

# Bigenderism at work? Organizational responses to trans men and trans women employees

Bigenderism at  
work

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to test bigenderism, a universalistic theory that purports to explain why trans men employees enjoy greater organizational acceptance and superior economic outcomes compared to trans women employees.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Respondents were presented with one of two case studies in which they had to choose whether or not to respect the right of a trans employee to use the restroom of their choice at work. The only difference between the two case studies was the gender of the trans employee. In one case, the employee was a trans man and in the other case, the employee was a trans woman.

**Findings** – The gender of the trans employee had no impact on the choices of the respondents.

**Research limitations/implications** – The chief research implication is that heightened discrimination against trans men may better be explained by situational theories of transphobia rather than the universalistic theory that was tested in this paper. The primary research limitation was the use of American undergraduate business students as respondents.

**Practical implications** – Organizations need to be especially vigilant in protecting the restroom rights of their transgender employees, which may entail eliminating gender-segregated restrooms.

**Originality/value** – This paper is original in that it uses an experimental design to test the theory of bigenderism. It adds value by encouraging experimental research that examines situational theories of transphobia.

**Keywords** Transgender, Gender, Employment discrimination, Theories of discrimination, Restrooms

**Paper type** Research paper



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## Introduction

In this paper, we study organizational reactions to transgender employees, particularly whether trans men and trans women receive similar or dissimilar reactions. The goal is to explore the perspective of bigenderism and improve understanding of other relevant theories. Section 2 defines transgender and transphobia, then Section 3 reviews the evidence and theories suggesting that organizations are more hostile to transgender employees who transition from male to female than to their colleagues who transition from female to male. Section 4 experimentally tests one of the theories in the context of the rights of transgender employees to use the restrooms of their choice, Section 5 explains why this is an important workplace issue. Section 6 concludes by discussing the implications of our findings for research and practice.

## Transgender individuals and transphobia

### *Transgender individuals*

Transgender individuals are those who exhibit:

[...] all manifestations of crossing gender barriers. It includes those who cross-dress or are considered to otherwise transgress conventional gender norms, and all others who wish to describe themselves that way (Davis, 2009, p. 111).

Although Bockting (2014, p. 320) notes that “the existence of gender-nonconforming and transgender people has been documented throughout history and across cultures,” their numbers are growing as:

[...] individuals are more likely than ever before to affirm a gender identity different than the one traditionally associated with the sex assigned to them at birth, and the gender expression of more and more people fails to reflect the normative stereotypes expected of them (Currah, 2003, p. 707).

Transgender individuals do not always appreciate being labeled as such because they may feel that they have not transitioned at all but are instead now expressing their true selves (Moser, 2013). However, it is preferable to the term “transgendered”, which they consider to be offensive (Bender-Baird, 2011).

Transgender individuals begin questioning their gender identities during childhood during which time they may believe that they are the only ones in the world with such feelings (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014a). Most but not all transgender individuals wish to transition to a gender other than the one to which they were assigned at birth (Whittle, Turner, & Al-Alami, 2007). The most common direction of transitioning is from male to female (Brown et al., 2012). The gender transition process often takes years (Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2013).

Transitioning while at work is particularly stressful as transitioning employees may fear negative repercussions that can include: fear of losing their current job, discrimination, prejudice and harassment from coworkers, social isolation, etc. (Brewster, Velez, Mennicke, & Tebbe, 2014; Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010; Walworth, 2003). Sometimes the stress is so severe that it can lead to suicidal thoughts (Budge et al., 2010). In fact, transgender individuals with successful careers often hide their transgender identity at work (Thanem, 2011). While there is no doubt that transgender employees are often stigmatized and marginalized while transitioning at work, there may be economic and psychological advantages associated with keeping one’s job while transitioning (Pepper & Lorah, 2008). For example, Drydakis (2016) observed increases over time in job satisfaction for employees who underwent gender reassignment surgery. In a cross-sectional study, Martinez, Sawyer, Thoroughood, Ruggs, and Smith (2017) found a positive relationship between job

satisfaction and the extent of gender transition. Keeping the same job while transitioning provides financial and emotional stability that one loses if one does not work during transition or changes place of employment.

