

Enhancing Workplace Inclusivity for TGNC (Transgender/Nonconforming) Communities: “A Path to Psychological-Safety”

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Abstract: Discrimination against transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals remains a pervasive issue, significantly impacting their psychological safety and overall well-being. This marginalised community faces an array of challenges, including experiencing homelessness, poverty, and harassment, which are interconnected and, to a considerable extent, a consequence of systemic discrimination. Studies by Tebbe et al. (2019) reveal that the TGNC community grapples with disproportionately high rates of homelessness, poverty, and harassment, thus highlighting the systemic nature of the challenges they confront. Workplace discrimination within the TGNC community extends across a spectrum, impacting individuals' authenticity and potential for forced engagement in underground economy work to offset poverty, including survival sex work and drug dealing (Par & Howe, 2020). Workplace discrimination is a pivotal determinant of psychological safety and well-being for TGNC individuals. Frazier et al. (2017) emphasise the critical importance of preventing discrimination and conflict in the workplace, which contributes to negative mental health outcomes. The consequences of discrimination are profound. A significant portion of the TGNC community reports a history of suicidal ideation, ranging from 45% to 77% (Testa et al., 2017). Promoting psychological safety and well-being for this marginalised community is not only a moral imperative, but also a pathway to fostering more prosperous and inclusive societies. This research utilises a qualitative methodology, through semi-structured interviews among diverse gender identities. By exploring the lived experiences of TGNC individuals in the workplace, this study uncovers the impact of discrimination on psychological well-being. The results of the findings demonstrate how to improve the psychological-safety of gender-diverse communities through

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1. Introduction

The transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) community face discrimination rates that systemically influence all factors of this community's psychological safety. This includes living with homeless, poverty, and harassment rates (Tebbe et al., 2019). Experienced workplace discrimination is a large spectrum for this community. On one end, it ranges from individuals feeling unable to live authentically and fear of being fired. Conversely, it has forced more than a quarter of reported unemployed TGNC individuals into survival work, such as survival sex work and drug dealing (Par & Howe, 2020).

Workplace discrimination can be a determining variable for someone who identifies as transgender or gender-expansive in being able to experience workplace psychological safety. Sharma (2019) states that more companies are benefiting their performance by having leadership and management make intentional initiatives to create more diverse environments for their employees. There is an increase within the newer generations of employees who are driven by making their work meaningful. Including expectations of purpose with elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Herndon & McCline, 2017). Efforts in this area are proven to increase productivity and promote workplace loyalty and performance (Kundu & Mor, 2017). For TGNC individuals, workplace peer acceptance can be life-changing. When employees view their peers as equals and value inclusion, workplace psychological safety increases, improving the environment for everyone (Frazier et al., 2017). When management participates in transformational change and make cultures DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging)-centered, TGNC individuals must be included in this effort. Thompson et al. (2018) present why all levels of management must be responsible for creating motivation and employee incentives for action.

The general business psychology problem is discrimination experienced by TGNC individuals in the workplace. The specific business psychology problem is understanding how transgender individuals experience workplace discrimination and the impact of stigmas associated with gender identity in the workplace. The gap in the literature is the limited amount of research on gender-diversity and its impact on workplace discrimination and the psychological safety of TGNC workers.

2. Literature Review

For individuals who identify as transgender or gender-expansive, a different reality sets them apart from the other LGB community (lesbian, gay, bisexual community) and their cisgender (not identifying as transgender) colleagues. These experiences vary depending on the individual. They range from physical aggression to micro-aggressions, such as underemployment, unemployment, and survival employment. In approximately half of U.S. states, there are limited or no protections against workplace discrimination for sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity (Lee et al., 2019).

Existing literature has demonstrated the trends of lack of acceptance, poverty, and impact on mental health for the TGNC population. Some studies cover the barriers to career upward mobility, like promotions (Rudin et al., 2020). Others put a greater emphasis on violence experienced on a daily basis due to the TGNC population not having access to higher standards of living due to their gender identity (Lim et al., 2020). There is a gap present in current research on how leaders can make changes in the workplace for special populations like the TGNC community.

