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Alecia D. Anderson

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, aleciaanderson@unomaha.edu*

Jay A. Irwin

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, jirwin@unomaha.edu*

Angela M. Brown

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

Chris L. Grala

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

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# “Your Picture Looks the Same as My Picture”: An Examination of Passing in Transgender Communities

Alecia D. Anderson<sup>1</sup> · Jay A. Irwin<sup>1</sup> · Angela M. Brown<sup>1</sup> · Chris L. Grala<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Transgender people remain one of the groups most susceptible to discrimination in the U.S. Previous studies have examined the discrimination and stress transgender people face, but few studies have examined trans identities using existing sociological theories of marginalized groups and identity formation. Using the theories of Dubois and Cooley, this study explores identity formation in conjunction with the phenomenon of passing among transgender people residing in Nebraska. Results suggest that while trans people do pass as a mechanism for subverting discrimination, there are other factors that influence an individual’s choice and strategy to pass or not. The current investigation lends a sociological perspective on the social aspect of gender presentation and gender visibility for trans individuals in a largely conservative Midwestern state.

**Keywords** Gender · Transgender · Passing · Identity

## Introduction

Given the increase of attention from the general public, social justice organizations, and academia, recent research has attempted to gain a more well-rounded view of the trans<sup>1</sup> experience. In 2011, the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force released a report entitled *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Discrimination Survey*. NCTE updated these data in 2016 with the U.S. Transgender Survey [18]. Currently the most comprehensive survey of the transgender community to date, with over 27,000 respondents, NCTE found pervasive discrimination throughout the sample [18]. Among the

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<sup>1</sup> We use trans and transgender interchangeably. This research uses trans as a large umbrella term to refer to individuals with gender identities different than their gender assigned at birth [10].

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✉ Alecia D. Anderson  
aleciaanderson@unomaha.edu

<sup>1</sup> University of Nebraska Omaha, ASH 383E 6001 Dodge Street, Omaha, NE 68182, USA

more disturbing findings are that trans individuals are at a greater risk of engaging in self-harming behaviors, and more likely to experience poorer health outcomes [18, 21]. These findings affirm earlier studies of trans discrimination and violence (e.g. Lombardi et al. [19]; White and Goldberg [36]). They also imply an urgent need to gain a sociological understanding of transgender identity; specifically, how transphobia, or the fear/distrust of transgender individuals that may result in discrimination, negatively affects identity. In addition, more attention should be given to the experiences of trans individuals in regions that might offer fewer resources for support, such as the Midwest and more conservative locations.

To date, several studies have endeavored to use sociological theory to understand trans experiences related to identity and discrimination (see Schilt and Westbrook [30]). In this paper, we have two goals. The first goal is to bring attention to the issues surrounding trans people's experiences with passing as well as illuminate how trans people understand the concept of passing. We conceptualize passing as appearing to belong to a social group other than the one that society has dictated to the individual. The second is to apply theoretical understandings of identity formation to a unique context that has been underexplored—trans identity. The theories of W.E.B. Dubois and Charles Horton Cooley are well suited for this analysis. W.E.B. Dubois began his exploration of discrimination and its effects on African Americans in the late nineteenth century. His theory of the veil, and the double consciousness that results, potentially hold truths not only to the experience of African Americans, but to other marginalized groups that are forced to consider their identity in relation to a majority group [7–9]. As Schilt [30] has argued, transgender people, because of their dual experience occupying multiple gendered positions within society, may experience Dubois' concept of "double consciousness" in a unique, yet similar way as African Americans [7]. Cooley's "looking glass self" theory emphasizes how individuals use society and social indicators as a mirror to develop their sense of self and shape their identities [6]. So, both theorists call attention to the role that external individuals play in shaping identity.

Both African Americans and transgender people have experienced widespread discrimination and have used similar means of coping through the act of passing. African Americans faced overt, cultural and structural discrimination, between the period of Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement. At times, African Americans who appeared to be white by phenotypical standards would sometimes *pass* as white to avoid this discrimination [14, 17, 22]. Passing for transgender people can be experienced in similar ways. Transgender people face violence and discrimination due to transphobia [24, 31]. As with African Americans, transgender people attempt to *pass* to escape that discrimination. A trans woman may attempt to pass as a cisgender (i.e. not transgender) woman in an attempt to avoid discrimination, scrutiny, or as a self-affirmative step in identity development. However, unlike African Americans who *pass* as white, transgender people *pass* to affirm their gender identities [2, 11, 31]. Passing as a concept within the trans community is not without its critics—those who discuss passing as an attempt to devalue and erase trans people [33]. Further complicating the concept, passing has been used against trans people by cis people to insinuate that trans people pass in order to deceive others regarding their gender and/or sex. The experience of passing among non-binary trans people

