Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity for Trans Women

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In this paper I discuss the interrelated topics of stereotype threat and attributional ambiguity as they relate to gender and gender identity. The former has become an emerging topic in feminist philosophy and has spawned a tremendous amount of research in social psychology and elsewhere. But the discussion, at least in how it connects to gender, is incomplete: the focus is only on cisgender women and their experiences. By considering trans women's experiences of stereotype threat and attributional ambiguity, we gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena and their problematic effects.[1]

1. AN INCOMPLETE PICTURE OF STEREOTYPE THREAT AND ATTRIBUTIONAL AMBIGUITY

Increasing attention is being paid to stereotype threat in feminist philosophy, and much attention in social psychology. Some dimensions of investigation have been into race, age, and gender forms of stereotype threat. However, little attention has been paid to *trans*gender forms of stereotype threat.[2] In this paper, I discuss some problems with, and sources of, stereotype threat, and some ways in which trans women face unique forms of stereotype threat generally not present for cisgender women, and I connect these discussions to issues surrounding attributional ambiguity. I contend that trans women often experience a dual layer of stereotype threat. This makes the risk of stereotype threat and attributional ambiguity particularly troublesome for trans women. Moreover, by understanding trans women's experiences of stereotype threat and attributional ambiguity, we'll gain a better understanding of the oppressive nature of the phenomena more generally.

It's important to note what this paper is *not*. It's not a paper on stereotypes, or even trans women stereotypes. I won't discuss in detail, for example, how stereotypes arise, or what effects stereotypes have on people aside from the specific phenomenon of stereotype threat. Moreover, this is not a paper on the concept of gender and what trans* identities can teach us about gender.

2. Trans Women Stereotypes: Three Tropes

First, what are stereotypes? Lawrence Blum defines stereotypes as "false or misleading generalizations about groups held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence. In doing so, stereotypes powerfully shape the stereotyper's perception of stereotyped groups, seeing the stereotypic characteristics when they are not present, failing to see the contrary of those characteristics when they are, and generally homogenizing the group" (Blum 2004, 251).

Three dominant tropes used to stereotype trans women are particularly salient.[3] These, combined with an implicit or explicit view of gender essentialism, I argue, lead to forms of stereotype threat for trans women. Moreover, the latter contributes to what I take to be a troubling difference in the forms of stereotype threat experienced by trans women compared to those experienced by cis women. The tropes are what Julia Serano calls the "deceptive" and "pathetic" archetypes (Serano 2007), and (building on her work) what we can call the "artificial" stereotype.

The deceiver trope portrays the trans woman as dominant and powerful, still full of "male" energy. Deceivers successfully "pass" as women: no one can easily determine their trans status without the trans person revealing herself. These trans women are always "stealthy," "hiding" their trans status. The focus is on the "real" sex of the trans woman (ostensibly male). In media portrayals, the deceiver is always depicted as sexually attractive, and thus powerful. The climax of these portrayals is always the "reveal," the revelation of the trans woman's trans status, usually done by forcibly exposing male genitals (see Kessler and McKenna 1985, chapter 6). A good example of this is Dil in *The Crying Game*. One form of assault commonly perpetrated against trans women is lifting their skirts or dresses, or otherwise disrobing them to "find out" what they have between their legs. Trans women as deceivers, moreover, aim to "invade" women's spaces such as bathrooms and change rooms, ostensibly to commit sex crimes.[4]

As Serano puts it, there's an intense contradiction between the deceptive transsexual trope and the pathetic transsexual trope (Serano 2007, 38ff.). The pathetic trope portrays trans women as weak, meek, and ignorant: ignorant about how to be a woman. Or, at least, they're bad at "playing" at being a woman. Consequently, whereas the "passing" deceiver is dangerous, due to her ability to seduce and trick unsuspecting straight (white) males and everyone else, the pathetic transsexual is harmless. Pathetic transsexuals do not "pass" as women, and they're viewed as sad, tragic characters. We see this, for example, in their poor makeup and style skills, as well as their inability to walk in heels, even for characters who transitioned years ago (Bree in *TransAmerica*, for example). These people are typically portrayed as attempting extremely feminine gender presentations, but as continuing to display masculine traits and mannerisms. We're perhaps supposed to respect them as people, or as courageous people, but not as women. The key here is that the pathetic transsexual is never portrayed as sexually attractive.

