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"Bigender is just a Tumblr thing": microaggressions in the romantic relationships of gender non-conforming and agender transgender individuals

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the microaggressions that gender non-conforming and agender identified transgender individuals receive from their romantic partners. While microaggressions have been studied in the romantic relationships of transgender individuals, gender non-conforming and agender individuals' experiences of microaggressions have not been the focus. Participants included 390 adults who identified as gender non-conforming ($n = 200$) and agender ($n = 190$) and who were either currently or formerly (within the past five years) in a romantic relationship. Results were analyzed via thematic analysis and resulted in three relationship salient themes: 1) *identity parsing*; 2) *binary assumptions*; and 3) *transition-dependent*. Discussion of the results focuses on the way microaggressions are shaped by normative assumptions of gender/sex and sexuality. Clinical implications for sexual and relationship therapy are discussed.

Previous research has focused on understanding transgender microaggressions in romantic relationships, and has found that microaggressions received from a romantic partner are particularly impactful (Pulice-Farrow, Brown, & Galupo, 2017). Transgender microaggressions are dependent on the context within which they are received (Chang & Chung, 2015; Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012), and may differ in expression based on the gender identity of the individual receiving them (Pulice-Farrow, Clements, & Galupo, 2017). It follows, then, that transgender microaggressions are experienced differently for binary identified individuals than they are for gender non-conforming and agender individuals (Pulice-Farrow, Clements, et al., 2017). This study utilizes a qualitative approach to examine the nature of microaggressions gender non-conforming and agender individuals receive from their romantic partners.

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Gender identities that do not fall within the gender binary

Gender/sex[1] is among one of earliest learned constructs (Egan & Perry, 2001). Typically, gender is understood with regard to binary dichotomies (e.g., male/female, man/woman, boy/girl; Richards & Barker, 2013), and with assumptions that all individuals are cisgender (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). This assumption uniquely affects *transgender* individuals (individuals who identify with a gender different than their sex assigned at birth[2]; McFarland, Wilson, & Raymond, 2017). For transgender, gender non-conforming, and agender individuals, the concepts of gender/sex are complicated as they are seen as dichotomous and, historically, have left little room for fluidity or flexibility (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Ramirez, 2017; Schudson, Dibble, & van Anders, 2017). Transgender experiences have typically been understood in relation to three different facets of gender: gender identity, transition steps, and sex assigned at birth (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Taken together, these three have been used to understand different nuances of transgender experience (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

While many transgender individuals identify with a binary gender (i.e., woman or man), many others do not. Gender non-conforming and agender individuals may identify as both genders, neither gender, or a gender outside of the typical male/female binary, and may experience shifts in their gender depending on time and/or context (Galupo et al., 2017; Richards et al., 2016). Gender non-conforming and agender individuals are also differently affected by *genderism* than binary transgender individuals, in which people receive negative or hostile reactions for not conforming to stereotypically gendered behavior (Browne, 2004; James et al., 2016). As such, gender non-conforming and agender individuals are more likely than their binary (e.g., transgender women and men) counterparts to be the subject of harassment and discrimination in restrooms and in highly gendered spaces (James et al., 2016). Gender non-conforming and agender individuals are also more likely to face intrusive questions and assumptions involving their bodies, transition, and genitalia (Pulice-Farrow, Clements, et al., 2017). Negotiating these assumptions may lead individuals to ruminate on their[3] gender identity and presentation (Bauerband & Galupo, 2014) and may lead to more negative mental health outcomes such as increased depression and anxiety (Smith, Shin, & Officer, 2012).

Transgender research has predominantly focused on individuals who identify with binary genders (Matsuno & Budge, 2017) and disproportionately centered on transition. Given that roughly half of all transgender individuals choose to socially transition, and only a quarter choose to pursue medical transition, (Collazo, Austin, & Craig, 2013; Scheim & Bauer, 2015) existing research frameworks may not resonate with the majority of the community. Future research should acknowledge that there are more

identities than woman/man, and seek out ways to include transgender individuals who do not fall into these discrete binary categories.

