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Experience with discrimination, perceptions of difference, and the importance of gender conformity on support for transgender rights

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ABSTRACT

Analyzing data from the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel ($N=4573$; August–September 2017), the study considers the influence of experience with gender discrimination, perceptions of gender differences between men and women, and the personal importance of gender conformity on support for transgender identity and societal acceptance of transgender individuals. While controlling for demographics, political and religious predispositions, values, and social contact, the results suggest that those who have experienced gender discrimination are more likely to support transgender identity and the argument that society has not gone far enough in terms of transgender acceptance. These individuals exhibit group empathy and express solidarity and a shared experience with their transgender counterparts. In contrast, those who perceive that men and women are significantly different with respect to gender and those who indicate that gender conformity is personally important to them are less likely to accept transgender identity and also less likely to support further acceptance of transgender individuals in society. The implications of these findings and the importance of strategic messaging are discussed in light of the increasingly polarized political climate surrounding transgender rights and issues.

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Transgender; identity; gender; acceptance; public opinion

Introduction

Over the past two decades, public opinion researchers have taken a keen interest in understanding the dynamics of opinion surrounding the same-sex marriage debate and other civil rights concerns directly relevant to gay men and lesbians (Brewer 2008; Hart-Brinson 2018). We've seen a considerable shift in US public support for same-sex marriage in the period between the 2003 *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health* case legalizing same-sex marriage in the state of Massachusetts and the 2015 US Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that made same-sex marriage a legal right across the United States. While some have called this dramatic and rapid shift in public opinion a *sea change* (Woodruff 2013; Harwood 2013; Brewer 2014), others have focused more narrowly on

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the role that generational change and social contact have played in driving broader support for marriage equality (Becker 2012; Silver 2010, 2015; Lewis 2011).

With an almost singular focus on the same-sex marriage debate, less attention has been paid to concerns that directly impact transgender individuals – the often left out “T” in the LGBT identity umbrella (Hackl, Becker, and Todd 2016; Becker 2014; Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Flores 2015). Historically, the transgender community has often been left out of discussions of public opinion towards gay men and lesbians and even bisexual individuals. In addition, there has also been significant debate within the broader gay and lesbian community about how and whether to include transgender individuals in the larger identity politics movement (Flores, Herman, and Mallory 2015; Murib 2015; Nownes 2014). In fact, the first study of public attitudes toward transgender individuals wasn’t published until 2013 and at present, there is still scant survey data available that separately tracks opinions towards transgender individuals rather than the larger LGBT community as a whole (Norton and Herek 2013; Flores, Miller, and Tadlock 2018b). Despite a dearth of transgender-specific survey data, it is clear that the dramatic shift in public support for same-sex marriage has not translated into broader legal support for transgender individuals, where debates about bathrooms and other public accommodations, identity documents, health care policy, Title IX and educational opportunities, and military service remain strikingly polarized (Castle 2018; Jones and Brewer 2018; Taylor, Lewis, and Haider-Markel 2018; Lewis et al. 2019).

Since 2013, the limited yet growing amount of research on public opinion toward the transgender community has focused on the role that demographics, political and religious predispositions, individual values, interpersonal contact, and media exposure have on support for transgender individuals, rights, and candidates for public office (Norton and Herek 2013; Flores 2015; Jones et al. 2018; Becker and Todd 2017; Flores et al. 2018a). Given a general lack of understanding and familiarity with transgender individuals and high levels of disgust sensitivity toward policies that violate traditional gender norms, it is clear that opinions toward the transgender community may be more fixed and less resistant to such rapid sea change when compared to the same-sex marriage debate (Miller et al. 2017; Haider-Markel et al. 2017). As Flores et al. (2018b) note, while attitudes toward gays and lesbians have warmed over time and trend toward more favorable group evaluations, the public still holds a quite low and remarkably stable opinion of the transgender community.

Analyzing data from the Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel ($N = 4537$; August–September 2017), this research considers the role of demographics, political and religious predispositions, values, and interpersonal contact on support for transgender identity and attitudes toward transgender acceptance in society. In this particular study, transgender identity is defined as having a different gender identity from one’s biological sex defined at birth. Importantly, in an effort to advance a more nuanced understanding of the public opinion climate surrounding transgender individuals and civil rights issues, the present research also uniquely considers the impact of individual experiences with gender discrimination, views on potential gender differences between men and women, and the personal importance of gender conformity on support for transgender identity and transgender acceptance in society.

What we already know: the influence of demographics, predispositions, values, and social contact on opinions

Recent scholarship has painted a fairly clear picture of the factors driving opinions toward transgender individuals and related civil rights issues. Not surprisingly, partisanship is an important predictor of support for transgender rights; research shows that Democrats are consistently more likely than Republicans to indicate their support for the transgender community (Jones et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2017; Tadlock et al. 2017). In fact, recent work by Flores et al. (2018a) has shown that Democrats were more positive in their responses than Republicans when being presented with facial images and information about transgender candidates.