3. Understanding the TGNC Population

3.1 Intersectionality

Issues involving the transgender and gender-expansive community will always include other intersectionality in social identity, such as those who are Black, Indigenous, and Person of Colour. This has further contributed to this population being historically underrepresented in research (Beauregard et al., 2016). As well as underrepresented in the yearly murders of transgender sex workers due to the nature of not being acknowledged as being transgender or being undocumented. Parmenter et al. (2021) discuss the impact of how those within the LGBTQ+ community who identify as people of colour may not have equal access to LGBTQ+ community resilience resources. This can contribute to the lack of reporting and data collection, which ultimately impacts the quality of life. Tillery et al. (2018) presents their research on how sexual minorities may not report violence, and they may have the perception that their allegations will be dismissed by law enforcement. This aligns with other research discussing how those living with the intersectionality of being a transgender sex worker experience a triple threat of sexism, racism, and classism through policing (Bolivar, 2017).

3.2 Femininity and Sexism

Trans Women and those who identify with femininity, specifically face a significant disadvantage in this population (Yavorsky, 2016). A study conducted by Schilt & Connell (2007) observed how male employees respond differently to trans masculine identifying individuals, compared to attitudes about trans women. Similar to other studies, this did not take into account "passing" or if a trans individual was perceived as transgender or cisgender. In these instances, it is also challenging to determine if the cis coworkers were even aware the trans masculine identifying person was even transgender versus the trans women studied in this survey (Asquith et al., 2019). This study can also be compared to another, where male individuals presented higher cisgender and heterosexist attitudes than female individuals in general.

These different forms of discrimination are due to variables such as gender identity expression and sexism. Prior research has demonstrated the impact of trans feminine individuals' income decreasing due to their gender identity (Leppel, 2021). Salaries were impacted by gender identity for Trans Women, which have reported falling by one-third after transitioning (Davidson, 2016). As mentioned earlier, this study does not include those who may have been fired for not coinciding with the bigender normatively.

4. Workplace Psychological Safety

Han & Roh (2020) discuss how workplace psychological safety impacts team collaboration, decision-making, and general safety behaviours. Workplace psychological safety consists of the stakeholders' trust in organisations and their security of being in an environment conducive to productivity through management, structures, and processes. Lerner (2021) presents that for the transgender community, this includes recognition, accountability, and policies as influential factors contributing to one's experience of safety in the workplace. Research has demonstrated that those from underrepresented demographics need a secure climate where they work in order to feel comfortable continuing to invest in their future at a workplace (Arasli et al., 2019). When workplace psychological safety is not prioritised, it can lead to other issues. This includes burnout, negative job

performance, and experienced discrimination (Mueller, 2019). Other researchers have also presented that workplace psychological safety is a necessity in order for organisations to grow (Smeets et al., 2021). This is why workplace psychological safety is considered acting as a dominant driver of learning from errors, as leaders of an organisation can create change.

5. The Impact of Discrimination on Employees

Discrimination, as faced by employees, does not have a one size fits all experience. Kleps (2022) argues that discrimination is not universally recognised. This means that the definition is subject to a shifting and continually contested concept as it relates to the communities experiencing it. Research has demonstrated both the physical and mental implications of discrimination on employees in the workplace. Kim et al. (2020) presents how depression increases risks associated with physical and mental problems. Research by Staiger et al. (2018) discusses how those who experience discrimination in the workplace reported more significant distress as well as more physical health problems. There is also the elevated risk of long-term sickness absence due to mental disorders and growing distrust of organisations where it goes without intervention by management, as discussed in research by Clark et al. (2020) and Guo (2017). This creates both long- and short-term issues when examining a decrease in overall work productivity.