We can extend Serano's work also to identify the "artificial" trope: trans women aren't real, and they need all sorts of tricks and medical interventions in order to remotely "pass" as women. In a sense, they're "constructed women" (in, for example,

Raymond 1979). This includes the focus on facial feminization surgery (where things like masculine bone characteristics are reshaped to better resemble female characteristics), breast implants (or the use of falsies), hormones, genital surgery, vocal training, clothing, mannerisms, and makeup. This trope goes along with gender essentialism: the view that there are features essential to being female or male, and that one is forever one's birth-assigned sex or gender. That is, trans women are still, and forever will be, men, no matter how indistinguishable they may be from cisgender women.

Biological aspects of gender tend to be privileged over social aspects, even though it's now common for philosophers, among others, to view "male" and "female" as not representing natural kinds, but rather as social constructs based on family resemblances, as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it (Wittgenstein 2001, section 66ff). I take it that there are convincing reasons to think that "male" and "female" are not discrete categories, even biologically speaking. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet write, "Sex is based in a combination of anatomical, endocrinal and chromosomal features, and the selection among these criteria for sex assignment is very much on cultural beliefs about what actually makes someone male or female" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 10). Indeed, the prevalence of intersex individuals makes this point clear: for any given measure of biological sex, we can easily find individuals who conform to either (binaristic) sex with that feature, or without it. For example, we can find people with XY chromosomes whom we label "male" (as this is the common chromosomal makeup for males), but we can also find some XY individuals whom we label "female." Indeed, as Anne Fausto-Sterling writes, "labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender—not science—can define our sex. Furthermore, our beliefs about gender affect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place" (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 3).

In fact, there's a robust psychology literature on the prevalence of essentialist beliefs and schemas, particularly about social categories such as gender and race. The tendency to form and perpetuate such beliefs is called "psychological essentialism." Marjorie Rhodes, Sarah-Jane Leslie, and Christina Tworek, for example, have found that children as young as four years old begin to form essentialist beliefs about gender through hearing generic language such as "Boys play with trucks" and "Girls wear pink" (Rhodes, Leslie, and Tworek 2012). In fact, adults seem *more* likely than children to hold and form essentialist beliefs. Moreover, people who believe that certain properties of people are immutable are more likely to produce and perpetuate group stereotypes (for example, women are emotional) (Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck 1998; Bastian and Haslam 2005), and these have strong implications for prejudice (Haslam and Levy 2006).

3. Stereotype Threat

Claude M. Steele, Steven J. Spencer, and Joshua Aronson define stereotype threat as: "When a negative stereotype about a group that one is part of becomes personally

relevant, usually as an interpretation of one's behavior or an experience one is having, stereotype threat is the resulting sense that one can then be judged or treated in terms of the stereotype, or that one might do something that would inadvertently confirm it" (Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002, 384). Importantly, the mere *threat* of discrimination and devaluation based on a stereotype is enough to trigger stereotype threat effects. Moreover, the effects manifest even if the agent knows that the stereotypes are inaccurate, or even false. Furthermore, the more one identifies with a particular domain or activity, the stronger one may experience stereotype threat.

Stereotype threat occurs whenever an agent is acting in a context where a stereotype may apply. There are many examples: women are stereotypically worse at math than men, so women may perform worse than expected on a difficult math task when primed with thoughts of gender. In fact, as I discuss below, the effects occur even without gender priming. Without the threat of the stereotype—or, more precisely, when primed with claims that there are no gender-based performance differences— each gender performs equally well. Effects can be found for many social identities, such as age (stereotype: the elderly have worse memories), race (stereotype: African Americans are worse at English language proficiency than Caucasian Americans) (Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002), gender (see above), and so on.

An impressive number of studies, typically in social psychology, demonstrate various manifestations of stereotype threat. In one particularly foundational paper, Steven J. Spencer, Claude M. Steele, and Diane M. Quinn (1999) investigated the stereotype effects on women's math performance. The dominant stereotype, at least in Western cultures, is that women are worse at math than men. In one experiment, men and women subjects each took an easy math test, and another group of subjects took a difficult math test. The men and women performed equally well on the easier test, but the women performed worse than the men on the difficult test. However, this does not yet demonstrate the presence of stereotype threat: these results could be explained by women generally being worse at difficult math tests than men.