In a similar vein, more politically conservative individuals tend to be less supportive of transgender issues, rights, and candidates; the same trend is also true with respect to religiosity, with more religious individuals (measured by church attendance and denominational affiliation) exhibiting lower levels of support (Jones and Brewer 2019; Norton and Herek 2013; Miller et al. 2017). Individual value orientations are also an important predictor of support for transgender rights and issues. Research has consistently shown that a preference for authoritarianism dampens support for the transgender community (Miller et al. 2017; Jones and Brewer 2019) along with anti-egalitarian attitudes, even after controlling for intervening variables like sexual prejudice, gender, or education (Norton and Herek 2013).

While increasing rates of social or interpersonal contact with gay men and lesbians remain as one of the most important factors driving greater support for marriage equality (Becker 2012; Lewis 2011), measuring the impact of social contact with transgender individuals on policy support has generally produced a mixed pattern of effects (Jones et al. 2018). While initial evidence suggests that social contact with gay men and lesbians can encourage a positive or secondary transfer of opinion toward greater transgender acceptance (Flores 2015) and that even parasocial contact (Garretton 2014) with media images of transgender individuals can reduce discomfort with gender nonconformity and transphobia via the mechanism of prejudice reduction (Flores et al. 2018b), there is only one recent study highlighting a positive relationship between direct contact with transgender individuals and resulting attitudes (Tadlock et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, research generally supports the argument that the influence of social contact on attitudes toward the transgender community will only continue to grow as media representations, policy efforts at the state level, and rates of familiarity increase (Becker and Todd 2017; Flores, Herman, and Mallory 2015). While there is still much progress to be made in terms of the quality of media representations (e.g., cisgender actors playing transgender characters), it is clear that we have reached a *transgender tipping point* with respect to entertainment media (Becker and Todd 2017; Steinmetz 2014; Taylor, Lewis, and Haider-Markel 2018).

Central to our present investigation, previous research on public opinion towards transgender individuals, rights, and candidates consistently suggests that women are more supportive than men of transgender identity and related civil rights issues (Norton and Herek 2013; Harrison and Michelson 2019; Flores 2015) as well as more likely to vote for a transgender candidate for public office (Haider-Markel et al. 2017). In fact, as Flores, Miller, and Tadlock (2018a) note, the most important demographic

variable shaping attitudes toward transgender individuals is gender: “In every analytical model, women held more favorable attitudes. This may reflect an increased sensitivity to issues related to gender and gender discrimination, even in cases of transgender identification” (101–102).

We provide greater context to this consistent finding by considering experience with, and views on gender, over and above the impact of survey respondents’ self-reported gender on support for transgender identity and societal acceptance of transgender individuals. Similar to the approach presented in recent work by Lewis et al. (2019) on public opinion towards transgender service in the US military, we expect that gender role orientations and attitudes may be important moderators of the effect of gender and other demographic variables on support for transgender identity and societal acceptance.

Theoretical considerations and experience with gender discrimination, perceptions of gender differences, and the personal importance of gender conformity

Theoretically speaking, experience with and views on gender may be of particular importance when considering the case of transgender identity and societal acceptance of transgender individuals. Historically, women and men who have experienced gender discrimination have been treated as an out-group in society given their inferior status relative to the status quo or dominant paradigm (Stimson 1999). It is only when this inferior status is challenged that we see greater strides toward gender equality. While the experience of transgender individuals is not the same as the gender discrimination faced by cisgender women and men, the parallel experience of being marginalized may encourage greater support for transgender individuals and rights. Focusing on experience with gender discrimination may foster a process of “perspective taking,” encouraging cisgender men and women who have experienced gender discrimination to step back and better understand what it must be like to experience similar injustice as a transgender individual (Broockman and Kalla 2016).

Characterized as group empathy by Sirin, Villalobos, and Valentino (2016), individuals who have experienced gender discrimination should be more receptive to the transgender cause given a shared experience of marginalization, and thus be more in favor of policy supporting and expanding transgender rights (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017). This shared experience should help counter negative reactions toward transgender individuals and may help to explain why gender has played such an important role to date in shifting public sentiment toward gay men and lesbians and more central for our purposes, members of the transgender community.

It is possible that focusing on issues central to the transgender community that effectively deal with conceptions of gender at their core primes individuals to think about their own identity experience and engage in the process of perspective taking or greater group empathy behaviors (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Sirin, Villalobos, and Valentino 2016). For those who have experienced gender discrimination, a focus on transgender identity and rights makes the experience of gender more salient. Moreover, applying the lens of social role theory, considering the effect of gender identity combined with experiences with gender discrimination may lead to a more nuanced understanding of

issues impacting the transgender community, and in turn greater support for societal acceptance (Schneider and Bos 2019).

