What happens when gender accountability is reduced? The experiences of non-binary and genderfluid people during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

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In their autoethnography, Alberto Fernández Carbajal (2022) described the social isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic as productive for their non-binary identity; they had time for introspection, along with “testing the waters of my queer gender expression” in their private space while working remotely (816). For Carbajal, one of the “queerest paradoxes” of the pandemic was that “it was not despite but because of this social isolation that I had the time and space to confront my gender identity” (816). This study analyzes the “queerest paradox” of the COVID-19 pandemic, theorizing that the social isolation of the pandemic produced not just free time and space but also reduced gender accountability due to changes in major social institutions like work and school. People felt relief from the intensity of their gender being constantly assessed in-person by others and thus had space to explore new gender expressions.

The theory of “doing gender” emphasizes that gender is constantly performed “at the risk of gender assessment,” and that people’s gender performances “are often designed with an eye to their accountability, that is, how they might look and how they might be characterized” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 136). Scholars frame gender accountability as relentless and unavoidable (West and Zimmerman 2009), as every social interaction is necessarily gendered (Crawley 2022, 374), and scant scholarship explores variation in gender accountability. This article queries what happens to gender subjectivities when there are reduced external assessments, which we define as anticipated or actual perceptions and surveillance by others of one’s gender. We advance theories on gender accountability by analyzing the nature and outcomes of less stringent external assessments during periods of social change in major institutions like work and school. We analyze gender accountability during the shelter-in-place period of the COVID-19 pandemic as much social life moved from in-person to online or remote work or school. This research uses
this natural experiment to understand how changes in social institutions affected interactions, and, consequently, gendered subjectivities. We analyze whether less stringent external assessments produce new gender subjectivities, including gender identities that defy binary gender.

We collected and analyzed interviews with a racially diverse sample of 22 adults in the United States who developed an identity as non-binary, genderfluid, or another gender-diverse identity during the shelter-in-place period of the pandemic. Many participants described a temporary relief from the intensity of external assessments of gender accountability as they worked or attended school from home, as even video-conferencing did not involve constant in-person full-body external assessments. Notably, white non-binary people framed the ungendering qualities of the pandemic as a “break.” Participants self-reflected and experimented with gender due to the social conditions of the shelter-in-place period of the pandemic, including wearing masks in public. Black and Latinx young adults who had had hectic lives before the pandemic found this increased space for self-reflection meaningful. Less stringent external assessments at work and school, especially the reduction of in-person assessments of their gender, produced new gender subjectivities.

**DEFINING ACCOUNTABILITY**

Accountability is a core component of how people “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 2009, 117). West and Zimmerman posit that “virtually any activity can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature” (1987, 136). Interaction (or anticipated interaction) is a key component of gender accountability (Hollander 2013, 15). West and Zimmerman defined accountability as how people perform gender with the awareness that they may need to give
accounts of their gender to others in relation to concepts of conduct that are appropriate for a woman or a man (West and Zimmerman 1987). Jocelyn Hollander (2013) emphasizes three parts of accountability: orientation to sex category, assessment (including self-assessment), and enforcement by others of consequences.

This study extends the gender accountability literature to theorize about the interrelationship of external assessments and gender subjectivities. Existing work has been more focused on external assessment, as “in order to shape their own behavior, people must evaluate themselves, considering what accounts their appearance and behavior may elicit” (Hollander 2013, 10). For example, even if no one openly comments on the gender non-conforming clothing worn by our friend Leaf, Leaf’s performance is oriented toward knowing/anticipating that others will evaluate their decision and then may impose consequences, and that knowledge/anticipation shapes Leaf’s thoughts and behavior before they even act (Hollander 2013, 8). This external assessment is attentive to potential consequences of gender assessments, ranging from disapproval to ostracism to murder.

We contrast this external assessment with an internal assessment, or gender subjectivities, which are interactional but involve introspection, embodiment, and self-concept. These categories are similar to stef shuster’s (2017) “other-enforcement” and “self-enforcement.” We query whether changes in external assessments produce flexibility and experimentation in gender subjectivities, including disengagement from binary understandings of gender. We use the case study of non-binary people during the shelter-in-place phase of the COVID-19 pandemic to understand what happens to gender subjectivities when external assessments are dramatically reduced.

GENDER ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE GENDER BINARY
Scholars debate whether gender accountability regulates gender conformity, and thus reinforces binary notions of gender (Deutsch 2007; Shuster 2017; Johnson 2015; Garrison 2018; Crawley 2022). Gender accountability often forecloses fluidity between binary categories by the “symbolic and material removal of fluid possibilities from sexual and gender experience and categorization” (Sumerau, Mathers, and Moon 2020). Transgender and non-binary people are disproportionately impacted by accountability to gender conformity and binary understandings of gender, including transnormative expectations that transgender people will transition into binary gender identities (Shuster 2017; Vidal-Ortiz 2009; Garrison 2018; Johnson 2016; Nordmarken 2014; Jones 2020; Johnson 2016). Non-binary people may experience a consistent fluidity in their gender subjectivities (Bradford and Syed 2019) and thus may feel “not trans enough” (Garrison 2018).

