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“I had to qualify my belonging to the group”: Trans women's experiences of gendered boundary work and the symbolic boundaries of womanhood.

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## ABSTRACT

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This study examines the symbolic boundaries and boundary work (Lamont, 2000) that trans women experience in relation to the cis women in their lives with whom they share a close or meaningful relationship. Centering trans women's voices and experiences, I analyze the ways in which boundary work is used to maintain or challenge symbolic boundaries between trans women and cis women, and how those boundaries and boundary work then act to locate trans women inside or outside of a larger conceptualization of womanhood. Analyzing data from 10 semi-structured interviews and 5 follow-up journal entries from 10 trans women in Sweden, this study shows that trans women experience a complex mix of inclusive and exclusionary boundary work from the close cis women in their lives. The findings show that several sites act as overlapping inflections points for boundary work, namely those pertaining to real or presumed biological differences (body), social space (spatial), and sexual orientation (sexuality). Trans women then respond to exclusionary forms of boundary work by employing several strategies to weaken symbolic boundaries, thereby reasserting their womanhood, and locating themselves back into a larger conceptualization of womanhood. These strategies include engaging cis women in discussion, navigating or negotiating acceptance of trans particularities with cis women, and filtering out cis women who are too exclusionary.

Keywords: transgender, gender inequality, symbolic boundaries, boundary work, inclusion and exclusion

## **Popular science summary**

In recent years, anti-trans feminist movements and anti-gender movements have grown in both scope and influence globally, and anti-trans discourse has led to the erosion of trans rights in different parts of the world. Feminist organizations have become divided about what to do about trans women and trans rights, with some opting to frame trans rights as incompatible with cis women's rights. This raises questions about the social relationships between cis women and trans women. In this study, I interviewed 10 trans women in Sweden about the social relationships they have with the cis women in their lives that they are close to. From trans women's point of view, I explored how the cis women in my participants' lives had demonstrated inclusiveness. I asked participants to describe the times and ways in which the cis women in their life had defended my participants' womanhood or their inclusion into women's spaces. I also explored how the cis women in my participants' lives had been exclusionary. I asked participants to describe the times and ways in which the cis women in their life had invalidated my participants' womanhood or sought to justify excluding trans women from women's spaces. I also asked participants if they had close relationships with cis women who are not supportive of them being trans, and if so (or not), why (or why not). I found that the trans women I interviewed had a mix of experiences of being included and excluded—sometimes even from the same cis woman in their life. I found that there were conceptual distinctions around womanhood that acted as boundaries between trans women and cis women, and that those boundaries were built up in some instances but weakened in others. Those boundaries, which changed over time, were maintained, challenged, or reinforced in different situations, and they served to either push trans women out of womanhood at times or pull them into womanhood at other times. I found that those boundaries became relevant when it came to different social spaces, sexuality, and real or imagined bodily differences between cis women and trans women. I also found that trans women then used different strategies in response when they felt the cis women in their lives were pushing them out of womanhood. Those strategies included engaging close cis women in discussion, negotiating or navigating the unique aspects of trans womanhood with cis women, and filtering out cis women who did not accept or respect their womanhood.

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## Introduction

As anti-trans feminist movements and anti-gender movements have grown in influence globally in recent years, some cis women and feminist organizations have become divided about what to do about trans women and trans rights (Butler, 2024). This raises questions about the social relationships between cis women and trans women<sup>1</sup>. It also raises questions about the kinds of conceptual distinctions and boundaries that are at play between trans women and cis women, and how those then influence or shape the social relationships between trans women and the cis women in their daily lives.

Recent public discussion about trans people in Sweden has focused on a variety of topics, such as the claim that being trans is a social contagion (Landén, 2019), which has been repeatedly debunked (Serano, 2023)<sup>2</sup>; the rates of regret among trans people who transition (Sweden, n.d.)<sup>3</sup>, which studies have consistently shown are low, around 1-3% (Barbee et al., 2023; Bustos et al., 2021; Nieder et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2024; Wiepjes et al., 2018); and the new gender law that will allow trans people to change their legal gender more easily (Orange, 2024). Representation of trans people in the media within Sweden, however, has been steeped in transphobia (Åkerlund, 2019). In fact, the public discussion and negative portrayals of trans people in the media in Sweden mirror a broader, international gender panic that is occurring around trans people (Butler 2024) and that is intertwined with an international anti-gender movement (Butler, 2024; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Studies have shown that cis women tend to be more supportive of LGBTQ<sup>4</sup> people than cis men are (Worthen, 2016). Indeed, in my own coursework (Faer, 2023a), using data from the 2018 European Social Survey and using multiple regression analysis, I found that cis women in Sweden were more accepting of LGB people than cis men were. However, this data did not allow for an analysis of rates of acceptance of trans people among cis women and cis men in Sweden, as the survey questions did not ask about acceptance of trans people. While cis women are generally assumed to be more accepting of trans people and, indeed, cis women in Sweden may be more accepting compared to cis men, anti-trans sentiment and anti-trans feminism are growing globally, with anti-trans feminists now aligning themselves

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<sup>1</sup> I use “trans” and “cis” as shortened versions of transgender and cisgender throughout this study. I define trans women as women who were assigned male at birth but whose gender identity is female, and I define cis women as women who were assigned female at birth and whose gender identity is female.

<sup>2</sup> See Julia Serano’s extensive blog post on social contagion theory in which she cites all the academic research that debunks it.

<sup>3</sup> See the documentary *Transkriget (The Trans War)* that aired on SVT in September 2023.

<sup>4</sup> This acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer.

with traditional patriarchal forces in eroding trans rights (Butler, 2024). Indeed, here in Sweden, some feminist organizations have come out against the new gender law that is designed to make it easier for trans people to change their legal gender (Hivert, 2024). Here, cis women's rights are framed as incompatible with trans rights. This, too, mirrors a larger anti-trans feminist discourse in which cis women's rights and cis womanhood are framed as incompatible with trans women's rights and trans womanhood (Pearce et al., 2020).

Moving beyond the issue of acceptance, however, and situating this study against the backdrop of a larger public discussion of trans rights that is influenced by anti-trans forces, this study zeroes in on the social relationships between trans women and the cis women in their lives with whom they share a close or meaningful relationship. I chose a narrower focus on close relationships for this study because when researchers have focused on the exclusionary acts and processes of cis women directed at trans people in the past, they have tended to focus more on prominent trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs<sup>5</sup>) who have an outsized amount of public influence in policy or social/mass media (Pearce et al., 2020; Zanghellini, 2020; Finlayson et al., 2018), or they have focused more on specific social spaces as sites of inclusion/exclusion, such as bathrooms, changing rooms, or other gender-segregated spaces (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014; Stones, 2017; Greey, 2023; Hargie et al., 2017; Travers & Deri, 2011). However, less attention has been paid to trans women's social relationships with the cis women who are a part of their daily lives and with whom they share a close or meaningful relationship—their family, friends, partners, co-workers, etc.

Within these social relationships, this study focuses on an analysis of the symbolic boundaries and boundary work that trans women experience in relation to the close cis women in their lives, and how those forms of boundary work then maintain or challenge symbolic boundaries. As Lamont (2002) defines them, symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space,” which social actors then use to “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” (p. 168). Lamont (2000) defines this process of separation and differentiation as boundary work (p. 270). Thus, drawing on Lamont's (2000) work on symbolic boundaries, my own previous coursework (Faer, 2023b), and using transgender theory (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010), the aim of this study is to understand trans women's

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “TERF” throughout this paper. This term was originally used by cis women radical feminists that were trans inclusive, and they used this term to distinguish themselves from radical feminists that were trans exclusionary (Smythe, 2018). Trans people then borrowed this term from those trans inclusive feminist allies. It has now become widely and commonly used among trans people and within trans spaces to refer to a specific type of anti-trans feminism.



experiences of the symbolic boundaries between, and boundary work performed by, cis women and trans women in Sweden.

I chose to interview only trans women for this study because trans women's experiences and voices have historically been minimized or silenced by cisgender society (Stryker, 2017). By interviewing only trans women, I seek to elevate their voices and experiences and, in doing so, to explore the issue from trans women's standpoint. In other words, I use standpoint theory (Smith, 1990/2012) here to shape my methodological approach. This also allows me to work towards the co-production of subjugated knowledge (Collins, 1990/2012) with my participants.

In this study, I use data from 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and 5 journal entries from 10 trans women in Sweden. Using an abductive approach and thematic analysis, I examine trans women's experiences of symbolic boundaries between cis women and trans women, and how boundary work then acts to maintain or challenge those symbolic boundaries.

## Research questions

The research questions I aim to answer here are: What are the symbolic boundaries between trans women and cis women and how are they maintained or challenged? Related sub-questions that I explore here are: What does that boundary work look like; who performs it; when and in what contexts; does it change over time; and how do trans women then view this boundary work and the symbolic boundaries between themselves and cis women?

## Previous research

In this section, I first discuss the literature on TERFs, as this is relevant to the symbolic boundaries between cis women and trans women in that what is at the heart of the conflict with TERFs is who qualifies as a woman. In other words, this issue is one of a symbolic boundary or conceptual distinction around who counts as a woman. I then discuss the research that has explored symbolic boundaries and boundary work that pertains to trans people, gender-segregated spaces, sports, and LGBTQ spaces.

### Research on inequalities between cis women and trans women

When previous research has explored the inequalities or social relationships between cis women and trans women specifically, they have often focused less on the close relationships that trans women share with the cis women in their daily lives and more on examinations of broader public discussions, theories and practices, access to social spaces, or

on prominent or influential TERFs and the outsized role they play in influencing policy or shaping discourse in social/mass media. For example, in the introduction to *TERF Wars*, Pearce et al. (2020) outline the ways in which contemporary debates in the UK (and around the world) about trans women's exclusion from feminism and women's spaces have been shaped and influenced by prominent, influential TERFs within academia, the media, and in public discourse. Pearce et al. (2020) argue that, within these debates, TERFs discursively rely on both "'biologically defined' notions of femaleness and womanhood over gender identity and social concepts of gender" and a definition of trans womanhood that associates trans women with men—along with all the potential dangers that men pose to women—as a justification for excluding trans women from both womanhood and women only spaces (p. 681).

Some scholars have sought to respond to or counter TERF claims and arguments. In a response to TERF arguments against trans people's access to gendered spaces, Zanghellini (2020) critically examines what they viewed as the "best" argument TERFs had put forth in their attempts to justify denying trans women access to such spaces. However, they show that even this "best" argument still relies on "a number of fallacies, and introduces modes of argument that are at odds with well-established and sound uses of practical reason" (p. 1). To give one example, Zanghellini (2020) argues that the fallacy of division is used by TERFs to justify excluding trans women from women's spaces. That is, because they view cis men as a threat to cis women's safety, and because cis men and trans women are both assigned male at birth, TERFs then assume trans women are a threat to cis women's safety, as well.

In their recent book, Butler (2024) also engages with TERF discourse, the types of arguments TERFs deploy, the history of this rhetoric, how it has been and continues to be wrapped up a broader anti-gender movement, and how TERF rhetoric has the potential to negatively impact—and has already negatively impacted—the lives of trans people by serving as part of a larger rights-stripping project. Other attempts have been made to engage TERF discourse or to counter it (Finlayson et al., 2018; Koyama, 2020; Williams, 2020), and while these discussions and analyses are important, there is often a lack of perspective on the social relationships that trans women have with the cis women in their lives (TERF or otherwise).

Furthermore, such abstract analyses and discussions on cis women's exclusion of trans women can often be oversimplified into a dichotomy in which cis women TERFs aim to exclude trans women on the one hand, while all other non-TERF cis women are assumed to be inclusive by virtue of their non-TERFness on the other (Finlayson et al., 2018). Indeed,

Stryker and Bettcher (2016) allude to this when they write that they wanted to “expand the discussion beyond the familiar and overly simplistic dichotomy often drawn between an exclusionary transphobic feminism and an inclusive trans-affirming feminism” (p. 7). The discussions and analyses of TERF discourse and their impacts are relevant here as they are ostensibly concerned with symbolic boundaries between cis women and trans women, and how those boundaries are then maintained or challenged, albeit at a more abstract level. It is also a topic that repeatedly came up during interviews and was important to my participants.

When researchers have taken a more “on the ground,” sociological, and less abstract approach to the social relationships or inequality between cis women and trans women, the focus has often been more on trans women accessing different social spaces, especially gender segregated spaces, such as bathrooms and changing rooms. It is somewhat unsurprising that the focus would be on women-only spaces, as Westbrook and Schilt (2014) note that “gender-segregated spaces are not evenly policed, as the criteria for access are heavily interrogated only for women’s spaces” (p. 35). In drawing on three case studies, namely “public debates over the expansion of transgender employment rights, policies determining eligibility of transgender people for competitive sports, and proposals to remove the genital surgery requirement for a change of sex marker on birth certificates,” Westbrook and Schilt (2014) find that people use different criteria to determine gender in different social spaces and that “gender-integrated spaces are more likely to use identity-based criteria, while gender-segregated spaces . . . are more likely to use biology-based criteria” (p. 32).

Indeed, broader cultural discussions of trans women accessing women-only spaces tend to frame the issue as matter of potential safety for cis women, with trans women (or cis men pretending to be trans women) being positioned as posing a hypothetical threat in accessing those spaces (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014, p. 48). Rarely is trans women’s safety considered. This is despite trans women being almost four times as likely to be the victim of a violent crime than cis women (Flores et al., 2021). That said, here, as well as with the conflicts with TERFs, the issue is who counts as a woman. That is, boundaries within and around social space become intertwined with symbolic boundaries of womanhood.

Among gender segregated spaces, bathrooms have been a particular focus of analysis. For example, in an analysis of user comments from online articles about trans women accessing women’s bathrooms, Stones (2017) finds that cis men were more likely than cis women to be concerned about trans women accessing women’s bathrooms, while cis women were more likely to be concerned about “perverts” posing as trans women to access women’s bathrooms. Indeed, Westbrook and Schilt’s (2014) work, which draws on two case studies to

explore the concept of “determining gender,” shows that “biology-based gender ideologies were more likely to be deployed when debating transgender access to women’s spaces” (p. 46). Within these ideologies, then, penises are given “the power to destroy the sanctity of women’s spaces through their (presumed natural) propensity to rape” (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014, p. 48). In other words, again, social boundaries in the form of gender segregated spaces collide with symbolic boundaries around real or presumed bodily differences, and within that collision, “biology-based gender ideologies” are deployed in attempts to deny trans women access to women’s spaces.