Additionally, transgender individuals face several challenges that differentiate them from the rest of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community. The concealment option, which is available to lesbian, gay and bisexual employees is closed to those who begin transitioning without leaving their current employers (Barclay & Scott, 2006), while the use of social media by employers has made concealment of transgender status increasingly difficult to maintain (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014b). Transgender employees may experience social isolation and find themselves excluded from the informal networks that are important for professional success (Collins et al., 2015).

### *Transphobia*

Transgender individuals suffer from a form of discrimination known as “transphobia”, which can be defined as:

“the motivating force for negative reactions to transgendered people that involve fear and disgust on the part of the observer [...] that is often manifest in the fear of personal acquaintances becoming transgendered or revulsion on learning one is transgendered or meeting a transgendered person (Hill, 2002, p. 119–120).

Victims of transphobia include “masculine women, feminine men, cross-dressers or transgenders” (Bandini & Maggi, 2014, p. 49). Not surprisingly, transphobia has a negative effect on the mental and physical health of transgender employees. “Anticipatory stigma” (Mizock & Mueser, 2014, p. 154), the expectation of employer hostility, influences employment decisions and raises unemployment rates for transgender individuals. Paranoia and emotional arousal are also common issues for transgender employees (Sawyer, Thoroughgood, & Webster, 2016).

While all minority employees experience microaggressions at work, which are defined as “communications of prejudice and discrimination expressed through seemingly meaningless and unharmed tactics” (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011, p. 210), Nadal et al., (2012) identified 12 types of microaggressions that transgender individuals may experience, ranging from the use of incorrect gender terminology to physical harassment. The emotional reactions of transgender individuals to these microaggressions include anger, betrayal, distress, hopelessness and exhaustion and feeling invalidated or misunderstood (Nadal et al., 2014). According to Brower (2016), American transgender employees are harassed in ways that differ from their LGB coworkers. Specifically, they are denied access to the bathrooms of their choice, deliberately referred to using incorrect pronouns and asked inappropriate and invasive questions about their surgical status. Employees’ coping mechanisms to deal with transphobia may be negative such as avoiding coworkers and disengaging from work (Mizock et al., 2017).

Men are more likely than women to be homophobic and transphobic (Walch et al., 2014). Predictors of transphobia other than gender and homophobia include traditional gender role attitudes and the need for closure (Tebbe & Moradi, 2012). The need for closure refers to a distaste for uncertainty and people with a high need for closure tend to dislike heterogeneous groups, as well as groups whose characteristics differ from their own (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Additional predictors of transphobia include low self-esteem and moral dogmatism (Willoughby et al., 2010).

About one-quarter of trans men and about one-eighth of trans women have heterosexual gender identities (Galupo et al., 2016). Although homosexuals tend to be much less

transphobic than heterosexuals (Warriner et al., 2013), transgender individuals are not always welcomed by other members of the LGBT community. As Morrison (2010, p. 660) explains, “just as homosexuality challenges assumptions of heterosexuality, transsexuality – particularly in its pre-operative state – dramatically challenges the grounding of both.” That transgender individuals are outcasts in comparison to the rest of the LGBT community is shown by the fact that half of the American states that protect lesbian, gay and bisexual workers from employment discrimination do not extend these same rights to transgender workers (General Accounting Office, 2009). Also, transgender individuals are much more likely to suffer employment discrimination than other members of the LGBT community (Kattari et al., 2016).

As one might expect given the diversity of the transgender community, there are several acceptable methods of describing those transgender individuals who have transitioned or are transitioning. In this paper, we shall use the terms “trans men” and “trans women.” A trans man is a man who was born with female genitalia and a trans woman is a woman who was born with male genitalia. Approximately one out of every 200 people identify as transgender and there are about twice as many trans women as trans men (Collin et al., 2016). Implicit in the transphobia literature is the assumption that trans men are as transgressive as trans women, as both groups challenge the binary gender system. For example, Hill and Willoughby (2005, p. 534), define genderism as follows:

[...] an ideology that reinforces the negative evaluation of gender non-conformity or an incongruence between sex and gender. It is a cultural belief that perpetuates negative judgments of people who do not present as a stereotypical man or woman.

An equally gender-neutral definition of genderism is “the discriminatory encounters individuals experience when they are read as the opposite sex than the one they identify with” (Browne, 2004, p. 342). Essentially genderism is to transphobia as racism is to xenophobia. Consequently, the genderism and transphobia scale includes a roughly equal number of questions about both groups such as “feminine men make me feel uncomfortable” and “masculine women make me feel uncomfortable” (Tebbe et al., 2014).