Non-binary people may experience gender accountability as indeed a relentless and unavoidable force in their lives. Non-binary people experience frequent misrecognition of their gender subjectivities and being misgendered by others, and thus are compelled to frequently provide accounts of their gender (Garrison 2018; Murawsky 2023). The constant navigation of these (mis)recognition processes and gender accountability becomes constant everyday labor (Shuster 2017). These (mis)recognition processes structurally perpetuate gender binaries (Connell 2009; Pfeffer 2014). Research emphasizes how relentless this gender accountability is for non-binary people. Even in transgender spaces, non-binary people are held accountable to binary gender expectations (Nordmarken 2022).

The expectations of gender conformity to binary gender identities disproportionately impact trans and non-binary people of color (Greene 2019; Abelson 2016; Alfrey and Twine 2017; Vidal-Ortiz 2009). Gender non-conformity always operates in concert with racialization
(Somerville 1994; Collins 2004; Snorton 2017). For example, because of the histories of enslavement and objectification, Black women’s bodies in the US have been subject to hypermasculization, heterosexualization (Collins 2004), and ungendering (Spillers 1987; Pinto 2017). Ungendering—or the exclusion of Black women from femininity—is the result of normative racial violence such that “the conventional grammar of gender fails Black women” (Snorton 2017; Tudor 2019; Cruz 2016, 152). Trans and non-binary identities have been developed within these histories of racist violence (Snorton 2017; Meyers 2022), and so non-binary people of color may have an ambivalent relationship with binary notions of gender.

There are also consequences for a lack of adherence to binary gender categories. Binary expectations affect the inclusion of non-binary people in job markets and housing (Jones 2023; Greene 2019), although occasionally gender-fluid presentations fit into work culture and advantage racially dominant workers (Alfrey and Twine 2017). Additionally, within institutions, algorithms, and artificial intelligence, gender is categorized and tracked in a way that conforms to binary logic, a form of administrative violence toward transgender and non-binary people (Spade 2015; Keyes 2018). Both administrative (and physical) violence is intensified within carceral logics for trans women of color (Greene 2019; Vidal-Ortiz 2009).

We question if gender accountability ever reduces in its intensity. We consider what happens to the labor of (mis)recognition and assessment when gender accountability varies, particularly during periods of social change. We question when external assessments are less stringent and if that produces gender subjectivities. Here, we push for an understanding of gender accountability that considers variations in external assessments.

**GENDER ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE TIME OF COVID**
Scholars have framed gender accountability as something that can rarely be avoided: it is both “invariant” (54) and with a “situational character” that changes as gender norms change (West and Zimmerman 2009, 118). The “undoing gender” literature criticizes this understanding of gender accountability for inadequately explaining social change and the complex relationship between social institutions and interactions (Deutsch 2007; Lorber 2000). Gender accountability works at the individual level but also at the institutional level of society because of the “inseparable and mutually constitutive production of the institutional and interactional” (Crawley 2022, 371). Scholarship on “undoing gender” stresses the ways that gender differences can be minimized and gender expectations unmoored from biological differences toward the ultimate goal of reducing gender inequality (Pierotti, Lake, and Lewis 2018; Goldberg 2013; Dozier 2019). However, S. Crawley critiqued undoing gender theories for missing the “doing gender” theory’s complex roots in ethnomethodology (Crawley 2022).

Scant literature articulates variation in gender accountability, a necessary element to understand gender and social change. Some scholars document heightened accountability for LGBTQ people in face-to-face interactions, including the external assessments of trans men in spaces where they fear violence (Abelson 2014) and lesbian and gay parents about the gender of their children (Berkowitz and Ryan 2011). This heightened accountability is always shaped by race and class, as white trans men in rural areas may feel less concern about violence because of how they fit into white rural masculine culture (Abelson 2016). In these situations, social actors must engage in an external assessment of whether the environment is dangerous or hyper-critical of their subjectivities and then do gender accordingly.

More flexible environments, such as online spaces, tell a complicated story about gender accountability, one with potentially less stringent external assessments and more expansive
gender subjectivities. Gender embodiment online may allow users to obfuscate, play, or experiment with gender subjectivities with fewer consequences, which is part of why online communities play a central role in the development of transgender and non-binary identities (Nordmarken 2023; Darwin 2017). Most scholars analyze both online games and online communities as spaces with reduced accountability compared to in-person social interactions (Garrison 2024). For example, “gender switching” in massively multiplayer online games allows for exciting gender play which may reinforce a binary gender (Roberts and Parks 1999) or, conversely, create space for players to “do gender in some unusual and fairly novel ways and with less anxiety about consequences” (Stabile 2014, 52). Despite scholars’ implicit insistence that online communities could foster less stringent external assessment, little scholarship analyzes where and when exactly we find reduced gender accountability offline nor how that reduced accountability impacts gender subjectivities.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an excellent case study for theorizing about gender accountability and social change in real life, because many social institutions were radically transformed by the social conditions of the pandemic. We understand the pandemic as a natural experiment with social institutions and gender expectations. Since 2020, analyses about the gendered impacts of the pandemic have focused on heterosexual, cisgender, dual-income parents and the reinforcement of conventional gender norms in the workplace for these parents (e.g., Mooi-Reci and Risman 2021; Herzberg-Druker, Kristal, and Yaish 2022) with little regard for people with non-binary or genderfluid identities.