[12], that is people who do not identify on the binary ends of gender as either male/masculine or female/feminine, may identify as both masculine and feminine genders, or identify with a completely different gendered ideal, is little understood. As non-binary individuals may not have a singular gender presentation, the concept of passing as a specific gender may not be important at all for individuals with this identity. Indeed, an examination of trans people's own experience of passing is an important sociological endeavor for understanding the nuanced nature of gender and how one integrates their own gender within society.

Using interviews with self-identified trans individuals residing in Nebraska, our study uses both Dubois' and Cooley's theories to explore transgender identity; particularly, how identity expression can be influenced by discrimination from a Midwest community. Specific to our research, we will explore the following: what are trans people's conceptualizations of passing? Do some trans individuals prioritize passing? And for those who do prioritize passing, how and why do they attempt to do so?

## Theories of Identity

At a young age, W.E.B. Dubois felt a disconnect within himself and with others in his interactions. Later, he began to understand that the root of this disconnection was a barrier that society had placed on him because of the color of his skin. He describes this barrier as a veil, which not only he wears, but all African Americans wear as a result of colonial racial categorization and discrimination [7, 9]. Like a physical veil, a thin material that covers or hides, the veil Dubois describes prevents African Americans from achieving true self-consciousness, and as a result, hides their identity from whites. Through his own experience, Dubois explains the sharp, sudden awareness of the veil's presence and the double-consciousness that results from wearing it: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" [7]. The realization of the veil induced a feeling of double-consciousness that Dubois describes as "a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" [7].

According to Dubois, double-consciousness causes internal conflict in the individual, as he describes it as "two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" [7]. The inner turmoil for self-realization places African Americans in between identity as African descendants and Americans—which have been defined as white by the dominant group. As Dubois insists, most African Americans would not prefer to align themselves with one identity to the exclusion of the other, but rather desires acceptance as both [7].

Dubois argues that it is important to merge the "twoness" into one in order to obtain full equality in the U.S. [7]. In order to accomplish this, the veil must be lifted. While the veil persists, African Americans are shut out from opportunity and acceptance as equals [7]. As he describes, African American people must begin to understand that in order to "attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another" [7]. This is the first critical step toward asserting equality through political and economic activism [7].

Charles Horton Cooley's theory of the "looking-glass self" echoes the sentiments of Dubois' double-consciousness. According to Cooley, understanding the self is a social process. It is connected to objects or people outside of the individual. More specifically, the self is imagined in the form of another's mind [6]. Cooley explains that there are three principal elements to the conceptualization of self: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" [6]. In this process, Cooley points out that the individual also shares the judgements of the other mind [6]. The development of the self begins with the perception of the other, and only with that perception in mind can an individual evaluate the appearance or actions of themselves.

Cooley's theory of the looking-glass self is not specific to any social group, but to our collective processes of how we come to understand our identity through our interaction with processes outside of the individual; e.g. social experiences, objects, and other people [6]. Through the idea of the looking glass self, Cooley [6] discusses the inability for one to know one's self without the ability to use society's views as a mirror. It is through the lens of society that we begin to understand who we are, where we fit, and our place within our social circles.

The similarities between Cooley's and Dubois' conceptualization of self are apparent. While Cooley discusses the "looking-glass self" as a process of self-understanding that is undergone by all people, Dubois offers double-consciousness as a uniquely African American experience. Therefore, while Cooley's "looking-glass self" is an unavoidable social phenomenon, as "self-feeling is natural and instinctual" [6], Dubois' double consciousness is derived from the cultural and institutional exclusion and misunderstanding of the dominant group toward African Americans—a social construction that can be unconstructed through the lifting of the veil [7, 9]. Therefore, other minority groups who have experienced social exclusion and misunderstanding from the dominant group may experience double-consciousness as well.

Affirmation of one's identity, then, becomes an important aspect of that identity formation and can influence the desire to *pass*. If a trans person is unable or uninterested in passing, and is thus seen as trans or only seen as their assigned gender at birth, what impact does this have on their lived experience? How is this experience shaped within a region that is relatively homogenous and conservative in its ideas regarding gender? Each of these theorists' rationale of identity being affected by societal influences is potentially applicable to the experiences of the transgender community. Cooley provides a theoretical understanding for the social development of the self/identity and Dubois explains how this development is influenced by one's marginalized status in the U.S. Together, these two theoretical approaches are poised to aid our understanding of trans identity formation and expression.