#### *Evidence of a moderating effect of gender transition on transphobia*

Worthen (2013) suggests that attitudes toward trans men and trans women should be explored to fully comprehend transphobia. Quantitative research designs appear to be the optimal research method to determine whether trans women face more discrimination at work than trans men. However, the dominant methodology for studying transgender workplace issues has been qualitative (McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016). Nonetheless, most but not all evidence from comparative studies indicates that trans men are viewed more favorably than trans women. For example, Gerhardstein and Anderson’s (2010) experiment determined that women had more negative attitudes toward trans women than trans men although men’s attitudes toward the two groups did not differ significantly. Schilt & Connell (2007) observed that male employees had negative attitudes about trans women but that they were surprisingly welcoming to trans men:

Heterosexual men might be expected to bar transmen from becoming men at work, as this move could challenge their own claim to masculinity. However, transmen describe heterosexual men going out of their way to include them in all-male interactions (Schilt & Connell, 2007, p. 615).

Schilt (2010, pp. 133–134) compared the experiences of trans men and trans women and concluded that “while not all transmen had smooth workplace transitions, they did not report nearly the same level of organizational opposition and coworker harassment as

transwomen.” A quantitative analysis of survey data by [Schilt & Wiswall \(2008\)](#) found gender transition significantly reduces the earnings of trans women while slightly increasing the earnings of trans men. [Dietert and Dentice \(2010, p. 126\)](#) noted that trans men “may experience male privilege as a result of their transition” along with its attendant benefits such as pay raises. [Sangganjanavanich & Cavazos \(2010, p. 191\)](#) express a concurring opinion, that as follows:

[ . . . ] many transitioned women (a) may need to cope with a loss of male privilege that they used to have before gender transition and (b) may face discrimination against women in the workplace.

In the belief that the female to male transition is associated with economic benefits, some feminists have criticized trans men for taking advantage of a sexist economic system instead of fighting to change it ([Noble, 2004](#)). [Reisner et al. \(2016\)](#) determined that trans women suffer more posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms than trans men, although as discussed below the same study found that trans men experience more everyday discrimination than trans women.

Examining the same issue, [Dispenza et al. \(2012, p. 72\)](#) found that trans men complained of “horizontal oppressions,” incidents of discrimination by other members of the LGBT community including trans women. [Whittle et al. \(2007, p. 38\)](#) found “negligible” differences between trans men and trans women in the likelihood of missing a promotion or feeling socially excluded. In [Lombardi’s \(2009, p. 985\)](#) survey of transgender individuals, “birth assignment, gender identity and gender presentation did not have a statistically significant relationship with any of the measures of transphobia.” [Carroll et al. \(2013\)](#) surveyed US undergraduate students and observed that men had lower opinions of trans men than trans women, whereas women had equivalent attitudes toward both groups. [Bailey \(2014\)](#) suggests that almost all transgender employees experience workplace discrimination, which implies that trans men are just as likely as trans women to be discriminated against. [Reisner et al. \(2016\)](#) determined that trans men experience more discrimination than trans women, although as discussed above the same study found that trans women suffer more posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms than trans men. [Dickey et al. \(2016\)](#) found no significant differences between trans men and trans women in terms of career decision self-efficacy. Based on the above discussion, it is clear that the evidence favoring trans men over trans women is not conclusive.

Most of the previously cited research has surveyed trans men and trans women. However, that research design is problematic for several reasons. First, a challenge with studies using any members of the LGBT community as participants is that random sampling is impossible ([Meyer & Wilson, 2009](#)), which means that results “are not apt to be representative of the entire transgender population in terms of age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomics or gender identity” ([Reisner et al., 2014, p. 99](#)). [Hughes, Emel, Hanscom, and Zanganeh \(2016\)](#) concur that the use of nonrandom sampling in studies of transgender individuals makes it difficult to estimate prevalence rates within the transgender population. Second, self-reports of discrimination against transgender individuals use scales with questionable content and construct validity ([Morrison et al., 2017](#)).