Finally, Harrison and Michelson's (2017) Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming may be a useful framework to consider here as well and suggests that those who have experienced gender discrimination may be more likely to support transgender identity and rights given the activation of a shared experience with discrimination, and ultimately, a reduction in social distance between oneself and members of the transgender community (see also Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017). In contrast, for those who perceive larger gender differences between men and women and for those who find gender conformity to be personally important, there should be little to no priming impact given the lack of open-mindedness toward non-traditional conceptions of gender (Rokeach 1960; Lewis et al. 2019). For these individuals, a focus on transgender identity and societal acceptance should run counter to their lived experience and be less salient as a political issue.

While much of the policy focus with respect to transgender rights has been connected with general support for non-discrimination in the areas of housing and employment, it is hard to ignore the reality that part of the policy debate centers on issues that are body-centric or "policies that involve how transgender people represent gender or gender roles with their bodies" (Miller et al. 2017, 5). Not surprisingly, public support for *inclusive bathroom bills* (in contrast with North Carolina's *exclusive bathroom bill, HB2*) that have cropped up in individual US states and would allow for greater choice for transgender individuals lags behind support for more generic non-discrimination measures related to employment opportunities or workplace protections (Jones and Brewer 2018). Much of this dynamic can be explained by a lack of support for policies that threaten one's own expectations of gender performance, personal gender identity, long-held conceptions of masculinity and male social roles, and activate one's disgust sensitivity (Harrison and Michelson 2019; Miller et al. 2017; Lewis et al. 2019). As public opinion research has shown, much of the negative opinion toward the transgender community may have to do with a level of personal discomfort with transgender individuals that is not present with other least-liked groups (e.g., Muslims, bisexuals, etc.) (Flores, Miller, and Tadlock 2018b).

While research on public opinion toward transgender individuals is still very much a nascent field of study, scholarship that focuses on experiences with and perceptions of gender on attitudes toward the transgender community is even more limited. Recent research by Haider-Markel et al. (2017) suggests a small effect for gender nonconformity on support for transgender candidates, particularly among female survey respondents. In other words, female respondents who were less likely to conform to traditional gender norms were also more likely to show their support for transgender political candidates, even after holding other key demographic factors constant (Haider-Markel et al. 2017). Gender identity was also an important factor driving a lack of support for transgender individuals in recent work by Harrison and Michelson (2019); individuals who indicated that their gender identity was important to their self-concept were ultimately less supportive of transgender rights. In addition, recent research has also shown that those who hold more traditional views with respect to gender identity and who personally possess sex-congruent gender identities are also less likely to support transgender service in the US military (Lewis et al. 2019)

Despite these initial findings, we know less about the role that experiences with and attitudes toward gender play in shaping support for transgender individuals than we do about the intervening role of demographics, religion, politics, values, social contact, or parasocial media interaction. Since so much of what is at stake for the transgender community in the legal arena (e.g., public accommodations, military service, educational benefits) conflicts with cultural norms and expectations about the role of gender in US society, it is important to take a closer look at experience with gender discrimination, perceptions of gender differences, and the personal importance of gender conformity on (1) support for transgender identity and (2) opinion toward transgender acceptance in society.

Hypotheses and research expectations

Having been targeted themselves by prejudice as members of an out-group (Allport 1954), those who have personally experienced gender discrimination should be more sympathetic towards transgender individuals via the mechanisms of dissonant identity priming (TDIP) and social role theory (Harrison and Michelson 2017; Schneider and Bos 2019; Eagly and Wood 2011). Further activated by a sense of group empathy (Sirin, Villalobos, and Valentino 2016), individuals who have experienced gender discrimination should be more supportive of transgender identity and believe that we have not gone far enough in society with respect to transgender acceptance. We thus hypothesize:

H1: Those who have experienced gender discrimination in their own lives will be more likely to support transgender identity and believe we have not gone far enough with transgender acceptance.

Beliefs about differences based on gender also bear on attitudes toward transgender rights, given that transgender identities by definition challenge traditional concepts of gender as a sharply differentiated binary. Previous research has shown that those who endorse more traditional beliefs about the distinct roles of men and women in society tend to be less supportive of transgender rights (Harrison and Michelson 2019; Lewis et al. 2019). Similarly, those with a greater need for cognitive closure – who tend to impose fixed meanings on ambiguous situations – in turn have cooler attitudes toward transgender people and their rights (Jones et al. 2018). We build on these findings, and expect that individuals who believe in strict differences between men and women will also be less supportive of transgender identities and rights:

H2: Those who see greater inherent differences between males and females in society will be less likely to support transgender identity and to suggest we have not gone far enough in society with respect to transgender acceptance.