Furthermore, as Butler (2024) notes, the implicit point of these types of ideologies is that “someone who has a penis, or even someone who once had one, will rape, because the penis is the cause of rape, or the socialization of those who have penises is the cause of rape” (p. 140). This means that whether any trans woman has a penis becomes irrelevant when accessing these spaces because the associations of the penis (that of rape or a propensity for rape) remain attached to trans women even if or when they have it removed<sup>6</sup>, because previous possession implies either an innate capacity for rape or a socialization to rape. Thus, under this logic, even previous possession of a penis becomes sufficient to cast any trans woman as a potential threat to cis women’s safety.

To complicate matters further, Bettcher (2012), in a more theoretical paper, argues that, culturally, gender presentation is assumed to communicate genital status. However, this cultural assumption is complicated by trans people’s existence in that trans people’s gender presentation does not always communicate their genital status in a cis normative way. Since trans people disrupt that assumption, they then become subject to different forms of genital verification (Bettcher, 2020). Through these forms of verification, trans people are then framed as deceivers or make-believers, both of which invalidate trans identities (Bettcher, 2007). Thus, for trans women, being seen as a deceiver or make-believer renders them inescapably associated with the sex they were assigned at birth, an assignation that was based on the presence of a penis. In other words, it renders trans women unable to escape all the cultural baggage that is associated with the penis, and trans women are left having to negotiate or navigate their inclusion into both women-only spaces and a broader conceptualization of womanhood.

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<sup>6</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I say “removed” here. This is, of course, an oversimplification. Gender affirmation surgeries for trans women typically involve restructuring and reusing existing tissue, not a simple removal.

While Westbrook and Schilt (2009, 2014) provide valuable insight into how and why trans women are viewed as a threat to women-only spaces, again, the focus is less on trans women's or trans people's lived experiences. Indeed, their 2014 study explores how people more broadly determine the gender of others, and what implications that then has for trans people; while their 2009 study examines how nontrans people, or who they refer to as "gender normals," interact with trans people to "highlight the connections between doing gender and heteronormativity" (p. 440). Schilt's earlier work with Connell (2007), however, did explore trans women and trans men's experiences of transitioning in the workplace. In that study, drawing on interviews with trans women and trans men who came out and visibly transitioned in the workplace, they find that the cisgender colleagues of their participants attempted to "enlist their transitioning colleague into gender rituals designed to repatriate them into a rigid gender binary" (p. 596).

As with bathrooms, similar dynamics play out for trans women in sports-related spaces, such as gyms, locker rooms, and lesbian softball leagues. However, studies in this area have done well in centering trans people's lived and embodied experiences. Greey (2023), for example, examines trans people's access to gender segregated locker rooms and finds that trans people (including trans women) use different strategies to access those spaces, such as "hurrying, avoiding nudity and eye contact, and recruiting ally support function to facilitate locker room access by minimizing attention to trans nonmembership" (2023). Using a broader concept of social exclusion, Hargie et al. (2017) analyze trans individuals' experiences of exclusion related to sports and physical activity. This is then discussed in relation to minority stress theory. Changing/locker rooms emerge as a site of exclusion and source of stress for the trans people they interviewed (Hargie et al., 2017, p. 223). Travers and Deri (2011) examine the "re-negotiation of sex-based boundaries" within lesbian softball leagues that have adopted trans inclusive policies in North America (p. 488). Trans women and trans men were included in the leagues they examine, and the authors find that trans women overwhelmingly reported positive experiences of inclusion, while the trans men reported more ambivalence about their participation and inclusion. The common thread in these studies is that embodiment can collide with gender-segregated spaces in a way that has unique implications for both trans women and the symbolic boundaries between trans women and cis women. Indeed, this was one of the findings of this study, which I discuss further below.

## Research on symbolic boundaries

Previous research on symbolic boundaries, meanwhile, has been varied, with different research applying the concept to different topics. For example, researchers have explored the symbolic boundaries of the middle-class (Jarness, 2017), healthcare workers (Allen, 2000), congregation-based community organizations (Swarts, 2011), hookup culture (Fjær et al., 2015), and homeownership/non-homeownership (Vassenden, 2014), to name a few. However, research has not often explored the symbolic boundaries or boundary work that trans people experience.

When researchers have analyzed symbolic boundaries or boundary work with respect to the lives or experiences of trans people, or even LGBTQ people more broadly, the focus has been more on symbolic boundaries among trans people or boundary work within LGBTQ communities and spaces. For example, through interviews and ethnographic observation of both community stakeholders and unhoused LGBTQ people, Knee (2019) examines how an LGBTQ neighborhood created and maintained “boundaries of exclusion based on hegemonic norms” (p. 499). He finds that hegemonic boundaries were created via policing, symbolic boundaries of respectability, and “exclusionary nonprofit practices” (p. 499). These boundaries then served to “exclude homeless LGBTQ individuals of color” (p. 509).

In an examination of the symbolic boundaries among and between trans people, Sutherland (2023), in a cyber-ethnography of a transgender forum on Reddit, analyzes how membership within the broader category of “trans” is collectively negotiated between different trans people. He finds “three distinct identity membership strategies, entitled ‘unbounded,’ ‘socio-biological,’ and ‘medically-based’” (p. 71). Trans people in this forum then used these strategies to develop and maintain “internal symbolic boundaries of what constitutes a ‘trans enough’ identity” (p. 71). In a similar examination of intracommunity symbolic boundaries, Weber (2023) draws on “thirteen in-depth interviews with trans people in gender support groups in the United States” to analyze and understand “who ‘counts’ as trans, who is welcome in the groups, and factors that influence boundary drawing” (p. 492). They find that trans people tend to engage in a high degree of emotional labor, what they call “gender confirmation work,” within the larger cisgender world, and that, because of this, support groups served as a place for trans people to rest from that emotional labor (p. 492). Trans people within these support groups then drew boundaries by excluding cis people and certain types of trans people to ensure that participants in the group could rest from the emotional labor that they felt they would otherwise have to perform within a cisnormative

world (p. 502). In other words, symbolic boundaries were not just drawn between cis people and trans people, or even just between and among different trans people, but were drawn to exclude anyone whose presence would preclude rest from gender confirmation work.

Lastly, in a study that is perhaps closest to the aim of this one, in that it explores the boundaries between cis women and trans women within a specific type of social space, Earles (2019) uses textual analysis of “printed newsletters collectively written by self-identified radical feminists in Western Florida from the 1980s to the 2000s” to explore how cis women in lesbian and feminist spaces justified excluding trans women (p. 244). She finds that “public narratives of gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality circulate in some lesbian spaces as members use the ‘penis police’ to maintain exclusionary feminism” (p. 243). She also finds that radical feminists in these spaces relied on and perpetuated claims that all cis women are vulnerable and that everyone assigned male at birth is predatory, and that “ideas about cis men and trans women are conflated” (p. 253-254). In other words, in these spaces, some cis women drew symbolic boundaries along essentialist, binary notions of sex/gender/sexuality that located trans women outside of womanhood and, therefore, given the binary framing, within the realm of manhood. However, while Earles (2019) discusses boundary work in this study, she does not use or reference Lamont’s (2000, 2002) theory of symbolic boundaries or boundary work, or anyone else’s. As such, it is unclear what theoretical approach she uses in her analysis or understanding of boundary work.

## Theory

I use two theoretical approaches in this study. First, I draw on Lamont’s (2000, 2002) theory of symbolic boundaries and boundary work to understand the conceptual distinctions that are made between cis women and trans women—who is categorized as a woman and under what conditions—and to examine the ways in which those distinctions are then maintained or challenged through forms of boundary work. Second, I use transgender theory (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010) to focus the study on the lived and embodied experiences of my trans women participants. This centers their voices and experiences in a way that emphasizes how important physical embodiment is in shaping gender and sexual identity, and how that embodiment is then integrated with one’s socially constructed sense of identity and sense of self.

## Symbolic boundaries and boundary work

For Lamont (2002), symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (p. 168). These boundaries are then used by social actors to “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” (p. 168). This process then, in which “people differentiate themselves from others,” is defined as boundary work (Lamont, 2000, p. 270). Thus, Lamont (2002) draws a distinction between social and symbolic boundaries, with the former taking the form of “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (p. 168). However, Lamont (2002) argues, symbolic boundaries should be considered just as real as social boundaries, with the former occurring at the intersubjective level and the latter manifesting in the relational groupings of social actors (p. 169). In fact, Lamont (2002) argues symbolic boundaries are “a necessary but insufficient condition of social boundaries” (p. 169). To put it another way, social actors separate themselves and others into conceptually discrete groupings through a process that is always relational. This relational process is a form of boundary work that establishes, reinforces, or weakens a symbolic boundary between different groupings of social actors, and those symbolic boundaries then serve to create, normalize, or maintain social boundaries.

Lamont advocates for “a more elaborate phenomenology of group classification,” or how social actors come to see themselves as compatible with or similar to others, and how differences and similarities are then performed by different social actors (2002, p. 188). In fact, she argues that we especially need a focus on the “hidden assumptions concerning the measuring sticks used by higher and lower status groups” (2002, p. 188). Indeed, this is what I seek to do in this study here through an examination of the symbolic boundaries and boundary work that my participants experience in relation to the cis women in their lives with whom they are close. This study seeks to examine the assumptions or measuring sticks that are used to create, maintain, or challenge symbolic boundaries between my participants and the close cis women in their lives. While Lamont’s (2000) work focuses more on self-constructions of dignity and moral worth, I explore other possible ways in which symbolic boundaries might be created, maintained, or challenged, such as through physical embodiment and bodily capacities, life experience and socialization, or the role of time—as in boundaries around who counts as a woman based on how long they have lived as a woman—to name a few. I also wanted to allow for new possibilities to emerge from the data



if present. While moral worth and dignity are important, my concern was that tying an analysis of symbolic boundaries to dignity and moral worth might limit analysis and hinder a consideration of new possibilities, whatever they may be and however they may present in the data.

As I mentioned above, I chose to only interview trans women for this study. A similar strategy is employed by Vassenden (2014) in their analysis of the symbolic boundaries between homeowners and non-homeowners in Norway, a nation that places high value on homeownership. Despite only interviewing non-homeowners, Vassenden (2014) still sheds light on the boundary work performed by both homeowners and non-homeowners and provided insight into the symbolic exclusion that non-homeowners experienced vis-à-vis their lack of homeownership. This is because symbolic boundaries and boundary work are relational. Non-homeowners interact directly and indirectly with homeowners and come to understand their own status as non-homeowners within a larger cultural context that values homeownership. Thus, Vassenden (2014), through interviews with non-homeowners, explores the values of homeownership “as seen through the eyes of those who are barred from it” and who are “from a vulnerable position” (p. 761). Those values are then used to explore how homeownership acts as a symbolic boundary (p. 761).

Similarly, in this study, I seek to explore the symbolic exclusion my participants experience (or do not experience) vis-à-vis their lack of cisgender status, given that, culturally, womanhood is predominantly defined in cisgender terms. Since symbolic boundaries and boundary work are always relational, an examination of one side of that relation can still shed light on part of the relational aspect of a symbolic boundary and the forms of boundary work that one side (trans women) experiences in a phenomenological sense.

### Transgender theory

In writing on the then emerging transgender theory, Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) seek to more formally develop a theoretical approach that would be better suited for analyzing and understanding trans lives. Specifically, their goal is to further develop a theory of gender that could more accurately capture trans people’s lived and embodied experiences, one that would encompass and transcend “feminist and queer theory by explicitly incorporating ideas of the fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed aspects of social identity” (p. 432). Indeed, they see transgender theory as a “an important next step to a more complete and inclusive understanding of gender and sexual identity” (p. 432). Thus, transgender theory

emerged out of a “need for a theory of gender identity that would incorporate both a fluid self-embodiment and a self-construction of identity that would dynamically interact with this embodiment in the context of social expectations and lived experiences” (p. 435).

Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) outline the central aspects of transgender theory. First, it incorporates an “embodied aspect of the self that generates bodily experiences, some of them undoubtedly unconscious, that really are essential for informing one’s identity” (p. 436). Second, “there is an explicitly self-constructed aspect of identity, one that derives meaning from the narrative of lived experiences” (p. 436). And third, social environments enforce a “seemingly objective identity” by pressuring individuals “to conform to the expectations of identity categories” (p. 436). Lastly, “in this formulation, the autonomous self exists only in relationship to and interactions with these embodied, self-constructed, and socially constructed aspects of identity” (p. 436). In other words, transgender theory merges considerations of physical embodiment and the ways in which the body influences, and is influenced by, surrounding social environments, with social constructivist considerations of how identity is shaped internally through agency and externally by outside social forces. These different elements are merged through a recognition that they are, in fact, relational, mutually influential, and mutually constitutive. Thus, transgender theory allows for a consideration of agency in constructing a sense of self and in making sense of bodily experiences, while also acknowledging the role and influence of social environments and outside forces.

Situated against the ongoing debates in feminist theory and queer theory (and debates between the two) on how best to theorize gender and sexuality, Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) advance transgender theory, in part, to address what they see as crucial limitations and shortcomings in both feminist theory and queer theory. Specifically, they note that feminist theorists had long struggled with the issue of gender essentialism and whether a fixed, ontological definition of womanhood, or a universally shared experience among all women, were needed to address gender inequality and gender oppression. They argued that such essentialist, fixed binary views of maleness and femaleness as static and immutable, and as sources of power or oppression respectively, are inadequate in analyzing or understanding transgender bodies and lives. Furthermore, such essentialist views render the body “a proxy for identity” and so are unable to account for the more socially constructed aspects of identity (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 435).

Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) note that queer theory was largely a social constructivist response to “the ‘essentialist’ ideas that developed in Western societies beginning in the late

19th century,” and that it was “in many ways, a challenge to feminist theory” (p. 434). However, despite its advances “in understanding sexual identity and oppression and in providing a voice for political challenge,” queer theory has left many trans people feeling dissatisfied precisely because of its overemphasis of social constructivism (p. 435). That is, queer theory has not been able to adequately account for the role of the body in understanding trans people’s lives and experiences. Indeed, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note that “bodies are involved more actively, more intimately, and more intricately in social processes than theory has usually allowed. Bodies participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct—the body is a participant in generating social practice” (p. 851). It thus became important to develop a theoretical approach that could capture the role that the body plays in social action.

