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Facing Gender Performativity: How Transgender Performances and Performativity Trouble Facework Research

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Individuals who identify as transgender or who perform their gender identity in non/anti-normative ways often find themselves in conflictual situations and can be subject to hostility, exclusion, and aggression by others who relate to and are part of the dominant gender culture. Instances of facework that occur in interpersonal interactions lend insights into how gender norms are enforced in particular communication moments. These moments are not seen or heard on a larger rhetorical or societal level, but are necessarily an integral part of gender culture. Such instances of reciprocal facework in moments of cultural and interpersonal conflict are important in better understanding the interpersonal implications of gender policing. In this critical review I look at how queer gender performativity may challenge notions of face and facework and provide possible new directions for further research.

There has been a great deal of research over the last few decades on how transgender and other-gendered individuals trouble or problematize the normative culture of gender (Bornstein, 1995; Bornstein & Bergman, 2010; Butler, 1990; Nestle, Howell, & Wilchins, 2002; Stryker, 2008). These researchers, and others, have documented the dominant cultural ideology of gender as a binary, in which there is always one of two choices in terms of an individual's gender—choices comprised of feminine and masculine, woman or man, or some other similar binary combination that denotes an expected action, display, or performance associated with a biologically sexed body (Drescher, 2010; Goffman, 1977; Valocchi, 2005; West, 1987). This culture of gender in which gendered bodies exist as a binary is also often linked with heterosexuality as being the dominant driving ideology and strategy for the continuation of gender norms (Butler, 1993a; Kaufmann, 2010). In addition, language, as a tool of dominant culture, medical rhetoric, and the biological sciences, is also cited as perpetuating the binary ideal of gender (Bloch & Lemish, 2005; Turner, 1999). Because these binary choices in gender are explicitly tied to the sex of an individual, those individual expressions or performances of gender that are non-normative or deviant from cultural gender expectations for a particular sex can be particularly problematizing

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for the dominant culture of gender. When an individual's performance of gender is incongruent with cultural expectations considering their sexed body, there is a direct challenge to gender norms through their performance. Gender norms, how we communicate our gender identity, and how we communicate from a situated moment of gender identification touch upon issues of agency, representation, epistemology, power, and performance (Butler, 1990/2008; Foucault, 1978/1990). Queer theory and studies or narratives involving transsexual, intersexed, genderqueer, and other transgender individuals also touch on these issues, often providing critiques of sex/gender binaries and examples of gender identities that can challenge dominant cultures and ideologies of gender (Boellstorff, 2004; Ehrensaft, 2009; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Stryker, 2006; Turner, 1999). While the focus of this paper is specific to transgender challenges to dominant gender culture, individuals who do not identify as transgender also have and continue to challenge the literal binaries of gender culture.

Prosser (1998, 2006) discusses the importance of transsexual studies in contemporary gender research to move understandings of gender past the literal and the binary. "Heterosexuality operates by attempting to literalize sex *in* the body; queer transgender reveals this depth as surface" (Prosser, 2006, p. 271). Such research focuses on the lived ambiguities of transgender experiences in terms of relationships between assigned sex, biological sex, and then individual and cultural understandings of gender. Through examining ambiguities between these relationships, theorists and researchers have shown a literal separation—a deliteralization—between the cultural enforcement of categories of sex and gender and their more fluid lived experiences. While focusing on deliteralizing gender can provide theoretical, linguistic, and cognitive models for which to think of gender as other or non-binary (Butler, 1993b; Butler, 1990/2008; Sedgwick, 1985), this research can neglect the real ways in which the enforcement of the dominant gender culture's literal norms operate and continue to perpetuate gender binaries (Sloop, 2004). While Sloop's "Disciplining Gender" looks to rhetoric and discourse to unveil the workings of gender enforcement, interpersonal communication can also provide rich and foundational examples of how gender norms are indeed policed and perpetuated. Specifically, issues of face and facework that occur in interpersonal interactions could lend insights into how gender norms are enforced in particular communication moments.

While there has been a myriad of research on facework since Goffman's (1955) initial conceptions (Manusov, Kellas, & Trees, 2004; Penman, 1990; Spiers, 1998; Wood & Kroger, 1994), there has been little work done in the area of facework and gender performativity. Facework deals with the negotiations and strategies that individuals use when presenting and maintaining their identities in conversation (Manusov, et al., 2004). These moments are not often seen or heard on a larger rhetorical or societal level, but are necessarily an integral part of gender culture.

