pseudonyms are presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

The first and third authors completed the data analysis, and the fourth author contributed a thorough audit of the process and resulting themes. The second author was sought after data analysis was complete for content expertise that aided in connecting findings to the broader scholarship related to gender and trans* stu-

Table 1
Participants' Self-Described Identities

Participant	Race-ethnicity	Gender identity	Affectional orientation
Em	Filipino American	Bigender	Bisexual
John Porter	White Caucasian	Transgender man	Bisexual
Ericka	White Caucasian	Agender-gender-fluid	Queer
Vie	White Caucasian	Genderqueer	Gay
Micah	Caucasian Jewish	Genderqueer	Gay
Bentley	White Caucasian	Trans male	Homoromantic asexual
Ella	White Caucasian	Nonbinary	Pansexual
K	White Caucasian	Agenderflux	Queer
Helen	Mixed race	Nonbinary	Homoromantic
Asher Julian	White Caucasian	Trans male	Pansexual

Note. Names are participants' chosen pseudonyms.

dents in higher education. The first and third authors began analysis by independently free-coding the participant transcripts, a reflexive technique that allows preconceptions, biases, assumptions, and emotional reactions to come through the researcher and be observed (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). In the next step, researchers completed a line-by-line analysis of each transcript. In IPA research, Larkin and Thompson (2012) referred to this process as phenomenological coding. Researchers then began identifying themes within each participant's narrative, highlighting patterns across the data and coding them as "units of meaning" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 108). The researchers maintained a dialogue during each step of the analysis for the purposes of discussing and dissecting the meaning of emergent themes, considering individual contexts as they relate to each theme, and examining the particular relevance of the phenomenon for each participant in their context (Miller, Chan, & Farmer, 2018). A participant's context included consideration of the unique intersections of their identities, their process and motivation for pursuing enrollment at a women's institution, and their current status toward degree completion. Due to the high engagement of the researchers with the data and with each other when considering the factors mentioned, the analysis and resulting themes are interpretive in nature (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Strategies for Trustworthiness

The researchers implemented several strategies for trustworthiness to strengthen the study. To begin, the quality of IPA research is improved when data are collected from purposefully selected informants (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). In this study, participants were carefully selected based on the identified criteria given their ability to share firsthand experiences of the phenomenon of interest. Peer validation, another strategy for trustworthiness, was employed by involving multiple researchers in the data-analysis process. Triangulation was further established by utilizing the fourth author, one who had no prior experience with the data, as auditor. Participant extracts were compiled to support the prevalence of meaning units within and across participant narratives. The first and third authors, who completed data collection and analysis, maintained reflexivity journals throughout the process to provide an outlet for ongoing personal responses to content.

Prominent IPA researchers have suggested a final strategy for trustworthiness: transparency of the researchers who are involved in the exploration of the phenomenon (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). To this end, all authors of the study identify as White, cisgender women who work in higher education, counseling practice, or both. All authors identify with experiences of institutional betrayal (Linder & Myers, 2018) in higher education to varying degrees and as related to varying minoritized identities. We recognize that our personal experiences of being targeted by an array of systems of oppression are distinct from the experiences of TGE-identifying persons targeted by genderism. As cisgender women, we are complicit in genderism and yet share an ideological commitment to social justice work surrounding TGE persons and communities within our realms of impact.

Findings

The following themes were identified: (a) expectations of conduct, roles, and appearance determined by gender binary adher-

ence; (b) lack of awareness or understanding of gender diversity; (c) campus climate; (d) self-advocacy and resilience; (e) incongruencies and mixed messages; and (f) the emotional toll and impact of genderism. Participant extracts are provided to illustrate and support each theme, as recommended by IPA methodologists (e.g., J. A. Smith, 2011). In several instances across the themes, participants from one of the three institutions referred to the material consequences (Beemyn, 2005) of that institution's policy related to gender identity and expression and students' continuing enrollment. These instances are woven into multiple themes, illustrating the pervasive and systemic effects (Jourian, 2015a) of genderism for TGE students at women's colleges.