## Gender

To many, gender is assumed to be a binary classification based on chromosomes and genitalia. The conflation of sexual organs and gender identity has been expected and normalized within Western societies [29, 30, 35]. The binary, and its presupposed

“natural” distinctions are the base for the hierarchal order of men over women and the source of gender inequality [29, 30].

Transgender people challenge this supposed “natural” binary with their existence [3, 5]. Transgender identities gained exposure in the 1990s after feminist theorists and activists emphasized the role of socialization in creating gender identity, opening the door for a shift in understanding gender, separate from biological sex [29]. However, this shift in understanding transgender people in academic circles did not stem the tide of misunderstanding and discrimination against trans people [2, 16, 29].

Cisgender people may not expect or accept a mismatch between an individual’s gender identity and the sex that they were assigned at birth [30, 35]. Gender identity, then, should be understood as the individual’s internal sense of self as a man, a woman, both, or neither [3]. Trans people may or may not decide to engage in biomedical intervention. In many cases, the decision whether or not to take hormones or have surgeries is influenced by the expectations of peers and by the norms established by the gender binary [4]. Those who deliberately object the binary may identify as genderqueer and blend gendered presentations. Others may choose not to “come out” as trans, and instead perform masculinity or femininity in a way that masks the discord between their gender and sex assigned at birth [5]. This forms a feedback loop of sorts for some trans people—the desire to affirm one’s identity through gendered expressions, but also needing to avoid potential violence and discrimination from a cisnormative world. These difficulties may be even more pronounced in non-binary individuals who must navigate a highly binary gendered world, and experience a unique set of microaggressions or microaffirmations as a result [13]. Thus there is the potential for an internal and external struggle for many trans people in terms of “true” expression within society. Ultimately, the ways that transgender people choose to identify and to present their gender identity depend on a complex context of the individual’s life [4, 5].

## Racial and Gender Passing

The experiences of African Americans are unique due to history and culture, however they are similar to the experiences of other minority groups in their struggles against the dominant group. Despite his primary focus on race, Dubois is clear that any oppression by one group upon another will slow the cultural advance of the oppressed group [9]. In particular, transgender people have been subjected to misunderstanding and discrimination because they have been veiled similarly to African Americans. Transgender people have faced police harassment and assault, family rejection, and disrespect from medical professionals [2, 16]. African Americans have endured slavery and second-class citizenship for generations [7, 14], and continue to face discrimination in housing and employment, among other areas [20, 23].

Although social constructions, both race and gender are presupposed to have biological foundations that are visibly evident [14, 22, 28]. These presupposed foundations were created and continue to be regulated by the dominant group [35]. Ginsberg explains, “gender, in the arbitrariness of its cultural perceptions, is a trope

of difference that shares with race a similar structure of identity categories whose enactments and boundaries are culturally policed” [14]. Trans people have attempted to push beyond binary ideas of sex and gender, while individuals of mixed-race heritage are currently pushing societal boundaries of the categories of race.

Similarly, both African Americans and transgender people have attempted to “pass” in an effort to subvert the discrimination forced on them by the dominant culture [14, 22, 28, 37]. Passing can be defined as “appear[ing] to belong to one or more social subgroups other than the one(s) to which one is normally assigned by prevailing legal, medical and/or socio-cultural discourses” [22]. Metaphorically, passing implies that one crosses a boundary to assume a new or different identity [14]. While Schilt [29] points out that “passing” may suggest acting, rather than embodying, we use a more inclusive understanding of passing for this paper that includes embodying. After all, African American people who “passed” as white were typically of mixed race, and suggesting that they were acting, rather than embodying invalidates their complex identities. Passing for trans people reflects the complex situated experiences of living with restrictive cultural gender categories that are mismatched with individual, internal gendered feelings. Therefore, the act of passing should not be understood as an attempt at fraud or deceit.

Transgender people attempt to pass not only as a coping mechanism for the stress associated with their discrimination, but to affirm their gender identities [2, 4, 11, 31]. As Charles Taylor [34] explains, “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others...Nonrecognition and misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone else in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” [37]. Trans people who attempt to pass, desire to be seen only as their affirmed, current gender identity, and not as their assigned gender at birth.