In a second experiment, the researchers investigated potential causes of the observed differences in performance. Men and women were both given a difficult math test, but one group was primed with gender stereotypes by being told that the test tends to show a difference in ability according to gender, whereas the second group was told that there's no difference in ability according to gender. In the first group, the results were similar to, but more dramatic than, the results of the first experiment: women performed worse than men. However, in the second group, the women performed just as well as the men: the ability difference disappeared. In a third study, the control group wasn't given any information on gender and test performance, whereas the experimental group was told that there's no difference. The results replicated those of the second experiment. This classic manifestation of stereotype threat, known as the *under-performance effect*, is thus elicited without priming subjects on the gender-based stereotype of math ability. Just asking women to complete a math test, without explicitly stating that there is no gender difference in the test scores, results in women performing worse than the men. The stereotype is so powerful that it doesn't need to be *made* salient: it already is to the women.

The threat of gender essentialist stereotypes (for example, trans women retain male characteristics because they're male) is particularly strong for many trans women, as trans women are constantly and acutely aware of the risk of being negatively stereotyped in nearly every social domain in which they participate. That is, gender identity is nearly always salient to trans* people, and it's a domain that they often care deeply about.

However, the under-performance effect is only one, albeit well known, manifestation of stereotype threat. Taking the definition of stereotype threat provided by Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002), I apply it to cases "beyond performance," as Paul Davies, Spencer, and Steele put it: to cases where behavior is altered, but not due to a cognitive under-performance (Davies, Spencer, and Steele 2005). Some behavioral changes, not clearly connected to the under-performance effect, are another manifestation of stereotype threat, which I call *situational avoidance*. One aim of this paper is to shine some light on this under-discussed manifestation of stereotype threat.

Many manifestations of the situational avoidance aspect of stereotype threat arise when people act so as to avoid situations where the possibility of stereotype threat looms. Women, for example, may avoid STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) disciplines because their mathematical abilities, where the stereotype is that they're less capable than men, will be constantly considered inferior, even if they aren't (Davies et al. 2002). And as I'll discuss in detail below, trans women may avoid a great many situations or behaviors for fear of being perceived in terms of (negative) trans stereotypes.

These social effects of stereotype threat are too rarely discussed in the feminist philosophy literature.[5] Most, if not all, of the discussion in feminist philosophy surrounding stereotype threat has focused only on the under-performance effect. For example, a recent paper by Jennifer Saul (forthcoming) focuses on implicit bias and stereotype threat for (cisgender) female philosophers. Her interest is in how gender stereotypes may reduce the performance of female philosophers, possibly explaining part of the gender disparity in philosophy (for example, Haslanger 2008; Antony 2012; and Norlock 2012). There is a similar concern for the under-representation of women in STEM disciplines. However, such a discussion ignores the many social effects (other than cognitive performance), such as situational avoidance, that are also important to discussions of stereotype threat in feminism. Moreover, ignoring these aspects of stereotype threat leaves a potentially powerful explanation for the gender disparity in philosophy (and other areas of academe) unclaimed.

However, as I've noted previously, *none* of the feminist philosophy or social psychology research into stereotype threat (at the time of writing) has considered how stereotype threat is experienced by *transgender* women. I consider this an unfortunate oversight. As I'll argue, transgender women experience some forms of stereotype threat in a markedly different way than cisgender women do: namely, the same behavior in a cis and a trans woman is treated differently, and in troubling ways that should be of interest to feminists generally. Essentially, trans women often experience a *dual layer* threat. By understanding trans women's experiences of stereotype threat,

we'll gain a better understanding of the oppressive nature of stereotype threat more generally, as well as aspects of stereotype threat present in instances where someone changes their social identity.

4. Examples of Stereotype Threat for Trans Women

In this section I raise three examples of stereotype threat for trans women. The first is possibly less serious than the second and third, but it shows how apparently innocuous behaviors in cisgender women raise stereotype threat concerns for transgender women. The first is reading a book such as Caitlin Moran's *How To Be a Woman*, the second is being assertive or firm in argumentation, and the third is simply wearing a dress or having a feminine gender presentation.

Stereotype threat generally occurs when an individual has heightened group awareness: for example, a trans woman knowing that she's the only trans person in a group. If people know she's trans, she'll be aware of this, and this may create anxiety and make trans female stereotypes more salient to her. However, even in cases of *invisible identities*, where the group isn't aware of her trans status, stereotype threat can operate.[6] For example, she may have internalized the negative stereotypes (or is constantly, acutely aware of them) such that the effects of stereotype threat are present. In such a context, a trans woman may be fearful of having any perceived "masculine" characteristics or behaviors, lest she risk drawing attention and scrutiny to her gender that could lead to being outed as trans, possibly with the attendant social, economic, and physical costs and harms.

