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Female Masculinity at Work: Managing Stigma on the Job

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Abstract

In this study, the author interviewed 49 self-identified masculine women in the United States to examine how they negotiate stigma in the workplace. Masculine women often negotiate dual stigmas due to both their gender nonconformity and perceived sexual orientation. Participants used a variety of strategies to cope with their stigmatized identity including modifying clothing; incorporating feminine behaviors to counteract masculine appearance; working in high-demand, undesirable jobs; working in male-dominated settings; and opting out of formal work organizations. While some participants experienced mistreatment in male-dominated settings, many reported positive outcomes including strong relationships with male coworkers, opportunities for advancement, and a general comfort in the work environment. Participants challenge Goffman's notion of sexual orientation as a concealable status, showing that sexual orientation minority women who are gender nonconforming employ strategies similar to members of other visibly stigmatized groups. Findings from this study suggest that researchers addressing sexual orientation minorities should include gender expression as a variable that can influence individual experiences and outcomes. *Online slides for instructors who want to use this article for teaching are available on* PWQ's *website at http://journals.sagepub.com/page/pwq/suppl/index.*

The term "masculine women" describes women who identify, or are socially recognized, as women, yet display masculinity broadly through appearance, behavior, and interactional styles. Researchers have suggested that masculine women often identify as lesbian or queer (Devor, 1989) and, as a result, can face a double stigma due to both their gender nonconformity and their sexual orientation. While theorists describe sexual orientation as a concealable stigma (Goffman, 1963), masculine women display visible markers associated with sexual orientation stereotypes, meaning they must engage different strategies to manage their stigmatized identity. In addition, their gender nonconformity not only signals a marginalized sexual orientation but also makes visible their noncompliance with societal norms and rules that maintain the gender hierarchy (Martin, 2003).

Gender Stigma at Work

Being perceived as a man or a woman significantly influences work experience due to gender inequality and persistent sex segregation in the workplace. Women may be the targets of prejudice and discrimination at work because of both their position in work structures and gender stereotypes that influence expectations for women at work including their tasks, authority, behavior, and occupation (Martin, 2003; Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Researchers suggest that women often face discrimination when engaging in stereotypically masculine behavior at work and can be negatively evaluated due to gender stereotyping (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Women are often viewed as less compatible with jobs requiring attributes such as strength, assertiveness, or leadership ability (Cabrera, Sauer, & Thomas-Hunt, 2009), which can have material consequences because positions and occupations associated with masculinity often receive greater rewards (Gorman, 2005).

Researchers investigating the effect of women's gender nonconformity at work generally hold a narrow view of nonconformity. They primarily examine women who incorporate stereotypically masculine behaviors, such as supervising men, holding leadership roles, negotiating for salary, or working in male-dominated occupations (Latour, 2009; McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008), rather than accounting for women who more markedly violate gender norms through a substantial, visible departure from gender norms and expectations. Occupational sex segregation (Padavic & Reskin, 2002) makes the position of masculine women particularly visible in the workplace. In

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female-dominated settings, their appearance may locate them as outsiders while, in male-dominated settings, they may be the sole woman on the job. Regardless of the setting, masculine women face complex negotiations regarding appearance, behavior, and interaction due to occupational sex segregation.

Visible Markers and Stigmatized Identities

A stigma signals a social identity that is discredited or defiled by the dominant culture (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). For the stigmatized, a visible marker or stigma invokes a negative stereotype and "a rationale is constructed for devaluing, rejecting, and excluding them" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 371). Rather than a fixed characteristic of a person, stigma is a social process that involves categorizing individuals and associating them with undesirable characteristics which may lead to discrimination, status loss, and, ultimately, inequality (Howarth, 2006; Link & Phelan, 2001; McCordic, 2012). Stigmas are a means of both defining societal norms and excluding low-status individuals and groups. Gender is a fundamental structure used to differentiate individuals, and masculine women may be stigmatized because of their position within this social ordering. They challenge heteronormative notions of gender through perceived sexual orientation status and their visible transgression of essential rules and norms that sort individuals into gender categories.

In his seminal work, Goffman (1963) differentiated between individuals who have discredited statuses (i.e., visible markers of stigma) and discreditable statuses (i.e., stigmas that are concealable). Those with discreditable and discredited statuses have fundamentally different aims in social interaction—discredited individuals work to manage the tension in their interactions while discreditable individuals strive to control information that may expose their stigma (Goffman, 1963; Hylton, 2006; Taub, McLorg, & Fanflik, 2004). Within this framework, sexual orientation is conceptualized as a discreditable or concealable status (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009; Herek, 1997). Much of the literature regarding the stigma of sexual orientation examines the process of managing information through assessing the safety of different environments, negotiating levels of disclosure, and managing potential signifiers such as appearance, behavior, and social connections (Clarke & Smith, 2015; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). Because masculine women display visible markers associated with a marginalized sexual orientation status, their social status may be better described as discredited rather than discreditable (Gordon & Meyer, 2007). Masculinity exists as a continuum, and while some masculine women can use concealment strategies, such as feminizing their appearance, other women are too masculine to avoid detection. Their physical masculinity invokes stereotypes associated with lesbian and gay individuals and communities, regardless of behavior or identity, while also stigmatizing them as gender transgressors, that is, individuals who violate and challenge rules and norms regarding gender.

Managing Stigma

While stigma is produced at the socio-structural level, managing stigma often occurs in social interaction (Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004). Individuals and groups with stigmatized identities use a variety of strategies in an attempt to reduce the influence of stigma on their material, social, and psychological outcomes (Taub et al., 2004). Generally, low-status groups cannot completely avoid the dominant culture or stigmatizing individuals or groups. As a result, they develop strategies to facilitate their interactions within dominant social institutions including de-emphasizing their stigmatized identity, reducing their perceived threat, and selecting less stigmatizing settings.