There is a particular need to take a critical look at existing research regarding face and facework in terms of non-normative gender performativity or “anti-normative” performativity (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Dougill, 2002, p. 165). Popularized by the work of Butler (1990, 1993a), gender performativity was derived from linguistics and speech act theory (Stryker, 2006). Performativity involves more than just a performance of gender, and instead encompasses cultural, historical, linguistic, and relational factors that are tied to a moment of performance. Such research involves looking at facework and gender performativity from multiple cultural perspectives as well as in terms of face conflict. Those individuals who identify as transgender or who perform their gender identity in non/anti-normative ways often find themselves in conflictual situations and can be subject to hostility, exclusion, and, in some cases, aggression by others who relate to and are part of the dominant gender culture (Aoki, 2010; Beemyn, 2005; Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008). Instances of reciprocal facework in moments of cultural and interpersonal conflict are important in better understanding facework research as well as the interpersonal implications of gender policing. In this critical review, I look at how transgender performativity may challenge notions of facework and provide possible new directions for further research. Beginning with a brief discussion of gender identity and performativity, I then review conversations in existing literature about facework, gender, and transgender performativity as well as how research concerning facework models that involve culture, power, embarrassment, and fear can begin to incorporate transgender performativity.

Gender Identity, Performativity, and Reflexivity

Butler suggests that gender identity is necessarily prior to any other identity and that “persons only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (1990/2008, p. 22). She suggests that identity is a social phenomenon, and one in which gender plays a primary shaping role as a dictate of cultural understanding of a person as such. To be understood as a person means that there is a social recognition of a *gendered* person and that the gender must also be socially recognizable. However, Butler’s argument is not that we are non-persons prior to gender identity but that a discourse about identity or about a person cannot occur prior to or separate from a gendered identity. At the same time, Ehrensaft (2009) has shown that from birth to infancy, and up until at least their first year, a person does not have the capacity to either understand gender or to even begin to have a gender identity. Yet, infants *are* intelligible and are gendered. The agency of the newborn and the infant is with the parents or caretakers who, after the assignment of sex (however arbitrarily a sex is or can be assigned), can choose to begin to attribute gender. Gender is often assigned as a correlate to an infant’s assigned sex, with all males assigned as boys and all females assigned as girls. As an infant beginning a

gendered existence in a culture, the power and agency to begin the gendering process is with another. We do not begin our lives as gendered beings with any agency or power—only with (an arguably questionable) biology.

Choices that are made as part of agency (whether that agency is of self or other) are not made in a vacuum but are made in a culture in which everything associated with gender is a duality or a binary—there is always only one of two choices. If, as Butler (1990/2008, p. 22) postulates, gender identity must precede any other identity, then how does a transgender person identify having a particular biologically sexed body that performs or acts culturally or socially as another gender? If, as Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) suggest, identity is both one's own and others' understanding and view of the self, how could a transgender individual possibly be understood with this mismatch of binaries? In this way, the issue of binaries becomes troubled and complicated by transgender persons. In some cases, transgender can even involve a fluidity of gender identity that seems to completely side step the binary categories of gender. Bornstein and Bergman (2010) provide an array of individual transgender narratives of people with fluid gender identities, including those who consider themselves genderqueer (Andre & Guitierrez, 2010; Luengsuraswat, 2010), mixed-gendered (Kusalik, 2010), and individuals who, while assigned a female sex at birth and a feminine gender, identify as men but prefer to express their gender in an ultra-feminine drag (Dalton, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010). At the same time, in a culture that designates binaries for gendered identities on three different fronts, it can still be difficult for a transgender individual to identify or be understood in a way other than at least one of the culturally prescribed binaries. In gendering, these three binaries include: the biological binary of male/female, the social and cultural binary of man/woman, and the linguistic binary that allows for the above namings, communications, or identifiers. These binaries are problematic for many reasons, not the least of which is that they do not allow for the recognition and acceptance of transgender performativity. A gendered identity simply cannot be understood without considering and being constricted by the biological, cultural, and linguistic binary choices that are available.