Expectations of Conduct, Roles, and Appearance Determined by Gender Binary Adherence

Participants described how pervasively their appearance was evaluated by the campus community according to binary gender norms. Participants discussed feeling judged and evaluated by their adherence to the gender binary, specifically by their adherence to feminine norms of gender presentation: wearing dresses, a feminine hair style, makeup, jewelry, and "frilly stuff" (Ella). Femininity was expected to be exhibited at all times. Some participants discussed the safety they experienced under certain conditions, such as if their chosen name was assumed to be more feminine or the inability to chest-bind (i.e., wearing tight-fitting apparel to flatten the chest) due to health reasons. The safety extended to students under these circumstances was self-described as unfair because their actual identities (as nonbinary or trans) did not warrant it. In other words, students in these circumstances felt unjustly invisible in their gender identities:

As a nonbinary individual who was unable to bind, I felt like I gained unfair safety in the realm of ignorance I existed in, because I was assumed female based on their unspoken rubric of what that was . . . Against the rubric, individuals who existed outside of or between genders were either left alone or harassed by administration, depending on how close to the binary ideals of womanhood they were. (K, agenderflux)

I tend to wear more masculine clothes (cargo shorts, guys shirts), I have my hair super shorty and it is usually messy, and I do not shave my legs. So, I look very different than the typical [student here]—girly, frilly dresses, make-up—and this makes me a target for other students and their questions. (Micah, genderqueer)

Students who identified as men or who presented their gender in a more masculine way described how negative stereotypes and prejudicial beliefs about men or masculinity impacted them. Whereas women were viewed as safe, benign, nonthreatening, small, and contained, men were viewed as dangerous, aggressive, threatening, powerful, and invasive. John Porter (transgender man) described this experience:

. . . people saying that I am a predator or immediately more dangerous because I identify as a man—even pre-HRT—because they assume there is such a thing as "female brain and male brain" and nothing in between. So, despite all socialization and personality to differ, I am immediately more aggressive and taking up more space.

A troubling aspect to this theme was the prevalence of what students referred to as "gender policing." Participants described

gender policing as a form of prejudice and gender profiling where faculty, staff, or students would report a student to administration if they were perceived to be transitioning to a gender other than female. Butler (1990) discussed gender policing as it relates to societal expectations of gender performativity; in this case, cisnormative gender expectations are imposed on a person who is evaluated as not performing their gender “correctly.” In particular, one of the universities involved in the study implemented a policy that outlines the conditions under which a gender-nonconforming student would be assisted in transferring to a different school. The ramifications of this policy were associated with some of the most extreme examples of gender policing:

People at my school, including professors, will evaluate student appearances and report them to the university to ensure that they are following the transgender guidelines if they do not match up with feminine norms. (John Porter, transgender man)

The [transgender] policy also serves to hunt nonbinary individuals, for if a student begins exhibiting masculine behavior, or performing their identity outside of feminine gender norms, they are called in for questioning and they have their educations and scholarships threatened. (Micah, genderqueer)

As further evidence of the pressure to adhere to binary gender norms, participants described a scrutiny of anatomy and body parts while attending women's institutions of higher education. This manifested in a variety of ways, including embodied gender essentialism, expressions of penis fear, and the ramifications of one's ability or inability to chest-bind. According to participants, when gender is associated with the presence or absence of particular body parts, genderism is the result:

I also feel like I was taken somewhat less seriously as a trans individual by some of the LGBT community (less the T side of it, more the LGB) because I'm unable to bind my chest due to health reasons—but the fact that I'd even have to bind my chest to be taken seriously is another form of genderism, because it's equating breasts to females only instead of considering them neutral. (K, agenderflux)

Residence life in general had a lot of “we're all girls here so it's fine” kind of attitude surrounding it, with phallophobia that was equated very closely with fear of men. Some binary trans men [were] existing in these spaces as well, but the overwhelming attitude was “they don't have a penis so it's fine” with the underlying feeling that they didn't consider them REALLY men, because there was no penis—which is another huge reason people would bring up for why they do not want trans women on campus. (K, agenderflux)

Other participants described sexually related, embodied gender essentialism toward TGE individuals in relationships:

Relationships end up complicated, especially of a sexual nature, because lesbians will say things like, “I'll date women and trans men” and you know they only think of gender as genitals and do not see you as a “real man” since they keep the lesbian label. (John Porter, transgender man)

Overall, students described an unspoken rubric for feminine gender adherence that influenced interactions with members of the campus community. Participants discussed pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, the weighted system attached to the pres-

ence or absence of physical body parts, and the evaluation of gender expression according to a binary view.