While queer theory has explored the ways in which subversive and nonnormative gender presentations and expressions can be used to intentionally disrupt dominant cultural conceptions of gender and gender norms (masculine women, feminine men, androgynous people, etc.), trans people are not always interested in engaging in such deliberate attempts to disrupt gender norms. Framing trans lives, bodies, or modes of being as necessarily disruptive in such a way, then, denies trans people the ability to define their own lives and embodiment on their own terms, and it ignores the ways in which some trans people might seek to conform to gender norms. Indeed, Davis (2009) challenges the notion that trans people’s lives and bodies necessarily either reinforce gender norms or subvert them, suggesting that this is a false dichotomy that ultimately denies trans people the ability to define their lives and experiences on their own terms. She questions the extent to which, and the ways in which, trans people engage in “agentic disruption” and finds that many trans people “seek to create meaningful coherent selves while also acknowledging and often embracing transitions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities” (p. 103). Ironically, then, when trans people are framed as necessarily engaging in “agentic disruption” of dominant gender norms and roles by virtue of their existence, they are denied the very agency they are purported to be using in such disruption. Transgender theory thus emerged to capture both the embodiment of trans lives and the social constructivist aspects of identity more accurately in a way that does not over-rely on positioning trans people as necessarily disruptive of gender norms or overstate the essentialist aspects of gender identity.

Thus, I use transgender theory here to focus the study on the lived and embodied experiences of my participants. Their physical embodiment, sexuality, and surrounding social environments all influence and shape their experiences, sense of self, and their sense of

womanhood. Furthermore, those experiences and senses of self are also relational and are shaped by the actions of relevant social actors, which, in this case, are the close cis women in their lives.

## Methods

### Epistemology

I use Smith's (1990/2012) standpoint theory to inform my methodological approach in this study. In doing so, I not only center and elevate trans women's voices but situate trans women as having unique insight and ways of knowing the world based on their social location outside of a cisgender dichotomy of cisgender men on the one hand, and cisgender women on the other.

Smith (1990/2012) argues that sociological knowledge production and epistemology had been predicated on men's standpoint, and that it was not sufficient to include women's issues as merely an addendum to the body of knowledge that men had produced. Indeed, she argues that "methods, conceptual schemes, and theories" had been the product of men's social universe and their way of knowing, existing within, and interacting with the social world and its structures (p. 398). Furthermore, women's exclusion from political power and knowledge production resulted in a bifurcated consciousness, one that recognized the world of men's professions as existing outside of their own local context—the domestic world of women—which was characterized by subjugation and domestic servitude by men. However, the world of women was not, and still is not, on equal footing with the world of men. As such, Smith (1990/2012) argues that knowledge production that arises out of the world of women, and the women that produce it, are not given equal authority. The effect of this is that it compels "women to think their world in the concepts and terms in which men think theirs" (Smith, 1990/2012, p. 399). She thus argues for a methodological approach that decouples itself from men's world, ways of knowing, and ways of thinking about the world.

I argue that this is the case for trans people, as well. While trans people have played a greater role in producing knowledge about their own people in the last 10-15 years, historically, the world of sociological knowledge on trans people was largely produced by cis people, from cis people's standpoint, focusing on topics that cis people considered worthy of study, using cisgender conceptual schemes, methods, and theories. Furthermore, like the world of women, the world of trans people is characterized by a bifurcated consciousness, one that is characterized by both a gender identity that does not match the gender they were

assigned at birth, and which recognizes that trans people's lives, bodies, voices, ways of knowing, life trajectories, sexuality, etc. are not valued the same as cis people's. In other words, like that of cis women, the world of trans people is not on equal footing to the world of cis people, and trans people are denied equal authority over their own lives and experiences. Indeed, as S. Bear Bergman (2009) writes, trans people are often treated like they cannot be trusted to be their own experts (p. 29).

In taking inspiration from Smith (1990/2012), then, methodologically, I tried to decouple trans people's ways of knowing and thinking about the world from cis people's ways of knowing and thinking about the world. I did this by using transgender theory (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010), interviewing only trans women, and treating them as experts on their own lives and experiences. I then paired this with my own positionality as a trans woman researcher. Through this methodological approach, their ways of knowing and thinking about their own lives and experiences are (hopefully) not subjugated to that of cis people's. Their experiences and local knowledge become part of the knowledge product that is this study, and this study then becomes a co-production of subjugated knowledge (Collins, 1990/2012).

### Sampling strategy

I chose to limit my selection of participants to trans women who are out<sup>7</sup> to at least some of the cis women in their lives with whom they share close or meaningful relationships and who have been medically transitioning through hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for at least one and a half years. There are two reasons for requiring at least one and a half years of medical transition. First, this is partially to ensure participants have had sufficient time to experience relevant symbolic boundaries and various forms of boundary work. Someone who has only been medically transitioning for a few months has potentially not had much relevant experience. Furthermore, a longer timeline of medical transition has the potential to allow for a wider range of diverse types of relevant experiences. Second, while results can vary widely depending on the individual, medical literature suggests that the maximum effects of HRT are typically achieved for trans women between approximately one to two years, at a minimum (Speck, n.d.; *Feminizing hormone therapy*, n.d.; GenderGP, 2021).

I chose to split the difference here and require at least one and a half years of HRT to participate. In doing so, I hoped to capture any possible changes in experiences around

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to being "out of the closet," meaning that they have informed at least some cis women in their lives that they identify as trans women.

symbolic boundaries or boundary work that might occur over time as trans women's bodies change from the effects of HRT. During previous conversations with trans women in the U.S. over the years, I heard trans women repeatedly say that some cis women became more inclusive and seemed to perform less of what could be considered boundary work as those trans women progressed farther in their gender transition. While other trans women said that some cis women actually became less inclusive and engaged in a greater amount of boundary work the farther those trans women progressed in their transition. For the latter, it was as if the farther they went in their transition (in terms of the effects of HRT), some cis women felt that those trans women were infringing on, complicating, or blurring a boundary that those cis women thought was important or needed to be maintained. My hope is that requiring participants to be on HRT for at least one and a half years will capture this sort of variation in experience among trans women here in Sweden, if such variation exists.

One of my participants, however, did not meet the requirements for this study as she had not been on HRT for at least one and a half years. I did not realize this until after the interview had already started. One of the questions I asked at the beginning of every interview was how long the participant has been medically transitioning. However, at the beginning of Ylva-Li's interview, it became clear that she did not meet the requirements. When I realized this, I had a small panic moment where I did not know what to do. I was unsure if I should stop the interview immediately or proceed anyway. As I have never encountered this before and was unsure what to do, I ended up conducting the interview anyway.

Once the interview was done, however, I found myself in a position where I needed to decide whether to include the interview in my analysis. After transcribing the interview and doing a first round of coding, it became clear that excluding Ylva-Li's interview would be a detriment to this study, as she did have a lot to say that was relevant. After discussing the matter with my advisor and some colleagues, I decided to include Ylva-Li's interview and journal entry in this study and to do so by locating her experiences as situated near the beginning of broader timeline of medical gender transitioning. One of the research sub-questions I asked at the beginning of this study was if my participants experience a change in boundary work with close cis women over time. Including Ylva-Li and locating her at the beginning of a broader timeline thus provides valuable context in understanding this change over time.

## Recruitment

I sought out participants on the digital platforms of Discord and Facebook. I first sent recruitment messages through a Discord server that was created for trans people living in Scandinavia and then through a Facebook group page for a trans organization in Sweden. To protect the confidentiality of the participants that I recruited through these sources, I will not use the specific name of the Discord server and will only refer to the Swedish trans organization as TransOrg, which is a pseudonym. While Facebook and Facebook groups are well known to the public, Discord is often less so. For those who may be unfamiliar with it, Discord is a chat and voice-based social platform in which people can create their own servers and invite others to participate. Individual servers can be private or public and typically contain separate channels in which participants can discuss different topics, post pictures and memes, or connect with each other through voice or video chat.

I joined the Discord server at the end of February 2023 and sent out recruitment messages for this study at the end of November 2023. The server is semi-private. That is, specific channels can only be accessed by members after a verification process. I received this verification shortly after joining. English is the primary and almost sole language used within this server because it is the language most members have in common. Members of the server hail primarily from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. However, some members reside in the United States or other countries and plan to move to one of these countries.

The purpose of joining this server was twofold. First, as a trans woman who is new to Sweden, I had hoped to meet other trans people and to connect with my community here. Second, I had hoped to then later be able to draw on those connections and that community when searching for participants for this study. While my positionality as a trans researcher puts me in a unique position to access this community, I did not want my access and participation to be solely or primarily extractive for research purposes. I wanted to be able to also build friendships and to feel as though I am participating in and giving back to this community, not just mining it for participants and data.

I joined the server early as I wanted to gain the trust of the community and to demonstrate that I was someone trustworthy. My hope was that I could accomplish this through regular, sustained participation over time. I feel I have accomplished that. Trust among social research participants is important generally and it is even more so when it comes to researching vulnerable populations (Liamputtong, 2007).

I joined the Facebook group, TransOrg, closer to the start of my data collection. It is a private group in which those who wish to participate must apply. I applied and was approved by the moderators in December 2023. After I was approved, I posted the same recruitment message there as the one I posted on the Discord server. I had far fewer participant contacts through TransOrg. This is somewhat unsurprising given that I was new to the group and so had not built up as much trust through participation there as I had on the Discord server.

### Data collection

I chose to do semi-structured one-on-one interviews with participants for this study, as research has shown this can be valuable in “accessing subjugated voices and getting at subjugated knowledge” (HesseBiber and Leavy, 2005, as cited in Liamputtong, 2007, p. 96). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are best suited “when the researcher knows enough about the topic or phenomenon to identify the domain. . . but does not know and cannot anticipate all of the answers” (Morse, 2012, p. 197). This is a topic which I have discussed with many trans women over the years when I lived in the U.S. Those conversations have given me insight into this topic, but my knowledge is not sufficient to know or be able to anticipate the answers a participant might give, especially within a different cultural context, such as Sweden.

I conducted the interviews in English, as I am not yet proficient in Swedish, and I paired them with a follow-up journal entry to be collected approximately one week after the interview. The purpose of the journal entry was to provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on the interview, reflect on what we discussed, and then to add to or elaborate on anything that we discussed or did not discuss. As Taylor et al. (2016) note, journal entries or diaries are “an excellent source of data because of its intimacy and self-reflection on the diarist’s immediate experiences” (p. 144). Thus, journal entries gave participants a chance to reflect on both the immediate interview and on relevant past experiences.

I also encouraged participants to write journal entries in Swedish (or their first language if it is not Swedish or English) if they would prefer, as I can more easily translate them after the fact through translation software than in the moment during an interview. The idea here was to give participants the option to express themselves in their first language as a means of overcoming or bridging any potential language barriers that might arise from participants doing interviews in a foreign language. However, the participants who submitted journal entries all chose to write in English. Five of the ten participants sent me journal entries.



I audio recorded interviews within Zoom, transcribed them, and then stored them on an encrypted flash drive using VeraCrypt. Most participants said they were okay with me recording the interviews within Zoom. This produces both an audio and video file. After each interview, I immediately deleted the video file, as I did not need it for transcription. Two participants expressed concern about the possibility of being video recorded. One opted to turn off their video in Zoom while the recording was active. The other participant wanted to still have that face-to-face interaction over Zoom, and so I recorded the audio on a separate device that was disconnected from the internet. I then transferred the audio file to the encrypted flash drive and deleted it from the separate device.

I had initially planned to conduct both online and in-person interviews and to prioritize the latter, as they tend to produce more “word-dense transcripts” compared to online interviews (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 1142). I had planned to reserve online interviews for participants who reside in parts of Sweden that are not practically accessible to me given both the financial and time constraints of this study, or when participants preferred it due to reasons of safety and/or comfort. However, all interviews ended up being conducted online via Zoom. The few in-person interviews I scheduled ended up needing to be rescheduled as online interviews due to either schedule changes among participants or because I became ill just before a couple in-person interviews were scheduled.

While there are benefits to in-person interviews, as previously noted, there are benefits to online interviews as well. For example, online interviews allow researchers to access participants who reside farther away, thereby eliminating or reducing travel costs and allowing researchers with no or limited funds to access participants they might not otherwise be able to (Olliffe et al., 2021). Furthermore, there are rich therapeutic benefits to doing online interviews over Zoom, and being able to do interviews from home affords participants a level of comfort that often helps them open up more during interviews (Olliffe et al., 2021). That said, there are downsides to online interviews, such as the tendency for Zoom-like technologies to suffer technical glitches or hinder researchers’ abilities to see and interpret different forms of nonverbal communication (Olliffe et al., 2021). It is worth noting here that all my participants participated in interviews via Zoom from their homes, and I did not experience any technical difficulties that either hindered the interview or subsequent analysis.

One additional benefit of online interviews is that, given that I was able to do them from home and given that I have problems with my hearing, there were no other loud sounds or competing noise that could hinder my ability to hear participants on my end; I live alone, and my apartment building is quiet. In fact, I was even able to literally turn the volume up on

my participants when I had trouble hearing them, which I did more than once. This is something that I cannot do in in-person interviews, at least not without some sort of assisted hearing device. That said, while researchers have a certain measure of control over the surrounding environment on their own end, they cannot always control how noisy a participant's environment might be on their end.

### Operationalization of concepts

I did not explicitly ask my participants questions about boundary work or symbolic boundaries as these are technical sociological concepts that many may be unfamiliar with. I also decided that defining these terms at the outset of the interview and then asking explicit questions about them would prove to be disadvantageous as it might bias my participants' understanding or interpretation of events or cause them to prioritize or emphasize stories that fit what they think I am looking for, rather than talk about their own experiences. The plan at the outset was to take an abductive approach in my analysis, using Lamont's (2000) theoretical approach as a starting point, as I wanted to leave open the possibility of bringing in different theories or concepts, or for the possibility of new theories to emerge from the data. In other words, I did not want to limit both my participants and the study.