However, discourse occurs in a multitude of ways in communicative action and not only through the binary possibilities that we encounter in language. Butler addresses this in discussions of phenomenology and identity by giving primacy to performativity as discourse in identity (Butler, 1993b). As West and Zimmerman (1987) show, gender performance is far more than Goffman's (1977) idea of gender display; there is also a communicative reflexivity to performance. The communication of a gender or a gender identity involves not just a performance, but also a reception, understanding, or interpretation of the performance. At the same time, "doing gender"—performing gender—does not imply the possibility of an opposite: an undoing of gender. Gender is always there as a cultural social construct in which each

of us is situated (Cole, 2009). As a result, doing gender as the performance *it has to be* is a continual, situated event marked by reflexivity with itself, other performances, and reactions to performances. “Doing gender” is multi-dimensional and is not necessarily constricted by binaries. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender identity occurs through performativity as a “unity of experience” in which gender identity is constituted by the expression of gender (1990/2008, p. 30, 34). In this way, performativity is the discourse in which gender *has* to occur and *is always* occurring. However, while getting beyond the binary of language through performativity, Butler believes that the history of binaries in gender identity, the culture of gender, and the understandings of biology are all a part of performativity. The binary is a part of gender performance regardless of agency or intent to perform. Culture includes a complex relationship with history and biology that cannot be separated from any individual gender performance.

Although performativity as discourse is not binary in its multi-dimensionality (in terms of history, culture, and agency) or in its phenomenological status in particular performative moments, the way we talk about and categorize that performativity—and the way it is understood culturally—still exists in the binary choices of language. Regardless of how I choose to perform my gender, I will always be categorized as either a male or female and, usually, correspondingly as a man or a woman. My choice and agency in gendering lay in my performance, but the social and cultural reception, categorization, or interpretation of my performance discourse (including binary language used to describe my gender) is not something I have complete agency over. I only have agency in regards to a *portion* of my performativity—in my doing or performance of gender. In addition, gender performativity as an expression of a continuously constructed identity is always dynamic and changing as identity continues to be influenced by its own performance and others’ receptions or interpretations. As a result, the reflexivity inherent in gender performativity calls for a critical view of not only the performance of gender but also the reception of the performance. In terms of interpersonal communication and facework, gender performativity involves communicative action on the part of the performer and recipient.

Gender Performativity and Facework

Despite certain works on politeness theory and facework that explain communicative action in face and facework as linguistically based in the speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lakoff, 1975; Spiers, 1998), performance and performativity also play a role in communication, interpersonal dynamics, and issues of face. There have been multiple definitions of facework, starting with Goffman who explains facework as actions taken by a person to be consistent with their face and to counteract instances of threats to one’s face (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). This feature of action in facework builds on Goffman’s theories of performance as communication

in everyday contexts (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's initial focus on actions (as opposed to only verbal communication) in terms of facework and performance in communication have been revisited by researchers since then who have likewise brought the possibility of inclusion of performativity into the facework fold (Manusov, et al., 2004; Tracy, 1990).

Facework researchers also break down face and facework in ways that are pertinent to transgender performativity. Goffman (1955) introduced the differences between corrective and preventative facework. While corrective facework involves the saving of face after an instance of face threat, preventative or "avoidant" facework involves positioning and strategies to protect one's face from potential threat (Goffman, 1955, p. 220-222). In gender performativity these aspects of facework are tied to an individual's identity as well as to an individual's understanding of their identity in a given cultural context. Differentiation between types of face claims is also pertinent in facework and performativity. Two types of face claims were developed through research in politeness theory that distinguish between positive face and negative face (Tracy, 1990). Tracy describes positive face as "the desire to be appreciated and approved of by select others" and negative face as "a person's want to be unimpeded and free from imposition (p. 210). These face claims are dynamic in communicative actions of gender performativity in that positive and negative face can be operating at the same time in an individual who expresses a transgender identity. A desire to be unimpeded in their expression of gender (negative face) can be combined with a desire to be approved of by either the dominant gender culture or any other non-dominant gender culture to which they belong. At the same time, people who are viewing the performance of transgender identity expression have their own negative and positive face wants. These wants can be related to their acceptance by the dominant gender culture and an expectation to be unimpeded in their normative gender expression or normative gender understandings. Further complicating dynamics of facework in gender performativity, researchers also differentiate between self-face and other-face, with the former being a focus on self-image, and the latter being a focus on another's image (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Likewise, in performativity there can always be a focus or an acknowledgement of a gender performance being viewed and interpreted by another. In this acknowledgement, while performativity is about self-face in terms of gender identity expression, there can also be recognition of other-face in the performance. These three components of face and facework show the complexity of facework interactions in gender performativity on a basic level.

