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Transgressive Capabilities: Skill Development and Social Disruption in Rural India

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Abstract. Under what conditions might the acquisition of new skills challenge discriminatory social norms? We interrogate this question through reference to a study on the social impacts of an agricultural skill development scheme in rural India. We present detailed vignettes drawn from this study, which illustrate the social consequences of acquiring and utilizing skills that transgress local gender and caste norms. Engaging with themes from capabilities theory, we highlight how, although not all skills are transgressive, for some, acquiring “transgressive skills” not only enhanced life opportunities for themselves, but also others within their communities. However, the form of their transgressions and their social consequences varied based on their relative privilege and the operation of place-specific social norms and systems of oppression. We argue that transgressive skills may drive progressive social change, but distinguish between two types of transgression. Individual, brash, “heroic transgressions” against the status quo are more accessible to the relatively privileged, whereas marginalized people are more likely to engage in “nested transgressions,” which form part of long-term, collective struggles for empowerment. The latter, though often overlooked, may offer sustainable pathways to progressive change that reflect local aspirations.

Keywords: *Capabilities, caste, gender, skill development, transgression.*

Introduction

The last two decades has seen an effervescence of research on geographies of skills. This research considers how skills diffuse across space and time, changing as they encounter new

materials, bodies, and socio-economic conditions (Patchett 2017; Mann 2018; Lea 2009). Some recent papers have considered how power structures enable or constrain skills – such as the power of the state to define certain practices as “skilled” or “unskilled” (Raghuram 2021), or the power of capital to determine which skills are valued, utilized, and remunerated in the workplace (Richardson and Bissell 2019). Research on skill geographies in the global South has considered these questions in relation to more socially embedded power structures, asking how social norms of gender, ethnicity, and other axes of social difference shape how skills are imparted, who is able to acquire and deploy them, and whether (or not) they facilitate social mobility (Carswell and De Neve 2018; Gough et al. 2019).

We explore these themes through reference to a study of recently introduced agricultural training programs in the state of Himachal Pradesh in the Indian Himalayas. These trainings form part of a renewed policy emphasis in the global South since 2000 on skill development and upgrading systems of technical and vocational education and training (TVET)(Powell and McGrath 2019). While the aim of these schemes is typically to improve productivity (King 2012; Allais 2012), researchers deploying “critical capabilities” theories advocate an approach that draws on skills to support broad-based human development (McGrath et al. 2020). This implies that acquiring skills should help people overcome constraints that prevent them achieving desirable life outcomes – thereby expanding the realm of “positive freedoms” (Sen 1999). A capabilities perspective may thus bolster research in geographies of skills, moving beyond a focus on the factors governing skill dispersal (e.g. Patchett 2017; Lea 2009), to consider the role of such dispersal in facilitating progressive social change.

In what follows, we take up this concern with how new skills might enhance capabilities. Yet, following Richardson and Bissell (2019), we do so with geographical sensitivity to how power

relations enable or constrain skilled performances within particular settings. While Richardson and Bissell are concerned with the regulatory power of capital and the state over skilled practices, we consider how place-specific patriarchies and caste norms inform which practices are acceptable and which are transgressive for people occupying different social positions (see Miller and Ponto 2016, 269). We contend that if skills are to enhance capabilities vis-à-vis such normative constraints, this entails individuals drawing on them to enact practices and build identities that transgress and/or challenge these norms. When transgressive skilled practices effectively challenge social norms – weakening the restrictions they impose – they may enhance the capabilities not only for the initial transgressor(s) – who may be few in number – but for others within their locality who occupy similar social positions. Yet, the capacity to enact transgressive capabilities and the social effects they generate also depend on place-specific factors, including the availability of resources, and the position one occupies within social networks and locally salient structures of hierarchy and privilege.

Geographers have previously examined how skills that challenge social norms may be acquired in safe, spatially bound enclaves (for a review, see Carr and Gibson 2016), yet have noted that scope for promoting change beyond these spaces is limited (Carlsson 2017). This paper, by contrast, examines the conditions and effects of acquiring such skills amongst people who remain spatially and socially imbricated within the communities whose norms they transgress. We argue that a more place-sensitive approach to capabilities theories of skills enables consideration of the social and spatial conditions under which “transgressive capabilities” might be acquired, deployed, and facilitate social change and capability enhancement.

Theorizing Capabilities and Transgression

In outlining the tenets of capabilities theory, Sen (1992; 1999) argues for assessing development not only in terms of its impact on income, but also whether development expands the scope of what people are capable of achieving with their lives: whether they have gained positive freedoms to choose from an expanded set of desired ways of living. Nussbaum (2011) elaborates on the theory, by developing a non-exhaustive list of capabilities that she posits as requirements for lives people have reason to value, including physical health and meaningful participation in community life. The theory provides a normative lens through which to evaluate the merits of development interventions that avoids prescribing a fixed aspirational vision of the “good life,” while still engaging with the substantive prerequisites for human flourishing (Nussbaum 2011; Olson and Sayer 2009).

Over the last decade, capabilities approaches have been deployed in research on skill development and TVET in the global South (Powell and McGrath 2019; McGrath et al. 2020). Such approaches emerged from concerns that dominant skills research and policies take overly “productivist” stances, concerned primarily with the role of skills in improving economic productivity and (perhaps) secondarily in improving trainee employment outcomes (McGrath 2012). Capabilities approaches, by contrast, emphasize the potential of skills to expand trainees’ sense of their possible futures and enhance their capacities to pursue a wide array of goals (Powell 2012). To this end, capabilities research on skills attempts to put trainee perspectives first, identifying what trainees value and wish to achieve with their lives, drawing on this to advocate an expansion of TVET’s social purpose (Powell and McGrath 2014a). TVET should not only impart technical skills, but also enhance agency, working on trainees’ capacity to convert skills into the achievement of desired life outcomes (Powell and McGrath 2014b).