Little empirical research analyzes the impact of these social changes on gender accountability. Queer scholars theorize about the “queerantine”; for queer people, the social isolation of the pandemic was freedom from “the direct public gaze of others” yet they were still
subjected to “a panopticon” online from “virtual observers” (Paceley et al. 2021). In this social isolation, people imagined new futures and reimagined sexual practices (Paceley et al. 2021; Quathamer and Joy 2022; Thorneycroft and Nicholas 2021). This queer time included “some reprieve from direct contact with society…and the constant surveillance of their bodies” (Quathamer and Joy 2022, 11). Some pandemic conditions, including time online, space for conversations with others, and experimenting with gender, are elements of coming into transgender identity (Nordmarken 2023).

We empirically consider this issue of reprieve from “constant surveillance” and “the direct public gaze” described by queer scholars. Although workers’ and students’ faces or partial bodies could be visible during remote work, many workers and students avoided using their cameras while on Zoom or other web-conferencing programs (Li et al. 2022; Balogova and Brumby 2022). Theories on gender accountability have not fully considered whether in-person full-body gender accountability is distinctly different from online or remote work and school. The shelter-in-place period of the pandemic allowed us to examine the role of in-person gender accountability in the lives of non-binary people. We consider whether shelter-in-place conditions transformed people’s external assessments within certain major institutions and what effect they had on gender subjectivities.

METHOD

This project is an interview study to understand the process by which adults in the United States came out as non-binary or genderfluid during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative interviews were the best method for investigating this research question, as interviews allowed insight into interviewees’ private life-world during the pandemic (Weiss 1995).
Recruitment

Interviewees were recruited through an online screening survey distributed in 2022 that was taken by 1600 LGBTQ-identified adults and youth (ages 16-65 years old). This short survey was distributed exclusively for the recruitment of participants into two studies: this study and a study of LGBTQ youth and housing stability. The survey asked questions about age, race, education, state of residence, gender and sexual identity before and after March 2020, experience with online communities, and contact information. The survey was distributed through social media, including promotion by non-profit organizations in Texas and California, personal social media, and sponsored ads on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The recruitment survey, recruitment materials, and interview questions were approved by the Trinity University Institutional Review Board.

Interviews

Survey respondents who were an adult, U.S. resident, and started identifying as non-binary, agender, or genderfluid during the pandemic were invited into the study. Approximately 1300 of the survey respondents were adults, and 20% of the survey respondents reported coming out as non-binary or genderfluid during the pandemic. Undergraduate researchers contacted approximately 150 respondents in order to set up 22 interviewees, as some of the younger non-binary respondents were recruited for the LGBTQ youth study instead.

Undergraduate research assistants conducted twenty-two interviews in April, June, and July 2022 over Zoom. All undergraduate researchers received six hours of training on interviewing and conducted two practice interviews. Researchers received feedback on their first two interviews along with weekly supervision.
Interviewers read through an informed consent form to the interviewees before the interview began and obtained verbal consent. The interviews lasted 45 to 120 minutes over Zoom, and researchers asked about the participant’s shelter-in-place experience, their gender identity, and their experience since shelter-in-place. Participants received a $40 Amazon gift card.

Sample

The participants were predominately racially-minoritized young adults who lived in Texas. Research on non-binary people disproportionately uses white samples (Darwin 2020). As described in Table 1, only ten of the participants identified as white/not Hispanic, and seven participants identified as Latinx or Hispanic, sometimes as part of multi-racial identification. We use the umbrella term “Latinx” to refer to participants who identified as Latinx, Latino/a, Hispanic, and/or Mexican. Other participants had racial and ethnic identities described in Table 1. The majority of participants (n=15) were from Texas, a state with anti-trans legislation that was passed during the pandemic and controversy over pandemic preventative measures. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 44 with most of the participants being between 20-30 years old. The participants had a range of educational backgrounds.

The majority identified as a woman (n=14) and bisexual/pansexual (n=15) before the March 2020 pandemic period. After the lockdown part of the pandemic, participants identified as non-binary, genderfluid, transgender, genderqueer, or agender, often with combinations of identities (see Table 2). We refer to all these identities as “non-binary” in this paper. A majority of racially minoritized participants identified specifically as genderfluid, either alone or in combination with a non-binary identity. The identity of genderfluid was included in the
recruitment materials for the study based on anecdotal evidence that racially minoritized people may find the identity of “genderfluid” more relatable than “non-binary.”