Clothing and appearance can be an especially important signal of social position in terms of social class, race and ethnicity, profession, and, especially, gender (Pettinger, 2005). Members of low-status groups may de-emphasize their stigma by modifying appearance to better align with dominant cultural norms and values (Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015; Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004; Shih, Young, & Bucher, 2013). In work settings, members of low-status groups can be negatively evaluated for failure to assimilate in appearance and behavior (Opie & Phillips, 2015) and can experience significant stress as they work to conform to dominant cultural appearance norms while maintaining a sense of authenticity (Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015).

Both gender expression and sexual orientation can require negotiation of clothing and appearance in the workplace. Clothing practices can signal the ability to conform to dominant cultural standards, yet are also an important form of self-expression and cultural identity (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015). Since sexual orientation is viewed as concealable, research regarding appearance often focuses on whether and when workers hide their orientation via subcultural signifiers (Clarke & Smith, 2015; King, Mohr, Peddie, Jones, & Kendra, 2014). Yet, female masculinity cannot always be concealed, and masculine women may employ strategies used by groups with visible stigmas such as people of color, immigrants, and older adults (Shih et al., 2013). Strategies can include attenuating subcultural signifiers, conforming to dominant cultural standards of dress and behavior, and choosing settings that reduce the likelihood of sanction (Ghaziani, 2015; Goffman, 1963; Hill & Gunderson, 2015; Shih et al., 2013).

Members of marginalized groups can resist their assigned social position by rejecting the dominant culture as much as possible, for example, by working and socializing within a subculture (Goffman, 1963). They can also choose social environments that may value characteristics associated with their stigma. Termed *situation selection* in the coping literature, individuals can choose settings that are likely to provide positive experiences and avoid settings that may result in prejudicial treatment (Hill & Gunderson, 2015).

While people with stigmatized identities have a variety of strategies for managing stigma, masculine women are unique

as they manage two stigmatized identities related to their masculine expression—gender nonconformity and perceived sexual orientation. In some jobs, especially blue collar work, they may also face the stigma of being women. Masculine women may also negotiate other stigmatized identities in combination with their gender expression including race and ethnicity, ability, immigration status, and criminal history. In the current study, I examined how masculine women manage multiple marginalized identities, how intersecting identities locate masculine women in distinctly different social positions that influence their work opportunities, and how others interpret their behavior and intentions in the workplace.

Overview of Present Research

Researchers who address gender in the workplace mainly examine the experiences of women and men who are largely gender conforming (McLaughlin et al., 2012; Padavic & Reskin, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Within this context, research on gender nonconformity is generally limited to the investigation of behavior and work roles that are counter to gender stereotypes, rather than instances of substantial nonconformity (Denissen, 2010; Gorman, 2005; Moccio, 2009). At the same time, researchers who address sexual orientation in the workplace typically do not incorporate gender expression and conceptualize sexual orientation as a concealable status, meaning the unique experiences of masculine women remain unexamined (King et al., 2014).

Work is an ideal setting to examine stigma management strategies because stigmatized individuals cannot avoid interactions with potential stigmatizers. Adults typically spend a significant proportion of their lives at work, and while stigmatized people might be able to immerse themselves in supportive networks outside of work, few can control the behavior and attitudes of coworkers or the general climate in the workplace (Waldo, 1999). In addition, gender nonconforming individuals are generally a small minority in the workplace—often they are the only one or one of a few. The current study was designed to examine the work experiences of women who are broadly gender nonconforming. The study was guided by the question: How do masculine women negotiate their stigmatized identities in the workplace?

Method

For the present study, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews between 2009 and 2014 with 49 self-identified masculine women in order to examine the experiences of masculine women in the workplace. A redacted (for confidentiality) version of the data and related materials are available upon request by e-mailing the author.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 58 with an average age of 36 ($SD = 10.5$) and held a variety of gender-related identities including "butch" (10), "stud" (7), "AG" or "aggressive" (2), "dominant" (2), "tomboy" (2), "genderqueer" (7), and "queer" (9). Forty-seven participants identified as women or female. Two participants identified as transgender at the time of the interview but had previously lived and worked as masculine women and, for this study, discussed their work experiences as masculine women. Only one participant did not currently identify as lesbian or queer; she instead characterized herself as a "butch, straight girl" who had previously lived as a lesbian. In this article, participants are occasionally described as "very masculine" based on their spontaneous report that they were usually or always assumed to be men in initial social interactions.

Participants were from all regions of the United States with the majority residing in the Western United States (67%). Twenty-nine (59%) of the sample reported identifying as White. Eleven (22%) reported identifying as Black, 2 (4%) as Latina, 2 (4%) as Filipina, 1 (2%) as Samoan, 2 (4%) as Middle Eastern, 1 (2%) as Latina/Native American, and 1 (2%) as Mixed Race. All of the participants graduated from high school or had a general equivalency degree (GED), and 57% held at least a bachelor's degree. Participants worked in a variety of jobs including cook, retail sales person, carpenter, teacher, project manager, office worker, electrician, farrier, trainer, nurse practitioner, security guard, software tester, technical writer, barber, adjudicator, artist, and subway mechanic.

Procedure

I used several strategies to recruit participants: (1) I made contact through acquaintances, and (2) in an attempt to geographically diversify, asked associates on the East Coast to post on Facebook. (3) In order to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the sample, I posted in the "women seeking women" section of Craigslist in locations that had significant populations of women of color including Baltimore/Washington, DC, Atlanta, Houston, San Diego, and Los Angeles. The posting briefly described the study and offered US$20 in exchange for participants' time; participants who were not recruited via Craigslist did not receive remuneration. (4) In an attempt to broaden the cultural reach of the posting, I used sub-cultural terms for potential participants including masculine-of-center, butch, stud, AG, trans, and genderqueer. Almost half of the participants were recruited via Craigslist ($n = 23$), which garnered a much more diverse sample for the study, both in terms of race and ethnicity and in terms of occupation.