Lack of Awareness or Understanding of Gender Diversity

Participants in the study described an overall lack of awareness of gender diversity at women's colleges. Trans bias was prevalent and frequently cited by participants. In some cases, the bias was perceived to be a lack of education and understanding; in others, it was viewed as willful ignorance. Trans bias was described as manifesting in a variety of ways: misuse of or disregard for pronouns, persistent use of dead name (the name used prior to gender identity transition) by faculty or health services staff, and gender binary assumptions in residence life practices. One participant described this example of a gendered policy affecting TGE students:

The one really weird thing is that we still have men's and women's bathrooms. I know friends at other all-women's schools and they just have bathrooms. Plain bathrooms. For anyone. We still have to flip a sign if there is a “boy in the bathroom.” And if there is a boy on the hall we are supposed to write it on the bathroom mirror for everyone to know. What would they do if someone wrote “boy permanently living on the hall” on the bathroom mirror? Because I have plenty of friends who are genderqueer and trans who identify as men who are living in the dorms. (Vie, genderqueer)

Participants described perceptions of genderist attitudes among staff, faculty, and peers on their campuses, which contributed to fear and misunderstanding. TGE students felt that they were viewed as a threat to gender binary campus norms. The lack of awareness of faculty was also identified as a challenge in the classroom. If professors assume that every student in the classroom is a woman, then they are usually not taking the time to ask students about pronouns and preferred names. Faculty who are uninformed about gender diversity may create an unsupportive, unsafe classroom environment for TGE students:

[The student] told the professor they wanted to use “he” pronouns and the professor said that they wouldn't do that in their class. The professor also said that this was a women's college and they were educating women. There doesn't seem to be much education around the fact that times have changed. Gender identity is not what it once was. We do not all identify as women and there are more gender variations than just men and women. But it seems the faculty, for the most part, and the staff do not understand or recognize that. (Vie, genderqueer)

A limited understanding of gender diversity further inhibits classroom discussions and learning, as described by Micah (genderqueer):

It also greatly limits academic discussion because professors assume that all students are coming from the same background of womanhood, which discounts the experiences of trans students entirely, but also discounts the fact that each student comes from a different place and therefore has different points of view.

In addition to the need for education on transgender issues, participants described palpable experiences of nonbinary erasure at their women's institutions. Overt bias from others was commonplace for TGE students who expressed their gender in more mas-

culine ways; however, for nonbinary students who present their gender as feminine or subtly nonconforming, they described feeling ignored, erased, and virtually nonexistent at their institutions. From policy to practice, nonbinary students reflected that they are not acknowledged at all. Some expressed benefits to falling under the radar, such as “being awarded a degree without any hiccups” (Bentley, trans male), whereas others discussed the emotional impact of having an identity that was treated as nonexistent:

Having my identity ignored is a complicated thing for me. On one hand I feel lucky in a way—I do not really worry about my place at [university], because the fact that I do not identify as a woman is not acknowledged. On another it hurts so much because I feel that I am not being properly represented when I am serving as an ambassador for the school—like at alumni events or to prospective students. I feel like I am lying to those people and to the people around me, and like I would not matter to them if they knew how I identified. (Ericka, agender—genderfluid)

To summarize this theme, participants described problems stemming from the lack of understanding of gender diversity on their campuses. TGE students cited trans bias and nonbinary erasure as prominent issues. Overall, the need for education about the continuum of gender was identified as a way to create a safer campus climate for TGE students and an improved educational climate for all students.

Campus Climate

Participants spoke at length about hostile climate experiences on their campuses. Some expressed feeling as though they are merely tolerated on campus, whereas others felt outright targeted and outcast. Many described experiences of being bullied, harassed, and targeted, with social media playing a significant role. The student body was described by some participants as volatile and unwelcoming to all forms of gender diversity:

Students would bully me, both anonymously on the app, YikYak, and in person. I was constantly asked, “Why do you go here?” and “If you’re a male, why did you apply to go to an all-women’s university?” I have been told that my presence at this school is a danger to the students, as they are afraid of males from a past experience. Though their fear is toward cisgender males, not trans males, and does not apply to this situation. And even though I would ask the staff for help with this bullying problem, they would do absolutely nothing. I talked, personally, to the President of the university about this issue . . . she told me that neither she nor the school board have any intention of changing the trans policy anytime soon. (Bentley, trans male)