Romantic relationships of transgender individuals

Romantic relationships are characterized as voluntary, loving exchanges (Furman & Shomaker, 2008) where partners are viewed as relative equals (Felmlee, 1994). Romantic relationships provide mental and emotional support and are even more important for transgender individuals given their relative vulnerability (Scheim, Bauer, & Coleman, 2016). Transgender individuals report being more likely to find acceptance from romantic partners than family members (Nuttbrock et al., 2009; Riggs, von Doussa, & Power, 2014). Rejection from romantic partners has been linked to increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, while more support in romantic relationships has been tentatively linked to less psychological distress (Fuller & Riggs, in press).

Transgender relationship research follows trends from the larger literature by emphasizing medicalized and binary understandings of transgender experience (Pulice-Farrow, Brown, et al., 2017; Velez, Breslow, Brewster, Cox, & Foster, 2016). Even the relationship literature emphasizes experiences during and following gender transition (Platt & Bolland, 2017). For gender non-conforming and agender individuals, transition may not be seemingly straightforward (Richards et al., 2016), and binary-identified partners may not understand or empathize fully with their wants and needs (Pulice-Farrow, Brown, et al., 2017).

Microaggressions in interpersonal relationships

The study of microaggressions presents as a model for understanding interpersonal relationships. Microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination that may manifest as verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights or snubs based on minority identity (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are commonplace for minority individuals, and negatively affect their health, well-being, and standard of living (Nadal et al., 2012). When perpetuated by a loved one, transgender individuals find microaggressions to be exhausting and negatively impact their day-to-day lives (Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014).

While transgender microaggressions have been studied in therapeutic (Whitman & Han, 2017) and workplace contexts (Galupo & Resnick, 2016), those that directly impact a social support relationship are of particular interest. Microaggressions routinely occur in friendships (Galupo, Henise, & Davis, 2014; Pulice-Farrow, Clements, et al., 2017) and romantic

relationships (Pulice-Farrow, Brown, et al., 2017). These microaggressions may erode feelings of trust and closeness, disrupting an important source of social support (Galupo, Henise, et al., 2014). While microaggressions have historically been conceptualized as damaging because of their frequency (Nadal et al., 2011), microaggressions that come from a romantic partner may be seen as more impactful specifically because of the importance of the relationship in which they occur (Pulice-Farrow, Brown, et al., 2017). In a previous study completed by Pulice-Farrow, Brown, et al. (2017), transgender participants acknowledged that similar microaggressions (e.g., misgendering or the accidental use of a deadname[4]) hurt more when coming from a romantic partner than from a friend, family member, or acquaintance. Even microaggressions that happen infrequently within close interpersonal relationships are experienced as being hurtful due to the closeness of the relationship, and the feeling that the other person "should have known better" (Galupo, Henise, et al., 2014, p. 466).

Statement of purpose

There is currently little to no research that directly examines the experiences of microaggressions that gender non-conforming and agender transgender individuals receive from their romantic partners. As microaggressions are sensitive to time and relational context (Chang & Chung, 2015) and the gender identity of the individual receiving them (Pulice-Farrow, Clements, et al., 2017), it follows that microaggressions gender non-conforming and agender individuals receive from their romantic partners will manifest differently than those experienced by binary transgender individuals. This study represents a sample of gender non-conforming and agender identified transgender adults and focuses on the following research question: *How do gender non-conforming and agender individuals experience microaggressions received from romantic partners?*

Method

Participants

Three-hundred and ninety gender non-conforming and agender identified participants were selected from a larger study of transgender individuals' experiences in romantic relationships who were recruited on the basis of identifying as transgender, transsexual, or having a transgender history or status. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 54 ($M = 21.1$, $SD = 4.5$). Initially, four gender identity choices were written into the survey: transfeminine, transmasculine, gender non-conforming, and agender. For the purposes of this study, the final two categories were analyzed. Participants self-

categorized their primary gender identity as either agender ($n = 190$) or gender-non-conforming ($n = 200$). Participants were also asked to provide their gender identity as a write-in response. Our sample had limited diversity, with a majority of participants (89.7%) acknowledging being raised female and only 21.5% identifying as a racial or ethnic minority (See Table 1).