Finally, the personal importance of gender conformity is worthy of consideration. Given what we know from previous research on the role of gender nonconformity and support for transgender candidates and transgender military service (Harrison and Michelson 2019; Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Lewis et al. 2019), we expect that:

H3: Individuals who place a higher personal importance on gender conformity will be less likely to support transgender identity and to support the idea that we have not gone far enough as a society with respect to transgender acceptance.

Materials and methods

A series of analyses were conducted using data from Wave 28 and 29 of the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (ATP), a probability-based online panel of US adults. Wave 28 of the ATP survey ($N = 4917$) was conducted between August 8–21, 2017; Wave 29 of the survey ($N = 4867$) between September 14–28, 2017. The dataset combines individuals who participated in both waves of the ATP survey ($N = 4573$) and is weighted to account for concerns about random selection, the propensity for individuals to complete both waves of the study, and to align with the demographic distribution for the target population (e.g., based on variables like age, gender, education, etc.). The margin of error for the combined sample is $\pm 2.41\%$. The response rate for Wave 28 was 74.0%; Wave 29 had a response rate of 72.7% (using AAPOR RR1). The cumulative response rate for the Wave 29 survey was 2.5% (based on the cumulative response for Wave 29 given the duration of the ATP project).

Key measures

Dependent variables: views toward transgender identity and societal acceptance of transgender rights

Support for transgender identity was based on the response to the question, “Which statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right?” (1) “Whether someone is a man or a woman is determined by the sex they were assigned at birth” (recoded as 0; 55.7%) or (2) “Someone can be a man or a woman even if that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth” (recoded as 1; 44.3%). *Societal acceptance of transgender rights* was based on the response to the question, “Which of the following statements comes closer to your feelings?” (1) “Our society has GONE TOO FAR in accepting people who are transgender” (recoded as -1 ; 33.5%), (2) “Our society has NOT GONE FAR ENOUGH in accepting people who are transgender” (recoded as 1; 38.7%), or (3) “Our society has been ABOUT RIGHT when it comes to accepting people who are transgender” (recoded as 0; 27.8%).

Independent variables

Demographics

Controls for gender (female = 1; 51.8%), age (18–29: 20.8%; 30–49: 32.8%; 50–64: 27.0%; 65+: 19.4%), education level (1 = “less than high school” to 6 = “postgraduate,” 28.2% high school graduates), and race/ethnicity (Black: 11.8%; Hispanic: 15.3%; Other: 8.0%) were included in the analyses. Non-Hispanic whites made up the remaining 65.0% of the sample.

Predispositions

The analyses incorporate two measures of religiosity: (1) identifying as an *evangelical* Christian (28.0% of the sample) and (2) attendance at religious services ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.64$; 1 = seldom to 5 = “more than once a week”). Controls for party identification ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.62$; 1 = “Democrat” to 5 = “Republican”) as well as a measure of political ideology ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.11$; 1 = “very liberal” to 5 = “very conservative”) were included.

Moral values

Subjects were asked whether they identified with the phrase “have traditional values.” One half of the sample was asked whether this statement “describe(s) you well,” while the second half of the sample was asked, “Do each of the following statements describe you well, or not?” Affirmative responses (68.5%) were combined across the two subsamples.

Experience with gender discrimination

Gender discrimination was based on the response to the question, “Have you ever personally experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly because of your gender, or not?” (31.0% yes).

Views on gender

Subjects were asked, “Do you think men and women are (RANDOMIZE: (basically similar) or (basically different)) when it comes to the following?” (1) “Their hobbies and personal interests,” (2) “Their physical abilities,” (3) “Their approach to parenting,” (4) “How they express their feelings,” and (5) “The things they are good at in the workplace.” A *difference score* (range 0–5) was calculated by adding up the number of “basically different,” responses ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.37$; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .60$). A measure of importance of *personal gender conformity* ($M = 2.47$; $SD = 0.93$; 1 = “not at all important” to 4 = “very important”) was based on the responses to the following question: “How important is it to you, personally, to be seen by others as womanly [manly] or feminine [masculine]?” Men were asked about the importance of personally being seen as manly or masculine, while female respondents were asked about the importance of personally being seen as womanly or feminine.

Social contact

Subjects were asked, “thinking about the people you know, including yourself, do you personally know anyone who is transgender, or not?”¹ 36.6% *know a transgender individual*.

Analytical plan

Given the nature of the dependent variables, logistic regression was used to examine support for transgender identity (e.g., 44.3% support coded as 1; 55.7% no support coded as 0). Ordered logistic regression was privileged for the analysis of societal acceptance of transgender rights given the natural order of the response categories of *gone too far* (–1), *about right* (0), and *not gone far enough* (1), when it comes to societal acceptance of transgender individuals. In addition to the regression models, we simulated the predicted probabilities of support for transgender identity and the need for greater acceptance of transgender individuals in society given shifts in the key independent variables from their minimum to maximum values (e.g., shifts in experience with gender discrimination (0–1), gender difference score (0–5), and the personal importance of gender conformity (1–4)), holding all other independent variables at their mean or modal variables. The results of the regression models are discussed at length in the section below, followed by a review of the simulated probabilities.