Almost all interviewees were childfree and quarantined at home with remote work or school, a situation that reflects age and social-class positions. Participants chose their own pseudonyms and pronouns. Only Kody, Juniper, and Poppy worked as essential workers. Only two participants had infants at home. Therefore, this sample represents a particular shelter-in-place experience of young adults without dependents doing remote work or school. Our analysis centers on the age, race, and gender positionalities of interviewees. The interviews did not contain adequate questions about each interviewee’s social class status to make conclusions about the role of class in pandemic experiences.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded on Zoom, professionally transcribed, and cleaned and organized in NVivo. A research assistant coded all the interviews in NVivo using broad, flexible codes like “school”, “online”, and “information gathering” that were developed from the interview guide questions (Deterding and Waters 2021) and interviewer feedback to facilitate analysis by the research team. The “perception” code was developed by the research assistant who coded the transcripts and noticed how often participants mentioned others’ perceptions.

The first author took the “pandemic” and “perception” flexible codes, which included every reference to the COVID-19 pandemic by interviewees and every reference to others perceiving one’s gender. The first author open coded both “pandemic” and “perception” for the purpose of thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998). Both authors developed the themes within the data through examining these open codes together and organizing the open codes into axial codes,
such as “less gender pressure at work” and “time for reflection.” The interviewees described a similar narrative about the pandemic: a narrative about changes in gender accountability, isolation, self-reflection, and gender experimentation.

**Reflexivity**

The co-authors identify as a white, middle-aged, non-binary, queer person from a working-class background and a white, middle-aged, Jewish, queer woman and mother originally from New York City. Both co-authors live in Texas. Five traditional-aged undergraduate researchers at Trinity University conducted all the interviews. Three of the interviewers identify as non-binary or transgender. The researchers identified as white/non-Hispanic (n=3), Latina (n=1), and Filipino American (n=1). Throughout the process of recruiting and interviewing, researchers had group discussions about intersectionality and their own positionalities and how these impacted the interviewing process. The co-authors made attempts to match the racial identifications of interviewers and interviewees as much as possible. The undergraduate research assistants were close in age to many of the interviewees and often related to their experiences as non-binary high school or college students during the shelter-in-place period of the pandemic.

Several researchers, including one of the co-authors, actively explored their gender identity during the pandemic. These relevant personal identities and experiences shaped the project, from interview question development to interview style to the analysis. The personal experience of discovering one’s own gender identity during the pandemic may have influenced the types of questions we asked, as there may have been uninformed assumptions about what types of information or social experiences were important during the pandemic. Our research team was thoughtful during data collection and analysis about how our own identities impact the
project. Because both co-authors are white, we intentionally read work by trans scholars of color to better understand their pandemic experiences. During the data analysis, the co-authors consistently discussed their own complex pandemic experiences and the way race, class, urbanity, religion, health, sexuality, and family structure influenced their life during the pandemic, to sustain awareness of the ways that

**RESULTS**

For all participants, the social conditions of the pandemic—including remote work or school, fewer social interactions with strangers, wearing masks, and extended social isolation—set the stage for their non-binary subjectivities. The shelter-in-place period was the “queerest paradox” as it was simultaneously challenging and productive of introspection and experimentation about gender. Participants described remote work and school as reducing the intensity of external assessments. However, for some, home was not a respite from external assessments. For all participants, less stringent external assessments at work and school produced self-reflection and gender experimentation.

**Changed External Assessments**

* A Gender Break: “I needed the break to just be a human”

Almost all participants described shelter-in-place as a time of reduced gender accountability at work and school. Many interviewees felt like their gender was not subject to constant review. Participants spent less time around others, even on video, and had fewer people assessing their gender expression in-person every day. Many people could work or do school without being on camera at all, and no one mentioned pronouns being posted in video meetings.
Even video-conferencing only featured people’s faces and shoulders, if anything. This shift from in-person to remote reduced the constant labor of gender accountability.

This time period comprised less stringent gender accountability from co-workers, classmates, teachers, bosses, and other people. Gender accountability did not vanish, but external assessments became less intense. Ella, a white non-binary transgender person in their early twenties, described being closeted at their not-queer-friendly high school and inhibited to experiment. During shelter-in-place, Ella explored their gender, because they were “in [their] room for days and weeks at a time” with less concern about others’ assessments. Ryan, an indigenous non-binary and genderfluid person in their early forties, experienced working from home as a shift away from “expressing an image” in the workplace, because “the niceties of gender went away.” Ryan’s description resonated throughout the interviews as participants described less concern about how others might evaluate their gender. Consistently, interview participants detailed how others perceived their gender less and thus put less pressure on them.