The possibility of passing challenges a number of problematic assumptions about identities. It forces the reconsideration of cultural logic that the physical body is the site of identity formation and introduces the argument that identities are multiple and contingent [14, 28]. As Ginsberg explains, “the very real possibility of gender passing thus is likely to threaten not only the security of [patriarchal] male identity, as race passing threatens the security of white identity, but also, as does race passing, the certainties of “identity categories and boundaries” [14]. Passing, then, is particularly important because legitimating the self requires cisgender people to understand that someone might deliberately shift identity in an effort to develop the self. As a result, cisgender people are forced to view the self with more acuity, and operate against culture and history for a more detailed understanding of self [37]. If we apply Cooley’s arguments, transgender people develop their sense of self based at least partially on cisgender people’s ability to recognize their gender identity that is being expressed. As Catalano [4] suggests “awareness of one’s own passing is a mode of understanding how others view one in the ‘looking glass’”.

Still, many people reject passing as a strategy for self-advancement because of its inherent paradox. Passing, which can be held as the gold standard of *successful* trans identity, may grant reprieve from social stigma, but those reprieves are often tenuous and revocable [24]. Someone’s trans identity could be discovered at any time, and their ability to pass in the world unthreatened could be jeopardized. This is one of

the reasons why, for decades, many trans people moved from the communities where they grew up to far away cities where no one knew them—it lessened the treat of discovery and exposure [32]. Furthermore, passing both subverts and reinforces the racial [22] and gender [33] binary by simultaneously exposing its frailty while granting authority and credibility to the “color line” and binary notions of the categories man and woman. In fact, to some advocates/authors, passing as cisgender is a political move that can potentially erase someone’s trans identity by utilizing (perhaps unconscious) gender conforming, binary reinforcing mechanisms [22]. This may be why the goal of passing is not generalizable to all African American or transgender people. In addition, as the larger U.S. society has become more accepting of diverse identities, some of the need to pass to ward off discrimination has dissipated [31].

## Methods

### Recruitment

The data utilized for the present study was part of a grant funded project aimed at understanding the lives of transgender people living in Nebraska. Data were collected in two waves. First, a short demographic screener survey was sent to Nebraska transgender individuals aged 19 and above in the winter of 2013/2014. Potential participants were recruited in multiple ways including social media posts to LGBTQ support groups locally, personal contacts known to the research team with request to forward the email on to others, fliers sent to local support groups that meet in person, and fliers placed in doctors and therapy offices of providers offering medical and mental health care to transgender persons in Nebraska. The goal of the demographic survey was to allow for a diverse pool of transgender individuals to be contacted regarding phase two of the study. Categories of importance for diversifying the qualitative sample were as follows: gender identity, social transition, medical transition steps (hormone therapy, top surgery, bottom surgery, and other surgical/transition related medical care), if the participant had legally changed their gender on official identity documents, if the respondent had lived in Nebraska for at least 1 year, age, and their location of residence (urban or rural location). The participants’ contact information (email address and phone number) was also collected. Fifty-six individuals filled out this initial screener instrument in full.

Phase two of the study involved enrolling diverse participants from the first phase into an open ended, semi-structured qualitative interview. The identities that were used to ensure diversity include gender identity, age, transition steps, and geographical location in the state. Gender identity was broken down into three groups: trans women, trans men, and genderqueer/gender non-conforming/non-binary gender identities.<sup>2</sup> Within each gender identity category, participants from different parts

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<sup>2</sup> These identities reflect individuals who reject binary understandings of gender, individuals within this third category think of their gender in a variety of complex ways, with the unifying feature of not identifying as neither female nor male. Instead, individuals in this third gender category identify as neither male nor female, some combination, or outside of these otherwise restrictive categories completely. For a full dictionary of trans identities, [transstudent.org/definitions](http://transstudent.org/definitions) is a helpful resource.

of the state were diversified, with particular emphasis on interviewing participants who lived outside of the Omaha and Lincoln metro areas. Lastly, different ages and individuals with different experiences around transition steps were considered for enrollment into phase two of the study.