Interviews were conducted by phone ($n = 21$), Skype ($n = 3$), and in person ($n = 25$) and ranged from 30 to 75 min. I developed a set of broad questions and sought to facilitate conversation related to female masculinity in the workplace. During the interview, I used follow-up questions as warranted and encouraged participants to go "off script" to discuss anything they thought was interesting or important about

their experiences as a masculine woman, especially as it related to work.

In order to improve accuracy and authenticity, that is, that the data collected truly reflected the views and experiences of participants, I practiced *validation in situ*. This process consists of continuously evaluating the interviewer's understanding of the participant's meaning and intent during the interview. The interviewer paraphrases participants' accounts, directly seeks feedback, and offers ongoing opportunities for participants to correct the interviewer's perception and to revise or extend participant insights (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Validation in situ improves accuracy and authenticity and is especially useful when working with difficult-to-reach populations that may not be available for follow-up checks for accuracy. To further improve accuracy, I collected data from a relatively large sample for this type of study, in order to strengthen the credibility of the insights offered by members of this understudied population.

In qualitative research, especially with populations that are structurally and culturally marginalized, the social position of the researcher can influence the research process, including the research questions, interviews, and analysis of the data (Yeh & Inman, 2007). I am a queer, trans-identified, masculine female and have spent considerable time reflecting on the interrelationship between gender expression, gender identity, and social positions (Dozier, 2014). My perspective is also influenced by professional identities—as an academic, a sociologist, and a gender scholar with significant experience engaging in qualitative research with populations that hold marginalized sexual orientation and gender identities (Dozier, 2005, 2015).

My status as White, highly educated, and an academic might inhibit rapport with participants who hold other identities, especially with less educated participants of color. I took an approach of *maintaining naïveté*—cultivating an open-minded, curious, and respectful demeanor, which can garner high-quality and extensive data (Bernard, 2002; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Participants appeared to view me as a cultural insider with common customs and language around masculine identity. Occasionally, participants asked for advice, based on their view of my cultural position (e.g., names children could use for masculine stepparents, books to read about gender identity) implying a general ease during the interview. The commonality of living as masculine women helped attenuate other social differences during the interviews.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis in order to identify patterns in the experiences of participants and capture key insights related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis process is inductive and involves collecting data through participant-directed, semi-structured interviews, reading resultant transcripts in their entirety to gain a broad sense of the experiences of participants, identifying central themes in participants' accounts,

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Participants Discussing Themes.

Themes	n	%
Appearance and presentation	44	90
Gender in male-dominated environments	25	51
Masculinity in blue collar jobs	13	27
Interactions with men	37	76
Capitalizing on markers of stigma	32	65
Working with stigmatized populations	9	18
Racial and ethnic differences	15	31
Opting out: alienation from work	21	43
Opting out: self-employment	23	47

Note. Sample *n* = 49.

and then sorting data into the identified themes (Creswell, 2013). This method is well-suited for an analysis of under researched groups because of its inductive approach. After developing a set of themes, text sections from each interview were sorted by themes. Broad themes generated from the data included appearance and presentation, gender in male-dominated work environments, masculinity in blue collar jobs, interactions with men, capitalizing on markers of stigma, working with stigmatized populations, racial and ethnic differences, alienation from work, and self-employment (see Table 1).

This analytical strategy allowed me to investigate experiences and insights both within the context of an individual's account and within thematic categories. I managed and sorted data using Version 10 of NVivo software (QSR International, 2014). The software allowed for disaggregation of the thematically coded data based on demographic characteristics such as race and ethnicity and age in order to examine the categorical differences in experiences and perceptions.

Throughout the article, participants are referred to as masculine women for simplicity's sake. However, people don't typically describe themselves as "masculine female" or "masculine woman" and often strongly identify with other masculine identities that hold greater significance and personal meaning, serving to structure both their identities and social relations. In discussing masculine women in the aggregate, I wish to acknowledge the obfuscation of important subcultural identities that express individual social locations influenced by a variety of factors including sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, social class, and gender expression.

Results

In this study, most participants held jobs in gender normative work settings and described numerous strategies, at both the individual and institutional level, to avoid stigma at work. At the individual level, participants managed appearance, seeking a balance between gendered workplace expectations and personal integrity, and sometimes compensated for masculine appearance with stereotypically feminine behavior. At the

institutional level, participants chose work settings that they anticipated would be less stigmatizing. Approximately half of the participants worked in male-dominated settings while others chose jobs with high demand, often due to their association with stigmatized populations. Many participants were reluctant to participate in gender normative work settings as evidenced by their alienation from typical work structures or their aspiration toward self-employment as a strategy to "opt out" of gender normative settings.

Negotiating Gender Normative Work Spaces

Conformity and clothing. A discredited status relies on physical markers that signal the stigmatized identity. For masculine women, clothing style is an important marker because not only is it associated with their stigmatized identity, but it is also viewed as a voluntary expression of identity. Participants indicated that they spent a great deal of time considering how to negotiate clothing style when trying to assimilate into gender normative workspaces.

Non-professional occupations typically have fewer gendered appearance expectations because the employer tightly scripts clothing choices and requires a standardized appearance for workers, which is often androgynous or masculine (Crane, 2000; Leidner, 1993). For example, many workplaces that have predominantly low-skill service jobs, such as McDonald's, require an androgynous uniform, similar for men and women. Other workplaces allow employees to wear their own clothes under a unisex smock or vest or have minimal dress standards such as a "collared shirt." For many masculine women, the opportunity to dress in an androgynous or masculine manner makes a job, even if relatively low status, more attractive. One participant applied for a job at Best Buy, an electronics retail store, solely because of the dress expectations: "I wanted the androgynous look. I wanted the blue shirt."

While low-skill service jobs often have androgynous dress expectations, many blue collar jobs expect masculine attire regardless of sex. Complying with dress expectations in this setting means masculine women can wear masculine clothing without signaling their stigmatized identity. "I was just thinking about the clothes that we wear for plumbing; they really favor being masculine. It's hard to find feminine work pants in the plumbing field, I mean like formfitting or something tight." The participant went on to explain that due to masculine clothing expectations, she faced less scrutiny, making her position as a plumber's apprentice a better occupational fit than the academic sociology position for which she had trained.