Results

Table 1 first displays the results of the logistic regression model predicting support for transgender identity, or the idea that “someone can be a man or a woman even if that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth.” As Model 1 shows, women ($\beta = 0.33$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$), older individuals ($\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), and those with higher levels of education ($\beta = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) are more likely to support transgender identity, while Black Americans are significantly less likely to support transgender identity ($\beta = -0.65$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$).

Consistent with previous research, evangelicals ($\beta = -0.44$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .001$), more religious individuals ($\beta = -0.17$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), ideological conservatives ($\beta = -0.35$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), and those with more traditional values ($\beta = -0.60$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$) were significantly less likely to support transgender identity.

Social contact, or knowing someone who is transgender, had a significant positive effect on support for transgender identity ($\beta = 0.68$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$).

Those with experience of gender discrimination were less likely to support transgender identity ($\beta = 0.15$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .10$; $H1$ supported). Those who perceive a greater gender difference between men and women were significantly less likely to support transgender identity ($\beta = -0.23$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$; $H2$ supported) along with those who find gender conformity to be personally important ($\beta = -0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$; $H3$ supported).

Model 2 displays the results of the ordered logistic regression predicting the view that society has not gone far enough with respect to transgender rights. Similar to the earlier analysis, women ($\beta = 0.46$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$), older individuals ($\beta = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .01$), and those with higher levels of education ($\beta = 0.10$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$) are

Table 1. Regression models: attitudes toward transgender identity and transgender rights.

	(1) Transgender identity β (SE)	(2) Transgender rights β (SE)
Gender discrimination	0.15 (0.09) [†]	0.23 (0.08)**
Difference score	-0.23 (0.03)***	-0.22 (0.02)***
Gender conformity	-0.14 (0.04)***	-0.30 (0.04)***
Female	0.33 (0.08)***	0.46 (0.07)***
Non-Hispanic Black	-0.65 (0.12)***	-0.25 (0.11)*
Hispanic	-0.09 (0.11)	0.09 (0.10)
Other race	0.13 (0.14)	0.03 (0.12)
Age	0.23 (0.04)***	0.10 (0.03)**
Education	0.10 (0.03)***	0.10 (0.02)***
Evangelical	-0.44 (0.10)***	-0.36 (0.08)***
Religious attendance	-0.17 (0.03)***	-0.18 (0.02)***
Party identity	-0.45 (0.03)***	-0.51 (0.03)***
Conservative	-0.35 (0.04)***	-0.45 (0.04)***
Traditional values	-0.60 (0.09)***	-0.41 (0.08)***
Know transgender person	0.68 (0.08)***	0.58 (0.07)***
Constant	2.71 (0.22)***	
Threshold 1		-5.07 (0.21)***
Threshold 2		-3.27 (0.20)***
<i>N</i>	4424	4259
Pseudo- R^2	0.28	0.24

*** $p < 0.001$.

** $p < 0.01$.

* $p < 0.05$.

† $p < 0.1$.

significantly more likely to believe that society has not gone far enough with respect to transgender rights and acceptance.

Not surprisingly, evangelicals ($\beta = -0.36$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$), more religious individuals ($\beta = -0.18$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$), ideological conservatives ($\beta = -0.45$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), and those with strong traditional values ($\beta = -0.41$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$) were significantly less likely to support the idea that we have not gone far enough as a society to support transgender rights. In addition, more Republican identifiers ($\beta = -0.51$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) were significantly less likely to suggest that society has not gone far enough with respect to transgender rights and acceptance.

Yet again, social contact or knowing someone who is transgender was a significant, positive predictor in the model ($\beta = 0.58$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$).

When considering experience with and views on gender, the results show that those who have experienced gender discrimination are significantly more likely to suggest that society has not gone far enough with respect to transgender acceptance ($\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .01$; *H1* supported), while those who perceive a greater gender difference between men and women ($\beta = -0.22$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$) and those who find gender conformity to be personally important ($\beta = -0.30$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) are significantly less likely to indicate that society has not gone far enough with respect to transgender rights and acceptance. *H2* and *H3* were supported.²