For some non-binary people, working or doing education remotely was a major relief from the daily labor of gender accountability. Before the pandemic, Lamp, a white non-binary person in their late teens, identified as a trans man and desired recognition at school. “I wanted so badly to be seen by other people that way,” they explained. But Lamp described the pandemic as respite from gender accountability which contributed to their newfound gender fluidity. They noted that “not seeing people day to day and not being constantly perceived in one way and gendered in one way… I let go of the anguish I would get from being misgendered.” Lamp experienced everyday in-person gender accountability as a source of anguish, as a constant struggle to be accurately recognized as a trans man. Nancy, a white non-binary/genderfluid/agender person in their early twenties, framed remote education for their
master’s thesis as having a “gender break.” Nancy explained, “I think the experience of not having to put work into being perceived every day, and just getting to exist… I needed the break to just be a human mostly.” Nancy described this gender break as a relief from the labor of being perceived and assessed by others. Nancy mentioned that this break was also an opportunity to just “exist” and “be a human.” When Nancy describes their time during quarantine as a much-needed “break to just be a human,” they are pointing directly to existing as a human without the labor it takes to consider external assessments and potentially account for the gender binary, whether to themselves or to others. Lamp mentions having the time “to think about who I am as a person” outside of gender assessments. Both Nancy and Lamp stressed that they could just be a person or human in the absence of constant external assessments. They both emphasized that this shift entailed less labor-intensive gender performance than before the pandemic.

This shift to remote work and school was not without complication. Poppy, a white person in their early twenties, reported a shift in self-identification from trans woman to agender during the pandemic. They were working at a local grocery store and took a leave of absence when the pandemic started. Poppy declared, “I can’t express my gender really at work. I can’t really even express myself, it feels like.” That period of unemployment gave them “more space… if the pandemic never happened, I would still probably be working at the grocery store or something, and I simply wouldn’t be who I am today.” This time also bred economic precarity. Poppy became unhoused due to a break-up and eventually moved in with a transmasculine friend. Although unemployment gave Poppy space to explore their gender, they became economically precarious.

*Accountability at Home: “Watching me like a hawk”*
These shifts in external assessments were mostly felt within the social institutions of work and education. A few participants described changes in gender accountability in interactions with family members. Eight participants were high-school or college students sheltering at home with family members. These younger participants, specifically BIPOC participants, often experienced heightened external assessments with their families.

A few Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) and Latinx participants expressed concerns about stringent gender accountability at home. They described both friend groups and college as having less intense external assessments than home. Socks, a Latinx non-binary genderfluid person in their late teens, explained that “at college I feel a bit more flexible with as far as what I can wear and how I present myself,” and noted that they have to be more aware of their presentation at home. Online school could be harmful for trans and non-binary students for whom school was a gender-affirming space (Brownstone et al. 2021). Echo, a multi-racial genderfluid person in their late teens, had concerns about how their family would react to changes in their gender presentation at home. However, later in the pandemic, they hung out with a few friends and felt comfortable experimenting with their gender around friends with whom “I can present or identify however I want and I know that they’re not going to care.” These youth described friends and school as places that provided more flexibility with their gender presentation than what they experienced at home.

Additionally, space to experiment during the pandemic required privacy, which some of these minoritized younger participants did not have. Rat, an AAPI genderfluid person in their late teens, described limited privacy as their parents “were just like watching me like a hawk” and said, “my parents can barge in whenever they want.” Expectations of family closeness and familism in AAPI and Latinx families may create more gender accountability and less privacy at
home for these youth (Patrón 2021). Indeed, privacy from other family members, including having privacy in one’s own room, seemed critical for exploring gender subjectivities. Queer youth in general may rely on the spatiality of their bedrooms to have privacy for identity exploration (Schroeder 2015), and access to this private space may depend on the economic privilege of private bedrooms and cultural understandings of teenage independence. Young participants who lived with parents but had their own bedrooms described extensive time in their rooms watching videos and practicing dressing up. Dude, a white non-binary person in their mid-twenties, noted that their room “gave me the space to reflect on my gender identity and expression, but I don't know if it gave me a space to express it more… but spending that time reflecting really helped build up my confidence and certainty that this is who I am.” Gender assessments by family members and close living quarters meant that only some participants (i.e., white, middle-class) were afforded less stringent external assessments. The privilege to assess and explore one’s gender identity and subjectivity was predicated by race, ethnicity, culture, and family.

**Developing Non-Binary Subjectivities**

*Self-Reflection and Understanding Their Bodies: “I figured a lot of things out about myself”*

Participants described respite from intense external assessment as creating time for self-reflection about gender. Specifically, young Black and Latinx participants mentioned space for self-reflection during the pandemic. Alpha, a Black non-binary person in their late teens, quarantined with their family and called the isolation “a blessing and curse, because my mental health was really bad and I had to seek therapy, but at the same time I had time to do my research, had time to think, and educate myself.” Alisa, a Latinx non-binary person in their late
teens, also said that their mental health was adversely affected by isolation but that “I had time to think with just myself and I figured a lot of things out about myself.” While this isolation contributed to poor mental health, the time without stringent external assessments helped them reflect upon themselves: the queerest paradox of the pandemic. Having “extra time” is linked to race and class privilege, because people of color and working-class people often experience more burdens on their time, including long commutes, extended working hours, and necessary employment as a college student. During shelter-in-place, reduced travel plus governmental support for unemployment created more “extra time” for Black and Latinx participants.