For most individuals, occupation dictates attire, but for masculine women, a job's clothing expectations can determine access to a job. While masculine women are able to avoid sanction for their clothing styles in both low-skill service jobs and blue collar work, they may have less success in professional positions. The gendered expectations of professional attire are often unseen and unexamined among gender conforming individuals, yet they can be a sorting mechanism for masculine women as they seek work. Participants suggested that the more professionalized the occupation, the more gendered the dress expectations, implying greater challenges for masculine women in professional work.

Negotiating gendered professional attire can be quite stressful and limit opportunities for some masculine women. A carpenter explained that after completing her degree, she realized she wouldn't be able to work as a lawyer because, "I don't look right. And I don't dress right. And it became very clear that that was not something I was going to do because of my appearance." Another participant stated, "I would say that, it sounds weird, but there were a great number of jobs I would not do simply because of what I would have to wear."

Some highly educated participants rejected professional positions, believing that they could not overcome the stigma of female masculinity or that the compromises that are required to gain access to professional work would be too great. "As a professional, there are some rules that you have to play . . . . I assume that if I would've dressed differently, I basically call it shuck and jive, I could've gotten further. But then I'm not me." Not only does dress become more gendered in professional realms, but individuals become more accountable for their gendered appearance. Professional attire is viewed as voluntary and expressive of identity relative to the prescribed choices in blue collar and service work occupations, and inadequately enacting gender norms becomes a personal failing that is open to sanction. "I think there's definitely a different expectation when you have to dress yourself for work. There's definitely an idea of, this is what a professional woman looks like; this is what a professional man looks like."

Professional participants attempted to balance work expectations with their gender expression by choosing a masculinity that they viewed as more palatable in the workplace. This masculinity was described as "gayer," meaning a masculinity that incorporated aspects of femininity. "I'm doing the metrosexual thing . . . . You can still be butch, but . . . you have to have some femininity in there. You can wear a suit, but the pants have to be tailored so they're still feminine. Rachel Maddow, you know."

Several participants reported that a tie was the clear marker of gender transgression at work. Many expressed their desire to wear a tie at work but viewed it as going "too far" with masculine presentation, signaling a disregard of gender norms in the workplace. One former lawyer discussed her process for gauging the level of sanction she might encounter before choosing her attire for the day. Her account illustrates the considerable thought required to manage a stigmatized gender identity in professional realms.

> I made a lot of very conscious decisions, as I think all of us who are gender nonconforming do, about how to show up on a given day . . . . Like if I was meeting with clients who I didn't already know and have a positive relationship with, I wouldn't wear a tie to work . . . . I never wore a tie to a deposition or to court, but [I did] when I was clerking for a judge. My judge was fantastic and very supportive . . . .

While some masculine women can choose to temper their masculine appearance by incorporating more feminine or androgynous styles, others are so masculine in appearance that clothing makes little difference in their likelihood of sanctions. "I get mistaken for a guy like 95% of the time . . . . People ask, 'So, do you take testosterone?' And I'm like, 'No, this is how I am. I was born like this.'" When very masculine women attempt to conform, they can run the risk of being viewed as men in women's attire—a potentially dangerous attribution. For these individuals, professional positions may be limited and dependent upon factors such as the gender ratio of the job, level of engagement with customers, importance of appearance in the workplace, and the population served. One participant who had a very masculine appearance struggled during her clinical work while studying to become a nurse practitioner. Patients frequently misattributed her gender and an internship supervisor complained.

> So, two of my professors sat me down . . . She had complained that my appearance was unacceptable, that I needed to be identifiably female or else I wouldn't be able to continue my clinical work . . . . So what do you do? You've got a semester and a half left to go. Women's shoes and stirrup pants—men don't wear stirrup pants—and women's flats. And that's what I wore. I had no choice. It was really, really terrible. It was humiliating, absolutely.

While the participant recounted difficult and painful incidents during her training, she has had more success on the job, primarily by working in challenging, high-demand environments with stigmatized populations including individuals who are low income and/or mentally ill.

Managing behavior. Some participants worked to incorporate typically feminine behaviors in order to reduce their perceived level of threat. "I do all kinds of things all the time to femme myself up, unconsciously . . . . I smile, I talk softly to people; I try to be gentle. And I try to let it go, because . . . it's so ingrained—I scare people." Although the participant described several strategies to reduce her perceived threat, she also acknowledged the need to engage in internal coping processes—to just let it go because she could not always influence people's perceptions.

Some participants reported that being too masculine was threatening to coworkers and supervisors, especially when their appearance was very masculine. In addition to incorporating feminine behaviors in order to disconfirm stereotypes, they would sometimes directly address their gender nonconformity. One participant described using friendliness and humor to mitigate the threat of misattribution of her gender and to emphasize her ability to meet work expectations, even within the context of a stigmatized identity.

> When I go into an interview, I'm very friendly. I smile, I say, 'Hey, my name's Beth. Yeah, it's Beth. Yes, I'm a girl. I look like a man, I know.' I try to break the ice as soon as I meet whoever is interviewing me because usually . . . they'll be like, 'Bethany?' And I stand up, and I'm over here in a suit and tie. I have a nice gentleman's haircut, I go, 'Hey, what's up? My name's Bethany.' And then they have this shock in their face. And I just laugh and I'm like, 'No, It's not a joke. I promise.' (laughing)

Participants sought to reduce the effect of their stigmatized status by emphasizing their alignment with dominant, gender normative cultural values and incorporating feminine characteristics into their behavior. Some participants believed this strategy was key to their success, pointing to poorer outcomes for masculine women who did not temper their masculinity. "They put up this façade like 'I'm just as manly as you.' . . . I have a friend . . . like that and . . . sometimes she doesn't get the job . . . . But she doesn't have to present herself like that. A simple smile would suffice."