Figure 1 displays the probability of supporting transgender identity, given a shift in the key independent variables of interest from their minimum to maximum values. Simulating predicted probability values from the regression coefficients (while holding other independent variables at their mean or modal values),³ showed that those at the lowest end of the gender difference scale had a .53 [95% confidence intervals = .47, .59] probability of supporting transgender identity compared to those at the highest end of the difference scale who had a .27 [.23, .30] probability – a first difference of $-.27$ [$-.33$, $-.20$]. Thus, as hypothesized, the larger the perceived gender difference between men and women, the less support for transgender identity. The probability of supporting transgender identity was higher among those who find gender conformity to be less personally important (.40 [.35, .44]) than among those who indicate that gender conformity is very important to them personally (.30 [.26, .34]); though the first difference was smaller for this independent variable $-.09$ [$-.15$, $-.04$]. Finally, those who had experienced gender discrimination were more likely to support transgender identity (.38 [.34, .43]) than those who had not experienced discrimination (.35 [.31, .39]); first difference of .04 [$-.00$, .07]. Put more simply, those who perceive a smaller gender difference between men and women, find gender conformity to be less important personally, and have personally experienced gender discrimination in their own lives have a higher probability of supporting transgender identity.

Figure 2 displays the difference in predicted probabilities for indicating that we have not gone far enough as a society in terms of acceptance of transgender individuals. Those who see no difference between men and women in terms of gender were significantly more likely to believe we have not gone far enough in terms of societal acceptance of transgender rights (.45 [.25, .63]) than those who perceive the greatest gender difference between men and women (.22 [.10, .35]); a first difference of $-.23$ [$-.31$, $-.13$]. Among those for whom gender conformity is less personally important, we see a greater probability of believing that we have not gone far enough as a society with transgender acceptance (.39 [.18,

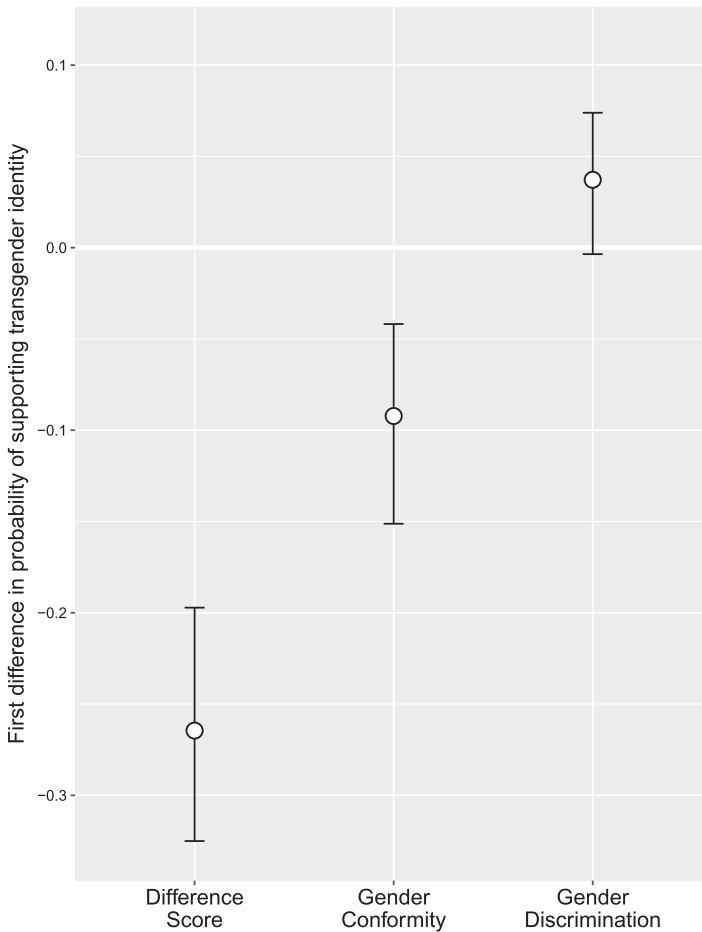


Figure 1. First difference in probability of supporting transgender identity. Notes: Difference in predicted probability of saying that someone can be a man or a woman even if that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth, given shift in independent variables from minimum to maximum values. Simulated with 95% confidence intervals from Model 1 in Table 1. Difference score shifted from 0 to 5; gender conformity importance from 1 to 4; and gender discrimination from 0 to 1. All other independent variables held at their mean or modal values.

.56]) than among those for whom gender conformity is personally very important (.21 [.09, .33]); a first difference of $-.18$ [$-.25, -.09$]. Similarly, those who have experienced gender discrimination are more likely to suggest that we have not gone far enough as a society in terms of transgender acceptance (.34 [.17, .50]) compared to those who have not personally experienced gender discrimination (.29 [.14, .43]); a first difference of .05 [.02, .08].

