Career Development and Trajectories

Career development is an overarching concept that describes the evolution of work and personal activities and commitments over time. It is a life-long process with particular implications for trans individuals. Career trajectories are one element of overall career development, typically describing the sequence of an individual’s education and work. Career development and trajectories are not limited to discussion of paid employment but rather the processes and pathways through which individuals explore and make decisions about their futures.

Career development and trajectories are specific to individuals, and there are professional fields whose goals include assisting individuals with career planning and decision making. Career or vocational psychologists focus on individual factors such as education, personality, opportunity, and agency in the processes of career development. Gender identity and systems of oppression based on gender—especially sexism, genderism, and transphobia—interact with career development to both afford and constrain aspirations, opportunities, agency, and trajectories of trans people.

Career Exploration and Job Search

There are several decisions that trans individuals make in relation to work and career that influence their trajectory, work satisfaction, and well-being. Before starting work, trans people may experience what researchers call a bottleneck in their overall development as psychological resources are taken up with gender identity exploration and coping with discrimination and harassment. This bottleneck draws personal resources away from vocational and career exploration, potentially creating a disadvantage for trans youth as they prepare to enter their working lives. Trans youth and adults who go to college may also experience a lack of support for career exploration and development from career services offices that are not well prepared to serve them. Similarly, high school guidance counselors and adult vocational counselors may lack knowledge and sensitivity to provide high-quality support for the specifics of trans people’s lives. It is important to remember that factors other than gender have a substantial influence on career exploration and opportunity; on their own and in intersection with gender, factors such as race, age, socioeconomic status, and ability are also influential.

Workplaces reflect the gendered nature and assumptions of the wider society, sorting many jobs into a masculine–feminine binary. For example, teaching and nursing are typically considered “female” occupations in the United States, whereas construction and military are classed “male.” Not all occupations are gendered to the same extent; clerical/administrative assistant and firefighting are more strongly associated with feminine and masculine, respectively, but fields like physical therapy and accounting are less so. Increasingly, life science and medicine are seen as inclusive of women, although having women join “male” fields has done little to change perceptions that the world of work is divided into binary categories. The assumption that there are only two gender options also excludes people whose identity is non-binary or gender fluid.
Thinking about jobs in gendered ways can influence career aspirations and pathways. Trans youth may align their goals with these binary conceptions of feminine or masculine careers and face some resistance, or at least curiosity, from peers and adults who see the goals as incompatible with the young person’s perceived gender. Conversely, awareness that gender is not binary may enable trans youth to see beyond the artificial categorization of jobs into feminine and masculine, opening opportunities for exploring careers without framing work in gendered terms. Nonbinary and gender-fluid youth may approach career selection and planning without the constraints of complying with gendered expectations.

Trans people may perceive some careers or workplaces as more open to them, potentially shaping career aspirations and job seeking. Working in a field that is less strongly gendered may attract trans people who do not want their jobs to reflect the masculine–feminine binary. The perception that gender does not matter as much for success in these fields could make them seem more open to gender diversity. Conversely, working in a strongly gendered field might appeal to some trans individuals who want their careers to reinforce their expression of their gender; for example, a trans man might choose a “male” field that aligns with his gender identity and expression, and a trans woman might elect a “female” field that aligns with hers. Some fields that are not strongly gendered in the masculine–feminine binary may still strongly enforce cisgenderism, however, making it difficult for nonbinary people to see themselves in these jobs; in essence, the message is “It’s OK to be either a man or a woman in this field, but you have to be one or the other.”

The job search process presents particular opportunities and challenges for trans people. Searching for and starting a new job represents a chance for a fresh start in which one can represent one’s gender perhaps differently from how one did in school or previous jobs, reducing or eliminating the need to out oneself as trans. Trans job seekers must contend with a set of legal and policy considerations: Does the employer or its locale provide protection from discrimination and harassment based on gender identity? What options exist for redress if there are violations? If the employer provides health benefits, do they cover gender-affirming services? Career and vocational counselors should be aware of these issues and help trans job seekers learn how to find the answers.

If a trans person’s name and/or pronouns have changed over time, they may feel the need to out themselves to prospective employers in the application process or to omit previous employment from their work history. Similarly, to avoid being outed, someone who has transitioned may not want to use job references from previous employers. School and university transcripts, professional licenses, recognition and awards, and resumes may carry different names over time. Changing a first name at some point in the career may seem confusing to potential employers or present obstacles to representing a continuous work trajectory.

**Workplace Gender Climate and Its Influence on Careers of Trans People**

Regardless of whether a field as a whole is highly gendered or less so, individual workplaces have their own climates for gender diversity. Gender climates have a direct influence on the people who work within them. Gender climate may be influenced by a number of factors, including the employer’s policies and practices related to nondiscrimination, gender diversity education and training for employees, provision of gender-inclusive health care and other benefits, local climate for gender diversity, and local, state, and national employment laws. Day-to-day experiences in the workplace affect the performance, well-being, and job satisfaction of trans employees, as well as their long-term prospects for developing a successful career. Workplace climate is the responsibility of the employer, although the effects are seen on individual employees.

Policies and practices related to gender inclusion may strongly influence career trajectories of trans people. The opportunity to be hired, to work, and to be rewarded for job performance without discrimination and harassment is critical to career success. Trans people may be deterred from entering or advancing in preferred careers by repeated experiences with discrimination or harassment. Some trans people develop and enact second- and third-choice career plans as ways to deal with inequitable treatment in the workplace. Some find an equitable, supportive workplace at some point in
their career and stay in those positions rather than pursue others that might advance their careers.