To be included within the present analysis, participants had to be currently in a romantic relationship, or must have been in a relationship within five years of recruitment. The sample represents an international group of individuals, with 75.8% coming from the United States, and the rest representing 14 other Western, English-speaking countries. While there were not enough participants to do a full between-groups comparison, future research should attempt to identify the cross-cultural differences in the microaggressions in the romantic relationships of gender non-conforming and agender

Table 1. Participant demographics.

	Total ($N = 390$)
Age mean (SD)	21.1 (4.5)
Gender raised as	(%)
Female	89.7
Male	4.8
No Answer	5.3
Gender identity	(%)
Agender	48.7
Gender Non-Conforming	51.3
Race	(%)
White	78.5
Hispanic	4.6
Black	2.3
Asian/Asian American	2.8
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.5
Biracial	9.7
Other	1.0
No Answer	0.5
Nationality	(%)
US	75.9
Non-US	24.1
Sexual orientation	(%)
Asexual	16.1
Bisexual	19.7
Pansexual	23.8
Gay	3.3
Lesbian	10.0
Heterosexual	0.5
Queer	15.1
Other	8.4
Education level	(%)
Some High School	7.9
High School/GED	22.8
Some College	35.4
Associate's	5.4
Bachelor's	16.2
Master's	2.8
Some Graduate School	1.8
Doctorate	0.5
Other	2.6

individuals. Participants were disproportionately educated, with 69.8% of participants having at least taken some college courses.

The sample was recruited online via snowball and convenience sampling. Recruitment announcements that included a link to an online survey were posted to social media pages. Some of these sites were targeted for specific transgender identities (e.g., gender non-conforming or agender), while others served the transgender community in a more generally. The majority (91%) of participants were recruited through Tumblr, while the remaining participants were recruited via Facebook (6.7%) or being referred to the survey by a friend (2.3%).

Measures: qualitative responses

This survey is part of a larger dataset that concerns the positive and negative aspects of the romantic relationships of transgender individuals. Participants completed an online survey where they answered questions about their romantic relationships. Three qualitative questions were created to parallel definitions of the three distinct types of microaggressions as outlined by Sue (2010): *microassaults:* "*conscious and deliberate violent verbal and nonverbal actions based on gender identity meant to hurt you through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions*" (p. 28); *microinsults:* "*unintentional behavioral or verbal slights, typically outside of their awareness that convey rudeness, insensitivity, or demean your gender identity*" (p. 31); and *microinvalidations:* "*unintentional verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify your thoughts, feelings, or experienced reality on the basis of your gender identity*" (p. 37). The three descriptions were followed by the prompt: *Provide an example from your romantic partner in which these actions have been directed toward you due to your gender identity. Please describe the experience in detail and include both your internal (emotional) reaction as well as any feedback or action you made to the situation.* To capture the relationship context, the prompts were also modeled after those used in previous studies that examined the effects of microaggressions in the friendships of transgender individuals (Galupo, Henise, et al., 2014).