Overall, we see a greater probability of support for the idea that we have not gone far enough as a society with respect to transgender rights and acceptance among those who are less likely to perceive a gender difference between men and women, for those who feel that gender conformity is not very important personally, and for those who have personally experienced gender discrimination in their own lives. Worth noting, these effects are significant even while controlling for respondent gender. Throughout the models,

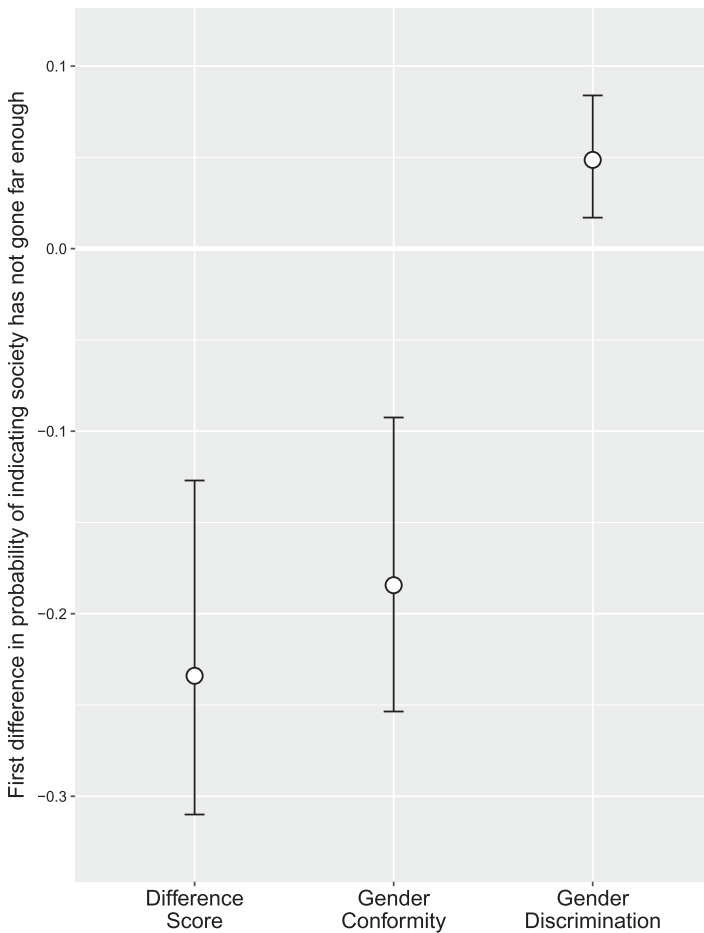


Figure 2. First difference in probability of indicating society has not gone far enough with transgender acceptance. Notes: Difference in predicted probability of saying that society has not gone far enough in its acceptance of transgender people, given shift in independent variables from minimum to maximum values. Simulated with 95% confidence intervals from Model 2 in Table 1. Difference score shifted from 0 to 5; gender conformity importance from 1 to 4; and gender discrimination from 0 to 1. All other independent variables held at their mean or modal values.

women are still more favorable than men towards transgender individuals even when accounting for variation in experience with and attitudes toward gender. Focusing on experience with gender discrimination, perceived gender differences between men and women, and the personal importance of gender conformity therefore serves to enhance and add to our understanding of the role of gender in driving opinions toward the transgender community and moves us past a simple discussion of demographics.

Discussion

The research set out to consider experiences with gender discrimination, perceptions of gender differences between men and women, and the personal importance of gender

conformity on support for transgender identity and the need for greater societal acceptance of transgender individuals. The current study adds nuance to our understanding of the politically polarized opinion climate surrounding the transgender community and moves beyond public opinion research that focuses solely on the influence of demographics, political and religious predispositions, moral values, media exposure, and social contact on more generalized attitudes and support for specific policies or transgender political candidates (Jones and Brewer 2019; Haider-Markel et al. 2017).

The results suggest that those who have experienced gender discrimination themselves exhibit group empathy towards the transgender cause (Sirin, Villalobos, and Valentino 2016), showcasing greater support for transgender identity and the belief that society has not gone far enough with respect to transgender acceptance. Given a bit of perspective taking (Broockman and Kalla 2016), these individuals may make a strong connection between their own discriminatory experience and that of members of the transgender community, whose concerns, as a result, feel more salient (Harrison and Michelson 2017). In contrast, those who see men and women as fundamentally different with respect to gender and those who rate gender conformity as being personally important are less supportive of transgender identity and less likely to agree that society has not gone far enough with respect to transgender rights and acceptance.

Taken together, the results suggest that experiences with gender discrimination and views on gender differences and gender conformity need to be taken into account when studying public support for transgender individuals and rights. As our research shows, individuals who have personally experienced gender discrimination, who see less significant a gender difference between men and women, and who find gender conformity to be less personally important, are most likely to be supportive of transgender rights. This may be particularly true for policy areas, like bathroom use, that disrupt traditional notions and practices of gender as an inherent binary. We encourage future researchers to explore whether and how these independent variables have differing effects on different policy matters, akin to prior work exploring the disparate effects of disgust sensitivity and authoritarian attitudes on civil rights and body-centric policies (Miller et al. 2017).