Wanting to Read a Book Like Caitlin Moran's *How To Be a Woman*

Many trans women are acutely aware of the "pathetic" and "artificial" trans tropes, particularly the one that suggests that trans women are only "playing at" being female, and that they're ignorant about how to be authentically female. According to the tropes, mannerisms, behaviors, and preferences are consciously and awkwardly acquired. For example, trans women are portrayed as falling over in heels, making poor fashion choices, having poor makeup skills, practicing walking with a feminine gait, and being overly careful about displaying "feminine" mannerisms, such as in how one places one's hands, and so on. Movements seem deliberate rather than natural. Trans women are thus *deliberately* female, not naturally female: they're constructed or manufactured females.[7]

This is common in media portrayals of trans female gender transitions. For example, the opening scene of *TransAmerica* involves the protagonist practicing along with the Andrea James voice-training video *Finding Your Female Voice*. These sorts of popular portrayals of gender transitions focus on the learning process trans women often go through, sometimes to unlearn their socialized male mannerisms and to develop their own feminine selves. This also contributes to the "artificiality" trope; cisgender

women often forget that they themselves went through a similar process. Their process was during childhood, though, rather than during the typical adult gender transition trans women undergo. In fact, women often play with their femininity (or masculinity) throughout their lives: the process never quite stops.

Cis girls often study, whether explicitly or implicitly, the movements of women role models and exemplars (which often include their mothers, female relatives, and friends) and attempt to mimic such behaviors. Young girls find their own way of being girls and women, and often "play" with different options. However, the same behavior, perhaps because it's portrayed as more deliberate (when it may not be), or because it comes later in one's life, in trans women is viewed as indicative of their artificiality. And since trans women are often acutely aware of this hypocrisy and negative stereotype, it will influence their willingness to discover themselves and express themselves.

By way of example, I came to hear about Caitlin Moran's acclaimed book, *How To Be a Woman*. It's a humorous take on gender and sexism from a woman's perspective throughout various stages of her life. No one would think twice about the motivations of a cisgender woman reading this book. However, trans women may worry that reading this book will be attributed to their wanting to learn how to be a woman, which the title might suggest is the purpose of the book—it's not. And this misattribution of motivations will occur when a trans woman has exactly the same motivations for reading the book as a cis woman, which may have nothing to do with learning how to be a woman.[8] Consequently, trans women may choose not to read such a book based on this fear: this is stereotype threat, of the situational avoidance variety, based on the artificiality trope.

Being Assertive or Firm in Argumentation

We generally know that being assertive or standing one's ground in argument is consistently gendered as a male characteristic, at least in many Western cultures. Thus, women who display these traits are viewed as masculine, and may suffer discrimination or harassment because of it. This was at the center of a landmark US legal case (*Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*). A senior accountant was denied a promotion because she was viewed as too "aggressive" and unwomanly. This was ruled as discrimination based on sex. It also introduced the interpretation of discrimination based on sex *stereotypes*.

Women sometimes suffer from some versions of stereotype threat such that they'll avoid a particular behavior for fear of being viewed as "manly." One example is being assertive or firm in argumentation. This is particularly a problem in fields where these traits are important, such as in medicine, law, politics, or philosophy. Strong women are often viewed as "bitchy" or "whiny" when they voice objections, whereas the same behavior is either positive or neutral for men. For example, Margaret Thatcher deliberately lowered the pitch of her voice because men were calling her "shrill" when she argued in the British Parliament. Behaviors are thus inappropriately shaped by social, sexist views of gender.

But for trans women, the fear is a little different: they will fear being viewed as masculine, and also that that *masculinity will be attributed to their being born with a male gender assignment*. Assertive behavior in a cis woman may result in discrimination or in people uttering misogynistic slurs, but her having this character trait won't bring her birth-assigned gender into question, at least not honestly. Some might joke misogynistically that she has a penis, but only as a joke. Serano calls these sorts of jokes and harassment transmisogynistic (Serano 2007).[9]

Both cis and trans women face stereotype threat about being assertive or argumentative, and both may respond with situational avoidance. For trans women, though, the threat is different: they'll face the same stereotype threat that cisgender women face, but they'll also face the stereotype threat from the behavior being wrongly attributed to their birth-assigned sex or gender. This adds an extra layer to the stereotype threat. This extra layer is always present for trans women, I suggest, but only rarely for cis women.[10] This is partly what causes many trans women to adopt stereotypical gender roles and gender presentations: in *some* cases, they do so not because they're ignorant about how to be a woman, and not always because doing so reflects their authentic gendered selves, but because doing so lets them avoid the stereotype (and other) threats associated with being trans women.[11] Trans women often make great efforts to the reduce the likelihood that someone will bring their birth-assigned gender into question, let alone use it as a tool of oppression.