## Participants

Participant demographics can be seen in Table 1 for phase two of the study. Twenty-six individuals were enrolled in phase two of the study, as saturation began to occur and interest from participants was exhausted. Interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2014. Interviews were conducted in person (at a location of the respondent's choosing, often a coffee shop or the researchers university office), over the phone, or over Skype. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

**Table 1** Respondent demographics, Nebraska transgender experiences study, n = 26

	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender identity	Location
1	Kevin	34	White	Male, trans man	Urban
2	Betty	54	White	Woman	Urban
3	M.	22	White	Gender queer, gender fluid, gender curious	Urban
4	Jenn	44	Human (White)	t girl, female, trans	Urban
5	Kaiden	21	White	Agender, gender neutral, trans masculine, trans	Urban
6	Alan	21	White and Indian on father's side	Man, transgender	Rural
7	Carla	52	White and native American	Trans woman	Urban
8	Vera	26	White	Female, transgender, M to F	Urban
9	Bob	33	Northern Irish	Trans masculine, male	Urban
10	Robert	59	White	Transsexual, trans, transgender	Urban
11	Becca	29	White	Trans female	Urban
12	Artenisia	31	White	Trans, gender non-conforming, gender queer, third gender, weirdo	Urban
13	Laura	55	White and Native American	Transsexual, trans woman	Urban
14	Finn	25	White	Trans guy, gay trans guy	Urban
15	Taylor	23	White	Bi gendered, androgynous	Urban
16	Micah	22	White	Gender creative, trans man	Urban
17	Billie	64	White	Gender fluid, bi gender	Urban
18	Jake	22	Brazilian and Black	Trans man	Urban
19	Jonathan	56	White	Trans man, queer	Urban
20	Brenda	58	White	Straight woman, trans woman	Rural
21	Lynne	42	White	Transgender	Urban
22	Jessie	30	White	Trans, trans feminine, trans woman	Rural

Interviews ran from approximately 45 min to around 1 h and 15 min. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

## **Interview**

The interview schedule included questions on a number of topics, but several questions focused on the concepts of passing. These questions include the following: “A lot of transgender people know the term passing—what does this term mean to you?”; “To you personally, how important is passing?”; “How do you pass (if participant indicated that passing was important)? What do you do to avoid not passing?”; “If a stranger, or even an acquaintance, misgenders you, how does that make you feel?”; and “Some people feel strongly that the term passing is political and a bad thing—for example there’s are trans advocates who consider passing as a particular gender erases the transgender person and identity. What is your reaction to this idea?”. All interviews were conducted by the second author, a trans man with deep social and professional ties to the local community.

## **Narrative Analysis**

We used a narrative framework to guide our analyses, using narratives and stories from the interview data to illuminate Dubois’ and Cooley’s theoretical understandings of identity [26]. We began with a priori codes followed by several weeks of developing emergent codes. The research team consisted of one trans man (who both collected the data and participated in coding), two cis women, and one cis man. The team met each week to ensure intercoder reliability, and discrepancies in coding were discussed until consensus was made. During our meetings, we engaged in constant comparison to identify emergent codes and emergent themes [15]. We repeated this process until the data did not yield any new theoretical insight regarding identity and passing. Throughout this process, we paid particular attention to the actions and choices of language provided by the respondents. In our analysis, we compare and contrast these narratives in order to construct themes regarding individual and group identities [26]. The results tell us that while passing influences identity development, trans people have varied perspectives on the practice of passing—its motivations, techniques and consequences.

## **Results**

Upon review of the data, four main themes emerge: passing priorities, passing motivations, passing techniques, and passing byproducts. The respondents have mixed views on passing. While some say that passing is a personal priority for them, others question the social effects of passing—often framing this response by discussing the potential to reinforcing gender binaries and eliminating the discussion for transgender recognition and acceptance. Those who do prioritize passing mentioned

that they do so because it affirms their gender identity or because they are concerned about facing discrimination. Respondents also discuss a variety of techniques used to pass, both physical and behavioral.

### Passing Priorities

Over seventy-five per cent of respondents interviewed indicate that passing is or was a priority for them. Respondents who prioritize passing admitted that they thought about their passing frequently. As Alan (21, man)<sup>3</sup> states, “I think I was worried about it just about constantly. Anytime I had human interaction, I was worried if they would call me sir or ma’am, you know, he, she, whatever”. This was especially the case when respondents were early on in their transition as Carla (34, trans woman) shares, “When I first started my transition, I was concerned with [passing]. How feminine do I look? Am I sending off the right signals?” Similarly, Kevin (34, male) states, “Well yeah I think the first few months when you’re really getting your footing and you’re totally being changed through hormones, there is that [worry], ‘Am I gonna pass?’”.