Finally, according to Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, and Takai (2000) there has been a great deal of research on facework in terms of requests and conflict styles but not in terms of identity and identity conflict. Research on facework in favor-asking and requests for assistance has focused on resolving conflict and conflict styles instead of relational

and identity issues (Oetzel, et al., 2000). Relational and identity aspects of facework are paramount in understanding interactions involving transgender performances (Khayatt, 2002). In addition, gender cultural differences play a part in identity and relational issues in these interactions. In the three sections below, I introduce select facework research that addresses these issues in some ways, but which could be improved as inclusive models through the incorporation of an understanding of transgender identity, gender cultures, and performativity.

Culture in Gender Performativity and Facework

Ting-Toomey's (2004) conception of face negotiation theory integrates cultural considerations and conflict with interpersonal communication in a way that can be useful in considering facework in gender identity and performativity. In face negotiation theory, the concept of face deals with identity and respect for identity in the context of an encounter as well as in the greater cultural context (Ting-Toomey, 2004). Using religion and interfaith couples as an example, Ting-Toomey explains that identity conflict goals in particular are linked both to an individual's underlying beliefs and goals as well as to cultural beliefs and goals. As in other intercultural interactions, in gender performativity the performer and viewer/receiver have cultural and individual beliefs that should be taken into consideration.

However, troubling or complicating face negotiation theory is that there could be more than two sets of cultures and beliefs when considering communicative situations involving a transgender person or individual performing a non-normative gender identity and an individual who expresses normative gender identity. A transgender person may belong to a culture or community(ies) related to their particular gender identity(ies) as well as to a minority culture within the dominant heteronormative gender culture. These two cultures then would be at play with the dominant heteronormative culture of normative gender identity. For instance, an individual such as Sherilyn Connelly (2010), who is male sexed but identifies as a woman and performs the gender identity of a woman, may participate in a transgender culture but always also belongs to the dominant culture of heteronormativity, although most likely in the margins of that culture. Connelly, who decided not to have sex reassignment surgery, explains the complexities of being transgender and not transsexual, "I'm not a boy because I have a penis, and just because I don't have a vagina doesn't mean I'm not a girl" (p. 81). Connelly finds herself always wondering whether she is "guilt[y]-by-biological-association" because she has a penis. She is perceived as a "threat" in cultural activities such as music festivals and bathhouses because of anatomy and despite gender performance (Connelly, p. 80). Connelly has an understanding of her status in dominant gender culture, but also finds that it can conflict with her status in transgender or feminine subcultures. Another example is that of Nico Dacumos, who also falls under the umbrella identity category of

transgender, has a biologically sexed body of a female, identifies as gender-fluid, and performs as neither a man nor a woman. “Nico is a flaming queer radical polysexual two-spirited female-bodied ... transgender butch fag...” (Dacumos, 2006, p. 22). Dacumos explains, “I find that I fail miserably at being a guy, whether it’s with butches or transmen or any other masculine-identified people. I feel more comfortable with femmes of any gender, but I don’t quite present or feel feminine enough to call myself femme” (p. 33). Dacumos’s gender performativity could be purposely ambiguous and unidentifiable to a communication partner in regards to the dominant gender binary. These examples bring up questions of how transgender individuals engage in facework in an instance of cultural conflict or confrontation with an individual who performs their gender normatively and identifies with the dominant gender culture.

Face negotiation theory is based on a dualism of collectivist versus individualist ideologies that researchers found operating in different cultures in cross-cultural comparisons of individuals from different nations or geographical locations (Oetzel, et al., 2000). In the above situations of potential conflicts in different *gender* cultures however, both individuals belong to the same dominant culture—neither as necessarily conforming participants, but both as part of the culture. Issues of individualist versus collectivist do not apply in the same way, as the two (or more) different gender cultures are part of a larger cultural system of shared gendered social patterns. However, the individuals also *do* belong to different cultures with different values in terms of gender identity and conformity. Connelly (2010) describes transsexuals she has met who have different feelings about having a penis than she does, and this can affect her interpersonal relations in that culture. Also, despite identifying and performing as a woman, Connelly describes difficulties being able to fully participate in women’s communities due to her assigned sex as a male. The intercultural issue at play in facework between the members of different gender cultures is not (necessarily) an issue of individualism or collectivism, but instead is (necessarily) focused on the connection between biological sex and gender performativity. While this does not negate face negotiation theory, it does trouble the idea of cultural variability in the theory, which is based on the variability between individualists and collectivists.