After an introduction and a few basic demographic questions, I started each interview with questions about transitioning and coming out<sup>8</sup>. These questions partially served as warm-up questions designed to ease into the heavier topics of inclusion/exclusion. They also functioned as a way of setting the stage and providing broader timeframes and context to the close relationships with the cis women in their lives. I then asked participants about who those cis women are that they share close relationships with, and then moved on to the focus of the study.

The "meat" of each interview was broken up into two sections in the interview guide. The first section contained questions about the ways in which close cis women have been inclusive, and the second contained questions about the ways in which close cis women have been exclusionary. Both sections contained sub-questions pertaining to womanhood and social space, with several pre-planned follow-up prompts. I then asked my participants questions about having close relationships with cis women who are not supportive of them being trans women, if they have such relationships, what they consider unsupportive, and what a cis woman would have to do or say to warrant not having a close relationship with them. I asked more broadly about instances of supportive/unsupportive behavior and

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<sup>8</sup> The full interview guide can be found in the appendix.

inclusion/exclusion, as I knew from previous discussions with other trans women that doing so would also get me specific instances and stories of symbolic boundaries and boundary work within those broader discussions.

The latter questions about having close relationships with cis women who are unsupportive, and filtering out those who are unsupportive, were not initially included in my interview guide. During transcription of the first interview, the theme of filtering out unsupportive cis women was notable. When this topic also arose in the second interview, it became clear early that this was at least contextually relevant to my research topic, and so I modified my interview guide to include questions about this for all subsequent interviews. Indeed, in the remaining interviews, the theme frequently came up even before I got to the questions about filtering.

## Coding

After transcription of each interview, I performed a first round of coding in which I coded general themes and conversations that were relevant to the research questions, such as discussions of having their womanhood invalidated or defended. I also coded elements that might later prove to be relevant (or might not), such as discussions of distrust being voiced by family members when my participants first came out. The aim was to try to ensure that my coding was not so narrow that it prevented new or unanticipated findings from emerging from the data. After I had finished all ten interviews and had collected as many journal entries as I had hoped, I returned to the data and did another and more thorough round of coding with NVivo. During this round, I coded specific instances of inclusive/exclusionary boundary work, the strategies my participants used in response, and the sites (inflection points) at which boundary work occurred. I will discuss these in further detail in the Results and Analysis section.

In my coding and analysis, I used Lamont's (2002) definition of symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (p. 168), and her definition of boundary work as a process of differentiation in which people separate each other into groups as a means of generating "feelings of similarity and group membership" (p. 168)<sup>9</sup>. These definitions informed my coding strategy when it came to coding sections where my participants talked about inclusive/exclusionary actions and supportive/unsupportive cis women. I also used transgender theory (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010) to inform my coding strategy, coding parts of

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<sup>9</sup> See the appendix for the full codebook.

transcripts that dealt with physical embodiment, lived experience, and construction of identity.

I used an abductive approach in my coding and analysis as it combines features of both induction and deduction (Vila-Henniger et al., 2022). This affords greater flexibility in that it allows for the use of existing theories and for new theories to emerge from the data. I used thematic analysis as, based on my previous discussions of this topic with many trans women over the years, I suspected interpretive description and meaning interpretation would be analytically important here (Morse, 2012). This turned out to be the case, as the data will show.

### Ethical considerations

Before turning to a discussion of my findings, I briefly discuss the ethical considerations that arose during this study. Standard ethical considerations of sociological research involve informed consent and protecting confidentiality. I distributed information letters to everyone who agreed to participate, letting them know what the study entailed and what their participation would involve. I then obtained written informed consent prior to conducting the interview. During the introduction of each interview, I advised my participants that difficult topics could arise during the interview, that this was not my intent, and that they were under no obligation to talk about anything they did not want to talk about. I also informed my participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Beyond the standard ethical considerations, however, there are unique considerations when interviewing vulnerable populations, such as safety risks (Liamputtong, 2007). As Chih Hoong Sin (2005, as cited in Liamputtong, 2007) argues, researchers have a responsibility to ensure the well-being and safety of their participants. However, these risks can be multifaceted and not always obvious or immediately apparent. For example, one added layer of risk when it comes to confidentiality for trans people is that not all trans people are out to everyone in their lives. In fact, the risk of being outed can vary, with those who live in small(er) communities facing potentially greater risk from a loss of confidentiality (Liamputtong, 2007).

To protect confidentiality, and to increase agency on the part of my participants, I encouraged my participants to choose their own pseudonyms. In addition to using pseudonyms for my participants and their friends and family (when the names of friends and family were used), I took care to eliminate identifying details such as cities or towns where my participants live, details about organizations they involved in, and their places of

employment. In one case, I even eliminated mention of my participant's profession as given that she lived in a very small community and had a notable profession, identifying it could have outed her.

My own positionality raised some ethical considerations, such as my vulnerability as a trans researcher. Suen (2015) notes the importance of acknowledging the vulnerability of the researcher, and as Pearce (2020) notes, being trans in the field can pose emotional trauma risks for the trans researcher, risks that are not always adequately acknowledged or accommodated within the academy. One way in which both myself and participants are uniquely vulnerable is in the high threat of violence against trans people (Schilt & Lagos, 2017). As I mentioned above, I had initially planned to prioritize and conduct in-person interviews. Meeting other trans people in public has the potential to expose us both to possible threats of violence. It can also pose a safety risk for myself as a trans researcher in that there is always the risk of being catfished by someone who would wish to do me harm for being trans. However, as mentioned above, this became a nonissue as all my interviews ended up being conducted online.

## Sample

Before moving on to a discussion of the results, I will briefly present a description of my sample of ten participants. The mean average age of my participants is 32.6 years old, and the median age is 31 years old. The youngest participant was 23 years old and the oldest was 54 years old. The mean average number of years on HRT was 4.35 years, and the median was 3 years. When asked how they identified in terms of race or ethnicity, all ten of my participants self-identified as white. One participant said she is Swedish but that "It's a complicated issue since I come from the top north of Sweden, and I technically belong to a minority group, but I haven't really experienced any racism because of that, so I would say Swedish."

Seven participants said they were middle-class. Among those, one participant specified "middle/upper middle-class," and one participant specified "lower middle-class." Among the remaining three, one said she was "working-class," one said she was "between working-class and middle-class," and one said she was "quite poor." This suggests that my sample is possibly skewed middle-class. However, it might also be the case that the trans population on HRT in Sweden is skewed middle-class overall because, while there is the potential option to get HRT through the Swedish healthcare system, there are lengthy wait times to do so. However, there is a private option available for those who can afford it. This

means that many poor and working-class trans people are stuck in queue, while those with money can skip the queue and opt for a private healthcare option to obtain HRT more quickly.

Participant	Age	Pronouns	# of Years on HRT	Socioeconomic Status
Isabelle	31	She/her	1.5	Middle-class
Maxine	31	She/her or they/them	2	Middle-class
Lena	24	She/her	4.5	“Between working-class and middle-class”
Louisa	25	She/her	2.5	“Quite poor”
Sandra	32	She/her	9	Middle/Upper Middle-class
Ylva-Li	31	She/her	0	Middle-class
Maja	23	She/her	3	Middle-class
Kurisu	29	She/her	3	Lower middle-class
Wera	54	She/her	7	Middle-class
Emma	46	She/her or they/them	11	Working-class

Table 1: Participant demographics on age, preferred pronouns, number of years on HRT, and socioeconomic status. The names of participants are pseudonyms.

## Results and Analysis

### Key findings on symbolic boundaries and boundary work

There are three key findings from my analysis on the symbolic boundaries and boundary work that my participants experience from the close cis women in their lives. I will give a brief outline here before moving into an in-depth discussion of each. They are: 1) building up/breaking down symbolic boundaries, 2) inflection points as sites of boundary work (body, space, sexuality), and 3) change over time. I also identified three strategies that my participants employed in responding to exclusionary boundary work: 1) breaking down symbolic boundaries through discussion, 2) navigating or negotiating trans particularities, and 3) filtering out cis women who are too exclusionary.

## 1. Building up/breaking down symbolic boundaries

The trans women I interviewed all had experiences of close cis women in their lives performing boundary work that both built up symbolic boundaries at times and weakened symbolic boundaries at other times. This creates a complicated tension of boundary work. It also illustrates that there is not a dichotomy between exclusionary cis women on the one hand and inclusive cis women on the other, but that trans women experience a mix of exclusionary/inclusive boundary work from the close cis women in their lives.

For example, when talking about the cis women colleagues with whom she is close, Isabelle mentioned instances in which her colleagues broke down symbolic boundaries by including her in feminine conversations:

And if they talk about the things that are generally feminine or only attributed to women, then I'm usually always included in those conversations as well, so they do tend to sort of include me in their sort of group during those kinds of conversations, which is positive.

However, she later said there were times when she felt she was being excluded by those same colleagues because they both did not include her in an afterwork activity and have excluded her from other feminine conversations:

They just planned the sort of afterwork activity for just the women of the office and didn't include me. Yeah, yeah. I guess also sort of not, it's not a big thing, but not really including me in conversations related to feminine things, or like, yeah, just sort of things that they deem are conversations amongst women in general usually tend to not involve me even though I have, you know, things to say on the matter.

Isabelle also suggested that when the cis women she is close with do include her in feminine conversations it may be performative and disingenuous:

It's sort of kind of like it's a token conversation in a way that this is how they're supposed to be behaving, because otherwise, you know. Yeah, it's basically just they're trying to be respectful of my identity and what I sort of identify as, but don't quite sort of accept, don't let me in as one of their own, in a way.

In other words, Isabelle felt that there were some conversations her colleagues were willing to have with her and others that they were not, and she wondered about the extent to which those colleagues really accepted her and saw her as one of them.

Similarly, Ylva-Li said that being included in feminine conversations among her cis women co-workers, with whom she is close, made her feel “firmly grounded in the

womanhood, the sisterhood at my workplace, and in my other relations.” She said, “generally it's just, you feel included when you say something like ‘Oh, it's just girl talk,’ or yeah, they turn to you as a fellow woman.” For Ylva-Li, inclusion in “girl talk” helped break down symbolic boundaries between cis women and trans women and made her feel like she was part of a larger conceptualization of womanhood that included trans women, like she was “one of the girls.”

Meanwhile, Emma described an instance in which she felt inclusive efforts made by close cis women friends still came off as exclusionary. She said:

Other friends I had back then could say stuff like, “Welcome to womanhood.” And that was often in connection to like painful experiences, like being sexually harassed or, yeah, stuff like that. And it felt like, that felt kind of exclusionary because it was like, “Oh, now you're a woman, when you have, now you're a woman because you have,” I mean, I feel like they, I feel like they tried to be inclusionary. That was their way of trying to be inclusionary, but it came off as kind of exclusionary because I had to qualify my belonging to the group, so to speak. Yeah, and also because it was not like joyful experiences. It was more like, “Oh, now you can share in the pain of womanhood.”

This shows that even when one of my participants felt like the cis women in her life were trying to be inclusive it still had the effect of making her feel excluded. It also shows that symbolic boundaries are constructed around gendered suffering or gendered oppression that is defined in cisgender terms. Trans women face a range of gender oppression that is unique to them—trans misogyny, for example—or unique to trans people more broadly—compulsory cissexuality, being forced to go through a puberty that does not feel appropriate, restricted access to gender affirming care, etc. However, this excerpt suggests that trans women are only seen as legitimately included in womanhood when they experience forms of gender oppression that are shared with cis women. This effectively positions cis women and cis womanhood as benchmarks against which trans women are judged in considering the legitimacy of their womanhood, and it perpetuates cisgender definitions of womanhood.

Kurusu also mentioned an instance which she experienced both inclusive and exclusionary boundary work from the same cis woman friend. She recounted a story about going to a spa with a friend in which the friend was initially supportive and validating of her womanhood, even offering to go with her into the changing rooms. I will return to this narrative later in the section on social space. However, for now, it will suffice to note that Kurisu said this friend later turned on her and was no longer inclusive, “Yeah, this is that



same friend, though, who later on has been like resprouting the nonsense of, ‘You'll always be a trans girl and not a girl. So why did you even transition?’”

The act of supporting her in accessing a gender-segregated space, such as a women-only changing room, served as an inclusive form of boundary work that Kurisu noted was validating for her womanhood. However, this later shift draws a clear conceptual boundary between trans girlhood and cis girlhood, with the latter being implied to be more “real” or more legitimate. This later shift then comes to serve as an exclusionary form of boundary work in which trans girlhood is implied to be less legitimate than cis girlhood.

These excerpts show that my participants experience a complex mix of both inclusive and exclusionary boundary work, sometimes even from the same close cis woman. Boundary work that is intended to be inclusive can end up having the effect of feeling exclusionary, and when it does not, the same cis woman or group of cis women may end up later engaging in exclusionary boundary work. This also shows that inclusive/exclusionary boundary work are not an either/or, but that both can occur over time or at the same time.

## 2. Inflection points

When my participants described instances of symbolic boundaries that were built up or broken down by the cis women with whom they are close, or when they described instances in which they performed their own boundary work to break down symbolic boundaries, such boundary work was performed around what I refer to as inflection points. These are points at which the differences or similarities between cis women and trans women can be emphasized or downplayed in such a way as to constitute inclusive or exclusionary boundary work. I found three such inflection points in the data, which can be broadly categorized as pertaining to real or presumed biological differences (body), social space (spatial), and sexual orientation (sexuality).

### 2a. Bodily differences as symbolic boundaries

Throughout my analysis, biological or bodily differences between cis women and trans women (real or presumed) emerged as an inflection point, a site at which symbolic boundaries were created, contested, or maintained through boundary work. These bodily differences revolved around genital and bodily configurations and the ability to menstruate.

When Maxine described coming out to her girlfriend, she said her girlfriend initially held some transphobic views. When pressed to elaborate on this, Maxine said her girlfriend was afraid she (Maxine) “was going to be more good-looking than her and that wouldn't be [okay]. It's like, ‘No, you're a trans woman. You shouldn't be more attractive than a cis

person.’ That kind of transphobic reaction.” In other words, Maxine’s girlfriend reinforced a symbolic boundary between cis women and trans women based on both gendered beauty standards and assumptions about differently gendered bodies and their capacity to live up to those standards. However, Maxine noted her girlfriend’s willingness to acknowledge and work through her transphobia and said that “through communication and just test of time, we’ve proven to ourselves that we are more than our gender roles.”