6. Inclusive Workplace Cultures

When there is both positive and negative workplace psychological contract, it can have a domino effect and impact the entire organisation (Sharma & Prasad, 2022). This influences areas such as vital resources, time, energy, respect, and dignity. In organisations where inclusive workplace cultures are valued, there is higher job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Clark et al., 2020). In addition, research by Haq et al. (2018) shows the impact of a lack of inclusive workplace cultures. Where discrimination may be a part of the culture, this study demonstrates that in these organisations, there is a positive correlation between workplace bullying and employee cynicism and distrust.

In organisations that prioritise an inclusive workplace culture, efforts to demonstrate allyship by leaders are crucial. Research by Dunn, N. (2021) demonstrates the importance of the impact of leadership, management, and resource groups in workplaces, including "allies." This is because it shows collaborative support and understanding of each group's identity and unique purpose. Dowell et al. (2019) state that by management implementing efforts of diversity it can be used as a collaborative interaction to promote positive group performance and communication. Inclusive workplace cultures make an effort to have individuals share knowledge to promote collaboration and alignment of stakeholders.

7. Methodology

In this qualitative research study, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study combined with hermeneutic phenomenology was used. This approach involved the use of semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences, experiential reflections, and meaning-making processes of transgender and gender-expansive individuals within the workplace setting. The primary objective of this study was to delve into the contextual understanding of workplace psychological safety as perceived by the transgender and gender-expansive community across various industries. Additionally, the research adopted a secondary lens to examine the influence of Transformational Leadership Theory on psychological safety. The choice of an interpretive phenomenological approach was driven by its participant-centric and meaning-making characteristics, which have historically proven valuable in research involving the LGBTQ+ community. This methodology was selected to effectively address the intricacies of experiences, social contexts, and the multifaceted meanings derived from lived experiences (Creswell, 2017; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2015).

7.1 Participants, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations

This demographics of participants in this study is presented as it relates to the understanding of gender-identity as a complex spectrum. The intentional use of "they" as vague pronouns is used to honour each participant's gender-diversity, as well as their pronouns. The nature of this study also implies that all individuals' identity must be protected as well as their psychological safety. Each participant's specific demographic information has remained completely anonymous for the study due to the priority of protecting all parts of their identity beyond the identity of being transgender and gender-expansive within the TGNC community. All participants have been assigned numbers to keep their identity anonymous.

The key limitations of this study included a restricted sample size of individuals comfortable discussing any workplace discomfort, trauma, or discomfort without further harm being done. As well as the access to people based on individuals who are comfortable enough to disclose their gender identity. All 11 participants have orally consented to participate in this study, and after coding their recordings have been deleted. According to Creswell (2018), sample size varies for differing types of qualitative research as it relates to the specific narrative and case of each individual's perception. For an IPA study, a sample size of up to 10 and no less than 3 is appropriate. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) recommended small sample sizes to encourage a rich and intimate ability to understand a participant's world. The concept of gender diversity as related to social identity is explored through the eleven participants' narratives. The numbers that have been assigned to each participant are used in this chapter as it relates to the discussion of the findings of the data collection to protect intersectional identities.

7.2 Data Collection

Data collection in this study involved semi-structured interviews with eleven participants. These interviews ranged in duration from 25 minutes to one hour and were designed to elicit a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Specifically, as it pertains to the connections between their social identity in the workplace and the concept of psychological safety. To ensure the protection of participants' identities and mental health, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. Only the audio was recorded and subsequently transcribed. Participants were explicitly instructed to keep their cameras turned off and to use pseudonyms during the interviews. Follow-up interactions included the transmission of only select interview questions through email communication.

During the interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect on their personal experiences and employment history within the context of psychological safety, as it relates to their social identification as transgender and gender-expansive individuals in the workplace. Furthermore, participants were asked to share their perspective on their experiential needs in relation to Transformational Leadership and workplace psychological safety. The semi-structured interviews explored the following set of interview questions.

1. **Interview Question Q1:** "What is the lived experience of transgender and gender-expansive individuals in the workplace?"
2. **Interview Question Q2:** "How are lived experiences of discrimination related to social identity in the workplace?"
3. **Interview Question Q3:** "How do you experience your gender identity as it relates to psychological safety and resources in the workplace?"