FEMININE GENDER PRESENTATIONS AND EXPRESSIONS

This brings me to the third case: feminine gender presentation and expression, such as wearing dresses, jewelry, makeup, high heels, and so on. The "pathetic" trope holds that trans women are ignorant about how to be authentic women. So when they make gender expression and presentation choices, they're not authentic expressions of their gendered selves. Rather, they're "duped" into adopting stereotypical caricatures of what it means to be women. Thus, when a cis woman chooses to wear a dress, or something pink, her motivation for doing so is rarely (if ever) brought into question, but when a trans woman does the same thing, her reasons for doing so may be wrongly attributed to her being a "typical" transsexual who seeks a feminine gender presentation instead of just being herself.

However, trans women are often expected, and even pressured, to have a stereotypically feminine gender presentation. This is often enforced at the level of healthcare gatekeepers: psychologists, psychiatrists, and gender therapists who have the power to provide supporting letters in order for their patients to access health care, and again at the level of a treating physician or endocrinologist. Some trans women feel forced, then (and indeed *are* forced: they may be turned away from treatment unless they conform), to conform to dated, binaristic, sexist gender presentation stereotypes. For example, the "pathetic" trope has trans women dressing on the ultra-feminine end of the spectrum, and posits that doing so is an over-reaction and misunderstanding of what it means to be a woman.[12]

Personally, I often have a feminine gender expression and presentation; that's because that's *who I am* as a woman. Moreover, it's part of my identity as a femme lesbian. But I'm acutely aware that in doing so, I face stereotype threats: it occurs to me when I make expression and presentation decisions that I may be judged as a "typical" trans woman; because, the view goes, all trans women just want to wear dresses and high heels all the time. So when a trans woman chooses to wear such attire on the rare occasion (or, in my case, more frequently), she still faces the stereotype threat. And again, this happens even though the trans woman herself knows that the stereotype is false. What matters isn't what she thinks of the stereotype, but what others *might* think of the stereotype and how it may be applied to her. Moreover, this threat is present even if other people don't know of her trans status: the threat can be present even for invisible identities. Cisgender women tend not to face this, at least not to the same degree.

Stereotypes surrounding gender expression create a number of problems for trans women. One particularly troubling result is that some of the stereotypes of trans women conflict, which sometimes manifests in double binds (Frye 1983). Consider a trans woman with a femme identity and gender expression who wears a dress and heels. According to the pathetic and artificial stereotypes, her choice in clothing doesn't represent her authentic self (because of a commitment to gender essentialism: she's still really a boy), and so she may be viewed negatively for wearing a dress. However, if she adopts a less feminine gender expression, people may attribute her doing so to her "real" gender: male. She thus can't win: no matter what choice of clothes she makes, she's potentially subject to negative evaluations in light of trans stereotypes (and gender essentialism).

General Comments on Stereotype Threat for Trans Women

Above, I discussed how one behavioral response to stereotype threat is situational avoidance. Women who are aware, even if only implicitly, of gender stereotypes about math ability may avoid disciplines where that stereotype functions, such as STEM disciplines. One way to mitigate a certain kind of stereotype threat is thus simply to avoid domains where the stereotype functions. I've referred to this as situational avoidance, and I've suggested that this is potentially a more worrying effect of stereotype threat than merely the under-performance effect. However, trans women often can't avoid domains where the gendered (and gender-assigned-at-birth) source of their behaviors are constantly scrutinized; or, at least, they can't avoid domains where there isn't the threat of the application of these stereotypes. Any social domain raises the threats. For example, many trans women avoid participating in competitive sports for fear of excess scrutiny of their gender, especially with stories such as the high-profile mistreatment of Caster Semenya, and the subsequent IOC/IAAF gender policies that allow for "whisper trigger" investigations based on anonymous complaints.[13]

Although one's gender may not be relevant in all social situations, Western societies are structured such that one's gender *identity*, and gendered history, is always

relevant. I raised the domain of sports, but this is true particularly in mundane instances such as using a public bathroom: trans* persons are regularly harassed and are even the subjects of violence merely for wanting to use the bathroom like anyone else. And even for trans* persons who "pass," in that it's not easily discernible that they're trans*, the risk is still present of being "found out" in such situations. This leads to anxiety and stress, and in some cases, situational avoidance: some (perhaps many) trans* persons intentionally avoid public bathrooms merely because of the stress and the *threat* of being perceived in light of (negative) stereotypes, however unlikely it may be in their particular case.