Maxine gave another example of cis women building up symbolic boundaries between cis women and trans women based on biological differences. When talking about a time when she was hanging out with two cis women friends, after having been out to them for about half a year, she said, “They turned to each other to discuss their menstruation cycle. I mean, yeah, sure it makes sense, but I still felt excluded and upset that I wasn’t part of that discussion, sort of. There was only us three together.” In this example, her cis women friends used current biological differences<sup>10</sup> to build up a symbolic boundary between cis women and trans women.

However, not all my participants reported a symbolic boundary being built up around who can menstruate and who cannot. For example, while Maxine said she felt her cis women friends excluded her from conversations around menstruation, Lena said she felt that her close cis women friends were comfortable talking about their menstruation with her and that this made her feel included and validated in her womanhood:

I feel like, now that I pass, like people aren’t that like, like women don’t go discussing like their periods and shit with like men, typically, but they’ll like, can mention it to me and stuff, and we can have that kind of like, just talk about it, like even if I’m trans and might not have those same experiences, like we can still talk about it or we can like send memes about women’s things, you know?

These two examples highlight how a particular bodily difference can be used to build up a symbolic boundary between cis women and trans women at times or weaken that boundary at other times.

Sandra also noted an instance in which symbolic boundaries were constructed around (temporary) bodily differences. She said, prior to having gender confirmation surgery, a previous girlfriend, “told me off for still having a phallic organ, which is like, that’s not really

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<sup>10</sup> While trans women are not currently able to menstruate or bear children, not all cis women are able to menstruate or bear children either. Furthermore, with progress being made in successful uterus transplantation (Johannesson et al., 2022), it may be possible for trans women to experience these things in the future (Jones et al., 2019).

in my control. If you can speed that process along, please do so or give me tips.” Here, Sandra expressed frustration around having her womanhood questioned around something that was beyond her control.

In her post-interview journal entry, Louisa noted a similar experience in which bodily differences were used to reinforce symbolic boundaries between cis women and trans women:

The day after the interview, I realised I had forgotten a somewhat uncomfortable memory in my newest relationship, where me and my girlfriend had a conversation about sex and about her inexperience. At the time, I felt I wanted to make sure that me having a penis wasn't going to be a problem, but during the conversation she stated that she hadn't ever been with any men. I explained to her that it made me very uncomfortable for her to speak about penises as something that men have when I was having a conversation about myself.

In this excerpt, Louisa describes an instance in the past in which her girlfriend reinforced a symbolic boundary between cis women and trans women by equating having a penis with being a man. Louisa responded to this by engaging her girlfriend in discussion to weaken that symbolic boundary, thereby reasserting her own form of womanhood as valid and belonging within a larger conceptualization of womanhood that is trans inclusive (I further explore the strategy of using discussion to weaken symbolic boundaries in a later section).

During the interview, while Louisa initially said she could not think of any instances in which the cis women she is close with had invalidated her gender identity, she did note that she has heard exclusionary discussion about genitals and sexual attraction in some lesbian circles:

So, it's very much like, oh, the subtleties of assuming that like trans women are essentially just walking penises, and that's not what lesbians like, and that's usually where I hear that kind of stuff, it's in lesbian circles.

Here, Louisa references exclusionary rhetoric that is designed to police the boundaries of both womanhood and what constitutes legitimate lesbian attraction. This exclusionary boundary work not only shores up a cisgender conceptualization of womanhood but then anchors legitimate lesbian attraction to that conceptualization. It is important to note, however, that Louisa was also quick to say, “but also in those very same circles is where I find the, I hear the inclusive part of that, where people explicitly include trans women.”

In talking about the early stages of medically transitioning, Kurisu said her relationships with cis women were strained because they were not always seeing her as the woman she is:

I would say that that middle, well not middle, but like the first year and a half, where not everything was lasered, and then my skin hadn't completely changed, and I was kind of like super early transition and my voice wasn't that good. . . . But that period was really awkward to be around women. Because you get this like sensation that like they kind of still see you as a boy, even if they respect that you're a girl. . . . And so, it's just like really, really strained, not necessarily bad, but strained, like the relationships didn't just happen.

However, over time, as she progressed in her medical transition and her body changed, she said those relationships became less strained:

And now, like 2-3 years later, I'm just a girl. And like sometimes people ask. Like I made a new friend pretty recently, another cis girl, and she only found out because she was looking at my like LinkedIn and my website, just to see my background.

This illustrates that, for Kurisu, the farther she progressed in her transition and came to embody a form of womanhood that more closely aligned with a cisnormative conceptualization of womanhood, the easier it was for her to connect with cis women. These two excerpts also illustrate a change that she experienced over time, which is a theme I will return to later.

These examples all show that, for my participants, a symbolic boundary was sometimes drawn around real or presumed bodily differences, which were then used to exclude trans women from womanhood. However, as Lena's example shows, and as examples in the next section will show, this was not always the case. Indeed, Meg-John Barker (2017) notes that trans women's womanhood is sometimes questioned on the grounds of biology in some contexts and on the grounds of the social in others.

## 2b. Social spaces as sites of symbolic boundary work

Social space emerged in the data as another inflection point around which boundary work was experienced by my participants. They found themselves having to navigate and negotiate access to different social spaces. Gender segregated spaces were particularly fraught spaces. Social spaces not only acted to reinforce social boundaries but worked as sites of symbolic boundaries and boundary work. Furthermore, for some of my participants, the

close cis women in their lives also acted as gatekeepers that had the power to allow or disallow their access to gender segregated spaces.

For example, Maja talked about a close cis woman friend breaking down symbolic boundaries by accompanying her in the women's changing room at a public pool so that Maja could go swimming:

I used to swim a lot before I transitioned, but it's been a lot more difficult for me to do now since, yeah, due to changing rooms and stuff being gendered. But I've talked about this with a friend of mine, and she was very much like, "We can go together. We can go through this together and so go swimming together," which we did, and it went really well, and I used the women's changing room, and it was very, it felt very scary, but it was like I would not have been able to do that without her helping me. So yeah, she sort of allowed me to do what I want to do.

This excerpt shows that Maja's friend was willing to assist her in accessing a gender segregated space. It also shows that some trans women avoid doing the things they enjoy or would like to do out of fear of how cis women will react to their presence.

Indeed, Kurisu described a similar experience in going to a spa that had a sauna and pool. She said she made a cis woman friend who invited her to a spa. Kurisu initially expressed reluctance in going out of fear and concern of using the changing room, but she said the cis woman friend encouraged her to go and offered support:

But she was like, "Look, you're a girl. You can go change in the girl's locker room and go out there." And I was like explaining to her, I was like, "Yeah, but like, you don't understand. Like I haven't done the thing [surgery]," and she was like, "Sweet hun, you're fine." And like I didn't grasp that; I didn't quite understand. So, the first day, I didn't go with, and the second day, she had like totally convinced me that I would be perfectly fine, and I was perfectly fine. Like the girls in the locker room at the spot didn't care. I don't know how to explain it. I didn't expect that that would be the case.

There are several insights from both this excerpt and Maja's. First, like Maja, Kurisu recognizes the symbolic boundary associated with women-only spaces. This boundary is around an expectation that people in those spaces will have certain bodily configurations. Kurisu and Maja recognize that they do not have the bodily configurations that other women will expect, and they express fear around what will happen as a result. Second, Kurisu's friend, like Maja's friend, affirms her womanhood as valid even though she does not share the bodily configuration of other women. And third, this affirmation and willingness to accompany them enables Kurisu and Maja to access these spaces. This highlights how access

to gender segregated spaces can be a fraught practice for some trans women, and that bodily differences can collide with social space to create tension.

Kurusu later said the friend who accompanied her in the spa turned on her and was no longer supportive, “Yeah, this is that same friend, though, who later on has been like resprouting the nonsense of, ‘You'll always be a trans girl and not a girl. So why did you even transition?’” This two-sentence comment shows a clear example of the creation of a symbolic boundary between cis women and trans women, with trans womanhood being framed as less legitimate or not belonging within a larger conceptualization of “real” womanhood. It also highlights the way in which even a single cis woman with whom a trans woman is close can both weaken symbolic boundaries at times or build up those boundaries at other times.

When responding to the question of how the close cis women in her life have been exclusionary, Ylva-Li brought up gender segregated spaces in relation to her close friends inviting her to yoga classes and gyms. She said:

In some cases, they say, “Tag along to my yoga class,” or “Tag along to my. . .” whatever. And they forget that I can't. I can, but I've tried, and I have to go to the men's room, obviously, because. Yeah, you can't go into a woman's dressing room with a man's body, and you can't. And you maybe shouldn't as well.

Similarly to Kurisu and Maja, Ylva-Li recognizes that gender segregated spaces not only serve as social boundaries but are also intertwined with symbolic boundaries around what type of body a woman is expected to have in order to access those spaces. Because of her bodily configuration, Ylva-Li feels she does not have the right to access those spaces, and maybe should not access those spaces, since she her body does not fit cisgender conceptualizations of womanhood. This places her in a bind where she can affirm the legitimacy of her own womanhood by accessing those spaces and possibly face negative consequences for doing so, or she can avoid these spaces and gyms entirely, thereby allowing her to maintain her womanhood on her own terms without the potential negative consequences. Whereas Maja and Kurisu had chaperones and so were able to access those spaces, Ylva-Li, lacking both a chaperone and access to HRT, was not.

While Maja and Kurisu's friends' support in accessing gender segregated spaces is commendable (albeit problematic in Kurisu's case given later developments) and is illustrative of how cis women can and do help break down symbolic boundaries, it also illustrates the power cis women have over trans women to act as gatekeepers who can allow or disallow trans women access to gendered segregated spaces. A cis woman who is willing

to be a chaperone to a trans woman in accessing gender segregated spaces can turn around and later deny that same trans woman access to that space. Other cis women can seek to deny trans women access at the outset. This places trans women in a precarious situation in which they become dependent on cis women for full participation in public life, and it positions cis women as having power to deny trans women full participation in public life.

### 2c. Sexuality as site of symbolic boundary work

Lastly, sexuality emerged in the data as an inflection point around which symbolic boundaries were built up or challenged, and around which boundary work was performed. This is somewhat unsurprising given that, as Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) note, for trans people, gender and sexuality are always intersecting. Nine of my ten participants said they date and are attracted to women, and one participant said she has dated both men and women. This means that sexuality as site of boundary work between trans women and the close cis women in their lives is particularly relevant among this sample. Additionally, like with other inflection points, sexuality overlapped with and was intertwined with other inflections points. For example, symbolic boundaries around sexuality often overlapped with or were influenced by symbolic boundaries around bodily differences (real or presumed) between cis women and trans women.

As I discussed in the previous section on bodily differences, Louisa said that she experienced boundaries being drawn in lesbian circles around what lesbians are and are not “into,” with some cis women in those spaces suggesting that “real” lesbians do not like penises. Louisa said that some of the cis women in those spaces have suggested that “trans women are essentially just walking penises.” However, as I mentioned above, she noted, “but also in those very same circles is where I find the, I hear the inclusive part of that, where people explicitly include trans women.” Sandra noted a similar experience where she said she was told off “for still having a phallic organ” by a previous girlfriend. In both these instances, symbolic boundaries around what a woman’s bodily configuration is supposed to be collide with ideas about authentic lesbian sexuality, and trans women are left having to navigate the particularities of their physical embodiment with cis women.

Kurisu also reported a mix of inclusive and exclusionary boundary work around sexuality within lesbian spaces. When talking about attending a lesbian club at her university, Kurisu said:

But at the beginning, when I didn't pass very well, there were a couple of members of the club who were like trying to accuse me of like, “Oh, that's not a real woman. How

can she be considered sapphic?” And then that got shut down immediately and people got kicked out of the club. So, the club itself was really on it. They were like, “No, that's a trans girl. She identifies as a girl. She's never identified as anything else. She's not doing anything wrong, she's just early in her transition and you need to let it go,” and they're like, “Oh, but she blah, blah, blah,” and all this stuff. So, it happened in clubs.

In this excerpt, physical embodiment and sexuality collide within a sexualized social space in a way that results in boundary work around who counts as a woman. Kurisu said that while some cis women lesbians in this space questioned her right to belong since she did not share their particular form of womanhood, other cis women lesbians deliberately sought to expand the definition of womanhood beyond the confines of cisgender experiences and cisgender embodiment to include a trans woman like Kurisu who was early in her transition. Physical embodiment thus intersects with sexuality, with both acting as an inflection point around which symbolic boundaries are maintained or challenged.

While some of my participants reported a mix of inclusive and exclusionary boundary work in lesbian spaces, Emma reported a lot of validation and support of trans womanhood among queer<sup>11</sup> cis women. When talking about the conversations she has had with her queer cis women friends about trans issues and trans women accessing women's spaces, she said:

I have had many talks and discussions with my cis women friends about current trans issues. We have talked about the right to access all women, or women plus nonbinary, spaces. All my cis women friends are LGBTQ+ somehow, and I feel they all understand the importance of these questions. In our discussions, I have always felt supported, and they have never questioned the right of trans women to access such spaces.

Here, Emma says that her queer cis women friends have all expressed support for trans women accessing women's spaces and have never questioned whether trans women have that right. This suggests that, for Emma's queer cis women friends, sexuality does not play a role in shaping symbolic boundaries, at least when it comes to accessing women's spaces.

However, during the interview, Emma also said that a cis woman ex-partner broke off the relationship with her because she could not see Emma as enough of a woman. Emma said:

I don't know how to put it because, well, she was always aware that I was trans and she was a lesbian, so, but we came to a point where she couldn't really, she couldn't really see me as a woman full enough to be in a romantic relationship with me. So,

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<sup>11</sup> I use the term “queer” in this section as an umbrella term that includes people who identify as lesbians, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or who explicitly prefer the term queer to define their sexuality.



and that was kind of a realization that she came to during our relationship. We were together for like 6 years.