Finally, self-reports of discrimination are inaccurate. Two sources of error in this context are minimization bias and vigilance bias. Minimization bias underestimates discrimination, whereas vigilance bias overestimates discrimination ([Lewis et al., 2015](#)). It can be inferred that women tend to suffer from minimization bias because perceived discrimination is negatively related to subjective career success ([Herrbach & Mignonac, 2012](#)) yet women and men do not differ in subjective career success even though women experience less objective career success than men ([Ng & Feldman, 2014](#)). As minimization bias causes self-reported

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discrimination against women to be underestimated, it might have the same effect on the measurement of self-reported discrimination against trans women.

### Theory

Our theoretical framework is “bigenderism.” It is derived from genderism, which is the opinion that there are only two immutable genders (Bilodeau, 2009) and that anybody who challenges this belief is deviant (Worthen & Dirks, 2016). This belief system pervades all aspects of social relations and has been described as “resilient and compulsory” (Nicholas, 2014, p. 17). Genderism appears to predict that trans men and trans women will be perceived to be equally transgressive and should, therefore, face the same amount of societal discrimination.

However, according to Gilbert (2009, p. 105) “bigenderism maintains a binary gender distinction, a higher valuation for male and masculine and a strict correlation between sex and gender.” Adherents to bigenderism are biased against trans people and also against women, which means that they have a more negative attitude toward trans women than toward trans men. They could be especially biased against trans women for two reasons as follows: first, while both men and women may be concerned about how to deal with feelings of physical attraction toward transgender individuals, the societal prohibition against homosexuality is stronger for men than for women (Worthen, 2013), which should make men’s fear of trans women greater than women’s fear of trans men. This could explain why, as discussed previously, men tend to be more transphobic than women (Walch et al., 2014). Second, adherents to bigenderism should disapprove of the rejection of masculinity by trans women because it runs counter to the core values of bigenderism.

Bigenderism is an appropriate theoretical framework for our study because it is universalistic. In other words, it predicts that in all situations trans women will receive inferior treatment compared to trans men. There are situational theories that predict circumstances under which trans women and trans men will face differing levels of discrimination, some of which are briefly reviewed at the end of this paper and they should be examined if the theory of bigenderism is disproven.

### Method

Our research question is whether trans women face more societal discrimination than trans men. This necessitates a quantitative research design because we are trying to determine if one quantity (discrimination against trans women) is greater than another quantity (discrimination against trans men). Fisher et al. (2019) concur that quantitative research is necessary to determine the prevalence of discrimination against members of the LGBTQ community. In this section, we describe the context of our study, our research design and our measures.

#### *Restroom rights of transgender employees*

In this study, we focus on the rights of transgender employees to use the restrooms of their choice. Although we shall demonstrate that restroom rights are a serious issue, we understand that this represents just one of the workplace challenges of transgender employees. Kelan (2010, p. 179) explains as follows:

In studying how gender achieves its status as a reality, created outside of situations, ethnomethodologists study perceptual, interactional, and micro-political activities as if they occur afresh in every new situation.

Therefore, the totality of the transgender workplace experience can best be understood through multiple situational studies.

Because of the societal taboo around discussing the activities that take place in toilets “it is easy to overlook how the modern attitude toward sanitation has been forged along lines of historical prejudice” (Faktor, 2011, p. 11). It is commonly assumed that public bathrooms need to be gender-segregated for safety and privacy and to accommodate anatomical differences (Antony, 1998), but Kogan (2007, p. 54) demonstrates that the motivations for legislating this practice in workplaces “were deeply bound up with early nineteenth-century moral ideology concerning the appropriate role and place for women in society”.

Public restrooms have not been a timeless characteristic of human civilization. They fell out of favor for over a thousand years after the fall of Rome (Braverman, 2009). The first public lavatory for women in London was not constructed until the beginning of the twentieth century and faced fierce opposition at the time (Nirta, 2014) and there is scholarly disagreement as to whether the original purpose of the ladies’ room was to emancipate or to oppress women (Jefferys, 2014). Today, almost all restrooms in workplaces are segregated by gender (Huesmann, 2016). Sex segregated facilities are considered to perpetuate male privilege because they “provide an important arena for men to engage with other men and exchange socially valued knowledge” (Cohen, 2010, p. 543) because men’s restrooms tend to be superior in terms of both availability and location (Anthony & Dufresne, 2007) and because they perpetuate stereotypes of women as being vain and weaker (Levy, 2011).