Shelter-in-place reduced social distractions from participants’ lives, and interviewees could focus on their gender identities. Leti, a Latinx non-binary person in their early twenties, described “a deep introspection about who I am, because it's easy to define yourself by other things when you're distracted by other things.” They described everyday life as busy before: commuting, work, school, errands, and weekends hanging out with friends. During shelter-in-place, they felt truly alone and “forced to look into yourself.” Leti’s deep introspection included considering how they “exist outside of the binary and that’s okay.” Ella, a white non-binary person in their early twenties, had been distracting themselves with overwork and activism to avoid thinking about their identity before the pandemic. Ella said, “I had those feelings, but I didn’t really think about them. And so being able to have that space outside of the social milieu.” Fewer distractions, perceptions by others, and less “busyness” created “queer time” when participants could reflect on themselves.

The reduced external assessments allowed for an intense form of self-reflection. For Lamp, they did not have to constantly navigate (mis)recognition of their transmasculine identity, which made space “to think about who I am as a person outside of the idea that one of the utmost
important things to me is being perceived as male.” Not navigating in-person external
assessments gave Lamp some space to reflect about themselves and who they are in the absence
of others’ perceptions. Leti described self-reflection as stemming from social isolation: “just
being alone for long periods of time […] makes you more introspective and it allows you time to
look really deep into yourself, and I guess get to know yourself.” For Charlie, a Latinx non-
binary person in their late teens,

The pandemic really gave me a chance to work things out without any pressure from
other people, what other people might think, anything at school or anything like
that… What the pandemic did was give me time to think about it and explore it
without really any outside influence, if that makes sense.

The pandemic created space for Charlie to think about their gender subjectivity without the
pressure of external assessments. This self-reflection and exploration happened in a space where
participants could disentangle themselves from constant actual and potential gender assessments
from co-workers, classmates, and the public. That pressuring quality of gender accountability felt
diminished, allowing deeper reflection.

A few participants described epiphanies of embodied discomfort during shelter-in-place
that were part of this self-reflection. For Azul, a Latinx non-binary and genderfluid person in
their early thirties who sheltered in place with their newborn baby and husband, spending time
alone and in therapy during the pandemic led to them ask questions like “why am I so
uncomfortable in my own skin?” and “why am I so defensive about my gender identity and the
way people perceive me?” The answers to these questions were complex and involved rethinking
their gender identity and relationship with their body. Similarly, Jaime, a white non-binary
person in their early twenties, realized that they were extremely uncomfortable with their long
hair and questioned the intensity of that discomfort. The pandemic provided opportunities for participants to explore this bodily discomfort instead of ignore it.

Sirius, a white non-binary transgender person in their teens, described that the isolation “had me turn inwards a lot more,” because they had ignored how their chest gave them dysphoria. Sirius explained that during shelter-in-place “you’re not really dressing up to go anywhere or go to school, you’re just kind of in pjs or whatever.” Anytime they put on clothes to leave the house, they realized, “wow, this feels really uncomfortable, and it’s got me thinking about why does this feel so much more uncomfortable now than it did before?” They realized how they had acclimated to being uncomfortable in their pre-pandemic everyday life, which they described as related to compulsory heterosexuality and cisgenderism. “You know, you’re just kind of told that this is what you need to do, and all of a sudden it’s like whoa, this feels so weird.” Reduced external assessments made some participants aware of feeling physically uncomfortable while in public. Sirius had ignored the ways that “dressing up” complicated their chest dysphoria, and a break from dressing up made them realize how intense this dysphoria was.

*Gender Experimentation: “No one’s here to see me”*

Almost all participants described experimenting with new forms of gender expression due to less stringent external assessments. Several participants attributed this freedom of experimentation to the conditions of the pandemic and working or doing school remotely. Poppy described cutting their hair short for the first time “whereas before, I was almost scared to show any masculine features… I was scared to be masculine in general because I didn’t want to get misgendered… I didn’t want to be perceived as a man, I guess.” Kurt, a white and Jewish non-binary person in their late thirties, began experimenting with their clothes while working from
home. They felt free to dress how they wanted all day, as opposed to experimenting only after work. They reflected that, “it's hard to think back and realize why that should have been such a huge, big difference, but somehow it was…. If I hadn't been working from home, then this wouldn't have happened.” The freedom that Kurt described was specifically linked to staying at home and working remotely.

Being quarantined at home gave participants space to experiment with their gender expression. Socks described the early pandemic as “no one’s here to see me, so I don’t really care [how I dress].” They felt so liberated from external assessments that they shaved their head, which “felt so cool to me.” They did become nervous about others’ perceptions when they went out into public with a shaved head. When Jaime’s friend came out as non-binary, Jaime thought “maybe I’ll try on these little they/them pronouns with a couple of people and see how I liked them… because I wasn’t entirely sure at the time… gender is fluid and I can experiment how I wish.” Jordan, a white non-binary transgender person in their early twenties, felt safer having friends call them a different name and pronoun over text “because they weren’t around me in-person.” And, “because I wasn't going anywhere, I could wear really masculine clothing and see how I felt just literally in the privacy of my room.” Remote gender experimentation felt less risky than in-person interactions. Many participants stressed that they felt freer with “no one here to see me” and not “going anywhere.” With reduced external assessments, they could evaluate whether new clothes and haircuts aligned with their identities.