When I asked her to tell me more about what the issue was, Emma said, “it was really like specific things like that she thought I, she sometimes said that she thought I smell too much like a man or that my skin wasn't soft enough and stuff like that.” Here, again, physical embodiment and expectations around what women's bodies are supposed to be like collide with sexuality to act as a symbolic boundary. This symbolic boundary between cis women and trans women then serves to locate Emma inside womanhood (deserving of the right to access women's spaces) in some cases, but outside womanhood (not “woman full enough”) in other cases.

In a case that is almost the inverse of Emma's experience, when talking about a previous relationship of 8 years, Isabelle said that when she came out as a trans woman and started transitioning, it ended her relationship with a cis woman. She said:

I think the gist of it is that she did not feel like she could be together with a woman, and then it was not a matter of me being trans that was the issue. It was that she did not feel comfortable to be in a relationship with a woman, which made her sort of end the relationship.

For Isabelle, then, it was precisely the validation of her womanhood, combined with her partner's lack of attraction to women, that led to the end of their relationship. In other words, based on what Isabelle says here, while her partner engaged in inclusive boundary work that located Isabelle firmly in a shared category of womanhood, it was precisely this shared category of womanhood that did not work for her partner given her partner's sexuality. Thus, sexuality and gender here intersect in a way for trans people that risks changing the dynamic of a relationship, or ending a relationship altogether, when they come out and transition from being seen as one gender to another.

As these excerpts show, sexuality served an inflection point, a site around which symbolic boundaries were maintained or challenged by the close cis women in my participants' lives. Those symbolic boundaries also then collided with physical embodiment and cisgender expectations of what a woman's body is supposed to be like. Thus, in some cases, my participants said they were not considered to be “woman enough” by some of the cis women in their lives to be part of lesbian clubs or to be in lesbian relationships, while in other cases they were. In other words, when it came to sexuality, particularly a lesbian sexuality, my participants found themselves being situated outside of womanhood in some

cases but not others. This also means that, just as in other areas, my participants reported a mix of experiences in which symbolic boundaries were built up sometimes but were weakened at others.

While Westbrook and Schilt (2014) find that “gender-integrated spaces are more likely to use identity-based criteria, while gender-segregated spaces . . . are more likely to use biology-based criteria” (p. 32), my findings suggest that it may have more to do with the motivations on the part of social actors. In other words, it may be that those who seek to exclude trans women (from spaces or otherwise) rely more on biology-based criteria, while those who seek to include trans women rely more on identity-based criteria. For example, for Kurisu, the cis women in her sapphic club—a gender segregated space—used a mix of both biology and identity-based arguments, with the latter being used to justify including Kurisu, and the former being used to justify excluding her.

### 3. Change over time

My participants also discussed experiencing a change over time with regards to the symbolic boundaries and boundary work that they experienced from the close cis women in their lives. Overwhelmingly, my participants said they felt like they became closer to the cis women in their lives over time and that they felt more included in a broader womanhood or “sisterhood.” My participants understood a greater sense of closeness with the cis women in their lives as greater inclusion into womanhood. That is, they talked about how the cis women in their lives shared information or parts of their lives with them only after they had achieved a level of closeness that those cis women do not share with cis men. There were only a few instances in which my participants felt they had become less close to a close cis woman in their life.

In an example of becoming closer to cis women over time, Lena said she felt that “passing” helped her become closer to the cis women in her life. When talking about how things had changed over time, Lena said:

Before, there was kind of a disconnect, before I passed, started passing. And now people will, other women will just be friendly towards me because I look like a woman, you know, like. So, in that way, like being further in transition definitely helps. And also, because I can like blend in, in a way.

Here, Lena references a boundary or “disconnect” that she felt existed between her and cis women prior to “passing.” After reaching a certain point at which she could “pass” as a cis woman, Lena felt that the cis women in her life treated her differently (better) from how they

treated her before. She felt that blending in with them allowed her to be treated like any other woman.

When talking about her friends, Louisa described a similar experience:

When I started like socially transitioning, and like over time, as I started medically transitioning, the only real difference there is I started to feel like our relationship became very clearly like a, my classic interpretation of what a like girl/girl relationship would be, our friendship would be. It was already leaning towards that before I came out because I was not very good at, you know, pretending, so ultimately, it just kind of blossomed into a more closer friendship, I suppose. And I very much feel like they both see me as a woman and that that makes us, like, get closer together.

Here, Louisa describes a change over time as she progressed in her medical transition in which her cis women friends became closer as she progressed farther in her transition. Again, the greater closeness here is associated with being seen and validated as a woman, and this recognition and validation then leads to an even greater sense of closeness. In fact, what she describes here is a kind of iterative process in which she felt like she came to be seen more as a woman by her friends as she medically transitioned, which led to a closer relationship with her friends, and this closer relationship then led to her friends seeing her more as a woman, since such close friendships are what they share with other women.

Wera, however, reported no real change over time with her wife of 25 years. She said her wife initially expressed concerns about the possibility of change over time, and how she was worried she might feel differently after Wera had started HRT and started to experience the changes that come with that. In speaking about her wife, Wera said:

I think she always, well, or from a very long time ago, it was clear that I was not a standard cisgender hetero male. And we've, we've gone through our ups and downs, but I think no real problems have been caused by the fact that I'm trans. Absolutely not. Of course, she had questions in the beginning. She also expressed, sometimes that, "Okay, I really accept who you are as a person, but I don't know how I will feel when your body will start changing because. . ." But it hasn't really been a problem.

Here, not only does Wera not note any significant change regarding inclusive/exclusionary actions on the part of her wife, but she also makes sense of that by locating herself as already closer to womanhood prior to transitioning in that she was not the "standard cisgender hetero male."

Kurisu described a mix of experiences. For example, she said, "My girlfriend was accepting at first, and sort of changed her mind as things progressed. I think she didn't really

realize that like I actually wanted to be a girl and not just dress prettier.” When talking about her move to Sweden to do a PhD program, she said, “I think I have more relationships with women here somehow. Like tons and tons of female peers and coworkers, and it's all just very normal.” This shows that, over time, trans women experience some cis women becoming closer, while others become less close.

As I discussed in the section on social spaces, Kurisu also recounted a story about a friend who invited her to spa and who was initially supportive in helping her access the gender segregated changing rooms by accompanying her. Over time, however, Kurisu said that friend turned on her and that the friend said, “You'll always be a trans girl and not a girl. So why did you even transition?” This highlights that exclusionary boundary work does not necessarily cease as my participants progress farther into their gender transitions, even among those close cis women who at one point engaged in the inclusive boundary work. It also highlights the precarity trans women face, especially regarding access to gender segregated spaces.

As I discussed in the previous section, Emma described a similar shift from inclusion to exclusion from womanhood over time. When talking about her marriage to a cis woman, Emma said that her wife ultimately ended the relationship because she could not see Emma as “woman full enough.” When I then asked her if they had married prior to Emma starting hormone therapy, she said yes, but that her wife had identified as bisexual then, and that she had always been open about being trans with her wife. As I discussed above, when I pressed for clarification about what her wife had trouble accepting, Emma said her wife told her that Emma’s body smelled and felt insufficiently feminine. Emma said she initially saw this as transphobic but does not see it that way now. She said they have talked a lot about this since then and that they are still friends today:

And it wasn't really, I mean, it wasn't really, it sounds really transphobic, and I reacted to it in that way as well back then, but I don't really think she meant it like that. We have talked about stuff that, and I think it was more of a personal process for her in that she had to figure out herself and her sexuality outside of our relationship. So, and yeah, and as I said, we are friends today. So, we feel like we have discussed it quite a bit.

These quotes from Emma not only illustrate a change over time regarding inclusion/exclusion from a broader conceptualization of womanhood, but also illustrate the way in which bodily differences can serve as a site of exclusionary boundary work. They also illustrate how trans

women often then respond to that boundary work through discussion, which is a theme I will discuss in the upcoming section on strategies for responding to exclusionary boundary work.

One of the research sub questions I asked at the outset was whether the boundary work that trans women experience changes over time. These findings show that my participants do experience a change over time, but not in predictable ways. In fact, my participants noted a mix of changes. Some participants experienced cis women engaging in less boundary work and becoming more inclusive over time, with others experienced cis women engaging in more boundary work and becoming more exclusionary over time, while others still, as in Wera's case, experiencing no change at all. These excerpts also show that my participants understand greater closeness with the cis women in their lives as a weakening of symbolic boundaries in which they are included into a shared conceptualization of womanhood.

### Strategies for responding to exclusionary boundary work

When my participants discussed experiences of exclusionary boundary work from the close cis women in their lives, three strategies for responding to that boundary work emerged from the data. First, my participants often talked about engaging cis women in discussion as a means of breaking down the symbolic boundaries that they felt were being built up. That is, when they experienced exclusionary boundary work, they would often respond by engaging those cis women in discussion about why their actions were harmful to them individually or to trans women more broadly. Second, my participants frequently discussed having to navigate or negotiate the unique aspects or experiences of trans womanhood in relation to cis women and cis womanhood. Third, my participants discussed a filtering strategy in which they filtered out cis women who were too exclusionary and specifically sought out, or filtered in, those cis women who were inclusive.

#### 1. Breaking down symbolic boundaries through discussion

When my participants experienced cis women engaging in smaller forms of exclusionary boundary work, such as using terms they did not know were offensive or unintentionally excluding trans women, my participants would often respond by engaging those cis women in discussion about why they felt their actions were problematic or harmful. In other words, their response was to try to break down those symbolic boundaries through discussion in order to be included in a broader conceptualization of womanhood. This discussion then works as a form of inclusive boundary work since they seek to re-locate themselves back into womanhood.

As with previous parts of the interviews, I did not use explicit language of symbolic boundaries or boundary work in order to not force the conversation into a specific theoretical framework and to not bog participants down in technical sociological terms. This means that conversations about using discussion as a strategy were often about supportive and non-supportive cis women in a broader sense. However, as the following excerpts show, my participants talked about using discussion as a strategy both in examples that explicitly pertain to symbolic boundaries and as part of a broader strategy in dealing with transphobic/exclusionary cis women and cis people.

When her cis woman friend, Ingrid,<sup>12</sup> used a derogatory slang term in reference to trans women and expressed interest in the new Harry Potter game, Sandra replied by having a conversation with Ingrid to explain how and why these things are harmful to trans women:

Ingrid, for example, when I was around 24, didn't understand what the derogatory slang term "trap" meant . . . Since they don't live in that space, they don't understand the context, unless pointed out. Or for example, Ingrid, a year or so ago was like, "Oh, a new Harry Potter game is going on. I want to play it." And I'm like, "Ingrid, here is the context. Go read it. Peruse it and return."

Thus, Sandra responded to what she saw as unintentional forms of exclusionary boundary work performed by her friend Ingrid by engaging her friend in conversation, thereby attempting to mitigate a symbolic boundary. The slang term "trap" used here comes from a trope in Japanese animation (or anime) where trans women are portrayed as men who are presenting as women for the sole or primary purpose of tricking unsuspecting straight cis men into a gay sexual encounter. It thus acts as a symbolic boundary in that it positions trans women as "really men" or not "real" women. Or to use Bettcher's (2007) terms, it frames trans women as deceivers or make-believers.

The excerpt from Louisa's journal entry presented above in the section on bodily differences showed a similar act of engaging in conversation as a means of mitigating symbolic boundaries. When she had a conversation with her partner about sex, Louisa felt her partner made a comment that equated having a penis with being a man. Louisa responded to this by having a discussion with her partner about why and how that was a problem for her. Later in the interview, when I asked Louisa whether she would have a close relationship with a cis woman who is not supportive of her trans womanhood, she said, "No. I could see myself having a relationship in the sense that I would possibly try to convince someone, but it's not

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<sup>12</sup> Ingrid is a pseudonym.

something I would like to spend any energy on.” This suggests an emotional labor cost associated with discussion as a strategy for breaking down symbolic boundaries.

Similarly, when asked if she would have a close relationship with cis women who are not supportive, Emma said:

I think it depends on what kind of issue there was and if it was like very openly transphobic or some other issue. If there was an issue that I thought we could talk about and communicate about, and they would, and I felt like they were, could listen and be respectful, then I think I could have that, I could have a close relationship with them.

Emma draws a distinction here between people who are “openly transphobic” and, therefore, potentially less receptive to a discussion, and people who are not “openly transphobic” and so might be more receptive. She further draws a distinction around the type of issue, suggesting that people might be more receptive to a conversation around some issues as opposed to others, and she qualifies that they would need to be respectful. Under these conditions, Emma said she feels like she might be able to have a close relationship with a cis woman who was not supportive of trans women.

During a conversation about whether she would have a close relationship with a cis woman who was not supportive of trans women, Maja said she would try to engage them in discussion and had done so in the past:

And then like, yeah, just talking with them and going over why they're wrong. It's something I've done before, so I feel like I could do a decent job of doing it. But yeah, again with like less overt things, might need to, you know, point out that, “Hey, that's not really how it works. That's kind of incorrect,” doing it in a bit more of a softer way, I guess, so not upset. [laughs] Wouldn't want to step on any toes. [said with in a sarcastic tone] [laughs]

Here, similarly to Emma, Maja frames the issue as conditional, drawing a distinction between more and less overt forms of exclusion, and indicates that she would use discussion for less overt forms of exclusion.

These excerpts show that my participants view discussion and conversations as part of a larger strategy for dealing with both unsupportive/transphobic cis women and cis women who engage in exclusionary boundary work. Some of my participants viewed discussion as a conditional strategy and drew distinctions around the types of exclusionary acts and types of conditions under which they viewed discussion as a viable or workable strategy in responding

to exclusionary cis women. Louisa even suggested this strategy comes at the cost of expending energy in the form of emotional labor.

## 2. Negotiating the particularities of trans womanhood

My participants often described having to navigate or negotiate getting the cis women in their lives to accept and respect the particularities and unique experiences related to being a trans woman. Complex tensions then arose when symbolic boundaries collided with social space, gendered and bodily expectations, and cisnormativities. My participants were then left having to navigate or negotiate these tensions with the cis women in their lives.

When talking about how her family, including the cis women in her family, came around to finally respecting her womanhood and seeing her as a woman, Maja said they were still reluctant to acknowledge or talk about her unique experiences related to being a trans woman:

It's still been difficult to talk with them about like trans related issues and like how trans people have it in Sweden and globally. Yeah, that's sort of left a bit of a gap between us, I would say, because I want to be able to talk about how, you know, how trans people are doing. They're my people in a way, you know? . . . There's sort of this not wanting to see all the trans parts all the time, and were like, "Oh, you're a woman. Can't we just be done with it now?" Sort of. But yeah, still being seen as a woman, but not really, understanding that we're still different in a way in our lived experiences.