Procedure

Following Pulice-Farrow, Brown, et al. (2017) Pulice-Farrow, Clements, et al. (2017), data across all three prompts were analyzed together for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013) to understand the full scope of the microaggressions that gender non-conforming and agender individuals experience from their romantic partners. Participants completed an online survey that sought to analyze the microaggressions that occur in romantic relationships

of transgender individuals. Initially, participants completed demographics questions, including a structured identity question in which they self-selected into one of four gender identity categories. For the purpose of the present study, only the responses of gender non-conforming and agender individuals were considered. Participants were then asked about their experiences of microaggressions (Sue, 2010) in relation to their romantic relationships.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013) was used to consider how participants described the microaggressions that occur in their romantic relationships. The analysis began with all three members of the coding team individually reading the data and coming together to discuss themes that were related to the microaggressions experienced by gender non-conforming and agender individuals. Three main themes emerged based on their salience and frequency. The research team then agreed on an initial set of codes. These were used by the first and second authors to code and sort the data. With the third/senior author serving as external auditor, the full research team met and refined the coding structure over several meetings. The team also met to select participant quotes that best exemplified each theme.

Several checks in our data analysis process were made to increase the validity of our results. First, throughout the data analysis process, we discussed themes and came to decisions via consensus. Due to our range of experiences and identities across gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, relationship experience, race, and religion, we came to these discussions with different perspectives. The research team consisted of a first-year PhD student in counseling psychology who identifies as a white queer non-binary person (first author); an undergraduate student who identifies as a white queer transmasculine person (second author); and a professor of psychology who identifies as a biracial bi/pansexual cisgender woman whose spouse is non-binary/gender non-conforming (third/senior author). Second, at the end of our survey, participants were asked how well it captured their experiences and were asked to provide feedback to improve future studies. Third, to further validate the thematic structure, we utilized a Chi-square analysis (Sandelowski, 2001) to verify that frequency of themes did not differ across gender identity (gender non-conforming and agender).

Results

Participants provided (qualitative) data regarding the microaggressions they received from their romantic partners, the circumstances surrounding these instances, and the participant's reactions to them. Thematic analysis resulted in three main themes: 1) *identity parsing*, 2) *binary assumptions*,

and 3) *transition-dependent*. Table 2 illustrates the thematic structure, including both themes and subthemes. Participant responses often exemplified multiple themes, as they are not mutually exclusive. Results of the data are described using direct quotes from the participants, and all quotes are contextualized using the participants' self-disclosed gender identity label, as well as race and age. Chi-square analyses confirmed that the frequency of themes did not differ between gender non-conforming and agender individuals: *Identity Parsing*: Chi-Square $(1, N = 190) = 0.01$, $p > .05$; *Binary Assumptions:* Chi-Square $(1, N = 190) = 1.58$, $p > .05$; *Transition Dependent:* Chi-Square $(1, N = 190) = 1.41$, $p > .05$.

Identity parsing

Participants described microaggressions that were based upon the conceptual disaggregation of their identities into two opposing dimensions. Participants noted that their romantic partners parsed their identities in multiple ways. Three subthemes were noted for identity parsing, and illustrate the way romantic partners' treatment of participants shifted based on these divisions: *real vs. presentation, public vs. private,* and *masculine vs. feminine.*

Within this theme, many participants described microaggressions that showed their partners were making a distinction between the participant's "true" selves as opposed to their presentation or self-identification (i.e., how they dressed, acted, or identified). As one participant succinctly described, *"[my partner] mentioned that '[birth name] is your name. [chosen name] is who you are.'"* (White seagender person, 18). Another participant similarly described:

> He used to make me feel uncomfortable about being trans, saying that he liked women and didn't want to date a non-woman. He also didn't want to use my chosen name, constantly expressing a preference for my birth name and expressing discomfort when I mentioned wanting to a) live by my new name and b) legally change my name. (White agender girl, 20)

Other participants felt invalidated when their partners treated their identities as too difficult to explain or acknowledge. For some participants, this was explicit: *"She 'simplifies' my identity when it's inconvenient for her to explain… She doesn't think that my identity is important enough to go to the trouble of explaining."* (White mavrique, 20), while for others, these

Table 2. Thematic structure.