Some participants compensated for their stigma by developing a strong identity with another attribute or skill that detracted from their stigmatized identity and aligned them with dominant cultural values. One participant who works in a professional position at a community college reported emphasizing her highly-prized data analysis skills in order to detract from her gender nonconformity and focus attention on characteristics relevant to her position. "I think in some ways I overcompensate in other areas. That's why I . . . like data so much because it takes away from, 'Well, this is what Will's thinking.' And I'm like, 'No, you can't. Numbers. This is it.'" She went on to explain the costs of overcompensating, "You have to go so much further, above and beyond. It is exhausting. I'm constantly under pressure to do more than anybody who's ever been in my position ever had to do."

Passing. A few participants avoided stigma by passing as a man during brief or one-time interactions, usually with customers. Being perceived as a man could help participants avoid the awkwardness of correcting others' misattribution of their gender and offer benefits usually accrued to men such as greater perceived competence. At the same time, misattribution of gender for the long term could be extremely stressful and participants risked severe sanctions if discovered, particularly in blue collar areas where physical masculinity is prized. One electrician described beginning a major construction job in a city where she had never before worked.

> Everybody automatically thought I was a man. What usually happened was somebody would tell everybody, but there was nobody to tell everybody. They really liked me . . . . Within two months they asked me if I wanted to be a foreman. I was a foreman on the job for like a year and they thought I was a guy. And I just ended up passing, but it was really stressful.

The participant reported the most success she had ever had on a job was due to mistaken gender attribution. Although she worked without a stigmatized identity for the first time, she lived in constant fear of a violent encounter if her gender was

revealed. "Once I made the decision . . . it was like, well, it's been four months, they're gonna be really pissed off at me if I say 'Oh, by the way I'm really this.'" In the end, the participant left the job before being exposed as a woman. Although she enjoyed working as a foreman, her previous experience with violence on the job and the everyday stress of hiding her identity were too costly.

Working in male-dominated settings. The structure of the workplace can also influence work experiences, and participants often sought settings where they anticipated fewer sanctions, including male-dominated spaces and jobs with high demand, often with marginalized populations. Many participants believed working in a male-dominated setting was a better fit, whether selling electronics in a retail setting or working as an electrician, in engineering, or in technology-related fields. These participants often felt less stigmatized in male-dominated spaces because they had more interests in common with their coworkers, the work was a better fit for their tastes, and the paucity of female employees resulted in fewer gender expectations for women in general. When asked what they liked about working with men, participants pointed to their common interests with men, especially sports, and their lack of common interests with women. When asked if being masculine was an advantage at work, a barber responded, "Well, I do like sports. I love sports. I talk about sports. I watch sports. I play sports. So, it helps me out in the men's department. We can actually have something to talk about."

Another participant worked in an electronics store where women primarily worked as cashiers and men worked in the sales floor. She discussed gender dynamics in the break room: "They're [i.e., the women] in there talking about Love & Hip-Hop or Basketball Wives or something crazy . . . . They're more chatty and gossipy which I don't have time for." When asked what the men talked about, she replied, "Technology . . . . Most of the men that work there are nerds . . . , so with the guys, there's a lot more freedom of speech and independent thought . . . versus when I'm talking to a girl."

Another participant, who experienced a great deal of discrimination from men while working as an electrician, still found working with women to be more troubling and stigmatizing.

> I had that one week I worked with women and it was terrible . . . . The women talked about their weight constantly and then one day . . . one of the women noticed that I didn't have matching socks on. I was like, 'Really? Are you paying that much attention to what I'm wearing?' It freaked me out. I would totally not work in a female-dominated job.

Almost half of the participants worked in male-dominated settings, and many of them discussed men and women at work in stereotyped, dichotomous ways. They often characterized themselves as more similar to men and distinctly different from women in attitude, appearance, and interests. Not all participants viewed themselves in this way and intersecting identities seemed to influence their evaluation. Participants who were college educated and working in blue collar occupations were less likely to describe close relationships with men at work. The interaction of female masculinity, social class, and type of work appeared to influence participants' reports of connection with men at work and alienation from women at work.

Working in male-dominated settings did not always help masculine women avoid mistreatment, particularly in situations where physical masculinity was foregrounded. When the job depended upon physical strength, especially when it was low status, such as work as a bouncer or in retail sales, masculine women had to work harder to avoid discrimination and manage their stigmatized status, not only as masculine but also as women and lesbians.

A participant who recently earned a PhD in a STEM field worked for many years in a tool and machinery rental business.

> When I was a blue collar worker there was definitely a pecking order which was kind of enforced by teasing each other and stuff. And as female and being small . . . you're automatically at the bottom of that . . . . I think the meanest one was, I was crouched down servicing a floor sander . . . and the parts guy came over and backed up and farted on my head.

Another participant who worked as a bouncer described working to preemptively address coworkers' hostility when initially meeting them.

> I think the guys who are my size, they get intimidated a little bit. But those are the guys who I talk to first, first and foremost. I say, 'Hey man, what's up?' Like, I'm not a threat. I'm just here to work. I just want to make money, just like you. I'm not going to take any girls from you, you can take them all.

In contrast, a high-level project manager in an engineering firm talked in detail about her particularly masculine behavior on the job that included holding positions of authority, directing complex, high-value negotiations, and even using humiliation to control high-ranking men. "And I'm running the negotiations and telling them, 'You sit down. You shut up. This is what we're doing . . . .' And when we took breaks, if you came back late you had to hula hoop. I made the secretary of the Navy hula hoop." Her position was characterized by hardline negotiation, frequent conflict, and assertiveness bordering on aggression, yet her masculinity was not physical and not contested. Sanctioning by male coworkers, then, was not necessarily due to participants' masculinity in general but to a physical masculinity that threatened coworkers' social standing. The presence of a masculine woman who was performing the same tasks was especially

challenging to men in low-status jobs, where they had few avenues for accomplishing masculinity except for physical expression.