Hate language was thrown around on social media and there was no way to report what was happening. People would write things like “no one wants transgender people at this school” and “find a different school.” The hate language also became more targeted and would be directed at one person who was thought of to be too masculine or maybe identifies as transgender. People would openly question someone’s identity on social media and threaten to turn in other students to the Dean. I saw a lot of generalizations made about trans students. Mainly things like we all want to be men, we want to take over the school, we want the school to be coed. There was no thought to maybe we were just looking for a space that was free and safe. (Em, bigender)

Related to the hostile campus climate experienced by TGE students is the emotional climate created as a result. Participants described feeling pressure to leave or transfer from their institution, perceived threats to safety, had fears of retaliation, and felt disconnected and isolated. Participants also discussed the prevalence of microaggressions related to gender identity at women’s colleges. The common use of gendered terms like *ladies* and *sisterhood* were frequent examples:

There were a lot of microaggressions that I felt I was unable to speak up against, such as addressing large groups of people as “ladies.” It felt exclusionary in a way that I was not able to properly describe, because the space of a women’s institution is built for women, and that’s important, but I existed there, too. (K, agenderflux)

All participants described the culture at a women’s institution as unique because of the history, traditions, and beliefs that have sustained it over the years. The rich history of many women’s institutions has a way of creating a rigid atmosphere for TGE students to exist in.

We just have a strong kind of undercurrent of traditions and history, um, that kind of force women into, um, a traditional binary role . . . While I do not feel pressure to conform, I also feel like I’m an outlier. Like I’m kind of on the edge of everything. And nobody, um, nobody puts pressure on me, but at the same time I’m not in the core of what this college is about. (Helen, nonbinary)

Adding to reflections on the campus climate, participants discussed their experiences of the administration at their institutions and how administrative policies and attitudes affect campus climate. Participants described ignorance, avoidance, silencing, and blatant dismissal of gender diversity in general and toward TGE students in particular. Participants perceived that administrators adhere to the traditions and history of the institution, with no indication of openness toward gender diversity in the future vision of the institution. Participants believed that this type of attitude results in blatant ignoring of gender diversity, which was prevalent in administrators, staff, and many professors:

There is one counselor who has been there for years who will only use she/her pronouns even if you ask her to use something different. When you go to her for help and you want to talk about your experience, she ends up talking about herself. She is not at all knowledgeable about gender identity, sexual orientation, or what a student’s experience is like here. (Vie, genderqueer)

As an extension of these attitudes, the “transgender policy” at one of the universities (described in Theme A) was created by the administration to enforce conformity to binary gender norms. Participants who attended this institution felt especially disenfranchised and targeted by the administration:

If a transman takes any steps toward transitioning, then the university has the right to kick him out of the school . . . I attended the school for one year and I probably would have stayed if the policy had been different. The policy was my main reason for leaving, but the environment also was not entirely agreeing with me. A lot of the people I interacted with tended to find offense in even the slightest remark and it made me feel not entirely accepted. (Asher Julian, trans male)

There was mixed discussion on the safety and experiences in student housing. Some students felt that safe housing on campus

was limited to a couple of specialty houses or residences. On the supportive side, many participants found their resident assistants (RAs) in student housing to be the most supportive and inclusive peers regarding gender diversity. These participants described ways they felt accommodated for and provided with a safe space in their housing, as initiated by RAs:

In a lot of ways HRL (Housing & Residence Life) has a great respect for the identities of the students who live on campus—this comes from having to deal with the reality of people living together versus whatever ideas might come to the minds of older donors. As a whole there is a great amount of attention given to respecting students' identities at the RA level; making sure that names and pronouns are known and used by the students' RA is actually a major part of training. As an RA I have also not had an issue stating my pronouns to my supervisors—though I will say they only get used correctly about half of the time. (Ericka, agender–genderfluid)

Overall, participants acknowledged an unsupportive and, in some cases, hostile campus climate as having a troubling impact on TGE students. This unwelcoming climate manifested in a number of ways, stemming from administrative policies and staff attitudes and social interactions through gender-based microaggressions, as well as in-person and social media–based interactions.