Capabilities research has explored whether skills training might enhance trainees' involvement in household decision-making (Hilal 2017) or their capacity to overcome the constraints of multidimensional poverty (McGrath et al. 2020).

Although capabilities research on TVET has been concentrated in education studies, it has also influenced research in geographies of skills. Geographers have found it valuable in considering how skills might enhance agency at individual and collective levels (Gooptu and Chakrabarty 2018; Brown 2020). Yet, they also note the need to nuance capabilities approaches, by noting how aspirations to use skills in particular ways are influenced by regional power structures (Brown 2020). This speaks to ambiguities within capabilities theories, particularly regarding the status of "local culture." Culture may be a source of personal meaning and hence "living a life one has reason to value" (Nussbaum 2011, Chapter 5); yet, cultural norms may also be an objective constraint on a broader suite of capabilities (Nambiar 2011). This ambivalence is reflected in capabilities research on skill development. Regarding gender, for example, some studies in this tradition highlight the value of acquiring skills that challenge culturally entrenched gender roles (e.g. Alla-Mansah 2018, cited in McGrath et al. 2020), while others argue skill development programs should recognize women's aspirations to perform unpaid domestic work and impart skills that enhance women's capabilities to perform these traditional roles (e.g. Hilal 2017).

Here there is value in returning to Sen's (1992, 6-7) insight that aspirations are often adjusted to contexts marked by multi-layered inequalities and deprivations. Normative social codes that discriminate across axes of social difference constrain both capabilities and aspirations. Living within these constraints may be a form of "flourishing" when doing so is a source of personal meaning; yet, their normativity inhibits not only the capabilities of those who passionately

adhere to them, but also others who are forced to conform to limiting social expectations. We contend that transcending structural constraints, systemic inequalities, and oppression implies a transgression of the normative order. While transgression, broadly defined, could imply deviance from universalizing moral or ethical codes imposed on *all* members of a society – including criminal activity or failure to conform with norms associated with “good citizenship” – in this paper we use the term in a narrower sense. Transgression here implies a violation of regionally specific cultural expectations of appropriate conduct for a person of one’s social position (on the basis of gender, class, race, caste, etc.). In other words, we refer to transgressions that violate discriminatory cultural norms that limit capabilities. Such norms tend to be place-specific, socialized within family and community settings as one learns their place within their immediate social milieu (Miller and Ponto 2016). Moreover, place-based factors, such as the strength of social convention and the spatial organization of work and life shape whether transgressions are viable and the extent to which they challenge social norms (Dyson 2008). Under some conditions, transgressions may open possibilities to be more than what society had expected – thereby challenging those expectations in ways that enhance the capabilities of others who occupy similar social positions.

There are, however, limits to what can be achieved by developing transgressive skills in isolation. While developing and deploying transgressive skills may have powerful demonstration effects that challenge restrictive social norms (Dyson and Jeffrey 2018), there are reasons for caution in promoting such skills without a commitment to broader social change. Assuming a will-to-transgress amongst target groups without engaging with their aspirations may represent a projection of liberal values that do not resonate with local socio-cultural conditions (Cook 2021). Moreover, there are risks that neoliberal individualist approaches to enhancing transgressive

skills that do not simultaneously effect broader social change may result in the transgressor becoming the victim of ostracization or violent responses (Madhok and Rai 2012).

Here, we see value in distinguishing different varieties of transgression. The way transgressions unfold and the substantive freedoms they engender differ based on axes of social difference. For the relatively privileged, transgression may occur through sudden, brash defiance of social expectations. Such transgression may entail a moral “fall from grace” followed by heroic acts of redemption. We call these “heroic transgressions.” The heroic transgressor proves to society the error of their limiting assumptions and reinscribes their transgression as innovation: one is not a deviant, but a pioneer. The suffering one experiences after violating community expectations can be encoded as part of a narrative of personal progress – enduring hardship to consolidate one’s identity and reach new heights. This, however, is contingent upon access to a discursive space in which the heroic component of one’s transgression is recognized. If this is lacking and those in one’s locality do not recognize merit in transgression, the transgressor requires a strong internal sense of the worth of their actions, perhaps developed through education, or access to religious or moral discourses. Successful heroic transgressions may shift social expectations in ways that not only transform the transgressor’s lifeworld but also create opportunities for the less privileged – both by lessening community resistance to the development of transgressive skills and by inspiring marginalized people to develop skills they once believed impossible (or “impossible here” or “impossible for people like us”).

Yet, heroic transgressions are not accessible to all. For those in positions of marginality, transgression often occurs more incrementally and its impact is contingent upon recognition

within the prevailing social order.¹ Marginalized people are often unfavorably positioned with respect to what Appadurai (2004, 66) calls the “terms of recognition” – that is, “the conditions and constraints under which the poor negotiate with the very norms that frame their social lives.” Prevailing cultural values and norms tend to disadvantage the poor and marginalized. In India, this is apparent in ideas surrounding caste – which glorify skills and attributes high-status castes are more likely to possess – and gender – which idealize features of “Indian womanhood” that encourage women to assume subordinate roles (Harris et al. 2020). Appadurai (2004) suggests that since marginalized people often lack “stocks” of recognition as dignified moral agents, they are compelled to either conform to prevailing cultural codes – even when this is to their detriment – or risk losing what little social standing they have. For this reason, Appadurai advocates the marginalized develop a cultural capacity for “voice” – allowing them to “speak back” to the prevailing culture and contest its norms. Such a capacity, he suggests, may develop through collective action and networking, in which marginalized people safely articulate and experiment with alternative values and desired futures. From this viewpoint, it may be more effective for the marginalized to engage in what we term “nested transgressions” – transgressions nested within long-duration, collective forms of action. Rather than directly opposing or rejecting the prevailing moral order – which may have adverse personal consequences – nested transgressions develop a capacity for critical engagement with that order, creating possibilities for longer-term capability enhancement.