To transgender employees, access to the bathrooms of their choice is not a trivial issue. In Bender-Baird’s (2011, p. 82) study of American transgender men and women, “nearly every participant brought up the issue of bathrooms, whether I solicited it or not.” Schuster, Reisner, and Onorato (2016) argue that serious health consequences such as kidney infections are caused by transgender individuals’ lack of restroom access. Storrow (2002, p. 155) explains the importance of restroom usage as follows:

Restrooms have become a powerful symbol for the right of the transgendered members of our society to be allowed the very means to survive. The fear that transsexuals will wreak havoc in the workplace by making other employees uncomfortable in the restroom fuels a hysteria that greatly impedes any progress to be made in the area of equal employment opportunity for the transgendered.

### *Research design*

Participants were 473 business students at a medium-sized public university in the northeastern US who were enrolled in an undergraduate course in organizational behavior. The instructors added reading to the required course materials entitled “transgender issues in the workplace” (Empire State Pride Agenda, 2009) and presented a case after students had read about and discussed this topic in class. Tompkins et al. (2015) determine that educational material, which is how the assigned reading would be categorized, is less effective than humanizing material that features conversations with transgender individuals. However, Rudin et al. (2016) found the assigned reading to be substantially more effective in reducing transphobia than providing no preparation at all to students.

The case was entitled “I’m not sharing a bathroom with ‘it’” and can be found in its entirety in the Appendix. The scenario was set in Little Rock, AR. In total, 13 states and over 100 cities have outlawed gender identity discrimination in employment (Kelly, 2010), but Little Rock and Arkansas are not among them. The case asked the students to play the role of a CEO receiving a complaint from an employee about using the same restroom as a coworker who is transitioning. Resistance to transitioning employees from coworkers and/

or supervisors is to be expected (Taylor et al., 2011). Referring to a transitioning coworker as “it” displays extreme insensitivity, as it is considered “best to refer to transgender persons by the name and pronoun that correspond to their gender identity” (Kirk & Belovics, 2008, p. 36).

In the fall semester of Year 1, 221 of the students were given the case. The other 252 students were given the case in the following fall semester of Year 2. In Year 1, the transitioning coworker was “Roberta, who was born as a male named Robert but who now identifies as female and plans to have gender reassignment surgery as soon as she can afford it” but in Year 2 the transitioning coworker was “Robert, who was born as a female named Roberta but who now identifies as male and plans to have gender reassignment surgery as soon as he can afford it”.

Our research design is very similar to the one that was employed by Dunn-Jensen, Jensen, Calhoun, and Ryan (2016), who developed two cases for which the only difference was the use of the pronouns “he” and “him” vs “she” and “her.” It is inspired by correspondence tests, a method of assessing racial and ethnic discrimination in which employers are sent two fictitious but nearly identical job applications that only vary in terms of the demographic characteristics of the applicants (Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2014). Koch et al. (2015, p. 140) summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of experiments such as ours, as follows:

Some argue that laboratory studies using ‘paper people’ are not similar enough to actual organizational scenarios to allow one to generalize laboratory findings in the workplace. On the other hand, the lack of experimental control of field-based studies leaves one unable to rule out other plausible explanations when it is found that one gender receives higher ratings than the other (i.e. are there true gender differences)?

### *Measures*

Students answered three open-ended questions about the case, as shown in the Appendix. The third question was of chief interest and it was “What solution best satisfies the needs of the company and its employees?” The instructors for the course used a common rubric to classify responses as hostility, compliance or inclusion. This paper’s senior author trained each instructor in the use of the rubric. Hostility, compliance and inclusion represent three of the organizational perspectives on sexual minorities according to Rocco, Landorf, and Delgado (2009). Hostility excludes and devalues LGBT employees, compliance establishes and maintains consistent corporate policies that obey applicable laws and inclusion involves “changing the culture of the organization so that sexual minorities feel they can belong openly and safely” (Rocco et al., 2009, p. 13). The term “sexual minorities” refers to individuals who because of their sexualities, “are denied rights other citizens enjoy” (van Loo & Rocco, 2009, p. 83). A fuller discussion of the relationship between transgender theory and organizational perspectives on sexual minorities can be found in Rudin et al. (2014).