When participants did venture into public spaces, they often wore facial masks, which actually became part of the gender experimentation and self-reflection. Masking transformed how people made gender assessments in everyday life, and obscuring the lower two thirds of the face led to the misgendering of gender non-conforming people or increased facial gender
dysphoria (Simon et al. 2021). Interestingly, masking was beneficial for some non-binary participants as they experimented with gender expression.

Participants navigating gender (mis)recognition by wearing masks while out in public often felt like gender experimentation. Azul was sheltering in place with their newborn and husband when they came out as non-binary. Azul described gender experimentation with appearing more masculine in a mask:

When I shaved off my hair about a year and a half ago during the quarantine, I looked exactly like my grandfather from the mask up. It was so disorienting, but when people started calling me “Sir”, it felt so incredibly normal… I did find that wandering out in the world and having people call me “Sir” was perfectly fine. Azul learned something new about themselves: while being called “Sir” initially felt disorienting, it was potentially reflective of their desire for gender ambiguity. Ryan enjoyed similar flexibility to experiment with gender while masking:

So, wandering out into the world, into the darkness, as I often put it, and wearing nothing but T-shirts and shorts that obscured my physical characteristics, and they only judged from my eyes and forehead, I found I was very comfortable in that non-binary role in being cast in a role of a male.

Lamp described being misgendered more often in a mask, as people “look at me and they assume I’m a girl and then they hear my voice and they go ‘oh sorry, sir.’… but I don’t necessarily care.” Wearing a mask became an opportunity to experiment with gendered subjectivities, including being (mis)recognized by others in ways that supported masculine parts of one’s identity. Masking gave non-binary people a break from doing gender in a binary way (DuBois and Shattuck-Heidorn 2021). It is important to note that the positive experience of masking was not
consistent across all trans and non-binary people, and some non-binary people may have faced even more complex, conflicting, and even contentious effects of mask-wearing (DuBois and Shattuck-Heidorn 2021). Additionally, many Texan individuals and businesses saw masking for the sake of protecting one’s health from the virus as unnecessary or politically provocative, placing mask-wearers in potentially dangerous situations regardless of gender presentation.

DISCUSSION

Gender accountability is part of how gender (and reality more broadly) is formed in social interactions that are “emergent, coproduced by members in interaction in their everyday lives, constantly spoken, reproduced, edited, and negotiated to make an otherwise unstable world feel real, concrete, and invariant” (Crawley 2022, 374). Shifts in gender accountability during the pandemic contributed to participants’ development of non-binary subjectivities.

What changed about accountability? Non-binary participants described relief from others’ constant perception of their gender. Indeed, throughout the interviews, participants mentioned their awareness that they were being perceived by others less than before the pandemic. By definition, gender accountability requires the social environment of our everyday lives; this sociality was temporarily reduced during lockdown, and thus reduced the accompanying accountability. Out in public, covering half of one’s face with a mask altered external assessments. The pandemic provided an environment of reduced gender accountability for participants who attended work and school remotely, which suggests that age and social class may impact who actually got some respite from gender accountability. Many participants were still interacting with co-workers, teachers, and students during video meetings, over email, and other remote interactions. However, people had relief from constant full-body in-person
assessment of their gender presentation at work and school. In our study, reduced accountability did not necessarily extend to the family, as non-binary youth of color described more stringent assessment of their gender at home with their family. These youth comments on having less privacy and more concerns about gender accountability from family members. There may be racial and class differences in how much accountability teens and young adults experienced with family during the pandemic.

Most participants described relief from the relentlessness of everyday gender accountability, which highlights how gender accountability is a form of labor for non-binary people. During their partial respite from this labor, participants described both less attention to external assessments of them in everyday life and also less gender enforcement for their experimentation. These findings suggest that reduced external assessments can happen and that that reduction was felt as a break from everyday labor.

Participants experienced this less stringent gender accountability through histories of racialization. Several white non-binary people described masking and remote work or school as a “gender break” or an opportunity to just “be a human.” For example, Nancy’s whiteness may have shaped their description of “just getting to exist”, because they did not bear the additional burden of racial performance. These ideas about “being human” likely rely on abstract liberalist frames about race that emphasize individualism and common humanity (Bonilla-Silva 2010), while erroneously placing whiteness as the neutral standard. White participants were relieved by these moments of being without gender, but non-binary people of color operate within racist colonial histories of being historically ungendered through the violence of enslavement and displacement (Meyers 2022; Pinto 2017; Spillers 1987; Snorton 2017). Thus, being ungendered
may not feel liberating or an opportunity to “just be a human” for Black and indigenous non-binary people.