Main Theme	Subtheme
Identity parsing	"Real" vs. Presentation
	Public vs. Private
	Masculine vs. Feminine
Binary assumptions	Cisgender male vs. Cisgender female
	Cisgender vs. Binary transgender
Transition-dependent	

microaggressions were more covert: *"[It] always felt as if he saw me primarily as a girl and never as a nonbinary person"* (White non-binary fluid person, 21). These microaggressions functioned to question the validity of a person's gender non-conforming or agender transgender identity.

Participants also noted a difference between how their partners interacted with them in public and in private. These microaggressions mostly focused on how partners negotiated the participant's gender non-conforming or agender identity while interacting with others outside of the relationship. Some participants saw their partners using gendered words, identifiers, or pronouns to describe them. For example, one participant described: *"My partner would always refer to me as his girlfriend, even in situations where my gender wasn't even necessary to disclose or he could have used the term 'partner'"* (Biracial/multiracial non-binary person, 19), while another mentioned: "*Usually my partner respects my pronouns (they), but sometimes, especially when we're around cis people or people who don't know my pronouns, he will slip up and refer to me as she*" (White agender person, 18).

This distinction in treatment between public and private settings also extended to participants' discussion of sexual roles. One participant noted:

> *I was often criticized for not being emotionally available, or "nurturing" enough. I continued to remind my partner that I was the exact same person they idealized as being rational and down to earth when they initially pursued the relationship. Ultimately my unwillingness to change my role in the relationship led to my partner cutting ties with me. Ironically, from a strictly sexual standpoint, he thrived on my less-than-feminine identity, and encouraged cultivating encounters where he would put himself in a position of vulnerability and submission, finding my dominance erotic, rather than off putting.* (White neutrois person, 26)

While the distinction between public and private has been documented in a number of previous studies (e.g., Katz-Wise & Budge, 2015; Pulice-Farrow, Brown, et al., 2017), participants in this study experienced these microaggressions specifically in relation to their gender non-conforming or agender identities.

The final way that our participants saw their identities parsed was through their partners' negotiation of masculine or feminine identity labels. This was often communicated linguistically.

> *My pronouns are she/they, and I really only include "she/her" as acceptable pronouns for ease with other persons who are not used to using singular "they/them". My partner will use she/her predominantly, while using they/them sparingly, which is saddening.* (Asian/Asian American gender queer person, 24)

> *[My partner] sometimes groups me in with women casually. For example, we were going to visit his boss's farm, and the men were mostly outside, and the women were mostly inside, and I was inside, and he made a comment basically calling me one of the women.* (White agender person, 24)

Historically, gender/sex has been split into the two distinct, non-overlapping categories of female and male (Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2012), while individuals who identify as gender non-conforming or agender may exist outside of these binary categories. Some gender non-conforming or agender individuals can (and do) place themselves into masculine or feminine identity categories, while others resist the associated constrictions that these categories convey (Galupo et al., 2017). Our participants named misgendering through the use of binary pronouns and overt categorization with women or women microaggressions. The literature highlights this type of misgendering and objectifying biological language as a form of genderism and cisgenderism (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012), leading to an increase in negative affect (McLemore, 2018). This type of identity parsing of feminine/masculine dimensions effectively rendered participants' gender non-conforming or agender identities invisible.

Binary assumptions

Participants also named microaggressions that reflected their partners' binary assumptions of gender/sex. Assumptions of gender/sex were experienced uniquely by our participants in relation to their gender non-conforming or agender identities. These went beyond gendering language, and focused more on the participant's body, personality, or social role. These microaggressions were described in two main ways.

The first subtheme described the romantic partner labeling certain behaviors, bodies, or actions as congruent with either cisgender women or men, excluding transgender identities from the distinction. While this could have been implicit or out of habit, our participants saw this exclusion of transgender identities as a microaggression. For example, one participant described their partner making assumptions: "When talking about scientific contexts and academic papers mentioning 'both genders,' [they] excluded my identity" (White bigender person, 20). Other participants noted their romantic partners' assumptions were rooted deeply in cisgenderist behaviors or mannerisms.