Hostility, the most transphobic perspective, as exemplified by denial of the transitioning employee’s right to use the restroom of his or her choice, an outcome, which Weinberg (2010, p. 250) characterizes as “unfair and unreasonable” and which “singles [transgender employees] out for embarrassment and humiliation” (Twing & Williams, 2010, pp. 196–197). An example of a hostile response was “once Robert has his surgery, he will be able to use the male bathroom” because the case made it clear that Robert had not yet undergone surgery. Compliance, which may be with either law or policy according to Rocco et al.’s (2009) framework, was the appropriate classification for responses that instructed the complaining employee to respect the co-worker’s wishes. Because it preserves the gender binary while



showing some respect for transgender employees' rights, this response exemplifies an intermediate level of transphobia. An example of a compliant response was to "allow Roberta to use whatever bathroom she feels comfortable in."

The most inclusive answer was to make the restrooms unisex. Bender-Baird (2011, pp. 83–84) interviewed 20 American transgender men and women and found that "several expressed an appreciation for unisex, family or single-stall bathrooms because it was one less thing they had to worry about." According to Overall (2007, p. 85), "the absence of toilets that can be used safely and comfortably by gender – and sex-nonconformists" sends a message "that such persons are not wanted, are not thought to have any rights and, perhaps, even are thought not to "really" exist." Doan (2010) argues that gender-segregated restrooms contribute to the daily experience of tyranny that transgender individuals endure and Herman (2013, p. 66) concurs that they cause "minority stress" in the workplace with physical and mental health consequences for transgender employees. An example of an inclusive response was "make sure to have unisex bathrooms so the discussion of what bathroom transgender people should use is not an issue".

**Results**

Responses needed to remain anonymous because students would be less inhibited and more willing to share their true feelings if they could not be identified. Avery & Steingard (2008) agree that anonymity can be useful in diversity education contexts because it reduces self-censorship. Although there is no demographic information about individual students, 91 per cent of the students in the organizational behavior classes participated and there is demographic information for the organizational behavior classes as a whole. Table 1 compares the demographic characteristics of the Year 1 and Year 2 organizational behavior classes. The age and gender distributions were similar in both years.

Table 2 shows the results of a trinomial logistic regression analysis in which the dependent variable is response choice (inclusion, compliance or hostility). The two independent variables are year, which also corresponds to the direction of gender transition and instructor gender. As previously discussed, men have been found to be more transphobic than women (Walch et al, 2014). Therefore, a social desirability effect might

Year	Percentage of female	Percentage of 25 years of age or older
1	27.5	8.4
2	32.1	6.9
<i>n</i>	498	512
$\chi^2$	1.26	0.42
Significance	0.28	0.62

**Table 1.**  
Demographic comparison, Year 1 (trans women) and Year 2 (trans men) student cohorts

Independent variable	$\chi^2$
year	4.21
Instructor gender	3.13
Pseudo $R^2$	0.01

**Table 2.**  
Trinomial logistic regression analysis (dependent variable = response choice)

**Notes:** \*Significant,  $p < 0.05$

occur in which students with female instructors claim to be less transphobic than they really are. No coefficients are statistically significant and the explanatory power of the model is low.

Table 3 compares student responses in Year 1 and Year 2. There was almost no difference at all between the responses. There was no evidence of a moderating effect of the two types of gender transition. Interestingly, no student in either year recommended that the transitioning employee be fired to resolve the restroom conflict. Such a virulently hostile response would have been legal in Little Rock, where the case was situated.

**Discussion**

The preponderance of the evidence suggests that trans women encounter more transphobia than trans men, yet this study found none. This raises two possibilities. The first is that there really is no moderating effect of gender transition on transphobia. This conclusion would obviously be premature based on the results of our single study, however, the possibility cannot be ignored that we may be examining a nonexistent phenomenon. The second possibility is that there is a moderating effect of gender transition on transphobia but it is situational and the scenario described in our research design failed to elicit it. Two situational theories that purport to explain greater discrimination are briefly reviewed below.

*Passing problems*

A coping mechanism that may be used by transgender individuals at work is “going stealth.” As Bender-Baird (2011, p. 44) explains:

“Going stealth” is a term some trans people use to indicate that they blend into society as their affirmed gender and no one (or only a very few) know about their gender history.