Research on skills in the social sciences has largely focused on the acquisition and deployment of skills that are normative, rather than transgressive. In exploring both formal and informal skill

¹ The progressive changes enacted by ‘heroic transgressors’ may also build upon longer-term processes of social change – but their visibility (and, often, social privilege) mean they are often perceived as solely responsible.

development, such research has highlighted how people seek opportunities to develop skills that enable the performance of socially desired gender and ethnic roles (Sundar 2018; Brown 2020; Colley et al. 2003). Within human geography, research on skills has mainly emphasized how social, economic, and political power encourages the acquisition of skills that accord with social identities (Dyson 2008; Gough et al. 2019). The focus has been on how skills are shaped by and reproduce normative social roles, structures, and values, with less consideration of how they might contest them. This paper, therefore, expands the scope of debate on skills by exploring the social and spatial conditions under which acquiring and deploying new skills may challenge an unjust social order, rather than reproduce it.

Context and Methodology

We explore these themes through a study of a set of new agricultural skill development programs in India. Agriculture provides a useful focus for studying transgressive skills, particularly in India, where agricultural tasks have distinct caste associations and where the agricultural division of labor is highly gendered. These programs were introduced as part of the Skill India initiative, which seeks to upscale and reform India's skill development sector (see King 2012). The programs studied were modular trainings of four to six weeks' duration. Each focused on one aspect of agricultural production, animal husbandry, or allied activities.

The data presented here was collected in the state of Himachal Pradesh. This state is notable for having small landholdings, but relatively high human development indicators, which reflects comparatively well-functioning state institutions. We engaged with trainees enrolled in trainings

on organic farming, mushroom cultivation, dairy, and poultry – though trainees had often engaged in one or more other agricultural training programs.

Data collection consisted of two rounds of interviews and participant observation from late 2018 to early 2020. The first were conducted at the training site, and explored trainees’ backgrounds, their reasons for enrolling, the meanings attached to their agricultural practice, and their plans after completing training. The second round of interviews were conducted approximately one year after the completion of training and explored the impact their newly acquired skills had on their lives and communities. Visits were made to trainees’ farms and villages, where we directly observed the contexts in which skills were applied and engaged in more ethnographic methods of inquiry. In interviews and participant observation, we avoided invoking tropes of gender- or caste-appropriate skills; yet, when interviewees mentioned caste and gender influences on their skill acquisition and utilization, we encouraged them to elaborate.

Fifty-three interviews were conducted in the first round of research and thirty-one in the second round. Interviews were conducted in English and Hindi, with Author 2 providing translations. The caste, gender, and age characteristics of interviewees are documented in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

From this sample, most trainees deployed their skills in ways that were normative with respect to their social identities. For example, men deployed skills that enabled them to establish commercial ventures, conforming to male breadwinner norms; women tended to use skills to play supportive roles within the domestic and subsistence economy, conforming to normative social reproductive roles. Eight trainees, however, acquired skills that transgressed locally salient caste and gender norms to the extent that this generated a social backlash. These individuals are

our focus in this paper. Their experience illustrates the social effects of acquiring transgressive skills and how this might inform skill development programs to enhance capabilities.

Training developed skills that were transgressive in one of two ways. They either (1) were immanently transgressive, pertaining to activities that violated local, caste-specific norms of purity and pollution – such as handling animals deemed “dirty”; or (2) encouraged the assumption of social roles and identities deemed inappropriate for a person of one’s social status.

For purposes of this paper, we selected four individuals who had acquired such transgressive skills. These four were selected on the basis that they occupied different and intersecting positions within local caste and gender hierarchies: a high-caste man, a low-caste man, a high-caste woman, and an intermediate-caste woman. This allowed a detailed comparative examination of how relative privilege affected the meanings and social consequences of acquiring transgressive skills and the different strategies their respective social positions enabled for navigating these consequences.

Caste, Masculinity, and the Transgression of Community Expectations

Caste remains a prominent institution of social stratification in India that limits capabilities (Ghosh 2019). Although caste as a system of hereditary livelihoods has weakened, caste discrimination remains pervasive in social institutions (notably, marriage) and in economic relations (Mosse 2018). Practices and beliefs associated with untouchability persist, exacerbating social exclusion and marginalization. According to these beliefs, some practices – such as skinning animals – are considered degrading and hence avoided by castes of higher status. This impedes the capabilities of upper castes by limiting the livelihoods available to them, but more

importantly, it undermines a broader suite of capabilities for lower castes. High-caste revulsion against “ritually polluting” tasks reproduces the stigma attached to them, undermining the dignity of labor for lower castes and entrenching their marginalization. Meanwhile, lower castes can be compelled into these low-status activities, because of their exclusion from other livelihoods (Ghosh 2019).

Public transgressions of caste norms – such as “untouchable” castes entering temples, or inter-caste marriages – have long been part of the repertoires of contention of anti-caste activists (Gorringe 2016). Yet, such transgressions generate a social backlash – often in the form of violence, directed particularly against lower caste transgressors (Katulkar 2013). These transgressions are, therefore, less risky for those occupying positions of caste privilege.