> My partner would often impose gender roles in our relationship, despite us both being the same gender (i .e. someone was to act more "feminine" and the other more "masculine") to be ideal. [This was] a problem considering I don't conform to gender roles. (Black male, 18)

> 'Obviously you're a girl, you're not sick, you're wonderful'; 'I couldn't date you if you were a boy, I just can't do that' it just made me, sad. This was the biggest deal I just felt so sad, that he could not love me as anything other than a girl. (White non-binary person, 18)

The second subtheme was characterized by the romantic partner acknowledging gender diversity but only including cisgender individuals and binary transgender individuals, excluding gender non-conforming or agender identities from the categorization. One participant described: *"He made it very clear that he did not 'believe' in non-binary genders"* (White agender person, 23), while another noted being told that *"Bigender is just a Tumblr thing"* (Hispanic/Latinx bigender person, 20). At other times, romantic partners who had full knowledge of the participant's gender identity would revert to ignoring their gender during times of stress.

> *Generally, she will only use gender (feminine)-specific names when lashing out, i.e. "bitch," "cunt," etc. It's rare that she has episodes such as these, but when she does there is ZERO regard for my position as a non-binary person. In times of stress, she generally reverts to masculine roles (she's mtf) and places me in the position of a "traditional" female.* (White non-binary person, 21)

> *My partner never calls me by my real name, and always refers to me with the wrong pronouns and won't change, he says because no one will understand him. He always calls me his girlfriend. And sometimes when he yells he tells me I'm really just a girl … It really hurts. If he can't accept me. Who will?* (Asian/Asian-American gender fluid person, 19)

These assumptions often impacted the romantic relationship in numerous ways. Participants articulated how these assumptions created an unsafe environment, impacting disclosure of their gender non-conforming or agender identity. While disclosure does not ensure a successful relationship, the failure to disclose, especially for fear of rejection, can lead to more negative mental health outcomes for transgender individuals (Meier, Pardo, Labuski, & Babcock, 2013; Reisner et al., 2016; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009).

Transition-dependent

The final way that participants saw their romantic partners invalidating or aggressing their gender non-conforming or agender identities was with regard to their transition. Many participants described their romantic partners' attempts to block their desired transition. One participant described their partner *"[throwing] away all of my masculine clothes because he thought my gender identity was stupid."* (Hispanic/Latinx non-binary person, 27). Another noted *"[W]hen I first mentioned going on testosterone she became very upset and did everything in her power to persuade me from going on hormones."* (Black trans non-binary person, 24).

Although social or medical transition can be an important part of transgender experience (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), it does not define it. Our participants described the ways they struggled to receive support from partners because there was a lack of understanding of their identities in

general, and because there was a lack of understanding of how gender non-conforming or agender individuals may experience a gender transition in particular. While many binary transgender individuals have their medical transitions well-documented within the media (Ryan, 2016), gender non-conforming or agender individuals are less represented and understood and this may have contributed to the discomfort that some partners had with the participants' transition steps.

Discussion

This study describes microaggressions that are received by gender non-conforming or agender transgender individuals from their romantic partners. Although we focus here on aspects of the relationship that were experienced as invalidating, it would be inaccurate to assume that the romantic relationships of our participants are predominantly negative. The romantic relationships of transgender individuals, like the romantic relationships of cisgender individuals, are complex, and can encompass both microaggressions and *microaffirmations,* where romantic partners perform actions to show support and love toward each other (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, Clements, & Morris, 2019; Pulice-Farrow, Bravo, & Galupo, in press). Thus, it is important to consider that romantic partners can, at times, both invalidate and affirm participants' identities. It is within this larger relational context that these microaggressions are negotiated.