The process includes not only changes to outward appearance but also changes to behavior, which is referred to as “passing” (Schilt, 2010, p. 51). If it is less effective for trans women than for trans men, then trans women will experience more transphobia.

Some evidence in support of this theory is provided by Moser’s (2013) survey, in which about a third of respondents in the female spectrum but only one respondent in the male spectrum claimed that they were usually unable to pass. Similarly, in Schilt and Wiswall’s (2008) survey, 56 per cent of trans men but only 17 per cent of trans women described themselves as always passing. Whittle et al. (2007) claim that it takes many more years for trans women to pass, compared to trans men.

*Penis panic*

This theory assumes a societal belief that men must be kept away from vulnerable locations such as women’s restrooms where:

**Table 3.**  
Response choice  
comparison, Year 1  
(trans women) and  
Year 2 (trans men)  
student cohorts

Year	Inclusion	Compliance	Hostility
1	62.0	21.7	16.3
2	61.5	22.6	15.9
<i>n</i>	473	473	473
$\chi^2$	0.012	0.056	0.015
Significance	0.93	0.83	0.90

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[. . .] their presence transforms a nonsexual space into a dangerously (hetero)sexual one. Within this heteronormative logic, all bodies with male anatomies, regardless of gender identity, desire female bodies, and many of them (enough to elicit concern from the public) are willing to use force to get access to those bodies (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014, p. 48).

These fears, although unfounded, are not uncommon. For example, in Brewster et al.'s (2014, p. 166) survey, female coworkers "were sometimes described as being uncomfortable" with the idea that trans women should use the women's bathroom.

Danger does lurk in gender-segregated restrooms but transgender individuals are the victims, not the perpetrators. In Herman's (2013) study, 14 per cent of trans women and 5 per cent of trans men were physically assaulted in gender-segregated restrooms. Cavanagh (2010, p. 69) recounts that some trans women "speak about an assault by non-trans male vigilantes who think they are protecting cissexual women from "male sexual predators" posing as "women" in the lavatory".

## Conclusion

Our results were entirely inconsistent with the belief that there is a moderating component to transphobia which is especially unfavorable to trans women. However, the preponderance of previous research indicates a moderating effect of gender transition and three sets of theories have been proposed to explain it. So, although the question is definitely worthy of further study, we continue to assume that there really are differential employment experiences for these two groups of transgender individuals and that our research failed to trigger any of its causes.

A chief implication of our study for organizations with policies that protect transgender employees from discrimination is that careful monitoring and additional training are necessary. About one-sixth of our respondents chose to deny restroom rights to the transgender employee, a response that would violate any applicable laws, as the other employees were free to choose their restrooms. Some companies have made more progress than others in fostering a welcoming working environment for members of the LGBT community (Konrad, 2006), but even these diversity leaders may suffer from a knowledge deficit about transgender individuals that can only be remedied through training (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). Another clear organizational implication from our study is that sex segregation in workplace restroom facilities should be eliminated. Previous scholars as reviewed above have made this suggestion, but our study suggests that the best way to ensure that all transgender employees have equal restroom access rights is to remove the managerial option of denying these rights. If there are no men's restrooms or women's restrooms, there can be no conflict over restroom usage by transgender employees.

Scholars who examine discrimination against transgender employees usually call for the passage of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, a proposed federal law that would protect members of the LGBT community from discrimination (Bailey, 2014). Although this law could weaken the protections that already exist in some states (Rudin, 2011), it would clearly represent an improvement for those who work in states that do not protect them at all. However, transphobia may be more powerful than other forms of discrimination because the gender binary persists even though racism and sexism are now generally considered to be socially unacceptable. Therefore, organizations may be more likely to overtly break the law for transgender employees than for female and racial minority employees. Should future research confirm a moderating effect of gender transition on transphobia, lawmakers may consider raising the penalties or lowering the burdens of proof in cases where the

victims are trans women. Trans women have very high unemployment rates (Hill et al., 2017), which is another argument in favor of their special treatment under anti-discrimination law. Another way in which the law could be strengthened would be to impose or increase penalties on employers who reveal that employees are transgender individuals without the employees' consent. Unauthorized employer disclosure of transgender status has a negative effect on transgender employees' careers (Mennicke & Cutler-Seeber, 2016).