In this section, we explore the processes and effects of two men – one of a high caste and another of a low caste – acquiring skills that transgressed community expectations. Their transgressions are not only of norms of caste, but also of regionally specific masculinities. Across India, a dearth of stable employment opportunities for educated men have undermined male breadwinner norms, leading some men to resort to novel strategies to earn livelihoods and reassert their masculinity (Jeffrey et al. 2008). In Himachal, as across much of the Himalayas, there is a long history of male outmigration to engage in seasonal employment in larger towns. This tendency has increased in recent years, such that now most agricultural tasks are performed by women -- elsewhere in India referred to as the “feminization of agriculture” (Ramamurthy 2010). As such, male engagement in certain kinds of agricultural work is transgressive of locally salient breadwinner norms. Caste norms also coarticulate with class mobility in the region, which has seen significant economic growth in recent years. Maintaining an upward mobility trajectory in such a context may create or maintain caste prestige.

Tandav²

Since childhood, Tandav wanted to run a poultry farm, but stigmas of caste forbade him.

Tandav's family belong to the high-status Rajput caste, who regard poultry as dirty and works of butchery as beneath them. "You're a Rajput and you'll work as a butcher, bring shame [*naak katwayega*]?" his mother scolded him. His mother was not only a Rajput, but a government employee, and was concerned about what his taking his livelihood in poultry would do to her reputation and that of the family. Such family disputes were common amongst those we interviewed who were planning to start ventures in poultry or piggeries – livelihoods that might upset local notions of respectability.

Unable to pursue this dream in his youth, Tandav made his livelihood as a taxi driver for tourists. Yet, the work was unsatisfying, entailing long hours, weeks away from family, and the navigation of dangerous Himalayan roads. While undertaking this work, he kept hearing about government supports for those starting ventures in animal husbandry, including poultry. Tired after two decades of taxi driving, Tandav revisited his childhood dream. "If I could run a poultry," he said, "I would never leave home." Ironically, he wanted to transgress by entering a vocation repulsive to his family and caste community, in order to be close to them.

Tandav began forming a business plan. He recognized that by availing schemes offered by the state agriculture department and purchasing subsidized chicks from the local agricultural university he could get started without incurring significant financial risk. He explains:

² All participants' names presented in this paper are pseudonyms. Minor biographical details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

A new car costs me ₹1,600,000, while a poultry shed would cost ₹1,000,000. With the 60 percent subsidy, this comes down to ₹400,000. It's almost free.

He drew on these calculations of potential profitability to persuade his family; yet, they remained skeptical. He found their opposition somewhat amusing and was dismissive of their old-fashioned way of thinking. “*Inko marne do* [Let them die],” he said, referring to the caste stigmas he was ready to abandon. His desire to engage in a transgressive livelihood seemed partly anchored in the possibility of increased acknowledgement and respect that successful rebellions sometimes bring. He hoped that his family and community would one day take inspiration from his success in this heroically transgressive venture.

Given his lack of prior experience in poultry, Tandav needed skills to make this planned business a success. Thus, in early 2019, he enrolled in the poultry training at which we met him. The training provided him the essential skills for building and managing a poultry farm, including shed design, hygiene, and feeding. Training also introduced him to other poultry farms and aspiring farmers in the region. Entering a community of practitioners and receiving moral support from trainers strengthened his resolve to persevere despite family opposition.

We followed up with Tandav approximately a year after the training. He had not yet commenced his poultry business, having encountered challenges associated with poor roads, which impeded market access. Yet, his resolve remained firm, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had disrupted his taxi business. As his plans matured, they were shaped by ongoing dialogue with his family about the suitability of a poultry livelihood. He persuaded them by drawing their attention to a meat shop a young man had opened opposite their house. He contended the shop was earning the same amount of money in just three hours that he would make driving tourists all the way to Delhi. This began to shift his mother's perceptions:

[I]n the beginning, if I would talk about it, she would get angry. “That is dirty work, will you do this?!” As time goes by things are changing. And my mother and my elder brother also look at that shop now and they see that he is earning 10,000 [rupees] in a matter of hours whereas I have to go to Delhi to earn 10,000 and in that 10,000 there are costs of fuel, there are costs of tires, of insurance, there are thirty-six tolls.

Profitability seemed to gradually trump social respectability. Yet, Tandav also had to make concessions to render this work acceptable to his family. During our first interview, Tandav told us he planned to be involved in all aspects of poultry, from rearing chickens to butchering them. Yet, as he made more concrete plans, he conceded that he will not slaughter the animals himself – which would be the clearest violation of caste purity norms.

Now when I sit at the shop, it's not like I will be sitting there and cutting [the animal] myself – I will not do that. So if I [make a profit] of 2000 rupees in a day and I am earning 60,000 rupees a month, if I hire a butcher and pay 7000-8000 a month to him, what do I have to do? I just sit by the table at the office!

Tandav was pleased with this concession – not only because, as this quote suggests, it required less physical labor on his part, but also because it allowed him to confine himself to what he called “good clean work.” This, he said, is something his customers would appreciate. Thus, despite claiming to have left behind casteism, his decisions endorsed norms of purity and pollution, in which certain types of work are regarded as “unclean” and hence stigmatized. Further, to minimize his family’s shame, he planned to establish the meat shop not in his village, but in a nearby town, spatially removed from village gossip. His venture was still transgressive in a context where the sale of meat would usually be done by lower castes, but less so than his initial plans to also handle and butcher chickens. Moreover, being spatially removed from

Tandav's immediate social milieu – as is often the case with transgressive activity (e.g. Dyson 2008) – the capacity of his transgressive skill deployment to challenge social conventions was limited.