Normative assumptions of the gender binary

Participants described microaggressions that can be understood in relation to three main themes: *identity parsing, binary assumptions,* and *transition dependent.* Collectively, these themes highlight the way that gender non-conforming or agender identities are uniquely impacted by normative assumptions of gender/sex and sexuality at multiple levels. To fully capture trans identities, best research practices suggest that multiple questions about gender should be used (Tate, Ledbetter, & Youssef, 2012). For this study, inclusion criteria reflected two levels of selection. Knowing our demographic questions is useful for framing an understanding of how normative assumptions of gender/sex and sexuality operated in our participants experiences. First, recruitment into our larger dataset required participants to identify as transgender, transsexual, or having a transgender history or status. Second, after completing an open-ended question for gender, participants were asked to choose one of four categories that best represented their experience (transfeminine, transmasculine, gender non-conforming, agender). Participants in this analysis were from the latter two groups. Our findings, then, reflect these different levels of identification.

Clearly, at the most basic level our participants' experiences as transgender individuals can be understood to be shaped by cisnormative assumptions. However, their experiences as *gender non-conforming or agender* individuals negotiating their identity within a romantic relationship requires additional nuance.

In her 2015 publication of Sexual Configurations Theory, van Anders provides a comprehensive breakdown of normativities that have constricted our understandings of partnered sexuality. As sexuality has been conceptually rooted in Western cultures on binary notions of gender/sex (Galupo, Mitchell, Grynkiewicz, & Davis, 2014; Wiseman & Davidson, 2011), van Anders' work frames an understanding of the ways that normative assumptions of gender/sex and sexuality work together. This work is particularly useful for thinking through the way gender non-conforming and agender individuals negotiate their identity in romantic relationships. Our participants' descriptions illustrated the way binary normativity, shame normativity, gender/sex normativity, and alignment normativity, all contributed to create unique expressions of microaggressions directed to gender non-conforming and agender identities their partners.

Binary normativity and shame normativity were often central to the way microaggressions were framed to invalidate participants' gender non-conforming and agender identities. Our participants detailed microaggressions that were informed by *binary normativity*, (i.e., the belief that individuals are hardwired to be women or men and/or that individuals are hardwired to be intimate with or attracted to women and/or men; van Anders, 2015). That partners conceptualized participant identities through the lens of binary normativity was clear when they communicated that transgender experience was not legitimate or when they specifically suggested that gender non-conforming or agender identities do not exist (or that they only exist on Tumblr, as one participant described). They were also seen in the way partners resisted participants' social and/or medical transition steps. In addition, binary normativity informed the way partners had difficulty conceptualizing their own sexual attraction to encompass gender non-conforming or agender individuals. Sometimes this was accompanied by *shame normativity* (i.e., that minority sexualities should be embarrassing to others and kept hidden; van Anders, 2015). Shame normativity was clear in the way partners managed participants' gender non-conforming or agender identity differently in private versus public. Sometimes this was due to the inconvenience or embarrassment of explaining their non-normative gender or because in a relational context partners' sexuality was assumed to be non-normative because of the participants' nonbinary gender.

Gender/sex normativity and alignment normativity were also highlighted throughout participants' descriptions of microaggressions. Microaggressions

often called out perceived gender violations as they relate to relationship roles and dynamics. *Gender/sex normativity* (i.e. that gender and sex should be coincident, and follow heteronormative gender/sex scripts; van Anders, 2015) was evident as microaggressions revealed how partners' gendered expectations were anchored upon the participants assigned sex (vs. their identity). *Alignment normativity* (i.e., that sexual and nurturant desires and behaviors should be coincident; van Anders, 2015) was particularly salient when participants described microaggressions from partners around sexual and relational roles. The expectations for alignment normativity were evident in the way that our gender non-conforming and agender participants felt invalidated by the gendered scripts that partners often imposed on their bodies (around sexual desire) and on their expressions of love and romance (around nurturant desire).