There are many future research possibilities. To disconfirm bigenderism, more studies using our research design would be helpful. If there is indeed no universalistic employer preference for trans men over trans women, then the other theories can be empirically examined without concern that bigenderism is influencing the results. Another interesting test for bigenderism could examine reactions to transgender individuals who do not associate themselves with a particular gender. Although all definitions are controversial, the term "transsexual" is often applied to the subset of transgender individuals who are trans men or trans women (Elliott, 2010). About 15 per cent of the transgender population consider themselves to be neither trans men nor trans women (Crissman et al., 2017) and this subgroup may elicit the most transphobia as they may be the most transgressive of the binary gender distinction. Another important issue that should be addressed is the intersection between transgender status and other demographic characteristics such as age, body size, class, ethnicity and religion (de Vries, 2015). This would facilitate the detection of "intersectional microaggressions" which are defined as "microaggressions that occur because of multiple identities" (Nadal et al., 2015, p. 148).

We also suggest that researchers should devote more attention to workplace restrooms. Current studies exclusively focus on gender and/or legal issues such as the right to privacy (Levinson, 2011). Restrooms may also serve other important functions for employees. For example, they may serve as places of refuge from excessive job demands, locations that facilitate socialization with same-gender coworkers and opportunities to surreptitiously surf the internet. We might learn a lot about how work is experienced from the workers' perspective by studying the non-obvious things that workers do in workplace restrooms.

Finally, researchers should consider re-evaluating the prevalence and impact of transphobia. The current President of the USA is perceived to be less committed to LGBT rights than his immediate predecessor (Byne, 2017), which may either cause or reflect a negative shift in societal attitudes toward sexual minorities in the American workplace. Accordingly, future studies of American transgender employees might find an increased likelihood that they suffer from workplace discrimination and might also find that the effects of workplace discrimination have become more severe.

The chief limitation of our research is one that is shared with many previous studies, which is that our participants were American students. Although Norton and Herek (2013) found transphobia to be uncorrelated with age, it would be worthwhile to replicate this study with older participants whose ages more closely approximate those of the people who make such decisions in the real world. Clearly more research of non-American populations is needed, as the majority of the world's transgender individuals live outside the USA. Another limitation is that we conducted this study in consecutive years instead of distributing two versions of the case during the same year, but that would have been a greater concern had we found any significant differences between the two sets of responses because we could not have been certain that it had been caused by a moderating effect rather than a temporal effect.

Another limitation of our research is that our respondents were not trans people. That may be appropriate in this context because we are examining transphobia among non-trans

people, but an excellent research design that has been underused so far in this context would study trans people and their non-trans coworkers. This could overcome the concern about using trans people as respondents, which is that random sampling is impossible and the concern about using non-trans people as respondents, which is that they have no firsthand knowledge of the challenges of transgender employees.

Our study casts some doubts about the existence of a moderating effect of gender transition on transphobia, it raises some issues about bigenderism as an explanatory factor for any such effect and it implies that transphobia is situational. Although there are not a huge number of people who are victims of transphobia, its effects are devastating. We cannot end transphobia until we know why it occurs and we can gain valuable insights by exploring the multitude of situations encountered by transgender individuals at work.

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## Appendix

“I’m not sharing a bathroom with “it””

You are the CEO of a company in Little Rock, AR. Your company has two small, identical bathrooms, one for men and one for women. One of your employees, Sheila, says “I’m not sharing a bathroom with “it”. You know that “it” refers to one of her coworkers, Roberta, who was born as a male named Robert but who now identifies as female and plans to have gender reassignment surgery as soon as she can afford it.\*

- The law in Little Rock prohibits discrimination based on age (if over 40, which Roberta is not), sex, race, religion, skin color, ethnicity and disability (which Roberta does not have). Does Roberta have the right to nondiscriminatory treatment because of her gender identity transformation?
- What are three dimensions of diversity (ways in which people differ) that could be relevant in this case?
- What solution best satisfies the needs of the company and its employees?

\*In Year 2, these two sentences were changed to the following:

One of your employees, Cecil, says “I’m not sharing a bathroom with ‘it’”. You know that “it” refers to one of his coworkers, Robert, who was born as a female named Roberta but who now identifies as male and plans to have gender reassignment surgery as soon as he can afford it.

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