Self-Advocacy and Resilience

For TGE students in this study, finding sources of support on campus was crucial to their livelihood and emotional survival. Although difficult, most participants acknowledged that TGE students are eventually able to “find their communities” (Micah). Some discussed the intentional process of selecting supportive peers to develop friendships but otherwise keeping to themselves:

I pretty much avoided people like the plague and kept to myself and the people that I did choose to be around were completely understanding and supportive of various genders, if not experiencing them [different genders] first-hand. (Asher Julian, trans male)

Despite the difficulty of finding supportive environments and friend groups, TGE students described transformative internal shifts that occurred during these challenging years: Students developed greater independence; were able to strengthen their own perspectives; and felt an increasing sense of self-acceptance, self-reliance, self-advocacy, and self-empowerment. When people consistently feel outcast or marginalized in their environment, they may experience internal tension as they work toward appreciating their own value and are simultaneously being disappointed by their surroundings. Self-empowerment and positive self-talk were exemplified in many ways:

Well, I think I can do anything and it doesn't really matter what my gender happens to be. Or, the sex I was born as. A long as I have the ability and the will to do it. I can do it, whereas, people would say because you are female or you were born female you can do this. Whatever it is. But I would rather break down that wall and kind of slip through and be like no, I can do this. (Ella, nonbinary)

A strong undercurrent of self-acceptance was most profound among participant excerpts. The ways that TGE students integrated their identities into their developing sense of who they are, despite

the pressures of existing in a largely gender binary environment, was understood through the lens of resilience.

I mean I've heard some things that say that some classes will open up to the nonbinary. And they have talked about that, like a couple of medieval history classes, whereas some of my classes are very binary views. But, it is a little easy, but also a little difficult, to get around that. And to be like, well, this is how I identify and this is how it is going to happen. And people are just going to have to deal with that. No matter how much they try and knock me down. (Ella, nonbinary)

Examples of resilience and positive self-talk were less frequent yet palpable in participant narratives. One student even described having a meeting with the president of the university, being misgendered, leaving the office, and then choosing to walk back in to ask the president to use the correct pronouns (Bentley, trans male). Courageous actions such as this, especially when interacting with authority figures who hold significant power, signify strength and the presence of valuable internal resources. Resilience is described in the literature as a “dynamic process of encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543). Despite frequent experiences of genderism, microaggressions, misgendering, and outright harassment, most TGE students in the study found ways to respect themselves, honor their identities, self-advocate when necessary, and continually adapt despite significant adversity.

Incongruencies and Mixed Messages

Participants in this study described many variations of mixed messages and incongruencies, some subtle and others more overt. The discrepancies recounted were primarily systemic in nature and supported by conversations with others on campus (i.e., peers, administrators, faculty, and staff members). One might even describe these accounts as microcultural mixed messages, viewing the women's institution itself as its own microculture.

There seems to be a competing idea of what a woman should be like. On one hand, I get the message that I should be this really knowledgeable, strong, independent scientist, and on the other hand, I'm getting the message that I need to be girly . . . All this very, like, feminine ideal, and there is the expectation that you're very feminine and you wear makeup and that you date, um, people from certain schools, and so, there really is this competing idea, and it really seems that traditionally as a woman you are kind of put into a box by being here. (Helen, nonbinary)

Mixed messages also pertained to the perceived climate versus actual experience of learning at a women's college or university. Women's institutions are often touted as “liberal,” open-minded campuses, yet many TGE students discovered through experience that diversity was not embraced in practice the way it was presented in the admissions process:

When I first came to this college I was under the impression that it was a liberal, open, accepting campus . . . I saw so many different types of people. It seemed really diverse! I was so excited about coming to college and all the people I would meet. What I experienced was completely different. Instead of a diverse campus where differences were welcomed, I found a campus that was divided. The African American students do not like the white students (and vice versa), the straight students do not like the gay students, and no one seems to like the transgender people. (Vie, genderqueer)

Finally, incongruencies were reported around the campuses' general understanding of gender diversity and advancing perspectives on the gender binary. Specifically, TGE students felt that redefining gender roles for cis women was commonplace; yet, expanding one's ideas about the socially constructed concept of gender was not part of the institutions' priorities:

Gender roles at a women's university are often challenged as it pertains to cis women, but anyone different gender-wise seems to be mostly shunned . . . If they are able to push and challenge gender roles and expressions for cis women, they should be able to take the next progressive step to acceptance for trans individuals. (John Porter, transgender man)

Given the frequency and intensity of narratives describing mixed messages and incongruencies, these excerpts represent one of the most robust themes. Navigating mixed messages left students to grapple with an array of emotions, such as confusion, disgust, disbelief, and indifference. With all of the emotional consequences of genderism at women's colleges, a separate theme was essential to underscore the prevalence, weight, and scope of TGE students' experiences.