In addition to generally enjoying interacting with men, many masculine women reported less stress in a job or work setting where there was little precedent for how women workers should behave or appear. The lack of an established script for women meant more freedom to act naturally and less pressure to conform to a pre-existing set of behavioral or appearance expectations. One participant who worked in a computer engineering firm reported that there were only 3 women among the 70 employees and that dress expectations for men were lax and dress expectations for women were unclear. Another technology worker explained, "So far, for me, my gender expression has been nothing but help at work. It just puts me in no man's land where people get taken off their guard because they don't know what category to put me in." During a phone interview, another participant reported, "Today, I'm wearing chinos, but I'm wearing Supras—these are high-top, all-black, military looking shoes. And I got on a black T-shirt and . . . a black hoodie. I work for a gaming company and I can wear whatever I want."

While the three participants above were able to carve out a place for themselves as both masculine and professional, their jobs were in technology-related industries. The technology industry may be a better work environment for individuals with stigmatized identities, as it is purported to be especially meritocratic. In addition, participants' positions often relied on computer networks and phones to accomplish tasks— while the participants were visible to their coworkers, they were mainly not visible to customers and the public. As one participant explained, "Part of the reason I get away with it is because it is invisible . . . . If I can deliver, it's like, 'Oh yeah, we can set her in a corner and . . . we don't care what she looks like.'" Although these professional participants reported being content with their work situation, it is possible that their occupational choices were limited to work behind the scenes.

Working with stigmatized populations. In an effort to temper stigma, some participants chose to work in high-demand fields where, because of the need for workers, employers could not afford to penalize stigmatized individuals. A participant who worked in a group home for individuals with developmental disabilities stated, "The fact that this is a very 'we need bodies in the job,' I think, drew me to it. It's also working with bodies that are considered deviant . . . where being 'abnormal' is a little bit more expected."

Participants reported working in positions with other marginalized populations such as individuals who were poor, immigrants, had disabilities, or had mental illnesses. Some participants reported consciously choosing to work with marginalized populations in order to improve their chances of getting work—for example, not only seeking a teaching credential but a special education teaching credential. One student who was finishing a master's degree in special education

commented, "There are very few people that want to go work with kids that are considered dangerous . . . so, I feel like I have a lot better chance of working in an alternative setting . . . ." Another very masculine participant returned to school to get a special education credential after facing difficulties as a wedding photographer. She was surprised at her positive reception in the New York City school system, where the majority of students are from marginalized populations. "The world is so desperate for special education teachers, for teachers at all . . . . I'm not saying everyone's one hundred percent comfortable, but the Department of Education is one place where I don't feel like it's factored in."

Participants sometimes found themselves accepting a less desirable position within a job classification in order to work, especially if they held multiple stigmatized statuses. One Black participant who, in addition to being low income also had a criminal record, found she was limited to a position as a security guard at a low-income clinic in a dangerous neighborhood.

> I'm 43 and at this stage of the game I really prefer a post that's a bit more, you know, upper echelon-type situation—a nice little office building or a high-rise or something like that. You know, signing people in, 'have a nice day,' check a few doors and do a few rounds . . . . This post is at a clinic, so you could imagine . . . . It's a gang area . . . . I get a lot of transients that come in . . . 5150 s (involuntary psychiatric holds) . . . . Some people fall off the medication, so they come in threatening the doctor and the staff—that type of thing. So you just have to be on your guard at all times.

The participant reported that her employer wouldn't place her in other positions, insisting she stay in this dangerous location because of her gender expression. "Just the fact that I look, you know, with the short, faded haircut, I have the tattoos and everything. So I think that's why my employer keeps me in certain areas, my look."

Capitalizing on markers of stigma. Some participants reported that, rather than stigmatizing, their appearance was an asset in their work because they worked in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community, their appearance was a "cool factor," or they contributed to diversity in the workplace. While gender nonconformity can result in greater stigma by the dominant culture, it can also signal insider status in LGBTQ communities. One participant who jokingly identified as a "professional lesbian" had only worked in jobs serving LGBTQ populations, first with youth and then in media-related positions where she holds a public persona as butch. She reported pressure to maintain a gender nonconforming appearance, regardless of her preference, in order to project the appropriate image for her position.

A few participants felt that they were valued as an aspect of diversity at work because their masculine appearance signaled LGBTQ status or positioned them as a cultural outsider within the context of the dominant culture. An art teacher

explained, "In New York, being queer . . . I realized that it could be an asset . . . . More schools are working to hire people that are minorities in one way, shape, or form so that they can have kids be able to relate to them."

In addition to directly marketing their stigmatized status, one participant reported her gender expression was viewed as desirable because it signaled a younger, hipper work environment. The participant worked in the computer industry where she experienced impressive economic success without a college degree.

> I think what it boils down to is it looks like a cool factor. What I've noticed is that a lot of people can't relate very well to the Indian guys who come in . . . . They don't have the same cultural background. So when I come in, they're not expecting me to walk through the door at all. I'm a girl so it's like, 'Okay cool. We've hit our quota for girls,' but then she dresses like a guy, so it's like, 'Oh, she'll fit in,' and then she's young and Black—'That's cool. We want to be cool.' So, I don't know if that's why I got hired, but I think it helps.

This view of Black female masculinity as cool relies on a complex relationship between ethnicity, immigration status, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, and social class. While a Black masculine female tech worker holds an intersectional identity that is uniquely stigmatized, she also signals a particularly American or, at the least, Western identity—an identity the participant reported as highly prized by her supervisors, who hold their own stigmatized identities as immigrants and Indian technology workers. This occurrence illustrates the contextual nature of power and stigma—an individual's own constellation of stigmatized statuses influences the evaluation of others as stigmatized or prized, depending upon social context.