7.3 Data Analysis

In this study, the transcription of audio recordings was facilitated through Zoom Auto Transcription. The extracted transcriptions were subsequently downloaded and utilised for the purpose of conducting Data Analysis Interviews. Following this, the transcripts were shared with the study participants to ensure the accuracy and fidelity of their responses. To facilitate data analysis, the interview transcripts were organised and coded using InVivo software. Subsequently, a thematic analysis approach was employed to examine the data, focusing on the identification of patterns and commonalities in the responses and collective experiences of the interviewees. The emergent themes were categorised into two distinct groups, namely appreciative themes and phenomenological themes. This systematic analysis process allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the meaning-making responses of the interviewees and provided valuable insights into the study's research objectives.

8. Research Findings

The IPA study yielded four core themes, each supported by several sub-themes, encompassing multiple pivotal concepts demonstrated by direct quotations and resulting in the identification of 62 initial phenomenological themes. The formulation of three research questions elicited rich and meaningful responses from the 11 participants who engaged in the study. Using InVivo software, the data analysis involved two cycles of coding. Initially, during the first cycle, 62 codes were identified through a pattern-coding process. As recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), a preliminary list of approximately 12 to 60 codes is suitable for most qualitative studies. Subsequently, a second cycle of value coding was performed using "meta-code" or sub-themes. This involved grouping labels that exhibited similar coded data. This methodological approach led to the emergence of four core themes, as detailed by Saldana (2015). The choice to employ two coding cycles was deemed efficient, considering that three cycles would have been excessive given the volume of data and the presence of

already salient themes. The interpretive analysis process revealed two themes for each Question and Response Set, and 8 themes in total.

Although the participant accounts contained more than one hundred and fifty relevant quotes that supported the interpretive themes constructed, 14 selected quotes have been included in the results tables to provide direct examples of the progression from individual concepts to overarching themes in the thematic analysis process. The alignment between participant accounts, the cited quotes, and the established themes is visually represented in Tables 1, 2, and 3, which showcase excerpts from the narratives as illustrative instances of the narrative statements that gave rise to these thematic insights.

9. Q&R1 Participant Accounts and Related Themes

In response to Interview Question Q1, which sought to understand the lived-experiences of having the social identity of being transgender and gender-expansive within the workplace, numerous shared narratives and participant accounts were documented. These accounts and corresponding details can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Q&R1 related themes

Coded Statements/Concepts	Themes	Number of participants mentioning these themes
-We have to put in the extra energy to fight to be recognized as our identity. To answer random or invasive questions about our identity. -when I am asked invasive questions about my body, I refuse to answer and make sure to set a boundary because my coworkers aren't owed that information just to satisfy their curiosity	1. Core Theme: Workplace lack of preparedness for gender-identity diversity	11/11
-Unfortunately due to management not respecting my new gender identity, I felt too uncomfortable to keep working because they wouldn't change my name on the schedule or refer to me as my name and pronouns. -Often members would continue to dead name me as well which only perpetuated the uncomfortable environment. After quitting I went to another gym where I also trained the same people and taught different boxing classes.	2. Need for workplace training, resources and policies	11/11

The transition from participant statements to the emergence of interpreted themes is readily apparent. While the number of direct quotations presented for each theme is relatively limited, the sentiments and comments regarding these thematic patterns were consistently prevalent within the narratives of the participants. This consensus is evident from the number of participants, as illustrated in Table 1. Out of 11 participants, all 11 articulated similar statements contributing to the overarching themes. The majority of the 11 participants shared common experiences as it relates to Workplace lack of preparedness for gender-identity diversity,