The Emotional Toll and Impact of Genderism

Every participant in the study described the emotional toll of genderism while attending a women's college or university. The emotional impact was vast and pervaded all areas of experience—from interactions with peers, faculty, staff, and administration to systemic issues affecting everyday experiences. Students described a broad range of emotional impact of genderism, including depression, anxiety, worry, stress, angst, isolation, rejection, invisibility, paranoia, disconnection, trouble sleeping, feeling unsure of oneself, and overarching feelings of not belonging. The emotional toll of genderism has a dire impact on the learning environment for TGE students. According to Micah (genderqueer):

I feel confident in who I am but I do not believe my community supports who I am. Time and time again this has been proven to me through things that people say, policies that are supported on this campus, or through a feeling of not belonging. When I stop and think about how much I am not welcome on this campus and the policies that are in place I feel isolated, disconnected, and depression sets in. I have trouble sleeping, trouble finishing work, and disappoint myself.

Concerning the emotional toll of genderism, one particular focus of TGE students' narratives involved descriptions of identity concessions made in the women's college environment. Participants expressed ways they have made concessions to avoid hardship or discrimination. For example, some described changing their identity from trans male to gender-fluid and accepting she/her pronouns for fear of being kicked out. Some rebought feminine clothes in order to fit in; others described wearing makeup, despite identifying as a man, and sought to confuse people. Some reported changing how they identified and their pronoun use in order to appease others or as an attempt to avoid the emotional turmoil of being misgendered. Participants said it was easier to face the reality of how they would likely be perceived than to continually correct others and feel hurt by the use of their dead name or she/her pronouns:

How many professors do you have in the span of a bachelor's degree? It's a lot. And if they aren't asking those questions (What is your preferred name? What are your pronouns?), then it becomes very overwhelming to go to class day after day, especially in the beginning when they are still getting to know you, and to say to them I do not use she/her pronouns I prefer they/them. And have to correct them each time. It becomes easier to accept the fact that they do not understand it . . . they think it is just a phase, and so then it becomes much, much easier for me to just kind of, you know, not correct them. And just accept that maybe it will be different after I leave here. (Helen, nonbinary)

Another focus of this particular theme involved the transgender policy that was described by all participants from one of the colleges. This policy was described as having detrimental consequences for TGE students, including students' being forced to transfer due to their gender identity status as well as emotional consequences creating rippling effects among TGE students in the student body. All participants either described their own experience of being questioned by an administrator about their personal gender markers or medications, or they recounted the stories of their TGE peers who underwent questioning, some even being forced to transfer:

I have been targeted because I was accused of taking hormones by another student and was called into the Dean of Students' office. The Dean of Students reported that there were suspicions that I was taking hormones and that it was her job to investigate the claim. I have never taken hormones and was so upset that this college wouldn't support me. I felt so violated to be sitting in front of an administrator and having to tell my personal business. During the meeting she reminded me of the transgender policy and said that if I was taking hormones that the university would help me transfer. I had to defend myself several times during the meeting and now I feel suspicious of the people around me. Who is looking at me? Who is judging me? And I have no idea who reported me. (Vie, genderqueer)

Vie's experience illustrates the stress, fear, and disillusionment caused by real and perceived surveillance and the threat of being forced to transfer if deemed noncompliant with binary gender performance rules. Such personal accounts combined with the vicarious traumas experienced through TGE peers has an undeniable impact on student development, real and perceived safety, academic progress, and relational security. In addition to these experiences, there is also a need to consider the detrimental impact of identity concessions on mental and emotional health for TGE students.

Discussion and Implications

This study's findings contribute to the minimal research on TGE students attending women's colleges. Participants described campus environments that were overtly genderist, transphobic, and transmisogynistic (Jourian, 2015a). These forms of systemic oppression intersected with compulsory heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017) and heterosexism and monosexism (Jourian, 2015a). These oppressive experiences conveyed mixed messages to TGE students, taking an emotional toll that included feelings consistent with institutional betrayal (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014). TGE participants' experiences in this study affirm previous scholarship on trans* students, identities, and communities' encounters with administrative violence (Spade, 2011), or what Jourian (2015b)

described as the “shortcomings and dangers of gender regulation” (p. 470).