How other people perceive and treat coworkers is one aspect of workplace climate. Regardless of gender identity, every employee makes decisions about dress, physical appearance (e.g., hairstyle, facial grooming), and communication (e.g., voice, inflection, vocabulary). Some careers and workplaces convey strong expectations, even requirements, for employees’ gender presentation. Some dress codes or uniforms are based on binary gender assumptions (e.g., skirts for women and pants for men) that do not offer options for nonbinary individuals (e.g., wearing a shirt and necktie with heels).

For trans people, decisions related to gender presentation may carry weight in career choices because they signal alignment or misalignment with identity. Working in a field that supports gender diversity reduces the emotional and cognitive load of constant self-monitoring of one’s gender presentation, which may have particular benefits for nonbinary people. Trans people with the option to do so may select jobs in fields that provide opportunities to align their gender presentation with their identities or provide flexibility to express gender differently at different times in a single workplace or across the career.

Workplaces and fields that offer positive and inclusive gender climate may be particularly attractive to trans people, allowing them to build successful, satisfying careers. Not all trans people have the socioeconomic, educational, racial, and/or citizenship privileges necessary to freely choose jobs in gender-inclusive workplaces. Workplace climate is one manifestation of the effects of intersecting systems of oppression that dampen trans people’s access to the full array of potential jobs and to career progression.

**Transitioning at Work and Career Development**

Although not all trans people undergo gender transition, transitioning at work may have specific effects on career trajectories of trans people. In addition to the general influence of gender climate and matters of nondiscrimination, transitioning at work brings particular opportunities and challenges for careers. Posttransition can be a time of possibility and growth in career. Freed from some of the psychological stresses of pretransition and transition, a posttransition person may be able to more fully explore career interests and plan for job change or career advancement. Transition may facilitate acceptance within a gendered field; for example, a female-to-male computer scientist may find himself more accepted in a predominantly male work setting. For trans people who work in inclusive contexts, the affirmation of coworkers may reinforce a positive decision to transition, contribute to job satisfaction, and promote a sense of well-being in career settings.

Transitioning at work can also pose challenges to work and career trajectory. The transition process may result in heightened visibility and negative repercussions from coworkers and superiors. Transphobia that was not previously evident may surface when someone changes appearance, name, or pronouns. In highly gendered fields, transitioning may mean being seen as less knowledgeable, as when a male-to-female trans person encounters workplace sexism in a field that is predominantly male. Trans people report losing relationships and standing in professional communities due to transphobia. As previously noted, transitioning at work can interrupt careers that are built on continuity of name and reputation. Navigating these potential obstacles can draw energy away from contributing to work and career. For these reasons, transition at work can decrease career prospects.

Trans people may choose to stay in a job or seek a new job before or after transition. Access to health insurance is one factor, as is the financial stability of keeping a job throughout what can be a costly process that often is not covered by insurance. Staying with a supportive employer is another reason to keep a job, while finding a new workplace, if possible, may be important posttransition if the climate is or becomes unsupportive.

Career counselors in any setting can work with trans clients to anticipate and mediate some of the negative consequences while building on the possibilities presented by transition at work. Training for career counselors can include awareness of trans identities, the transition process, and the possible effects of transition on work. Accounting for career and work identity among the many considerations for transition can help prepare trans people in advance. To support trans career development,
human resources and other employer units can take responsibility for creating an inclusive, affirming workplace climate for trans people overall and proactively in advance if they become aware that someone will transition at work.

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See also Therapist Training; Workplace Climate; Workplace Policies; Workplace, Gender Transition

Further Readings


Chest Feeding

This entry discusses lactation and infant feeding for transgender and gender nonbinary (trans) people. The term chest feeding refers to a person’s ability to produce and express milk from mammary and ductal tissue in the chest to feed an infant. This term is preferred when discussing this practice among trans people, because it is gender neutral and more acceptable to people on the transmasculine spectrum who may be reluctant to use gendered language to refer to their body. It also accurately describes the practice in transfeminine people. The following sections address chest feeding for both transmasculine and transfeminine people, including special considerations with hormonal treatment.

Transmasculine Chest Feeding

The term transmasculine refers to those who were assigned female at birth and whose gender identity is on the masculine spectrum. Many trans people who are female assigned at birth may identify as nonbinary, meaning they do not identify as male or female. However, chest feeding is dependent on physiology rather than identity, and both transmasculine and nonbinary people with the necessary tissues are able to chest feed. Transmasculine and nonbinary individuals retain the ability to become pregnant and chest feed their infants as long as their uterus, mammary, and ductal tissues are intact. In a single study published in 2014 by Alexis Light et al., titled “Transgender Men Who Experienced Pregnancy After Female-to-Male Gender Transitioning,” 51% of transmasculine participants chose to chest feed after delivering their child or children.

It may be possible to complete chest masculinization without compromising the ability to chest feed, but this may compromise aesthetic outcomes because mammary and ductal tissue will have to be left in the chest and remain attached to the nipple. In 2018, Christine Jaslar published the only available case study to date of one person’s experience attempting to express milk after double-incision chest masculinization with free nipple grafts. He was able to express 15 mL of milk from one nipple and only droplets from the other while off testosterone treatment. While it is unexpected that he would have any milk production after a free nipple graft (a process during chest masculinization in which the nipple is completely removed from the body, thinned, and reattached), he was unable to produce enough milk to adequately feed an infant.

Staying on hormone therapy while chest feeding is a common desire for transmasculine people with