Despite his concessions, Tandav continued to invest in his identity as a transgressor. He planned to call his shop “Thakur Meat Shop,” Thakur being a Rajput name, and hoped people will notice this and that it will demonstrate that anyone can sell meat. In this, Tandav's transgression had the potential to expand capabilities for others, particularly other Rajputs, but also those of lower castes, by challenging stigmas associated with the sale of meat. At the same time, it enabled him to consolidate an identity as an innovator who went against social taboos to establish himself. This shows how Tandav's caste privilege allowed him to turn his transgression into opportunity in a way that would not be possible for members of oppressed communities. Our research suggests “upward transgressions” by lower castes might generate a more harmful social response. Some interviewees suggested, for example, that Brahmin families routinely refuse to purchase milk from members of lower castes, such that lower caste trainees who acquired dairy entrepreneurship skills would encounter obstacles to accessing markets. Tandav, by contrast, despite causing embarrassment for his family, was able to signify his (relatively modest) transgression as heroic, believing this would increase the visibility of his business. Tandav's representation of his transgression as heroic is not without irony, since although he may have slightly modified social perceptions and stigmas with possible flow-on effects throughout the community, in trying to appease his family he had to modify his plans – enacting them “without getting his hands dirty.” The transgression was real, but its effect was only to shift the boundary between pure and impure work; the boundary itself was reproduced.

Arjun

While Tandav's disavowal of societal expectations was admirable, it rested on privilege. For those born into privileged castes, there is room to maneuver regarding respectability norms: the personal consequences of transgression would not have been greater than embarrassment for the family. Moreover, privileged castes' superior access to resources provide greater opportunities to displace their transgressions spatially, as Tandav hoped to do by establishing his butchery away from his village. For those from lower castes, however, social status has been hard won and is implicated in ongoing struggles for individual and collective mobility. This was apparent in the case of Arjun, a member of a Scheduled Caste (SC).³ Arjun's foray into agricultural entrepreneurship, though transgressing family and community expectations, was contingent upon incremental gains in respectability over several years.

Arjun and his family are involved in a suite of home-based entrepreneurial activities – including off-season vegetable cultivation, goat rearing, mushroom growing, solid waste trading, and manufacturing paper bags for local stores. This was not always the case. Though women in his family had always been involved in farming, Arjun acquired most of his agricultural and entrepreneurship skills in the last three years (he is now forty-three) after attending training programs at the local *panchayat*, Krishi Vigyan Kendra,⁴ and agricultural universities. As the son of a wage laborer, it was expected that Arjun, too, would engage in wage labor to provide for his family. In his youth, he followed the path of many other young SC men in the region of migrating to Delhi for work. Such migration is important for young SC men, not only in

³ SCs are castes recognized to have suffered the stigma and social exclusions associated with untouchability and are targets of positive discrimination efforts by governments in India.

⁴ *Panchayats* are institutions of local government in India. Krishi Vigyan Kendras (Agricultural Science Centers) are district-based institutions of agricultural extension.

enhancing opportunities for cash income, but also escaping the indignities of caste oppression that characterize village settings (Carswell and De Neve 2018). Migration for purposes of wage labor also accords with local constructions of masculinity, in which agriculture – associated with subsistence, rather than cash income – has become a feminized activity (Fischer 2017). Though life in Delhi was challenging, it was necessary for Arjun to move away from farming, which his family associated with the poverty they sought to escape. “We used to detest agriculture” he says, bluntly, since “there was no profit in farming.”

In 2005, Arjun returned to Himachal to tend to his father, who had become ill. It was around this time that Arjun married, and this, combined with his father’s medical expenses, put pressure upon him to find local sources of income. He began collecting and selling scrap metal – a low-status profession associated with SC communities – and working for a cable TV company, managing installations. He describes the period following his return as being characterized by “tension.” Following the birth of his two daughters, he was preoccupied with thoughts of how he would provide a prosperous future for them.

I kept thinking about it in a perpetual state of mental torture. I kept getting sick. Since I have two young daughters, I have to think about them too. All the time, I worried that things will remain just as abject as they were. They will crumble further. I didn’t have the money to invest, set up a business.

Part of Arjun’s anxiety was that his status as male provider was under threat – important, given that regional patriarchal norms expect men to provide cash income. He was perhaps even more sensitive to these expectations, in a context in which men from SC backgrounds who fail to meet these expectations are often stereotyped by upper castes as being lazy and prone to alcoholism and family neglect.

Yet, Arjun had an aptitude for developing positive relationships with his urban cable TV clients, who took interest in his family's farming and requested to buy fresh vegetables from him. This fostered an aspiration to make a livelihood in agriculture. His cable work also connected him with people from local banks, who told him of subsidies available to farmers, and people at agricultural education centers, who told him about training programs. It was thus in 2017 that he decided to enroll in a course on protected cultivation, and began venturing into agricultural production. Developing skills as a farmer was transgressive, challenging agriculture's feminized status and his family's associations of agriculture with poverty. When he started his agricultural experiments, his sister berated him, questioning what possible income he could derive from farming. As household breadwinner he was expected to provide for his family and secure their futures. Living in a locality undergoing rapid economic development, the pressure to attain upward mobility and overcome historical associations of their caste-community with poverty was paramount.

Arjun was able to make this transgressive venture into agricultural livelihoods because he had already established his reputation as family breadwinner and responsible community member. His cable work had earned him the respect of a wide section of local society. Arjun's concern for respectability was reflected in his attitudes towards government schemes. Unlike Tandav, for whom accessing government benefits was part of the process by which he persuaded his family of the economic viability of his transgressive venture, for Arjun, the respectability of his work was predicated on its being secured without assistance from government subsidies. Much in the manner described by Appadurai (2004), to maintain his pride Arjun was overly responsive to pervasive discourses suggesting SC people prosper not by merit but through government handouts. Unlike Tandav, Arjun's venture into a transgressive livelihood was not accompanied

by amusement in the shock it generated or a claimed disavowal of concern for societal attitudes. At every step, Arjun sought to demonstrate his work was respectable and conformed to local social expectations.