At the same time, participants—in a study explicitly about genderism at women’s colleges—described powerful instances of self-advocacy and characteristics of resilience. In fact, participants who thrived did so despite the administrative violence they encountered. This, too, is consistent with prior research foregrounding trans* students’ resistance, well-being, and success in genderist educational environments (Catalano, 2015a, 2015b; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Jourian, 2017a, 2017b; 2018; Kortegast, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017; Nicolazzo et al., 2018, 2017). In the words of K (agenderflux), “it felt exclusionary in a way that I wasn’t able to properly describe, because the space of a women’s institution is built for women, and that’s important, but I existed there, too.”

Borrowing from Nicolazzo and Harris’s (2014) discussion of campus-based women’s centers, women’s college administrators and board members are contending with whether “they intend to be spaces that address issues related to females (sex), women and femininity (gender), or both” (p. 7). Individual and institutional responses to this question vary widely, as noted in scholarly literature (Kett, 2015; Marine, 2011; Nanney, 2017; Nanney & Brunnsma, 2017) and higher education news coverage (Caplan-Bricker, 2019). As Caplan-Bricker (2019) noted in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* feature, “resistance to rethinking the meaning of ‘woman’ can be strongest in the most avowedly feminist spaces” (para. 23).

Such resistance is troubling and harmful to educators and activists who seek to critique and uproot genderism and its harmful material effects (Serano, 2007). Yet, Marine’s (2011) research suggested that despite having a range of perspectives about the presence of TGE students on campus, women’s college student affairs administrators espouse values consistent with the historic and contemporary missions of many women’s colleges. They “were effusive about the ways that their college communities make space for students to thrive, to find their voices, and to excel in their academic work and co-curricular activities” (p. 1181). However, this perspective diverges profoundly from the experiences of administrative violence and institutional betrayal shared by TGE students in this study. Our findings raise questions about the well-being of students enrolled at women’s colleges and, as such, should concern all administrators and educators who work at these institutions.

With this in mind, our findings have implications for creating and sustaining gender-diverse and trans-affirming climates at women’s colleges and universities. The participants in this study described many of these varied issues for consideration. By centering TGE students’ voices in this study, we surmise implications for higher education practitioners and policymakers, as well as systemic considerations.

First, from a mental health and wellness lens, there is concern for the long-term consequences associated with constant pressure to appease others and make concessions around one’s gender identity and expression. Participants spoke about the rigidity of policy at one of the colleges in particular, which incited fear about TGE students’ ability to move through their day-to-day lives. Gender nonbinary students especially spoke about their erasure and the struggle to merely be acknowledged in their identities. These students’ experiences expanded beyond institutional be-

trayal (Linder & Myers, 2018) as we originally conceptualized; rather, institutional trauma resounded in these emotional accounts. College counseling center staff and student affairs professionals have a responsibility to bolster the education of the campus community about gender diversity and create safe, affirming climates for TGE students (B. Beemyn, 2003; B. Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005).

Further, the emotional consequences and stories of gender policing were prevalent throughout participants’ narratives. The idea of gender policing also elicits important conversation about whether disciplinary action is acceptable, legal, and ethical as it relates to a student’s gender identity. Dialogue about this type of administrative involvement, centered on picking apart a student’s gender identity and expression, represents a marked departure from the historical purpose and formation of women’s colleges (Harwarth et al., 1997). Aspirationally, women’s colleges pride themselves on providing safe, accepting campus communities (Women’s College Coalition, 2018). Title IX is a federal policy that protects students’ ability to fully participate in school activities; students are not supposed to be subject to discrimination based on sex (Kraschel, 2012). Federally funded higher education institutions and those accepting federal financial aid from students are required to adhere to Title IX (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In addition, the HIPAA Privacy Rule protects students’ personal health information and medical records in publicly funded institutions, requiring safeguards to protect privacy and limiting disclosure (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Yet one participant, Vie, recounted being called in to the dean’s office and questioned about taking hormones, a personal health prescription. Given the diversity of TGE students with regard to sex, gender identity, and gender expression, women’s colleges that continue to institute policies that promote administrative practices akin to gender policing should consider the legal and ethical ramifications.