Here's another example of how stereotype threat functions for trans* persons with regard to bathrooms. There's a pernicious stereotype that trans women transition *in order to gain access* to women-only spaces such as bathrooms and changing rooms. Implicitly, or explicitly, the stereotype is that trans women do so in order to violate cis women or even children: trans women are perverts, molesters, and rapists. This is the stereotype even though there hasn't been a single documented case of such an event, and even though no trans* person has ever transitioned for such a ludicrous reason. The stereotype remains, even though there's nothing to stop a man from entering a women's space to molest a child or rape a woman (or child).

Moreover, it's a regular social occurrence that more than one woman will go into the bathroom together. The social convention is that the other woman, or women, wait for the other(s) until everyone is done, exiting together. However, the stereotype of trans women is that they hang around women's bathrooms in order to ogle or even molest/rape women. So a trans woman, knowing about this stereotype, may be nervous waiting in a women's bathroom for her friends, even though she's not there embodying the stereotype. The stereotype threat is that she's afraid that *others* will view her as embodying the stereotype, whether she actually embodies it or not. This leads to anxiety and stress, and so many trans women (I can speak from personal experience here) won't conform to the social convention, and so exit the bathroom alone in order to wait for their friends. Cisgender women generally do not experience this.[14]

Now, one might think it implausible that trans women experience *all* of the same stereotypes as cis women (*mutatis mutandis*), as I have claimed. I admit that I haven't conclusively made that case: I would have to enumerate each stereotype and demonstrate that both cis and trans women experience it. This is not meant to be a phenomenological claim: how stereotype threat *feels* may be different for cis and trans women. However, part of what is behind my claim is that stereotype threat, and one's experience of it, depends heavily on how one is perceived by others, and on how one perceives how others perceive one. Provided that a trans woman is perceived as a (cis) woman, she will be subject to the same stereotypes and thus the same stereotype threats as cis women are.

One might think that there are at least some disanalogies, though. We know that women face discrimination—or at least the threat of discrimination—based on their potential pregnancy, for example.[15] Employers are cautious in hiring women, particularly in high-energy and power jobs, due to the fear that the woman may become

pregnant and require accommodations. And since trans women cannot (yet)[16] become pregnant, they can't possibly face this form of discrimination, and therefore the related stereotype threat. However, this is mistaken: provided that the trans woman is perceived merely as a (cis) woman, the concern will still be present, and she will face the same threat of discrimination and stereotype threat. From personal experience, I'm regularly asked in medical contexts whether there's a possibility that I'm pregnant. This happens, for example, before being administered a medication or an x-ray.

5. ATTRIBUTIONAL AMBIGUITY

Another recent topic of inquiry in social psychology is known as attributional ambiguity (see, for example, Crocker et al. 1991; Major et al. 1998; and Aronson and Inzlicht 2004, among many others). We find this whenever it's unclear why someone behaves a certain way toward us, such as a positive or negative evaluation of our actions. Suppose that you're a young, attractive undergraduate student in a biology lab. The male teaching assistant has just given you an A+ on your skills evaluation. Now, did he do that because your skills deserve an A+ (they very well may!), or because he's attracted to you? It's ambiguous.

Attributional ambiguity connects well with my discussion of stereotype threat. Here are two recent incidents that I faced in quick succession. Walking through airport security, I'm told that I've been selected for a random search. I select the patdown (not wanting a full body scan), and before being taken to the private room, I'm asked if my gender is female.[17] Now, did the employee do that because she suspects that I'm a trans woman, or was asking the question standard operating procedure? (All of my identification lists "female" as my sex/gender.) At the time, it was unclear. Similarly, I recently applied for a passport, and part of the process is supplying personal references. In the past, it was rare that the references would be contacted. However, this time, all of my references were contacted. I had to be explicit about my trans status on the application (with supporting documentation from my physician), so was the reference check because I'm trans, or was it, again, standard operating procedure? At the time, it was unclear.