The guiding sub research question of “how are lived experiences of discrimination related to social identity in the workplace?” has yielded narratives that have contributed to the first core theme. The core theme, workplace lack of preparedness for gender-identity diversity, is a result of a frequently described experience of “need for workplace training” which was prevalent 30 times throughout the participant’s experience. It is also reflective of how this study’s participants had high recurring expressions of how their workplace responsibilities were often hindered by the organisational culture and both physical and virtual environments. During the data collection process, it became evident that each of the participants talked about experiences where their workplace facilitated documented accounts of harassment. This was while stakeholders in leadership had no training nor resources to prevent these incidents to rectify them. The TGNC population frequently encounters situations where their workplace has never had any other transgender and gender-expansive identifying individual at their work. This lack of visibility is a theme often associated with the accounts of lack of preparedness as demonstrated by this participant. In this excerpt, Participant 3 describes how they feel like their job has repeatedly put extra mental health burden on them by having them have to repeatedly educate the staff, taking away from their own workplace responsibilities.

The subtheme of “Need for workplace training, resources and policies” in Table 1 demonstrates the experience that all eleven participants shared. Multiple participants during this study referenced their transition process and the monumental moments that stood out to them the most. This is presented through the findings by participants recounting moments of trauma that were initiated in the workplace by processes and policies not accommodating the nuances of transitioning. Such as a name change.

10. Q&R2 Participant Accounts and Related Themes

Addressing Interview Question Q2, which sought to explore the experiences of discrimination through TGNC social identity within the workplace, a range of perspectives and participant narratives emerged as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Q&R2 related themes

Coded Statements/Concepts	Themes	Number of participants mentioning these themes
-At the first store location of the customer service job, I was isolated, given an unfair workload, misgendered and ridiculed by my coworkers and shift leads... The solution was for me to change to a morning shift, and I felt that I was being punished twice. -We trans people live in a constant psychological turmoil because our social life always carries some sort of back lash and effect in our mental health due to the constant attack to our energies, our identities.	3. Core Theme: Sacrifice of psychological-safety	11/11
-I know of people who have left their jobs due to discrimination and the difficulty that those individuals then have to endure in finding other means of employment is akin to criminality. -I made it very clear to them, that during pandemic still have large private clientele, when all the trainers returned in real life and trainers were trying to rebuild their clients. I was completely disregarded. I was not given any serious leads, no serious buyers, seriously neglected. -There should have been a warning at least, but everyone who harrasses the trans coworkers doesnt even get a warning.	4. Inequitable job practices	10/11

The second research sub question of “Is workplace psychological-safety experienced differently with intersectionality in social identity?” was represented by the following accounts as they relate to the core theme of “sacrifice of psychological-safety” at work. In the first account Participant One discusses a recurring associated theme that arose during pattern coding in cycle one. These were the experiences associated with “isolation”. These types of experience were presented 34 times throughout all eleven participants. The experience of isolation is associated with the core theme of “sacrifice of psychological-safety”, as transgender and gender-expansive individuals are often excluded from others in the workplace. Participant One discusses in this excerpt how their manager’s resolution to harassment being experienced by the Participant, resulted in a punishment for them instead. As shown in Table 2, the participant’s account consisted of feeling double punishment, “the solution was for me to change to a morning shift, and I felt that I was being punished twice.” In this account, Participant One describes feeling “isolated” in addition to being “punished”. Due to the lack of the manager’s experience of being able to handle gender-identity workplace discrimination, the recipient of the discrimination had to sacrifice their own psychological-safety to accommodate the abuser. This is a common theme that is intertwined through the narratives of the other participants as determined by the subthemes. Lastly, in this account by Participant Two found in Table 2, they discuss how other transgender and gender-expansive individuals’ “social life” and identities have resulted in “backlash” to their mental health due to experiencing an “attack” to their energy and identity. An important experience that Participant Two’s excerpt closes with, is that the resilience of living “in a constant psychological turmoil” is not by “choice”. This is experienced by Participant Two and having strength is shared as the only option to face the “effect” on their mental health.

The emerging theme as present in Table 2 of “Inequitable job practices” is present in ten out of eleven participants. For the participants in the study, inequity is experienced through multiple levels of their workplace. While different participants have expressed feelings of “discrimination” existing through managers, clients, and coworkers, “inequitable” treatment in the workplace is a common recurring theme. This narrative builds off of the last experience of Participant One by displaying the meaning-making of what a lack of preparedness for gender-diversity in the workplace results in.