Before concluding, it is important to point out some limitations of the current study. Given the secondary nature of the Pew Research Center data, we are limited to the questions asked on the survey. While our gender difference score achieved reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .60$), a more robust measure would have been preferable. Further, we recognize that there are many ways, given the contributions of prior research, to measure gender conformity; our variable was based on measures available in the secondary Pew data set. In addition, we would have liked to include media measures in our analysis, particularly those tapping exposure or attention to entertainment content that features transgender characters. Doing so would have allowed us to further test the effect of familiarity with transgender individuals via mediated parasocial interaction on acceptance of transgender identity and support for greater societal acceptance of transgender individuals (Garretson 2014). We look forward to considering the influence of exposure to relevant entertainment media content in future research.

Despite these limitations, our research points toward the value of considering experiences with and views on gender when studying the public opinion climate toward transgender individuals and civil rights issues. Doing so broadens our theoretical understanding of the factors that drive opinions toward the transgender community

over and above a foundational consideration of demographics, political and religious predispositions, values, social contact, and even media exposure. Strategically, appealing to those who have experienced gender discrimination, who see less inherent differences between men and women, and who find gender conformity to be less important in their personal lives, may be a solid tactic for enhancing support for legislative and legal efforts that seek to advance transgender rights, public accommodations, and equality. Of course, our data is limited to self-reports of experience with gender discrimination. While we can speculate that much of this discrimination may have taken place in the workplace or more formal settings, the survey did not ask respondents to specify context or circumstance.

As suggested at the outset, it is readily apparent that the opinion climate towards the transgender community remains bitterly divided from a political standpoint (e.g., in an April 2019 PRRI poll, 45% of Americans indicated their support for legislation that would require individuals to exclusively use the bathroom that is consistent with the sex they were assigned at birth, while 47% oppose this type of legislation) and that it is unrealistic to expect the same rapid sea change in opinions that was present with the same-sex marriage debate (Jones et al. 2019). While support for gay and lesbian individuals leads to some secondary transfer effects with respect to support for transgender issues and rights (Flores 2015), it is clear that this particular public opinion debate is both more complicated and less well studied and understood than the same-sex marriage debate (Brewer 2014). At the same time, our results confirm the positive influence of social contact on attitudes toward transgender identity and support for greater societal acceptance. This dynamic should only increase in its importance given increasing visibility of transgender individuals in our communities, our politics, and in entertainment media (Tadlock et al. 2017). Importantly, our social contact measure did not incorporate social distance or the closeness of the relationship with a known transgender individual. The survey data also did not measure LGBT identity. By considering decreasing social distance and increasing rates of self-identification in future research, we may see an even greater influence for experiences with and attitudes toward gender on support for transgender individuals and greater societal acceptance.

In sum, the present research adds to our understanding of the public opinion climate toward the transgender community by focusing on experiences with gender discrimination, perceptions of gender differences, and the personal importance of gender conformity. From a strategic perspective, messaging that encourages members of the broader public to make connections between their lived experience and that of members of the transgender community will reduce the social distance between these groups and further encourage the activation of group empathy, perspective taking, and dissonant identity priming.

More specifically, messaging that focuses on emphasizing a shared narrative of discrimination and perceptions of difference can encourage cisgender individuals to channel their sense of group empathy to support policies that focus on transgender inclusion rather than exclusion. Understanding the importance of the shared experience with gender discrimination, perceptions of gender differences, and the lack of personal importance of gender conformity is important for those looking to shift public opinion toward more favorable outcomes for the transgender community.

While this research points to the strategic messaging that can help shape legislation, raise awareness, and influence public opinion toward transgender rights and societal acceptance, it represents a starting point in a broader dialogue. We look forward to future research that continues to explore what factors best explain the public opinion climate towards transgender individuals and rights, focusing at least in part on attitudes toward, expectations of, and experiences with gender.

Notes

1. The Pew Research Center did not release the data denoting which respondents self-identified as transgender.
2. In addition to the analysis presented above, we also tested models with interactions between gender and gender discrimination. The lack of significant interaction effects suggests that our findings presented here are not masking a larger effect for gender, or being female, alone.
3. The following values were set for the predicted probability simulations: gender (female: modal value), age (30–49 years: modal value), education ($M = 3.30$), race/ethnicity (non-Hispanic White: modal value), evangelical (0: modal value), religious attendance ($M = 1.90$), party identification (3: pure Independent), conservative ($M = 3.06$ for ideology), traditional values (1: modal value), gender discrimination (0: modal value), difference score ($M = 3.31$), importance of gender conformity ($M = 2.47$), social contact (0: modal value for knowing someone who is transgender).

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