There is some agreement that passing entails that another individual views the transgender person as the gender to which they identify. Billie (64, gender fluid) shares, “It is to be accepted. To have that validation that what I see in the mirror matches what somebody else will see...Your picture is the same as my picture”. Similarly, Alan (21, man) states, “Basically the idea of passing is that a trans person looks like their gender...” and Becca (29, trans female) adds, “Passing, to me, is when you have completed a transformation to a point where a stranger would look at you as the gender you present without a second thought”. This supports Cooley’s assertion that the conceptualization of self is, in part, determined by how we appear to others and how others judge us according to that appearance [6].

### Passing Motivations

At the forefront of the motivations for those who prioritize passing are identity expression, affirmation, and fear of discrimination. Several respondents were clear that their gender identity and expression is simply a part of who they are: “I do whatever’s natural for me”, says Robert (59, transsexual), and “I just feel like I need to be me”, states M. (22, gender queer). A big part of passing, then, can be summarized as displaying one’s identity and self to the world in a self-affirming way, as Jenn (44, t girl) explains, “I just wish other people can see what I see... to be treated like any other female. That’s all I care about”. Kaiden (21, agender) shares, “Most people still assume I’m a girl. It’s kind of a moment to celebrate when somebody sees me as something else”. These responses are consistent with arguments made by

<sup>3</sup> Some respondents mentioned multiple gender identities during the interviews. We have chosen to report the first identity mentioned in the results section in the exact form it was mentioned by the participant. For a full list of gender identities and other demographic information, see Table 1.

Catalano [4] and Bockting et al. [2], in that passing is a technique for self-affirmation and being seen by society as one wishes to be seen.

Others received self-affirmation even when their gender identity fell more in the middle of the gender spectrum than on the binary ends. Taylor (23, bi gendered) states, “I enjoy whenever I’m getting sirred in public...it’s validating that I’m doing a good job of not only being female. That’s the biggest issue is that I don’t want to be seen as only female, because I’m not”. As the respondent expresses, affirmation becomes paramount to individuals who prioritize passing. Many respondents express happiness at memories of passing: “I remember how I felt. I don’t remember really where I was or anything, but when I was actually greeted as a male, and that’s what I wanted to be, I felt great”, says Robert (59, transsexual). Becca (29, trans female) adds, “Mostly, what I get really excited about now is when someone calls me ma’am, or when someone on the street comes up and tries to hit on me, which has happened lots of times. Those are the things that I really dwell on. I get very excited about my progress”.

Respondents also expressed negative emotions at being misgendered: “If it’s somebody who knows that I’m trans, then I’m just going to be really angry at them for not making an effort and knowing that about me”, says Alan (21, man). Vera (26, female) states, “Getting misgendered makes you like... it’s mentally jarring. Even if you’re expecting it, it is mentally jarring”. The responses emphasizing the importance of affirmation is best described by Cooley’s third component of self—the feelings of pride or mortification [6]. These feelings, as indicated by the respondents, are induced by other individuals’ recognition (or lack thereof) of the respondents’ gender identity as it is being expressed.

Respondents also noted fear of discrimination as a motivation for passing. Some described physical abuse: “There’s definitely people out there that will just beat the crap out of you for their own amusement”, warns Jenn (44, t girl). Others described religious experiences: “like in Arkansas [where the respondent grew up], the religious fervor just flows through the community and anything that is not perceived as normal is satanic, so I can’t tell you how many exorcisms that I’ve been through”, says Carla (52, transwoman). Others were concerned about legal discrimination. Bob (33, trans masculine) shares, “They just passed a law [in Arizona, where the respondent previously lived] saying you have to carry your birth certificate around with you if you gotta take a piss in a gas station bathroom...So, that’s when, and I didn’t fully come out of all this, and didn’t fully transition until after I left Arizona”. These forms of discrimination are pervasive [5, 24, 30, 31]. While the stereotypes that follow trans people are different than those facing African Americans, the motivation to pass stemming from fears of discrimination is comparable. African Americans historically passed as white to avoid discrimination of various types, including those mentioned by the respondents in our study [1, 7, 9, 14, 17, 22, 28].