Fortunately, in these cases, both were due to standard operating procedure. But at the time, the reasons were ambiguous for the behavior toward me. Incidents such as these produce increased anxiety and also a sense of distrust about motives. They can also lead to heightened expectations of discrimination, or even misperceptions of actions. One interesting (and troubling) feature of attributional ambiguity is that even among persons with high self-esteem, people will *discount* praise.[18] In the lab example, the attractive female student will discount her A+ as a response to the attributional ambiguity of the source of her grade.

Trans women, once again, face the same forms of attributional ambiguity that cis women do, but they face some additional sources. I've given two examples, but here is another that is particularly problematic. As mentioned, one response to attributional

ambiguity is to discount praise. So suppose that, as a trans woman, another woman praises my appearance. Now, is she saying this out of pity, or is it a genuine compliment? It's not entirely clear from the context. So this leads, in many cases (again, speaking from personal experience) to discounting the praise. It's not that the compliment is attributed to pity, but that the ambiguity leads to discounting, albeit perhaps slightly, the probability that the compliment was sincere. In a sense, the possibility of a less positive cause pollutes the possibility of the more positive cause.

Attributional ambiguity goes hand-in-hand with stereotype threat because the situations where attributional ambiguity arises are typically those where stereotype threat also functions. Was that nasty look from a woman in the bathroom because she's jealous of what a (trans) woman looks like, or is it because she's "clocked" the (trans) woman *as* a trans woman? It's ambiguous. And once this has happened, the stereotype threat of being a trans woman in a bathroom is heightened, and the anxiety and behavioral responses are similarly amplified. It's not uncommon for a trans woman to develop a sudden, intense desire to remove herself from a situation as a response to such situations (again, speaking from experience). And this can happen when the source of the behavior that produces the attributional ambiguity was of the benign sort, not connected to her being trans.

I raise the issue of attributional ambiguity not to argue that trans women experience it in importantly different ways than cis women do, as I did for stereotype threat. Instead, discussions in feminist philosophy should take note of the related research on attributional ambiguity in their discussions of stereotype threat. The topic deserves treatment on its own, but its close connections to stereotype threat make it particularly important.

6. A More Complete Picture

In this paper I've raised forms of stereotype threat faced by both cisgender and transgender women. However, due to some prevalent tropes applied to trans women specifically, I've raised some forms of stereotype threat that are unique to trans women. Moreover, the same behavior that may be negatively evaluated in a cisgender and a transgender woman are treated differently: in the latter case, behavior may be inappropriately attributed to the woman's birth-assigned gender, whereas it won't be in the former case. The threat of one's behavior being wrongly attributed to one's birth-assigned gender is a form of stereotype threat (generally) unique to trans people.

Most discussions of stereotype threat and gender assume a cisgender, cissexist perspective by ignoring how trans women experience stereotype threat. I hope that this paper goes some distance toward correcting this. Trans women carry their gender identity and history no matter where they go. Apparently benign situations become potentially harrowing, and a source of anxiety and situational avoidance.

My comments extend beyond raising awareness for trans women's experiences of stereotype threat, though. We gain a more complete understanding of stereotype threat by canvassing the widest range of examples. And since, as I've argued, trans

women face some unique forms of stereotype threat, where the explanation for their behavior is often mistakenly attributed to their birth-assigned gender, including trans women's experiences of stereotype threat is particularly important for completing our understanding of stereotype threat: feminist philosophers and social psychologists should both take note.

NOTES

1. I will generally use "trans women" to refer only to transsexual women, and "trans* women," which is the emerging convention, as the more inclusive term that refers to all forms of transgender women, including genderqueer, genderfuckers, bi-gender, and so on. However, it's important to note that many trans women only refer to themselves as "trans" and not as "transsexual." Personally, I avoid use of "transsexual" in descriptions of myself and others. The generic "trans*" denotes maximal inclusivity, including trans masculine people, agender people, and so on. For a useful explanation of this, see http://thoughtcatalog.com/samantha-allen/2013/07/7-ways-to-be-a-trans-ally/ (Last accessed October 28th, 2013).