In different gender cultures, there can be differences in core cultural beliefs between the dominant culture and non-normative gender cultures, as well as differences in core beliefs and values among the various non-normative or transgender cultures. Butler (1990) outlines some of the former in her review of essentialist versus constructionist ideas of gender, also highlighting the differences between different feminist understandings of constructionism, masculinity, and sex. More recent studies of queer and transgender communities have also shown cultural differences and core value differences among cultures of people who share similar

non-normative identities. Hansbury (2005) examines the vast cultural differences in transmasculine identities, differentiating between three distinct transmasculine cultures (categorized as Woodworkers, Transmen, and Genderqueers) in which individuals communicate from very different points of core gender beliefs and values. Similarly, Beemyn (2005), focusing on college students, discusses diversity in identities of individuals in different queer and transgender groups. The value differences that Beemyn finds are between the culture of demographically older transgender people who strive for and identify as transsexual and the culture of younger transgender people who separate sex from gender and identify as genderqueer. Each culture has distinct values regarding gender that could cause variations in their concepts of positive and negative face and, as a result, would also cause variations in facework strategies and understandings. These types of cultural variabilities are not included in face negotiation theory.

Following from this troubling of cultural variability in face negotiation theory, typologies that have been made in facework research based on this particular conception of cultural variability may be incomplete when trying to understand facework interactions between individuals of different gender cultures. Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) conducted research involving American and Japanese college students and developed a 16-category typology for facework. They chose American and Japanese participants to attempt to capture the facework strategies from both individualist (American) and collectivist (Japanese) individuals. The issue of differences in gender cultures was simply not part of the research into typologies. If, as mentioned above, identity conflict goals in particular are linked both to an individual's underlying beliefs and goals as well as to cultural beliefs and goals (Ting-Toomey, 2004), and those cultural beliefs and goals do not agree with the prescribed cultural dualism of collectivist vs. individualist that Ting-Toomey identifies, then how can facework differences due to gender culture differences be understood through this 16-category typology? In fact, Ting-Toomey states, "any facework typology used in a cross-cultural interpersonal communication study must include strategies which are applicable to the cultures of the study" (Ting-Toomey, 1994, p. 313). In order to fully address facework concerning gender performativity, cultural differences among individuals from different queer gender cultures need to be included in some way among the cultural variables of face negotiation theory.

Power, Rights, and the Other in Facework

Lim and Bowers (1991) took a different approach to facework that is also important to issues of facework in gender performativity and is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on politeness theory. In their study, Lim and Bowers found that politeness theory was too limiting in instances of conflictual facework and did not adequately account for acts that threaten people's positive face—the aspect of face that accounts for conflict. They

conceptualized three types of facework—solidarity, approbation, and tact—and studied them in terms of power, intimacy, and “rights” to perform or act. While their research has been criticized as being limited due to its focus on other-face and lack of attention to self-face (Ting-Toomey, 1994), the other-face aspect of gender performativity is important to understanding the policing and perpetuation of gender norms in dominant culture. In its reflexivity, performativity involves a turn toward the viewer or other. In the viewer’s response to a gender performance by a transgender person, there is an interpersonal exchange that then allows for either a space outside of dominant binaries for transgender expressions or, conversely, a closing of space and possibilities that excludes culturally non-normative expression. There is an opportunity either for policing or for understanding in the “other” of the performative action, so the other-face directiveness of the Lim and Bowers typology seems to have considerable potential and could be particularly useful for understanding facework in gender performativity.

Lim and Bowers (1991) also showed that those communicative situations in which an individual had both power and rights were less likely to include facework especially in situations between those less intimate. When looking at gender performativity through this research lens, one would expect that those who display more normative gender identities would feel more powerful and believe themselves to have more of a right to their performance than those who engage in transgender performativity. However, because both performativity and facework are reflexive and dynamic, how do these individuals engage in facework together?