Given his concern for reputation, undertaking training was not only useful for Arjun in developing his skills, but also in affirming an identity. It was telling that when we asked him the greatest benefit he gained from training, he responded:

We got to talk amongst ourselves. When I did the first training... I met farmers who were very literate and skilled... [W]hen I came to realize such educated people were practicing agriculture, and when we got time to speak and share amongst ourselves, I realized I can also talk this way with other farmers. This was very important for me.

From Arjun's perspective, the value in the training was in improving his "terms of recognition" (Appadurai 2004), through the affirmation of his identity [*pahchaan*] as a farmer. If finding his livelihood in agriculture was transgressive for Arjun, he would not find comfort in boldly struggling against the dominant culture, but rather by engaging with it by mobilizing a more positive image of what a farmer can be and achieve. This highlights the value of agricultural education programs that develop these "cultural" capacities and cultivate agricultural livelihoods as sources of identity and pride.

Arjun also drew on this positive image of agricultural livelihoods to uplift others. Central to his aspiration as a farmer was to become a role model to local young people, noting that this is often lacking.

The youth here want to leave agriculture. Because growing up here, they don't have role models to look up to – there isn't any farmer with a good business, who has a car, who

has [thriving] fields. The youth here leave their homes for jobs at which they are exploited and paid poorly.

By demonstrating the commercial viability and dignity in agricultural work, Arjun enhanced the capabilities of young men who may be similarly disposed towards agricultural livelihoods, but reluctant due to associated social stigma. This would not have been possible, were Arjun's transgression not nested in his long-term, incremental efforts at building his reputation as a hardworking, respectable member of his community and, indeed, his community's long-term struggles for recognition.

For Arjun, the kind of brash, heroic transgression enacted by Tandav would be unthinkable. It would destroy a long-established public image, already threatened by negative social attitudes towards SC communities. By transgressing in a manner that was more sensitive to social attitudes and respectability norms, Arjun created a clearer pathway for others, showing young people the potential for profit and dignity in agricultural skills. At the same time, precisely because he was so accommodating of social attitudes, Arjun reproduced some aspects of the wider culture that disadvantage SCs – notably, the idea that there is dishonor in relying on government assistance. This limited his potential to realize profit from his agricultural ventures – ironic when contrasted to high-caste Tandav's trajectory, in which government support played a major role.

Transgressing Patriarchal Norms through Entrepreneurship Skills

In developing his identity as an agricultural innovator, Arjun depended upon the labor of female family members. These women's contribution, however, was less visible and they did not lay

claim to being innovators as Arjun did. Across rural north India, patriarchal norms devalue women's labor and limit their opportunities to gain social recognition, develop empowering identities, and exercise agency in developing and utilizing skills.

Patriarchal norms in India limit women's engagements in paid employment and access to public space, whilst demanding the subordination of their labor to the needs and objectives of their families (Harriss et al. 2020). Transgressing patriarchal norms may risk spoiling one's social reputation, limiting marriage prospects, eliciting conflict within the marital home, or engendering public violence and harassment (Bhattacharyya 2015). For this reason, it can be in women's interest to conform to normative gender roles. In such contexts, the acquisition of new skills are unlikely to enhance capabilities without a shift in what Kandiyoti (1988) calls the "patriarchal bargain" – the socially normalized "rules of the game" to which women are expected to conform.

In rural Himachal, as across much of the Himalayas, women are more directly involved in agricultural production than on the north Indian plains. Given norms of male outmigration, in many families, elder women serve as de facto heads of household while men are away (Berry, 2001). Yet, there are strong expectations that women remain in villages to serve domestic needs. Moreover, women's lack of ownership of productive agricultural assets mean that men often claim social recognition from agricultural ventures, developing identities as "entrepreneurs," while women are represented as "helping" with projects led by other family members (Brown 2020). Women are further restricted from becoming rural entrepreneurs by social norms that prohibit them selling food at the market. Here, gender intersects with caste – upper caste women may be particularly constrained in engaging in public forms of entrepreneurship, as they are positioned as custodians of their family's caste honor in a context where female mobility is transgressive (Field et al. 2010; see Miller and Ponto 2016). In this section, we present the

journeys of two women from different caste backgrounds, to highlight different dynamics of developing transgressive skills related to agricultural entrepreneurship.

Malini

With two sacks of vegetables in front her and another two behind, Malini rides into the vegetable market on her motor scooter. By now, her presence is familiar, but when Malini began selling vegetables at market it surprised many. Not only was she a woman selling her produce in a context where men typically do so, but a Brahmin woman. Both selling vegetables and riding a scooter by herself were activities regarded as demeaning for a woman of her status. On her farm, Malini had constructed three polyhouses (plastic greenhouses) for growing off-season vegetables entirely by herself. Initially, her neighbors believed she could not manage such work alone and that working the fields all day is not a suitable lifestyle for a Brahmin woman.

Unlike Tandav's and Arjun's, Malini's transgressions were initially due to factors outside her control. She was raised in a town in upland Himachal, where gender norms are less restrictive than in the lower hills and plains, and engaged in activities – including horse riding and martial arts – typically considered unsuitable for girls. She excelled in her studies and, with encouragement from her natal family, formed the aspiration to obtain a senior position within the Indian civil service. Yet, this plan was thwarted. It began with her marriage. After completing higher secondary studies, Malini married into a family from a village in the lower hills of Himachal. There, she says, there were greater restrictions on what women could do and with whom they could associate, which frustrated Malini, who was accustomed to a more “open atmosphere [*khula mauhaul*].” In this new environment, she was subjected to a gendered division of labor in the household and to gossip from local women, who invoked stereotypes of upland

women's loose moral standards – subtly disciplining her confident disposition. Malini's parents-in-law were less supportive of her career aspirations and only allowed her to complete her studies via distance education while she focused more on domestic and agricultural tasks. Malini did what was expected of her as a dutiful wife, tending to fields – and later children – alongside her studies and applying for government positions.