## Passing Techniques

Passing techniques discussed by respondents largely involve mirroring what cisgender people look like and do to express their gender identity. Some respondents

discussed hormone treatment to alter their bodies' appearances: "I'm far enough into my hormone therapy that my body is definitely changing. I have some curves. I'm starting to get breasts to a point to where I have to wear a bra every day now", shares Becca (29, trans female). Laura (55, transsexual) discusses the importance of behavior to match appearance: "The hormones and surgeries and all the medical side of it, turns out that's the easy part. The body language, speech patterns, mannerisms, the way you interact with people. That's all the stuff that really takes the work". In this statement, Laura is indicating at the importance of the social side of trans people's existence. Despite medical interventions, how does society see, accept, and treat trans people? For many trans individuals, this lack of clear social standing necessitates careful consideration of how they present themselves within the cisnormative world.

Jake (22, trans man) shares, "I waited to see how...I would make sure that I was doing the thing that was specific to how they [men] [were] treated..." Other behavioral techniques include Alan (21, man) who shares, "I remember trying to set my jaw so it would look more square or just larger in general". Becca (29, trans female) adds, "I have a new wardrobe. I wear feminine clothing every day. I put on make-up almost every day". These responses speak to the intentional shift in presentation to ensure that their outward presentation represents their affirmed identity. They support what Schilt found in her study regarding the "achievement of social maleness" [29].

Respondents were conscious about how these efforts or lack thereof were perceived by others either via affirming: "I was probably three months into my transition and had a grey t-shirt on and some army shorts. I opened a door for a woman as she walked out and said, 'Thank you, sir.'... That was one of those moments where I felt like people were seeing me" (Kevin 34, male) or misgendering "On days when I don't put on a face, I get sirred. I get misgendered. When I do have my make-up on that happens much less", says Becca (29, trans female). The reactions to their gender presentations helped them understand if and when they were effectively passing. In these examples, it is clear that the respondents are aware how their techniques are being perceived.

### Passing Byproducts

It is notable that several respondents agreed with the arguments of Sycamore [33] that passing is a problematic concept for full trans acceptance. "It's kind of reinforcing society's expectations of what gender should be, as opposed to what gender actually is", says Kaiden (21, agender). Alan (21, man) agrees, "it is something that tends to erase trans identities...". Furthermore, while respondents were sympathetic to those who prioritize passing, they understood that seeing passing as a goal presents challenges. Kaiden (21, agender) argues, "at best, transgender people are kind of just looked at as a joke in wider society so I definitely can't blame people for wanting to pass because that's avoiding all of the negative stigma and all the terribleness that's associated with being transgender all the time". Alan (21, man) states that "the problem with passing is that it implies that transgender people have to do

an extra, extra, extra amount of work in order to be seen as their gender and if they don't pass, they've failed in some way". So, while many respondents did say that they prioritize passing, those who oppose it are arguing that sense of self should not be determined by the impressions of others. Alan's latter statement above indicates that trans people may be experiencing double-consciousness and that it may be influencing their motivations to pass.

Trans people have varying ideas about passing. While passing is a priority for gender identity and expression, one of the adverse effects of passing is the reinforcement of the gender binary [30]. Even for individuals who prioritize passing personally, the acknowledgement of the reinforcement that passing has on binary understandings of gender is acknowledged through the quotes of Alan. When this binary is upheld, support and acceptance of transgender people can be depleted as assimilation is prioritized. This is complicated though, as trans people who prioritize passing do so because it affirms their gender identity or because they have fears of discrimination. In order to pass, trans people engage in physical techniques—clothing choices, makeup, hairstyles, etc. or behavioral techniques walking, speaking, and other mannerisms that are associated with cisgender people in our society. While trans identities are seen as a place to dislodge rigid gender roles and ideals within a society, trans lives are not theoretical. Trans individuals are making very real decisions on a day-to-day and moment-to-moment basis that balances their own identities, comforts, and social arrangements.

## Conclusions

This study is an investigation into identity formation and expression among transgender people. Specifically, we have explored trans people's ideas about passing to help understand why some individuals might prioritize passing. In addition, we investigated some of the techniques that trans people employ in order to pass. Together, this information helps inform us about the influences, nuances, and expressions of transgender identity. Understanding the nuances of identity among trans people also helps us appreciate the impacts of ongoing prejudices and discrimination on a person's selfhood.

Identity is more than simply an individual sentiment. As Dubois and Cooley have argued, each individual is conscious of not only their own perspectives, but the perspectives of others with whom they come in contact [6, 7]. As the respondents in this study have conveyed, their ideas about and strategies for passing are very much dependent on the perspectives of their cisgender counterparts in society. Furthermore, the internal conflict that Dubois discusses in African Americans is also found in the responses of the transgender people in our study. It is one thing, as Cooley projects, to understand that identity involves understanding how one is viewed by others; it is another to realize that the dominant group in society presents a doubting, degrading, shaming perspective toward individuals in minority groups. As African Americans feel that strife due to their race, transgender people experience it due to their gender identity. The result for each group is fear and doubt and an undeniable desire for acceptance by the dominant society.