Issues of power and “right” have been seen as dominant forces in the continuation of binary gender categories (Butler, 1990/2008; Foucault, 1978/1990; Foucault, 1982) and are likewise of interest in the interpersonal facework interactions in gender performativity. As mentioned above, performativity is reflexive by definition in that it is always moving from performer to viewer and then back again. It is also reflexive in its constant referral back to cultural and societal history despite being phenomenologically based in a moment of performance and expression (Butler, 1990). In addition, gender performativity as an expression of a continuously constructed identity is always dynamic and changing as identity continues to be influenced by its own performance. For Lim and Bowers (1991), the issue of power, rights, and agency influence facework in these reflexive communicative actions. In terms of transgender performativity in the face of dominant gender culture, the already existing power structures within gender culture are at play with the interpersonal positions of power that can determine facework strategies. Based on this theory, a transgender individual performing an ambiguous, fluid, or “other” gender is usually already at a power disadvantage in an interpersonal interaction with an individual expressing normative gender identity in a communicative moment. At the same time, the reflexivity of performativity allows for a constant exchange of power in the interaction by

moving from performer to viewer and then back to performer. The dynamics of these power exchanges in an interpersonal communicative situation of gender expression should be researched to better understand the dynamics of power in gender facework.

Embarrassment, Facework, and Gender Performativity

Embarrassment has been covered extensively in facework and relational research, and there have been a multitude of definitions of embarrassment (Costa, Dinsbach, Manstead, & Bitti, 2001; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Edelmann, 1985; Higuchi & Fukada, 2002; Petronio, Clark, & Dollar, 1989; Sharkey, Kulp, Carpenter, Lee, & Rodillas, 1997). However, while embarrassment has played a large role in facework studies, a model of embarrassment provides difficulties when considering facework in transgender performativity. Keltner and Buswell state that, “Embarrassment occurs when individuals fail to behave in accordance with socially defined scripts and roles” (1997, p. 261). The problem with this statement and similar statements about embarrassment is that the cause of embarrassment is not necessarily a “failure” on the part of an individual, but is necessarily caused by a rigidity or lack of fluidity in social norms and expectations. In some cases, this cultural rigidity may be warranted if it provides for an individual’s safety, freedom, or health. Safety, freedom, and health are not at stake in the case of normative gender expectations though. In fact, the arbitrary rule of gender in our dominant culture does the opposite—often putting the transgender individual’s safety, freedom, and health at risk if they do not conform to gender expectations. Further, while embarrassment may occur on an interpersonal level, it is rooted in cultural expectations. In the case of gender, the dominant cultural expectations are ones in which no individual has agency. As explained above, an individual does not have agency in regard to the assignment of sex, gender roles, or in the reception of a gender performance. This lack of agency in gendering suggests that in transgender performativity, an individual does not cause embarrassment through any personal failure; the failure occurs on a level outside of the individual at the societal and cultural level.

However, embarrassment does still play an important role in facework and in transgender performativity and face. Looking at the embarrassing social predicament as a model to study facework, Cupach and Metts (1994) write about the relationship between identities, uncomfortable feelings, and facework due to embarrassment. Drawing upon and furthering Goffman’s earlier writings about embarrassment in social interactions, the researchers explain that “the individual who performs behavior creating embarrassment may or may not correspond to the individual feeling embarrassment, or the person for whom embarrassment is felt” (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 18). As in the work of Lim and Bowers (1991) above, the focus of facework research on embarrassment is a focus on other-face in interpersonal interactions. The issue in embarrassment becomes centered on the complexities of a relational

dynamic in which the viewer or dialogue participant may feel embarrassment either for or about a breach of behavior that defies dominant gender norms. As a result, work in embarrassment and facework can be particularly important in further understanding the turn in interactions that allows for either the policing or the opening of space in gender expression. In addition, there is also a reflexivity in embarrassment models in which the one who causes embarrassment can be viewed as “tactless” and responsible for the situation by offending another through their actions of neglecting social rules and norms (Cupach and Metts, 1994, p. 23). With the combination of embarrassment occurring, whether it was purposeful or not, and then the possibility of blame for not following social norms, there is great potential for a transgender person to be involved in such a facework predicament. Because of essentialist beliefs about gender, sex, and identity, often times non-normative gender performance can be construed as a choice to violate rules and norms. As a result, those performances of gender identity that may embarrass another because they are nonconforming may be strongly attributed and linked to the responsibility of the transgender performer. Cupach and Metts explain that the stronger such linkage, the more severe the predicament is (1994). Facework responses to embarrassment can include aggression and criticism (Cupach & Metts, 1994), and in the case of gender performativity, assist in the “disciplining” of gender (Sloop, 2004). Also, because of the primacy of embarrassment and its link to fear in social situations (Miller, 2001), there is a need for further study of embarrassment, facework, and non-normative gender performativity.