2. I do not subscribe to a gender binary where there are only men and women (even if these categories include trans men and trans women). Moreover, I don't fully subscribe to the distinction between gender (as social and perhaps mental) and sex (as biological). Regarding language, I will use male, female, man, and woman to describe gender identities, whether cisgender or transgender. I'll typically refer to transgender women as "trans women" when it serves my purposes, and cisgender women as "cis women." When I use the general form "woman" or "female," I mean to include *both* cisgender and transgender women. I know that this is controversial. Fully justifying this is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, one worry I have is that making a relatively clear distinction between, for example, "female" and "woman" is cissexist. Let's say that we grant that trans women are women (gender term). Are they female (sex/biological term)? Let's say that we grant that those on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and post-genital surgery are female. That's problematic for a whole host of reasons, not least of which is the financial burden that such medical interventions cost (they're often prohibitively expensive, which raises class and other intersectional issues). Such a distinction, I think, often seems to make intersex people invisible and places them into "gray areas" of the applications of the concepts in problematic ways.

3. One might question whether some stereotypes (or their enforcement) and thus stereotype threats arise within trans* communities themselves. The short answer is "yes," often quite rigidly.

4. In line with Blum 2004, this stereotype of trans women remains dominant despite absolutely no clear, documented cases.

5. McLeod 2010 discusses cases of situational avoidance, but not in the context of stereotype threat.

6. This isn't just for trans* persons. Any social identity can be invisible.

7. These are the terms used by Raymond 1979.

8. Note the asymmetry in a cis woman reading something like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* which is explicitly about learning about the female bodily experience; such a motivation (wanting to learn about the female bodily experience) is not looked upon with any negative suspicion, whereas a trans woman's motivation to read something in order to learn about her bodily experience as a woman will be looked upon with suspicion. (Lest the reader think that trans women's bodies are totally different from cisgender women's bodies, remember, for example, that trans women who undertake hormone-replacement therapy experience the *same* breast growth stages as cisgender women.) Cisgender women aren't portrayed as "artificial" or as "studying" how to be a woman because of reading a book like this, whereas trans women are (or may be).

9. Consider the "hyena" joke in the Sandra Bullock movie *Murder by Numbers* (2002). However, it's only in jest: no one actually suspects that she's a trans woman. For suspected trans women, though, it wouldn't be in jest: there would be an actual questioning of her birth-assigned gender. I myself have heard utterances such as, "Well, I throw poorly for a girl without a penis."

10. However, it's disproportionately present for cis women who break gender schemas, such as butch lesbian women, or even for cis hetero women of color.

11. Although I can't fully explicate what I mean by "authentic," I merely mean that one isn't, in a real sense, intentionally acting a part. That one "really is" a woman must be a possibility for trans women, just as much as it is a possibility (if not the perceived default) for cis women.

12. Of course, this objection is less frequently levied against cisgender women with similar gender presentations. Tammy Faye Bakker is one salient example.

13. One would be right to note that there are alternative analyses of what happened, particularly intersectional analyses noting, for example, race, colonialism, and other important axes of identity and legacy that led to her poor treatment. Although I agree that intersectional analyses of such cases are critical, the reader may note that I've largely ignored intersectional issues with stereotype threat, gender, gender identity, race, and so on. These are critical questions and issues, but they are beyond the scope of the current project. There has been some research on this topic, though it is often not labeled as such. See, for example, Pittinsky et al. 1999; Shih et al. 1999; and Pittinsky et al. 2000. For a discussion of the IOC/IAAF gender policies, see Karkazis et al. 2012.

14. This isn't entirely true, and noting how it should be qualified is important. There are a number of reports of cis black women, often with short, cropped hair, being incorrectly gendered male and subjected to violence, harassment, and even police or security harassment for using the women's bathroom. Cis butch women also often experience these problems. It's thus important to note how intersectional analyses are important. However, an intersectional analysis of stereotype threat—and situational avoidance manifestations—is a rich topic that is beyond the scope of this paper.

15. My thanks to Richard Nunan for this example.

16. Medical technology is quickly approaching a point where trans women can be impregnated and carry a baby to term. One proposed method is uterine transplantation (UTx); see del Priore et al. 2013. The feasibility is at the point where ethical guidelines are being devised (although very problematically); see Lefkowitz et al. 2013. My thanks to Lindsey Porter for pointing me to this research.

17. Connecting to note 2 above, this was the language used by the security officer, herself a woman.

18. This isn't a typo: Crocker and Major 1989 propose this as a way that those in stigmatized groups protect their self-concept. See also Crocker et al. 1991.

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