Limitations and future directions

While this study has noteworthy results, it is not without limitations. Consistent with national findings from the U.S. Transgender Survey where gender non-conforming and agender individuals were younger than binary individuals (James et al., 2016), our participants' mean age was 21.1. Compared to their older counterparts, younger transgender individuals have more recently come out (James et al., 2016), and have less experience in romantic relationships (Booth, Crouter, & Snyder, 2015). When taken in the context of James et al. (2016) study, older individuals may experience different microaggressions given that they may have previously negotiated their identity within the context of a long-term romantic relationship. Consequently, the participants in this study may have a different experience of microaggressions than older gender non-conforming and agender identified individuals.

It is important to consider that, consistent with national samples, the vast majority of our participants were assigned female at birth. Among the gender non-conforming and agender individuals included in the U.S. Transgender Survey, 80% were assigned female (James et al., 2016). Because transgender experience is simultaneously informed by gender identity, transition, and assigned sex (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), it will be important for future research to better understand how assigned sex factors into gender non-conforming and agender experience.

This study utilized an online sample to recruit gender non-conforming and agender identifying participants. The internet may serve as a support for transgender individuals who are physically isolated from the transgender community due to geographic location or lack of visibility (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005). However, participants who typically participate

in online research are disproportionately White, middle class, and educated (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). The present sample reflects this lack of racial, class, and educational diversity and our findings should be interpreted within this demographic context. Since gender non-conforming and agender people of color experience microaggressions at the intersection of race and gender (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunte, 2013; Nadal et al., 2015), their experiences are likely to be distinct from those reported by our participants.

Implications for sexual and relationship therapists

As sexual and relationship therapists primarily work to address dynamics of relationships, the present findings provide some real-world implications. While this study focuses on microaggressions in particular, it is important to understand that these actions do not fully characterize the romantic relationships of gender non-conforming and agender individuals. Specifically, these same participants described ways that their partners affirmed their identities (Blinded for review). It is within this larger relational context that gender non-conforming and agender transgender individuals are processing microaggressions and making decisions whether or not to acknowledge a partner's slight. Sexual and relationship therapists should draw on the positive experiences within the relationships to help their clients build trust and work through any issues that arise from microaggressions.

It can also be helpful for sexual and relationship therapists to remember that while microaggression research suggests that small and isolated instances of slights culminate (Nadal et al., 2011), even single instances of microaggressions coming from a friend or romantic partner may have an impact on the relationship (Pulice-Farrow, Brown, et al., 2017; Pulice-Farrow, Clements, et al., 2017). As gender non-conforming and agender individuals may have to act as teachers for their therapist and romantic partner on topics concerning their gender (Barker & Iantaffi, 2017), having a therapist who understands how microaggressions reinforce assumptions of normativity for gender/sex and sexuality can be especially helpful. Therapists can help their clients understand how seemingly small and unintentional invalidations may run deep, as they play directly on the insecurities borne out of cultural misunderstandings of gender/sex. Making this connection may help partners of gender non-conforming and agender individuals understand how their actions are connected to a lifetime of experiences and put the hurt they have caused into perspective. Additionally, therapists may help their gender non-conforming and agender clients begin to unlearn a lifetime of self-stigma (Austin & Goodman, 2017) based on what they have been taught about their own gender and sexual identities.

Notes

1. Following van Anders (2015), we use gender/sex to reference a concept that cannot be understood as only biologically or socially constructed.
2. While this definition is what is typically utilized to define the term transgender, we understand that this definition supports alignment normativity (van Anders, 2014), wherein a person whose gender aligns with their assigned sex is seen as more normative than someone whose gender does not align with their assigned sex.
3. We use the singular *they* pronoun in place of *his or hers* in order to be inclusive of non-binary identities.
4. *dead-name* refers to the name (given at birth) that an individual no longer identifies with (Gratton, 2016).

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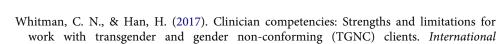
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