As seen in the results presented above, trans individuals report significant concern related to discrimination. In fact, it is one of the primary considerations that many people discussed as to why the need for passing was so critical. In light of consistent research that points to the detrimental health impacts of discrimination [21], this concern cannot be overlooked for trans individuals living in a more conservative region within the United States. As all trans individuals in the current study live in Nebraska, unique stressors related to gender and being visible as a trans person are likely at play. This is likely most relevant for the experience of concerns about safety for trans Nebraskans. While place was not intentionally examined within the interview guide, individuals within the current study consistently point to passing as cisgender as a tactic to avoid the potential for discrimination.

Applying Dubois' concept of the veil [7] to the trans experience, we do find evidence of a two-ness within trans individuals in their perceptions of passing. The pervasive experience of acknowledging a largely cisgender lens to understanding gender expands Dubois' concept of the veil to also cover the experiences of people whose gender identities do not match their gender assignment at birth or how society sees them. This concern might be further compounded for trans people of color (a group not well represented within the current data). Furthermore, a kind of double-consciousness is discussed in the data. Even for individuals who prioritized passing, the same individuals would express concern over the emphasis on passing and the reification that passing lent to binary notions of gender. What is perhaps needed is a merging of these two world views by acknowledging trans identities beyond binary labels and providing more nuanced understandings of trans identities and experiences to get a better understanding of what Schilt has deemed "gender double consciousness" [29].

In light of Cooley's looking-glass self [6], our study shows support for a societal aspect of one's self identity. Affirmation of one's gender identity is a common experience within this sample of trans people. Trans participants in the current study discuss watching others to understand how gender is performed, matching those expected behaviors in their own presentation, and reaping the rewards of a correct gendering process. Misgendering is hurtful to trans people's sense of self and creates self-doubt of identity and social acceptance. Trans people acknowledge the social aspect of gender performance and identity, and many report feeling validated and happy when the reflection back to them by society matches how they view themselves, findings that are consistent with work on microaggressions and misgendering [25].

This study is not without limitations. Our results may not be generalizable to transgender people across America since our sample was limited to the state of Nebraska. The sample is also limited by lack of ethnic diversity among the respondents. As recent events have shown, African American trans women have been targeted for violence in the U.S. [27]. Our sample only contained one respondent who identifies as "half black", so we are unable to analyze how that particular demographic might view passing.

Still, this study contributes to several areas of study. Research on trans people rarely approaches trans identity from a sociological theory perspective, as we have done here. This perspective is important, though, as it helps us understand how

external forces influence trans identities. This study also expands our understanding of passing in the trans community. In addition to uncovering varied perspectives on passing generally, we have initiated a conversation about a trans person's motivation for passing and how those motivations differ from the more thoroughly investigated phenomenon of racial passing. While racial passing occurs primarily to circumvent discrimination, transgender passing is motivated by fears of discrimination and identity affirmation. Identity affirmation is the critical difference, as African Americans who have passed as white, historically, were not doing so to project their sense of identity. This final point brings us to another contribution of the study—a new and unique application for two major theoretical models. Dubois' veil and double-consciousness was developed specifically to address the experiences of African Americans [7–9]. However, this study suggests that trans people have similar experiences with their own consciousness. Relatedly, Cooley's "looking glass self" theory is salient in the realm of trans identity development. Over and over again, our respondents discussed how their sense of self is shaped by how the world perceives them [6]. Though other tests have been performed to evaluate the applicability of the "looking glass self" (see [37]), these have focused on individual identity rather than group identities.

Future research should investigate ideas about passing in diverse groups to discover if ethnicity, gender identity, religion, or other factors influence how transgender people view passing. Future research should also investigate trans people in different regions of the U.S., as gender performance is in some ways regional. We acknowledge that gender in the Midwest may vary from coastal regions and large cities, and by conducting a study of trans individuals in the Midwest, we are adding understanding to the trans experience. We also encourage scholars of trans identity to consider sociological frameworks in which to understand gender identity. By utilizing theoretical lenses not typically applied to gender, the current investigation has tied disparate areas of social research.

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## **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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