Here, Maja conceives of trans womanhood as involving experiences that are unique to trans women but still fall within a larger conceptualization of womanhood that contains both cis womanhood and trans womanhood. She expresses a desire to be able to talk about the particularities of trans womanhood without it being viewed as necessarily clashing with cisgender conceptualizations of womanhood. From what she describes, Maja gives the impression that her family is more comfortable acknowledging her as a woman if doing so does not challenge a cisgender conceptualization of womanhood by acknowledging her unique experiences related to being trans.

While Lena said that the close cis women in her life have been overwhelmingly inclusive and supportive, at the end of the interview she said there were times when she did feel excluded, specifically when cis women assumed she had experiences on things that do not apply to her. When I asked for clarification on this, she said:

Yeah, like they'll say things that might be relatable to other women, expecting me to relate, and I just, well, I'm kind of in the weird spot where like I want to be seen as a woman, but I also don't want to be assumed to be a woman. In a way like, like in my



ideal world, people would like kind of know that like I'm just a trans woman and accept me as a trans woman because like, it doesn't matter to me. To the cis, I wouldn't be the person I am if I was cis, I would be a different person, so there's no, there's no world where I'm cis and I'm this version of me.

Lena expresses a desire here to have her trans womanhood seen and accepted as valid by cis women, to have her specific form of womanhood and the experiences related to that incorporated into a larger definition of womanhood that is not cisgender specific. This illustrates how she has to navigate the particularities and unique experiences of trans womanhood as it pertains to a larger conceptualization of womanhood.

Wera said her mother is the only cis woman in her life who has not been accepting of her, and that her mother still misgenders her and deadnames<sup>13</sup> her. She said this is in part because her mother insists that she should have seen a sign that Wera was trans when she was young. About her mother, Wera said:

She doesn't accept it. "If you would have, if I would have seen," she told me, "when you were, that you were playing with dolls, or wanted to play with dolls when you were five or six or seven, then I would understand, but the fact that you did not, and that you only came out so late in your life, makes it very," she still says that, "makes it very hard for me to understand." And I translate that as "this makes it very hard for me to accept," because I see that whenever I'm with them.

As this excerpt shows, Wera has to negotiate her unique experience as a trans woman in her 50's, who grew up in a time when coming out as transgender or expressing femininity as a child was much less of an option. Indeed, she said, "I grew up in the 70s and the early 80s. There were no role models, there were no people to look up to, there, I mean, LGBTQIA+ didn't exist in my life when I grew up." The idea of trans children expressing their gender identity or their transness during childhood is a more contemporary notion, one that often does not match the lived experiences of many older trans people like Wera. This then creates a disconnect between contemporary expectations and the lived realities of older trans people. Because she did not have a stereotypical trans childhood by contemporary standards, then, Wera felt her mother questioned the legitimacy of her womanhood and her unique trans experiences.

Lastly, as I discussed in the section above, Louisa had to negotiate her particular physical embodiment as a trans woman when she had a conversation with her partner about

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<sup>13</sup> Deadnaming refers to using a trans person's previous given name or previous legal name, typically against their will.

sex. Through both discussion and a negotiation of the particularities of her trans womanhood, Louisa sought to weaken a symbolic boundary by reasserting her womanhood as valid and legitimate.

These examples show that my participants must navigate or negotiate the unique particularities of trans womanhood when those particularities collide with cisgender expectations of physical embodiment, social boundaries, cishnormativities, symbolic boundaries, or a cisgender conceptualization of womanhood. Tensions resulted from a conceptualization of womanhood that my participants felt was too small in that it did not adequately encompass trans women's unique experiences or embodiment. And as these examples show, my participants used this strategy of navigating or negotiating trans particularities in a variety of contexts that were not limited to specific spaces or specific types of cis women.

### 3. Filtering out those who build up symbolic boundaries

As I previously noted, the theme of filtering out cis women who engage in exclusionary boundary work came up in the first two interviews. Since this was a notable theme, I modified my interview guide to include questions about it after the second interview. These questions were added to the end of the interview guide. However, in the rest of the interviews, even before I got to those questions, all my participants brought up the topic of filtering people out who were exclusionary in one manner or another.

For example, when I asked about instances in which close cis women had engaged in exclusionary actions, Maxine said, "if people were exclusionary, I didn't like hang, I didn't stay around, sort of. It's not that I've become an enemy of anyone, or that we like had to cut ties with anyone." She then said that "it's also been sort of a, it's by design that I hang out with these people. . ." Here, when she says, "these people," she is referring to people who are supportive and who do not engage in exclusionary actions, such as exclusionary boundary work.

Meanwhile, Sandra said she filters out people more broadly who are "more or less dicks." She said this includes people who spread anti-trans disinformation and "scare propaganda, or in general people who ask other people what genitals they have or don't have" and people who are "misgendering people on purpose or saying transition person's previous gender or something, who doesn't like seem to care how that person actually defines themselves, but only want to place their own label to them." Here, deliberate misgendering is a clear example of exclusionary boundary work as it invalidates trans people's gender

identities and thus locates them outside of the gender with which they identify. However, Sandra and Maxine's examples show that this filtering out process goes beyond those who engage in exclusionary boundary work and is applied to others, as well.

Wera, made a similar comment when I asked if she has any close relationships with cis women who are not supportive:

No, I don't. I mean, I think I, it probably goes both ways because I would not be close with someone that would not accept me, and I think people that don't accept me wouldn't approach me with the wish of being close with me. . . . So, I think I'm not close with any non-supportive cis women. I'm not close with any non-supportive people. How could I? How could I be close with anyone that does not respect me?

Wera makes it clear that she would not be close with someone who could not accept her as a trans woman. In fact, for her, it is not just a matter of acceptance or support, but also a matter of respect. She suggests that she would also filter out those who are disrespectful. She also points out that unaccepting and non-supportive cis women might also seek to filter her out, thus highlighting the relational and reciprocal aspects of filtering.

Ylva-Li recounted meeting and befriending a cis woman while in school that she later had to filter out when she found out this cis woman was posting pro-J.K. Rowling and anti-trans messages on Facebook:

There was one woman in my class . . . she was very, very inclusive in the classroom, and we talked about a lot, and she had a very, very interesting subject. And yeah, it was no problem, and we became friends on Facebook, and she started posting a lot of, uh, pro-J.K. Rowling stuff and a lot of anti-trans women stuff. So, we, I did not contact her when I went up to [a different city]<sup>14</sup>. But I wanted to in the beginning because I thought she was very nice, but then she showed this side and I, she dropped out of my priorities, so to speak.

In this excerpt, Ylva-Li expresses a desire to be friends with this woman, but ultimately decides that her comments on Facebook are so extreme that they preclude that possibility, and so she decides to filter her out of her life.

For my participants, filtering, like discussion, was a strategy they used broadly, applying it both to cis women who engage exclusionary boundary work and those who did not, but who were deemed worthy of being filtered out for other reasons. I would argue this filtering in/out process is itself a form of boundary work performed by my participants. It is a gendered practice designed to craft and maintain a broader conceptualization of womanhood

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<sup>14</sup> I removed the city that Ylva-Li mentions to protect confidentiality.

for themselves that is trans inclusive. While they may try to filter out certain cis women from their lives, their intent is not to exclude those cis women from a conceptualization of womanhood. Rather, their intent is to expand womanhood to include trans women. Because of this, one could see this filtering out strategy as an inclusive form of boundary work.

To put it another way, since my participants, as individuals, do not have the social power to change the dominant, macro-level cultural conceptualization of womanhood that is defined in cisgender terms, the act of filtering out cis women (and people more broadly) who engage in exclusionary boundary work affords them the ability to craft and maintain a conceptualization of womanhood that is trans inclusive at the micro-level. Indeed, as Connell (2012) argues, creating gender configurations is a practice that “starts from structure but does not repetitively cite its starting point”; instead, “social practice continuously brings social reality into being, and that social reality becomes the ground of new practice, through time” (p. 866). Thus, the practice of filtering in/out allows my participants to push back against dominant forms womanhood that they view as insufficiently trans inclusive, thereby bringing a new social reality into being—one that is trans inclusive.

## Concluding Discussion

In this study, I interviewed 10 trans women in Sweden about their social relationships with the cis women in their lives with whom they share a close or meaningful relationship. Throughout the interviews, I asked participants about instances of inclusive/exclusionary actions from the cis women in their lives, how they felt about them, and how they then responded. After each interview, I tasked participants with writing a follow-up journal entry in which I asked them to think about and then write about any relevant experiences that did not come up during the interview. I analyzed the data through a theoretical lens that combines Lamont’s (2000) symbolic boundaries and Nagoshi and Brzuzy’s (2010) transgender theory. Using an abductive approach and thematic analysis, I coded and analyzed instances in which my participants discussed experiencing symbolic boundaries or boundary work from the close cis women in their lives.

Through my findings and analysis, I showed that my participants experience a complex mix of both inclusive and exclusionary boundary work from the close cis women in their lives, sometimes even a mix of both from the same cis woman in their life. My participants experienced this boundary work as locating them outside of womanhood (exclusionary) at times or inside of womanhood (inclusive) at other times. This boundary work occurred around certain inflection points. These were sites at which symbolic

boundaries can potentially be built up or weakened. I identified three such sites in the data: those pertaining to real or presumed biological differences (body), social space (spatial), and sexual orientation (sexuality). All three sites had the potential to overlap, and, for some participants, they did.

These findings confirm what other scholars have found, while also adding new insights. For example, Meg-John Barker (2017) notes that the validity of trans womanhood was often questioned on the grounds of biology in some contexts and on the grounds of the social in others. Westbrook and Schilt's (2014) work also shows that, when it comes to social space, "gender-integrated spaces are more likely to use identity-based criteria, while gender-segregated spaces . . . are more likely to use biology-based criteria" (p. 32). However, my findings somewhat complicate this, as some of my participants experienced a mix of both identity and biology-based criteria when it came to gender segregated spaces. That is, some close cis women in their lives used identity-based criteria to justify including them into gender segregated spaces in some instances, while other cis women used biology-based criteria to justify excluding them from gender segregated spaces in other instances. This suggests that it may be less of a matter of whether a space is gender integrated or gender segregated and more the motivation of the social actors.

When my participants experienced exclusionary boundary work, they responded with different strategies. These strategies were designed to weaken the symbolic boundaries that my participants felt were being strengthened or built up by some cis women in their life, with different strategies being reserved for different situations. These strategies included engaging cis women in discussion, navigating or negotiating acceptance of trans particularities or specificities among cis women, and filtering in/out cis women who were inclusive/exclusionary.

My participants tended to engage close cis women in discussion when they viewed exclusionary boundary work as minimal or unintended. In other words, discussion was used when my participants felt it would be sufficient to remedy the situation. They reserved filtering out cis women for cases when exclusionary actions were considered so extreme that they were unresolvable, would require too much work, or precluded the possibility of friendship or support. Filtering also allowed my participants to maintain a conceptualization of womanhood that is trans inclusive. Meanwhile, the strategy of navigating and negotiating trans specificities or particularities was spread across different contexts and spaces, across more mild forms of exclusionary boundary work and more extreme ones, and it was used to

expand a conceptualization of womanhood to be sufficiently large enough to adequately include trans womanhood.

While my participants overwhelmingly said they experience a lot of inclusion (inclusive boundary work) from the cis women in their lives and tended to state they experience more inclusion as they progressed in their transitions, they still reported experiencing forms of exclusion (exclusionary boundary work). In some instances, this was even the case when close cis women had previously been supportive or inclusive. This shows that there is not a binary between transphobic and exclusionary cis women on the one hand, and accepting and inclusive cis women on the other, but that trans women experience a complex mix of both inclusive and exclusionary boundary work from the cis women in their lives.

These findings also suggest that we need a more nuanced analysis and consideration of exclusion/inclusion that decouples transphobia from exclusion, and acceptance from inclusion. This study indicates that inclusive efforts and accepting individuals can still have the effect of excluding others. It further shows the need to move beyond the either/or framing of inclusion/exclusion to consider how acts might be both inclusive and exclusionary simultaneously, whether pertaining to boundary work or not. Rennstam and Sullivan (2018) make a similar argument in their study of LGB officers in Sweden in which they argue that “inclusionary and exclusionary pressures coexist” (p. 177). Indeed, my findings show that inclusive and exclusionary boundary work are not an either/or but can also coexist. For example, some of my participants felt the actions of the cis women in their lives were exclusionary even when they also recognized that those actions came from a place of well-intended inclusion.

Future research could benefit from grounding studies on symbolic boundaries with a phenomenological approach that specifically considers the role of embodiment, as this could provide insight into the ways in which the body and physical embodiment interact with, are shaped by, and in turn influence and shape, our surrounding social environments. This is because, as Butler (2024) notes, “Biological and social forces are together interacting in embodied life” and so “what we call our biology is always interacting with social and environmental forces” (p. 157). Or as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) put it, “bodies are involved more actively, more intimately, and more intricately in social processes than theory has usually allowed. Bodies participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct—the body is a participant in generating social practice” (p. 851). Indeed, my findings show that physical embodiment served as an inflection point around which boundary

work was performed and symbolic boundaries were negotiated by my participants and the close cis women in their lives.

There are several limitations in this study. First, while this study managed to collect a diverse range of participants in terms of class and age, all my participants self-identified as white. This means that in terms of how the symbolic boundaries, boundary work, and interventions examined here are racialized is not a question that I can answer. Indeed, in that area, this study raises more questions than it answers. Future research on the symbolic boundaries between cis people and trans people would benefit from incorporating a more racially and ethnically diverse group of participants. Such diversity would shed light on how symbolic boundaries and boundary work are racialized. Furthermore, for many of my participants, when asked how they identify in terms of race or ethnicity, their response either started with or incorporated reference to their Swedish nationality in addition to identifying as white. A consideration of how race is socially constructed in Sweden, along with a cross-cultural analysis of symbolic boundaries between cis people and trans people, could provide valuable insights into how different cultural constructions of race, being influenced by nationality, then intersect with symbolic boundaries of gender.