This period of fewer external assessments was simultaneously a break from the relentlessness of external assessments and productive of non-binary subjectivities. Reduced accountability produced opportunities for introspection and experimentation, creating “spaces of transition” (Jones 2020; Snorton 2011) or “identity incubators” (Shapiro 2007). These spaces of transition are more than the conventional understanding of physical transitioning but rather also “modes of anti-gender essentialist self-fashioning that occur in the everyday” and “a place where particular mapping on the body come under scrutiny as to implode” (Snorton 2011, 3). Less attention to being perceived by others offered people more time and energy to experiment with gender presentation (e.g., cutting their hair, using different pronouns, wearing t-shirts and shorts). Many participants felt safe experimenting with gender presentation within their private space; youth who did not have their own rooms were not afforded this luxury.

This study has a few notable limitations. The small size of this sample does not capture the complexity of the non-binary experience during the pandemic. Notably, almost all interviewees worked or attended school remotely and were not quarantined with children. The two participants with children had infants, who required care but did not have schoolwork. Being an essential worker, supervising children’s education, caring for dependents, or navigating domestic partnerships produced different shelter-in-place experiences. For example, participants’ self-reflection was less likely for people who had children, partners, or elders who demanded attention. Further research should address the impact of social class on non-binary pandemic experiences, as there was not enough heterogeneity in this sample to accomplish that task.
CONCLUSIONS

This project adds nuance to theories of gender accountability. First, although gender accountability may be inescapable, it has significant variation, with times and places in which external assessments of gender are less intense. In her theory of undoing gender, Francine Deutsch (2007) questions if there are interactions where gender is less significant or irrelevant. Gender did not lose relevancy during the pandemic. However, many non-binary participants felt their gender was less strictly assessed by others, an experience that loosened the enforcement of gender accountability. Reduced external assessments also created space for non-binary people to consider gender subjectivities outside the gender binary. Our work suggests the need to understand the “situational character” of gender accountability, specifically when and how gender accountability is heightened or reduced (West and Zimmerman 2009).

Second, this research suggests that in-person full-body assessments may be a critical component of gender accountability. Much work has been done on gender accountability in the virtual world, including how people cultivate their online presence by creating avatars, curating images on social media, and experimenting with gender presentation. This study highlights how in-person social interactions were a source of labor and anguish for participants. It is impossible to fully curate an in-person social interaction. Non-binary participants expressed concerns about how their gender was constantly perceived in-person, and so they engaged in the self-enforcement of the gender binary. Our study calls for research about how in-person full-body assessments operate as an essential component of gender accountability. As people move through an in-person world where each social interaction is gendered in unpredictable ways, external assessments feel relentless. Future gender scholars should consider the role of in-person social interactions and the body itself.
Third, this work also suggests that gender accountability may be more intense (and more variable) within some social institutions. The non-binary youth of color in this study who described stringent gender assessments at home suggest that the family is a site of intense gender accountability, particularly for children and youth. This study suggests that the social institutions of work and education may also produce heightened gender accountability. While several of our participants spoke about how quarantining with family affected their non-binary gender, almost all participants stressed the reduced gender accountability within work and school.

Why was reduced accountability at work and school so salient? These two public-facing social institutions have several features in common. Both work and school have an organizational logic that has a veneer of gender-neutral, disembodied social systems yet are deeply gendered organizations (Acker 1992). Unlike the institution of family, in which gender expectations are transparent and openly acknowledged, the gendered organization of work and school is hidden behind (often false) discourses of equality and abstract, gender-neutral, and race-neutral understandings of the “ideal worker” and the “ideal student” (Acker 1990; Pawley 2019). Both the workplace and school are organized around binary notions of gender and are spaces of constant assessments and enforcements. Coworkers, bosses, classmates, and teachers inevitably evaluate one’s body, language, and dress and measure how those outward features compare to normative standards of gender. Additionally, like the family, both work and education are “greedy institutions” (Coser 1974) that seek exclusive loyalty and require full commitment (Sullivan 2014). These greedy institutions follow capitalist, neoliberal logics: they consume a person’s time, energy, and commitment while the worker, parent, or student engages with these institutions’ norms. Significantly, consequences for nonadherence to the gender binary within these institutions can include extreme economic and social consequences like
economic precarity, educational disenfranchisement, and loss of status. These social institutions are conducive to stringent and relentless gender accountability.

Our research contributes to the understanding of how variation in gender accountability impacts the gender binary. Scholars theorize that undoing gender inherently destabilizes the gender binary (Risman 2009; Lorber 2000). This study proposes that people could think about, experiment with, and reconfigure their identity outside the binary if social institutions had less gender accountability. Andrew Bland stated that during the pandemic there were “underacknowledged and underactualized human capacities” to “heal false dichotomies and become more capable of living fully, authentically, and flexibly” (Bland 2020, 710, 717). We argue that the pause—or rather, break—in time and space that occurred during the pandemic demonstrates that gender accountability is not static within our society, but rather can be disrupted and reduced. We challenge ourselves and others to imagine a time-space where gender accountability could be reduced permanently without the urgency of a global pandemic.

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