Racial and ethnic differences. While approximately 40% of the participants were people of color, I did not find a categorical difference in treatment based on race and ethnicity. For example, Black participants did not report that they were perceived as more threatening, as might be expected due to their association with Black masculinity. Nor did they report that they believed managing multiple marginalized identities affected their work outcomes. In only a few instances did race or ethnicity appear to explicitly influence the outcomes of participants. One participant was passed over for a promotion because, she believed, professionalism at her workplace was racialized and gendered, meaning that professionals were limited to "White, straight-looking female[s]." Another participant reported that, as a high-end bartender, her Muslim name was a bigger hurdle than negotiating her masculinity. "My last name is really Arab and really Muslim. My name also could be a Black name, so . . . I know that I have to go in person if I'm going to apply somewhere." She reported that when on the job market, her gender expression was more acceptable than being Arab.

The interviews also suggested that people of color may be more resilient to mistreatment and more strongly committed to maintaining the integrity of their gender expression. Participants who were not White may have developed better skills at managing stigma due to their experience negotiating other socially marginalized identities. They more often referenced confidence or inner strength or placed responsibility on the stigmatizer, rather than themselves, for poor outcomes. One Black participant discussed dealing with prejudice at work: "It's about that person over there who is putting that energy out. That's their shit . . . . They say consistent exposure to racism . . . shortens your life, so you have to find a way to not take it on and in." Although it is difficult to generalize from this small sample, working class and Black masculine women seemed especially likely to work to maintain the integrity of their gender expression.

In addition to appearing more skilled at coping with stigma, racial and ethnic minority participants in this study seemed more at ease regarding their masculine appearance. White participants more often considered whether to temper their masculinity and worried about sanctions that might accrue to their gender expression. For example, when asked if she changes her appearance for work, a cook at a country club who identified as mixed race was adamant: "The way I dress is the way I dress at work. There's nothing I change about my attire, my attitude, my talk, my walk, nothing's changed." In contrast, a White participant in her early 20s, who worked in a bookstore, carefully considered her appearance and how it might affect her opportunities. When asked if her appearance was a limitation, she seemed conflicted, replying, "It's more that I've perceived it as a limitation . . . . I would always worry that it would be an issue if they saw me presenting like I normally do."

While not all White participants struggled with whether and how to temper their masculinity, they more often mentioned thinking about it. Because race and ethnicity are not generally concealable, people of color may expect to encounter prejudice, thus they may approach managing stigma differently. In addition, people of color may receive family and community guidance about managing stigma while maintaining a sense of integrity and authenticity—skills that may carry over to the negotiation of their female masculinity.

Opting Out

While the previous sections discussed how masculine women seek to fit in at work, some participants avoided typical work structures, by becoming self-employed, working in jobs not commensurate with educational attainment, or by maintaining a tenuous relationship with employment and workplaces. Some participants illustrated a general feeling of alienation from work as evidenced by numerous job transitions and markedly disparate job choices over their work life. A degree holder remarked on her work history: "I had had thirty jobs . . . when I turned thirty. I had to have all these random

jobs over the years.... and I called them crappy jobs, you know what I mean, they are...not skilled labor." Some participants had job histories that didn't follow a typical progression of working in increasingly skilled jobs and included jobs as disparate as demographer and plumber, yoga instructor and electrician, computer technician and personal trainer, and adjunct professor and gas station attendant. Several participants also reported being overeducated for their position or working in jobs which did not reflect their training. One participant illustratively reported her education history: "I have a BA in philosophy from Penn State and a Master's of theological studies from Harvard Divinity School. I'm a carpenter." Others reported a remarkable number of jobs or stretches of unemployment, implying an aimlessness or alienation from work life. Participants often indicated they were unwilling or, due to appearance, unable to assimilate into dominant work cultures: "Anywhere that you're supposed to be the 'normal'...I can guarantee you I should not be in it."

Opting out of stigma-laden work environments does not always end in poverty and marginal employment. A few participants were self-employed and several aspired to self-employment. One participant owned a physical therapy practice with her partner, where she managed the business side of the practice. She believed having control over the environment reduced the likelihood of prejudice. "We created our own work setting and so, by default, it's comfortable for me and I don't hire anybody that's not...There's a lot more risk involved with self-employment, but...we get to have complete control over everything."

While some participants aspired to self-employment to avoid stigma, self-employment could have high costs such as limited opportunities, stress, and poverty. One participant who was clearly traumatized by significant negative experiences due to her gender expression claimed that self-employment was her best strategy for avoiding harassment. Throughout the interview, she was adamant that owning her own computer repair business was ideal, even though she only worked 40–50 hours per month. When asked if her earnings were enough to make ends meet, she admitted, "It really isn't, but you have to accommodate with what you've got."

Discussion

Participants in this study used a variety of strategies to address stigma in the workplace. A majority of participants worked in environments organized by and serving the dominant culture. Participants negotiated aspects of their appearance and behavior and sought a balance between avoiding sanction and maintaining authenticity in relation to their gender expression. Working in professional positions that were not male-dominated and that engaged with clients or customers in person (e.g., lawyer, sales representative) required the most negotiation. Few participants participated in this type of work, unless it was in an atypical setting such as a lawyer who worked as an adjudicator for public housing cases and interacted mainly with residents and public housing officials. Regardless of setting, masculine women faced complex negotiations regarding appearance, behavior, and interaction due to sex segregation in the workplace that influenced expectations of workers' behavior and appearance.

Masculine women in this study had a decidedly different experience of gender on the job—they often appeared to be classified as both women and not-women. While being acknowledged as women, coworkers and supervisors often interacted in ways that suggested they viewed participants as more similar to men or, at the least, different from other women on the job. While gender normative women report alienation and discrimination in male-dominated settings (Ainsworth, Batty, & Burchielli, 2014; Smith, 2013), in this study, masculine women often found the environment to be a better fit. In failing to incorporate gender nonconforming women into analyses (Ridgeway, 2009), researchers miss the opportunity to understand the potentially separate influences of holding a social identity as a woman and gendered behaviors and attributes, especially in gender-segregated settings such as the workplace.