Second, as I noted earlier, there is value in studying only one side of a relational process such as symbolic boundaries or boundary work. That is, focusing only on trans women here allowed me to center and elevate trans women's experiences and voices, which have historically been silenced or minimized (Stryker, 2017). However, such an approach does not shed light on the other side of that relational process. Future research on the symbolic boundaries between cis women and trans women would benefit from including cis women, as this would provide insight into the intent, interpretation, meaning making, and experiences of cis women as the other side of that relational process. Additionally, expanding beyond the confines of Sweden, and exploring how trans women and cis women in other countries and cultures experience symbolic boundaries and boundary work, could also provide further insight into the role culture plays more broadly in influencing the symbolic boundaries between cis women and trans women, especially if done through cross-cultural comparison.

Lastly, while the HRT requirement for this study helped to narrow the scope of the study and sought to set the stage for exploring how bodily changes through HRT might influence symbolic boundaries and boundary work, it imposed limitations as well. First, here in Sweden, there are extensive wait times for trans people to begin HRT. However, a private option is available for those who can afford it. This means that trans women who are on HRT

in Sweden could possibly skew more class privileged as they are the ones that can afford the private option. While my participants ended up being a good mix of middle and working-class trans women, it still raises questions about the perspectives and experiences of those trans women who were excluded because they do not have the funds for private access to HRT.

Second, coming out and transitioning is also a lengthier process than just being on HRT. While every trans woman's process of coming out and transitioning can look different, and different parts can vary in their length or be absent altogether, this process tends to look something like this: a trans woman comes out to the people around her, maybe explores expressing her gender in new or different ways, starts to have facial hair removed, starts HRT, and maybe then has one or more surgeries. Again, this may look different for any given trans woman, and there is no one right way to transition. The point is, however, when analysis of symbolic boundaries begins post-start of HRT, this tells us little about what forms of symbolic boundaries or boundary work trans women experience pre-HRT and how those might differ post-HRT. A more extensive (and perhaps funded) study could explore how symbolic boundaries and boundary work might differ at different stages of social and medical transition.

This research contributes to the literature on symbolic boundaries by exploring both the symbolic boundaries and boundary work that trans women experience in relation to the cis women in their lives with whom they are close. It also contributes to the literature on transgender studies and gender studies in that it expands our understanding of the lived and embodied experiences of trans women, it furthers our understanding of the dynamic and relational processes that influence and shape the social relationships between groups of women (cis and trans), and it provides a window into the role that symbolic boundaries play in the social construction of womanhood.



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## Appendix

### Information Letter

#### **Invitation to participate in a research study about the social relationships between trans women and cis women.**

I am seeking trans women to participate in a study that examines the social relationships between cis and trans women. This research is being conducted by me, Valyn Faer, a master's student in the Sociology Department at Lund University.

For this study, I am interested in trans women's experiences of cis women doing or saying things that made them feel included or excluded, with a particular attention to what cis women say and how trans women then respond. My focus here is on trans women in Sweden who have been medically transitioning for at least 1 and a half years and the acts of inclusion and exclusion they have experienced from the cis women in their lives, specifically the cis women with whom trans women share close relationships, such as friends, partners, family, colleagues, etc. I want to know what these acts of inclusion/exclusion look like, what is said, and how trans women respond. As anti-trans sentiment and TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism) rhetoric continue to spread, the study of this relational dynamic becomes all the more important, as cis women's support of trans women (and trans people more broadly) has been and will continue to be vital in our ongoing fight for equality and acceptance.

#### **How is the research conducted?**

Participation in this study will consist of a one-on-one interview conducted in-person or over video chat. The interview should last about an hour and will be conducted in a place of your preference (a public place, your home, café, etc.). Video chat interviews can be conducted with participants who live too far away for in-person interviews and can be conducted on whichever platform participants prefer. Only audio from the interviews will be recorded for later transcription. The interview will be followed up with a short journal entry that will be collected about one week after the interview. The purpose of journal entry is to give participants the opportunity to write about the things they forgot to say during the interview or to elaborate on things they did say in the interview, if they wish to do so. Interviews will be conducted in English as I am unfortunately not yet proficient enough to conduct interviews in Swedish. However, you are welcome and encouraged to write the journal entry in Swedish

(or another language) if you are more comfortable doing so. Non-English journal entries will then be translated to English.

### **Confidentiality.**

All participation in this study will be kept confidential in compliance with relevant laws and regulations. Identifying information in interviews and journal entries will be coded to protect the identities of both participants and the people mentioned during the study. Since I will not be using participants' real names, you are welcome to choose your own fake name for the study. Information will be stored safely and securely, and I am happy to answer any questions you have about how information will be handled and protected.

Participation in this study is voluntary at every stage and you have the right to withdraw at any time. Unfortunately, I am not able to offer compensation for participation in this study. If you are interested in participating, you will be provided with and asked to sign an informed consent letter.

When I am finished with this study, the findings will be used to write my master's thesis and will be published in limited quantities by the Sociology Department at Lund University as part of their tradition of publishing master's theses. If you are interested in reading the final product, I am happy to send you a copy.

This study's title is Social Relationships: Trans women's experiences of inclusion/exclusion among cis women and is being conducted by me, Valyn Faer, as part for my master's thesis at the Sociology Department at Lund University in fulfillment of the requirements for my MSc in Sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Sara Eldén of the Sociology Department at Lund University.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you! Please call or email me if you have any questions or would like to participate!

Valyn Faer

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## Interview Guide

This study about the social relationships between trans women and the cis women in their lives with whom they share a close or meaningful relationship. The goal is to approach the topic from trans women's perspective in order to center and elevate trans women's voices and experiences. Some of the questions I want to ask you about will require you to reflect on your own history and your own experiences. I want you to be aware that some additional topics may arise from these discussions and that those topics may end up being difficult or challenging to talk about or may bring up painful memories. I hope none of my questions will have this effect, they are not intended to, but please be aware that the discussion could end up in a place that is challenging or painful. I encourage you to take care of yourself throughout this interview. If anything comes up that is too difficult to talk about, you are not obligated to talk about it, please let me know, and we can move on to a different topic if you would like to do so. While your participation in this interview is important, it is also voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time. This interview will be recorded. However, your participation will be kept confidential and once I'm done transcribing the recordings, they will be deleted. Do you have any questions for me? May we begin?

(You may hear me typing during the interview, that's me just writing down a few notes)

(What was the pseudonym that you wanted me to use?)

### **Basics:**

How do you identify (in terms of your transness)?

What pronouns do you prefer?

What is your age?

Since I won't be using your real name, is there a fake name you would like me to use?

### **Transition/coming out:**

How long ago did you start your medical transition?

What did that process look like for you?

Did anyone in your family assist you in this process? Or were they supportive?

Tell me about the cis women in your life that you are close with. Who are they?

Describe coming out to the cis women in your life.

Were they supportive?

What was said?

How did they respond?

How did you respond to what they said?

Has that changed over time? And if so, in what ways?

**Inclusion/exclusion:**

Tell me about the ways in which the cis women you're close with have been inclusive.

Was there ever a time where you felt like they defended your womanhood or your inclusion in women's spaces? And if so, what did that look like and what happened.

Where did this happen and what was said?

What were your thoughts when you heard this?

How did you respond to this?

Tell me about the ways in which the cis women you're close with have been exclusionary.

Was there ever a time where you felt like your womanhood was being invalidated or that they were trying to justify excluding you from women's spaces? And if so, what did that look like, what happened.

Where did this happen and what was said?

What were your thoughts when you heard this?

How did you respond to this?

Do you have a close relationship with a cis woman who is not supportive of you being a trans woman?

If yes, tell me about that.

What are some ways in which they're not supportive?

If no, would you have a close relationship with a cis woman who is not supportive of you being a trans woman?

If yes, tell me about that.

If no, what are some things that a cis woman would have to say or do that would make you choose to not have a close relationship them? (What would cause you to select them out and decide to not have a close relationship with them?)

**Demographics information:**

How do you identify in terms of race or ethnicity?

What socioeconomic status do you consider yourself to be in?

**Journal Entry Instructions**

This journal entry is intended to give interview participants time to reflect on what was said during the interview and then to provide an informal space to write about anything that you might have forgotten to mention during the interview, wished you had said, or to elaborate on something that was said. It is also intended to provide participants with the space to write about their experience in their native language. While there is no hard and fast limit to how much or how little you can write, given the time constraints of my master’s project, I ask that you not write anything longer than 10 pages.

A digital journal entry is preferred in the form of a document file (.doc, .docx, .pdf, etc.). There is some flexibility here, though. For example, if you would prefer to write the journal on a piece of paper and mail it or send a picture of it, that can be arranged. Online word document programs such as Google Docs are not recommended as I am not able to guarantee the privacy and confidentiality of what you write. And please remember to write the fake name you chose for the interview at the top of the journal entry.

**Codebook**

Code	Description
Boundary work	Actions in which people differentiate or separate others or themselves into groups in order to generate feelings of group membership, similarity, or difference. This is divided into subcategories of exclusionary boundary work and inclusive boundary work. Sections were coded as both inclusive/exclusionary when they contained both elements.

Code	Description
Exclusionary boundary work	Boundary work that has the effect of situating trans women outside of a larger conception of womanhood.
Inclusive boundary work	Boundary work that has the effect of including trans women in a larger conception of womanhood.
Change over time	The ways in which trans women's relationships with close cis women have changed over time regarding their gender transition or womanhood.
Chaperone (gatekeeper)	Discussion of cis women accompanying trans women into gender segregated spaces, thereby acting as (intentional or unintentional) chaperones or gatekeepers to these spaces.
Close relationships	Cis women with whom my participants are close, or they feel they have a close relationship with.
Aunt	The sister of someone's father or mother.
Colleagues	The people my participants work with.
Family unspecified	Instances in which my participants mentioned family but did not specify who they were referring to.
Friends	Self-explanatory.
Grandma	The mother of someone's father or mother.
Intimate partners	This refers to partnerships of a sexual nature and includes boy/girlfriends, spouses, polyamorous couplings, etc.
Mothers	Biological and stepmothers. No nontraditional uses of the term mother were used by my participants.
Non-close relationships (cis women)	Cis women who my participants were not close with and who engaged in exclusionary or inclusive boundary work or who were otherwise relevant.
Roommates	People who share(d) a living space with my participants.
Sisters	Biological or stepsisters.
Unspecified relationship	Instances where my participants mention the cis women with whom they are close but do not specify who they are, such as friends, mother, sisters, etc.

Code	Description
Communication	This refers to discussion of my participants' efforts to communicate about trans related topics with the cis women with whom they are close
Communication that weakens symbolic boundaries	Communication that has the intended or unintended effect of breaking down symbolic boundaries, thereby including trans women into larger conceptions of womanhood.
Feminine conversations	Discussion of topics that they perceived as exclusively or primarily occurring between women or instances that my participants described as "girl's talk".
Deadnaming	Using a trans person's name that was assigned to them by their parents and that they did not choose. This is usually a legal name that was given to them at birth.
Distrust	Instances in which my participants talked about the people in their lives treating them with distrust related to their gender identity or gender transition.
Emotional availability	Instances in which my participants brought up the topic of emotional availability regarding the cis women they are close with, and how it had impacted their relationships.
Filtering	Instances in which my participants talked about filtering in or filtering out cis people from their lives who they felt were not sufficiently accepting of their trans womanhood. This is divided into two subcategories: Filter in and Filter out. Sections were coded as both when they contained both elements.
Filter in	Actions in which my participants talked about filtering in cis women (or cis people more broadly) who were supportive or accepting of their trans womanhood.
Filter out	Actions in which my participants talked about filtering out cis women (or cis people more broadly) who were not supportive or accepting of their trans womanhood.
HRT	Hormone replacement therapy related to gender transition.
Inflection point	A point, topic, or location where inclusive/exclusionary boundary work occurs. This is further divided into subcategories.

Code	Description
Bodily differences (body)	Discussion of bodily differences (real or presumed) between trans women and cis women.
Sexual orientation (sexuality)	Discussion of sexuality or sexual orientation that pertained to symbolic boundaries between trans women and cis women.
Social spaces (spatial)	Social spaces in which symbolic boundaries can also be reinforced or challenged.
Gender segregated spaces	Social spaces that are gender segregated, such as restrooms, changing rooms, and other spaces that are divided along gender lines.
Girl's night	A night out or activities that are meant to include only women.
Hotel	Discussion of hotels as sites of possible boundary work.
Other or unspecified	This is a catch all category for any discussion of space as it pertains to boundary work or symbolic boundaries that did not fit into any of the other categories, or when there was discussion of boundary work, but the site was not specified.
Space avoidance	Talk of avoiding certain spaces or situations out of fear of discrimination, harassment, exclusion, violence, or some other form of rejection or prejudice.
Work	The place of employment of my participants.
Length of medical transition	How long my participant has been medically transitioning through hormone replacement therapy.
Private healthcare	Healthcare that is obtained outside the Swedish system, which my participants pay out of pocket for. Instances where my participants talked about using a private healthcare option to gain access to hormone replacement therapy were coded with this.
Pronouns	Refers to discussion or mention of the use of pronouns by the cis women (and cis people) in my participants' lives.
Supportive cis women	Cis women who were supportive of my participants' gender transitions or womanhood.



Code	Description
Supportive cis women	Cis women who were supportive of my participants' gender transitions or womanhood and who were straight or whose sexuality was unspecified.
Supportive cis women queer	Cis women who were supportive of my participants' gender transitions or womanhood and who were specified to be queer in some capacity.
Uncertainty about support	Instances in which my participants expressed an uncertainty about the cis women in their lives being supportive of their gender transition or womanhood.
Unsupportive cis women	Cis women who were unsupportive of my participants' gender transitions or womanhood and who were straight or whose sexuality was unspecified.
Unsupportive cis women queer	Cis women who were unsupportive of my participants' gender transitions or womanhood and who were specified to be queer in some capacity.
Swedish healthcare system	This refers to mentions of the Swedish healthcare system regarding accessing gender affirming care.
Weird or lucky	Instances in which my participants talked about how they felt they were lucky that they have experienced so much acceptance of their gender identity/transition from the cis women in their lives or talked about how it was weird that they have not experienced more rejection or discrimination around their gender identity/transition from the cis women in their lives.