In 2002, the final year of her studies, Malini's husband, a day laborer, suffered a workplace accident, paralyzing him from the waist down. As he had been the primary earner, the household – which by then consisted of three children – faced a crisis in meeting expenses. Thus, just as Malini was approaching her dream of government employment, she was forced to withdraw from studies and seek paid work. Doing so was not only a source of personal disappointment, but required transgressing the boundaries of appropriate behavior for a woman of her social standing. She was forced to engage in regular work outside the village – somewhat transgressive for any women in rural Himachal, but particularly for Brahmin women. She told us that while people believe that women from high-status castes should not work outside the home,⁵ she could not heed such concerns when she needed to consider her family's wellbeing. She worked in a beauty parlor for several years, barely covering household expenses. As her children grew older and moved into higher studies she needed to find ways to earn more. She began exploring options for more remunerative agricultural enterprises. She heard of a government scheme, which provided an 85 percent subsidy on polyhouse construction. She made enquiries and enlisted herself for training at a local Krishi Vigyan Kendra on protected cultivation. There she learnt (masculinist) skills related to the physical construction of polyhouses, as well as the technical and

⁵ Government employment and other white-collar work would be an exception to this prohibition and would not be regarded as transgressive.

entrepreneurship skills in growing off-season vegetables within polyhouses to obtain higher rates at market.

After completing training, Malini took a bank loan to construct her first polyhouse and availed the aforementioned subsidy. Drawing on the skills acquired in training, she made a profitable livelihood. Within a few years she had not only repaid her loan, but also self-financed the construction of two additional polyhouses. She later undertook further training to bolster her capacity for agricultural entrepreneurship, including in organic farming and mushroom cultivation.

The first time we interviewed Malini, she was somewhat lighthearted in describing the effect her actions had on others within her community. She explained how people were surprised to see a woman constructing a polyhouse and even more so when she began transporting vegetables to market:

I used to take around 40 kilos of capsicum on my Scooty [motor scooter] each day by myself. At the market, the other shopkeepers kept looking at me, [thinking] “a lady, on a Scooty?” I was in the middle with two sacks in front of me and two sacks behind. They used to go on watching – they could only see capsicum – I wasn’t visible! They were all surprised. It was a little different – this might happen in cities, but here no one had done this work.

In our follow-up interviews, however, she clarified that there was a darker side to people’s reactions. She fought back tears as she related how her activities outside the home invited gossip and slander from others in the village. Her brother-in-law distanced himself from her. When she went out to attend trainings and sell her vegetables, local women claimed she was not providing adequate care for her husband and children and alleged sexual impropriety. Malini struggled with thoughts of suicide, but was determined to persevere for her family’s sake. When achievements

invite gossip instead of esteem, the capacity for new skills to enhance agency is limited – particularly when one remains socially imbricated in community and dependent upon it for livelihood and social survival.

Yet, despite numerous obstacles, Malini had enabling factors that allowed her to prevail. For many women we interviewed, taking time to attend long-duration agricultural trainings was challenging, given their agricultural and domestic duties. Malini adjusted her schedule, doing agricultural work before and after training, but her children (by then in their late teens and early twenties) also helped manage the farm while she undertook training. Even her husband, who had regained some mobility, took on some work in the polyhouses. “My family supports me completely,” she says. “With them managing things, I can handle a twenty-five-day training.” Further, although she does not mention it explicitly, the passing away of her parents-in-law years earlier undoubtedly made it easier for Malini to take control of the family farm – we encountered no cases in our study of women having executive command over farmland while parents-in-law were still living.

Malini’s education provided her with the cognitive resources to endure the social and personal hardship associated with transgressing community expectations. The way she narrated her story felt somewhat rehearsed. By detailing the community opposition she faced and people’s disbelief that a woman could achieve what she has, she made it apparent how remarkable her achievements were, resignifying what others regarded as improper behavior as a heroic struggle against gender norms. Her capacity to develop her own narrative was a source of personal resilience and also helped shift community perceptions, highlighting the importance of self-narration for aspiring transgressors.

By 2020, Malini's innovations had gained her a reputation as a "progressive farmer" and the local extension agency was using her as an exemplar of what is possible. She featured on a regional television program on women farmers. People in the village who initially gossiped about Malini came to recognize her for her achievements. Despite bitter feelings about the past, Malini decided to use the skills she had gained to form a self-help group for women in her village, through which she provides training on natural farming, supports women's entrepreneurship, connects them to expertise, and develops their leadership capacity. "I have had to struggle in life and had to depend on myself," she says. "I want others to learn from my example, from my experience, to make sure they are not left behind." She notes, however, that selling at market remains a major barrier for most women, making the development of entrepreneurship skills challenging.

As is common amongst women in rural India, Malini did not have much say over her circumstances – her transgression was born of necessity, rather than freedom. The effects of her transgressions contrast with those of Tandav's and Arjun's in the extent to which they damaged her reputation and caused emotional distress. After persevering, however, Malini was able to resignify her transgression as part of a "hero's journey"; it not only enabled her to attain economic security, but became a source of pride, allowing her to consolidate her identity as an innovator. The benefits of this resignification were not only personal, but also social and economic, gaining media attention which has enhanced her profile in the community. Her educational background and the support of her family undoubtedly assisted Malini in articulating this positive narrative. In doing so, her transgression has created opportunities for others and shaped local discourse on the potential of women's entrepreneurship.