Additionally, there are systemic implications for women’s institutions to continue to grow and thrive with TGE-affirming policies and practices. There are several key stakeholder groups that are valuable contributors to the long-term livelihood and sustainability of women’s colleges, such as alumnx, governing boards, and administrative leaders. Administrative staff must work to educate alumnx groups about the evolution of TGE inclusivity, including a rationale for why these changes ultimately strengthen the campus climate and further anchor the mission of the women’s institution (Nanney, 2017). Higher education leaders and scholars can further promote inclusive policies and practices that support TGE students to not only persist in completing their degrees but thrive in their college experience (Diamond, Erlick, & Wong, 2015).

Finally, our findings support a renewed call for educators to challenge genderism and intersecting systems of oppression on college campuses. Although our findings affirm many prior recommendations calling for more inclusive practices (e.g., Beemyn, 2005), we concur with Nicolazzo’s (2016) critique of “best practices” as a response to evidence of oppressive systems. Instead, we wish to amplify her argument, based on Spade’s (2011) notion of “trickle-up activism,” that “campus environments could be (re)structured” to meet the needs of students experiencing the greatest degree of marginalization (p. 554). Specifically, we propose that women’s college alumnx, board members, administra-

tors, educators, and students work together to restructure the physical, psychological, and organizational dimensions of campus climates (Hurtado et al., 2012) with the needs of TGE students in mind. Taking a trickle-up approach may bolster the well-being and success of all students and would also honor the strength TGE students already exhibit as they navigate and resist genderist environments.

Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

All women's colleges and universities represented in the current study are located in the southeastern United States. The geographical context is important to consider, because some women's colleges in other regions of the country have differing degrees of openness to gender diversity. Furthermore, each geographical region across the country has its own cultural context regarding how open people are to gender diversity in general. Most women's colleges and universities are governed by a board of directors, which implies that the views of those individuals strongly influence the governance of the institution, the rules and guidelines created (such as the transgender policy for one of the institutions in this study), and decisions about how the institution will progress into the future.

The framing of the study included Farmer and Byrd's (2015) definition of *genderism*, which emphasizes prejudice and bias. Although participants' experiences of genderism were powerful and troubling, it is possible that the definition used in this study encouraged participants to emphasize these experiences while deemphasizing concepts that were salient to trans* students participating in other recent studies (e.g., resistance, resilience, and kinship; Nicolazzo, 2016). Future researchers should explore these concepts to contribute to a fuller understanding of the lived experiences of TGE students at women's colleges.

There was an absence of trans women and trans feminine (TWTF) students in this study. The researchers are uncertain whether this is an accurate reflection of TGE students who attend women's colleges or perhaps a trend in only the Southwest, where the study took place. Future research would benefit from the exploration of TWTF students' experiences at women's colleges. In a similar way, only two of the 10 participants (Em and Helen) identified with racially and/or ethnically minoritized identity groups. Because there is a significant gap in the literature on the lived experiences of TGE students of color (Jourian, 2017a), this study would have been strengthened by having more racially and/or ethnically minoritized students. Further, Em and Helen did not voluntarily discuss the intersection of their racial, ethnic, and gender identities, and the authors could have probed with greater intentionality to create space for these intersectional reflections.

It would be beneficial for future studies to examine TGE students' experiences at women's institutions with more affirming policies and practices for gender diversity or institutions in other geographic locations. G. Beemyn (2018) and Nanney and Brunnsma (2017) summarized policies and practices regarding gender diversity at women's institutions. Quantitative measures of wellness, perceived stress, or adjustment to college may also be useful to understand TGE students' experiences across women's colleges.

Conclusion

Through centering the voices of TGE students at women's colleges and universities in this study, experiences of institutional betrayal and trauma emerged. However, stories of courage, self-determination, and resilience also shone through. As an antidote to institutional betrayal, Linder and Myers (2018) introduced the concept of institutional courage in the form of campus activism. For TGE students at women's colleges, courageous action in the face of adversity takes many forms. The authors of this study wish to probe the dialogue surrounding women's colleges and universities to promote inclusive practices and supportive campus environments for TGE students.

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Received November 14, 2018

Revision received April 8, 2019

Accepted May 23, 2019 ■