11. Q&R3 Participant Accounts and Related Themes

In response to Interview Question Q3, which delved into the experience of gender identity in the context of psychological safety and resources within the workplace, multiple thoughts and participant narratives of significance came to the forefront. Table 3 showcases the most impactful quotes, representing a clear progression from participant statements to the resulting interpreted themes. This table simplistic glimpse into experiences and recommendations for organisations. These outline how stakeholders can foster inclusive organisational cultures and establish psychologically safe environments for transgender and gender-expansive individuals.

Table 3: Q&R3 related themes

Coded Statements/Concepts	Themes	Number of participants mentioning these themes
-If training were better, or having these conversations... -New manager has had conversations about treating people with respect.	5. Core Theme: Implement collaborative trainings	9/11
-We did some training at work and it gave us the chance to talk about our lived experience and it gave me the chance to talk to my workers and talk about what they experienced. And it gave me the chance to humanize the lived experience and while it did put the work on me, it gave me the space to have that dialogue.	6. “humanize the lived experience”	11/11

The core theme of “Implement collaborative trainings” is present in nine out of eleven participants. This participant discusses how their gender social identity would have been experienced with more respect if there was training in the workplace. While these accounts in Table 3 both highlight the phenomenon of organisational trainings and existing in the workplace with psychological-safety the theme of “collaborative training” is revealed. Additionally, it also demonstrates how when workplaces value diversity there is also opportunity for greater team collaboration.

This next account by Participant 3 demonstrates how the managers who enforced respect for coworkers was a need experienced that also aligns with the theme for greater efforts of collaboration. This account relates to other participants. All of these themes have an intersectional psychological safety impact on each participant which is why it's important to discuss how this need for team collaboration and respect is also directly mentioned when the core theme of workplace lack of preparedness for gender-identity diversity is being discussed.

As shown in Table 3, Participant Ten mentions in their interview that “gave me the chance to humanise the lived experience”. They discuss this experience as it relates to the context of workplaces empowering employees to tell their stories. However, on the other side of this perspective, the theme of work mandated collaborative training as being a necessary implementation is revealed to create positive psychological-safety impact. As shared by all participants. In this same passage, Participant Ten discusses how they had to actively bring their experience through dialogue to demonstrate the value of different lived experiences and to encourage workplace psychological-safety. In this example Participant ten also discusses how the impact of lack of diversity in leadership leads to social identities being unable to experience psychological-safety.

12. Conclusion



Figure 1: Nguyen Workplace Gender-Diversity Psychological-Safety Model (2023)

After determining the prevalent themes and how they were experienced by the participants, a result of this study is a model that can be used to support psychological safety for TGNC individuals in the workplace. As informed by the findings of the interviews, The Nguyen Workplace Gender-Diversity Psychological-Safety Model can be used to solve to inclusivity problems, as being a guide for leadership and their stakeholders to make holistic assessments and interventions. This model provides a visual map of progressive actions which will empower organisations to create safer and more inclusive cultures of psychological safety for their TGNC employees. When an organisation is able to assess their current workplace environment and culture and then implement the suggested progressive actions, workplace gender-diverse psychological safety will improve not only for TGNC employees, but for entire organisational efficiency.

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to understand the lived experiences of transgender and gender-expansive individuals in the workplace by exploring how they experience their social identity as it relates to their workplace and psychosocial safety. The emerging themes emphasise the need for transformational leadership change as it relates to protecting the psychological-safety of different social identities in the workplace.

Through Transformational Leadership Theory in workplace processes, resources, and equitable practices all communities with different social identities could benefit. The findings of this study show how increasing the psychological-safety for those who are gender diverse would lead to higher organisational efficiency. Future studies have the potential to explore how through better understanding of social identity, marginalised communities will be able to contribute to overall increase in workplace efficiency. Through the meaning-making and exploration of experiences, this study reveals the opportunity of understanding the social identity of being transgender and gender-expansive in the workplace.

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