The findings from this study contribute to the literature on sexual orientation because few studies address the diversity of gender expression among lesbian and gay individuals. Researchers addressing sexual orientation should more often incorporate gender expression and examine its influence on outcomes (Kazyak, 2012). In addition, the participants illustrate the intersection of identities that lead to unique social positions based on social class, race and ethnicity, sex, and bodily expression that influence work experiences. Within female masculinity, expressions labeled soft butch, stud, AG, genderqueer, or butch not only convey different social identities, they also yield different interactions, and possibly outcomes, depending on the social setting.

The findings from this study add to the literature on stigma management by showing that sexual orientation is not always a discreditable status primarily negotiated through managing information (Clarke & Smith, 2015; Goffman, 1963; Ragins et al., 2007). Instead, individuals who hold visible markers associated with a stigmatized group use fundamentally different stigma management strategies. Rather than discreditable, their status is discredited, requiring them to manage tension in their interactions through disconfirming stereotypes, reducing the perception of threat, and reducing the likelihood of stigma by finding the least stigmatizing work environment.

In addition, the literature characterizes stigma as a duality, where stigmatized "others" attempt to move from abnormal to normal, yet stigma also exists as a hierarchy, ordering "those who are less stigmatized and those who are more stigmatized" (Han, 2009, p. 108). These hierarchies are not monolithic and can differ within social contexts. Many participants in this study upended normative structures and

participated in unexpected social contexts in an effort to serve their identities, interests, and tastes and to reduce their stigma in the workplace.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In this study, I used a non-random sample that may not accurately represent the experiences of masculine women in the United States. Also, not finding a categorical difference in the experiences of White participants and participants of color could be due to the aggregation of small numbers of participants from several ethnicities under the rubric, "participants of color." In addition, all participants of color worked in both White-dominated settings and settings dominated by people of color; this diversity in workplace composition may have contributed to the lack of a pattern in work experiences among participants of color. A larger sample size might have helped illuminate differential experiences based on class, racial and ethnic composition of the workforce, and geographic location of the workplace.

Finally, the data were not audited by a second person and the author was solely responsible for its interpretation. While sole authorship weakens the credibility of analysis, it is commonplace among academics who hold marginalized identities and/or work with marginalized populations (Devor, 1989; Dozier, 2005; Han, 2009). Despite these limitations, this research is significant because it is one of a few studies of masculine women and their negotiation of dominant social norms and rules.

Future research could investigate whether work experiences of masculine women of color differ based on the racial and ethnic composition of workers in the workplace. In addition, a study focusing on masculine women of color could examine whether individuals with ethnicities that are associated with stereotypes of aggressive masculinity (e.g., some Black, Latino, and Asian-Pacific Islander cultures) engage in different strategies to manage stigma in the workplace. Future research could also address masculine women who work in female-dominated environments and whether their strategies for managing stigma differ from employees in male-dominated settings. In addition, participants suggested that experiences in the workplace are influenced by an individual's level of physical masculinity. Future research could develop a measure of physical masculinity and assess its influence on work outcomes for masculine women. Finally, implementing a similar study with feminine men would allow for a comparison of how masculine women and feminine men manage stigma in the workplace.

Practice Implications

Managing the stigma of a marginalized identity creates a unique set of stressors that can lead to negative outcomes (Dozier, 2015; Waldo, 1999). Recent minority stress literature addresses the value of resilience in the face of these stressors (Meyer, 2003). The current study illustrates how stigmatized individuals are resilient in the face of prejudice, and how they work to maintain a sense of integrity while conforming to work norms imposed by the dominant culture. Mental health professionals can foster resilience in clients as they seek to maintain integrity, while negotiating workplace standards and, as suggested in the minority stress literature, encourage strong connections to the LGBTQ community for sexual orientation minority clients (Meyer, 2003). At the same time, if clinicians and others foster an awareness that stigma in the workplace is a fundamentally structural, rather than personal, issue, it may support better health outcomes among individuals experiencing career limitations or workplace mistreatment.

This study also contributes to the conceptual understanding of stigma. Sexual orientation has been identified as a concealable stigma, and sexual orientation minorities have been characterized as primarily managing information and negotiating levels of disclosure and managing potential signifiers. This study suggests that some sexual orientation minorities do not have a concealable status but a discredited status due to their gender expression. As a result, they do not manage information and disclosure about their stigmatized status but instead employ strategies more similar to individuals with visible, discredited stigmas. Researchers addressing sexual orientation minorities should more consistently include gender expression as a variable that can influence perception and experience in a variety of settings.

Conclusions

Because individuals with marginalized sexual orientations, especially individuals who are gender nonconforming, have historically experienced violence and discrimination, the author expected to hear far more accounts from participants of failure and discrimination in the workplace. While participants described significant efforts to manage their gender expression in the workplace, both by monitoring behavior and appearance in the workplace and by choosing settings they believed would be less stigmatizing, overall, participants reported satisfaction with their work life. The stories told by participants were mainly positive, consisting of accounts of their resilience and successful, creative management of their stigmatized identity. Most reported little discrimination, often having pre-emptively chosen work environments that were supportive, because the demand for workers or their particular skills subsumed their stigma, their subcultural appearance or identity was valued, or a male-dominated environment had fewer sanctions for their gender nonconformity.

While participants generally described themselves as successful at work, members of stigmatized groups often seek to "make sense" of discrimination. People can emphasize positive aspects of their work life or reinterpret negative events in order to cope with stigmatizing work environments (Hill & Gunderson, 2015) and it is possible that participants engaged

in this process. While the findings in this study attest to the ability of a stigmatized group to resist, modify, and reinterpret dominant norms and rules in order to successfully participate in dominant social institutions and settings, this resilience does not eliminate the obligation to work to reduce gendered inequality in the workplace.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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