Cupach and Metts (1994) also review literature that results in the categorization of five main events or situations that cause embarrassment and that can be seen as potential sites for facework. Of particular interest in studying facework in instances of transgender performativity are the events labeled as “impropriety,” “conspicuousness,” and “breach of privacy” (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 19). The labeling and consideration of an act of gender non-conformity as embarrassing would most likely come from one of these three categories of events. Impropriety is defined as “a failure to observe standards or show due honesty or modesty” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2010). This pairing—not observing standards with dishonesty—points to an immediate negative association between breaches of culture such as gender non-conformity and negative personal characteristics. In fact, Cupach and Metts use “improper dress” and “dirty talk” as their examples of impropriety (1994, p. 19). Since a great deal of transgender performances include “improper dress” in that the choices of apparel are often incongruent with a person’s assigned biological sex (Bornstein, 1995; Crawley, 2002; Eves, 2004; Pitts, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987), it is likely that this negative category of impropriety would be considered an instance of such an embarrassment event. Further, because Cupach and Metts’s second category of “conspicuousness” involves sticking out or being other than

the norm, performances of gender nonconformity can often be included in this embarrassment event as well. The third category of “breach of privacy” is one that could occur in specific instances of gender non-conformity in private places such as sexed restrooms where individuals as a result of dominant gender culture expect gender performance to coincide with assigned biological sex. There may also be a privacy expectation to exclude other-sexed and therefore (culturally) other-gendered persons from their private restroom space. There have been numerous recent studies on the experiences of transgender and other gender non-conforming individuals in public sexed restrooms—experiences that range from uncomfortable to aggressive and threatening (Brown, 2004; Pitts, 2006; Elkind, 2007; West, 2010). These instances of breaches of privacy in public spaces, and especially restrooms, are also important to the understanding of facework interactions in gender nonconformity and the perpetuation of gender norms in dominant culture.

Conclusion

While there may be many more obvious examples of gender performativity in our culture that appear in media and other forms of rhetoric, the exploration and study of less known and more intimate interpersonal communicative moments of transgender performativity can be instructive in terms of the perpetuation of gender norms and the dynamics involved in transgender oppression. While past facework research has not considered transgender performances or performativity, communication research in the field of face and facework reveals possibilities for new and expanded research in the particular area of gender facework. First, face negotiation theory points to cultural variability as key to understanding facework dynamics, but its propositions are based only on specific cultural values. The theory assumes these values to be pertinent in all facework dynamics. However, when considering facework in transgender performativity, differing understandings of gender are essential cultural variabilities that need to be accounted for. This idea of value variance in subcultures is not only important in studying transgender performativity, but can be instructive in understanding facework dynamics within any non-dominant culture.

Power and its exchange further trouble facework research. While power in interpersonal dynamics is important in some approaches to traditional face and facework theory and research, gender performativity consists of additional layers of various power relations that must be considered in transgender understandings of facework. Power in terms of gender expression, biological sex, and the relationships between the two can complicate understandings of facework dynamics, but also may provide richer understandings of how power can operate in interpersonal communicative moments.

Third, embarrassment can be an especially effective model when trying to understand facework in situations between queer and hegemonic expressions of gender. Many individuals face violence and aggression

when expressing gender in nonconforming performances. These reactions or fears of these reactions can enforce cultural hegemony and policing in gender expressions. While there can certainly be a variety of cultural and interpersonal rationales for such reactions to transgender performativity, embarrassment provides a perspective in facework from which violence, aggression, and impertinence can be begin to be understood in these facework dynamics. Some embarrassment concepts such as impropriety may seem outdated in light of transgender performances, but can still be instructive in understanding the heteronormative reception of transgender expressions.

Finally, there are relational and identity issues in facework that often are not considered in facework research, but are necessarily important when researching gender and specifically transgender performativity. While literature from the current body of facework research can be applied to facework in transgender performativity, the reflexive qualities of gender performativity, differences in gender cultures, and issues of power in gender and in dominant gender culture point to the necessity for specific research regarding gender performativity and facework. By looking at facework from a performativity perspective and including the various gender cultures in facework study, the communication discipline can move toward a greater understanding of interpersonal dynamics in transgender performances. Such research may show possibilities for non-binary understandings of gender as well as find existing spaces for gender inclusivity within interactions.

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