Lakshmi

Not all Indian women have Malini's educational resources, family support, or confidence to transgress social expectations. In such cases, transgressions are articulated through more everyday negotiations of the boundaries of acceptable practice. Where more privileged actors, like Tandav, were able to express bold intentions to transgress which were later negotiated with family, less privileged actors have more to lose from expressing such intentions, lacking, as they do, the "terms of recognition" (Appadurai 2004). They are better positioned to transgress norms by tapping existing currents of social change and persuading others of the benefits of small, incremental transgressions. Take the example of forty-year-old Lakshmi, whose efforts to establish a mushroom business required continuous bargaining with her husband and mother-in-law. While the stories of the three transgressors presented above were somewhat exceptional within our study, Lakshmi's was more typical of the female trainees we interviewed.

Lakshmi lives at the periphery of a small town and belongs to one of the "Other Backward Castes" (OBCs).⁶ At a young age, Lakshmi married and soon after faced family pressures to have children. Moreover, her husband, who until then had worked in a wedding supplies business, decided to start such a business of his own. Since her marital family aspired to send her children to private schools, there was additional pressure on Lakshmi to support this business and make it successful. Lakshmi had to subsume her labor to the interests of her marital family, including child raising, subsistence farming, and supporting her husband's business. Between these obligations she had few opportunities to consider projects of her own.

⁶ OBCs are castes which, while not having faced the historical stigma of untouchability, have nonetheless been deemed to suffer social and economic disadvantage.

The business was set up within the family home, where wedding costumes and decorations were made to order. As the business expanded, it came to occupy almost the entirety of their double-story home. Living spaces became small workshops, where family members and temporary workers cut fabric and worked at sewing machines. Bedrooms doubled up as storerooms for materials and commodities. The business not only subsumed her labor, but also the domestic space. Yet, even after nineteen years working alongside her husband producing these wedding supplies, Lakshmi still referred to it as “my husband’s business.”

By 2018, the business had become reasonably successful. The family covered the costs of their children’s private school education and their schooling was almost complete. The pressure on Lakshmi to subsume her labor to household needs was abating. Around this time, Lakshmi attended an event organized by a local women’s self-help group (SHG). A leader from the NGO sponsoring the SHG came and told of the potential of women starting household-based businesses in mushroom cultivation and informed them that the NGO would provide a significant subsidy on mushroom bags to help them get started. Lakshmi was intrigued, seeing potential in this to do something of her own and earn her own money. “Earlier I had no interest in [mushrooms],” she explains, “[the NGO] gave me the idea, they encouraged me – ‘you can do your own work, have your own earnings.’” This, along with witnessing other women from the SHG start their own projects, helped build Lakshmi’s confidence.

Yet, acquiring skills in mushroom cultivation and entrepreneurship would be transgressive, moving against the expectation that she subsume her labor to household needs. Moreover, starting a project of her own would require rearranging the domestic space and disrupting the temporal cycles of the family business. She had to bargain with her family – not through fiery exchanges, but rather ongoing negotiations. It began with requests to her husband that he allow

her a room within the home to keep mushroom bags. He was initially reluctant, given the already cramped domestic-commercial space, but eventually agreed to set aside a small room. Lakshmi also had to negotiate with her mother-in-law, who was initially convinced this project would consume too much of Lakshmi's time. "It seemed like hard work," her mother-in-law told us, "I thought she would just try it once and give up." Lakshmi also had to negotiate with her to take time out to attend mushroom cultivation training – the twenty-five-day course involved 8 hours of classes each day, which significantly disrupted her routine. To persuade her mother-in-law that this would not be too disruptive to the household, she agreed to complete the day's cooking early in the morning before departing for classes, thereby ensuring her mother-in-law would not have to assume additional work. This kind of bargaining with family was common – almost universal – amongst women whom we interviewed who enrolled in these trainings.

When we visited Lakshmi a year after her completion of the training program, she had not only continued growing mushrooms, but had expanded and was now occupying more space within the house. From one room, her mushrooms had colonized three. Moreover, her husband, who initially left the mushroom business exclusively to her, now takes part in watering and harvesting, referring to it as a "good side-business" for the family. Lakshmi kept the money made from the sale of mushrooms for herself. Since in most agrarian contexts in north India, women do not receive the cash that results from their agricultural labor, this injection of personal, discretionary income – however small – represented a boost to autonomy. Lakshmi did not spend her profits on herself, however; instead, she invested in expanding the mushroom business, growing new varieties. This suggests that even more than gaining her own income, Lakshmi valued developing a project that was distinctly her own.

Lakshmi's transgression may appear subtle, but its effects, when combined with those of other women in her neighborhood acting in similar ways, were profound. The simple act of claiming space and an autonomous economic activity pushed the boundaries of what is acceptable for women in a context in which economic constraints conspire with patriarchal norms to justify the subsumption of female labor and autonomy to the needs of the household. Yet, despite the potential of these activities to enhance women's autonomy, they are often socially invisible, not receiving the same positive attention as those who create greater social disruption or economic value. Where women like Malini were held up as "model farmers" by their training providers and in news media, this was not the case for Lakshmi, whose work might be recognized as valuable but unremarkable.

Although Lakshmi's transgression expressed individual agency, the will-to-transgress was a social achievement. Lakshmi was inspired to develop her skills and start her own business by an NGO and other women who had come before her. This social context cleared the pathway for Lakshmi and likely ameliorated the resistance to transgression from family members, normalizing minor transgressions of the patriarchal bargain and highlighting the positive impacts of these activities on household income. Amongst the women in Lakshmi's SHG, transgression (in the form of asserting claims for autonomy) had thus become a social process, whereby the pushing of some patriarchal boundaries had become progressively normalized. In this process, the enhancement of one woman's capabilities helped open opportunities to increase capabilities for others. Lakshmi spoke with enthusiasm about joining the SHG's WhatsApp group, through which women share stories of their mushroom cultivation activities and thereby propagate new ideas. Being nested within the SHG enabled Lakshmi's transgression to have collective effects –

when she shares what she has achieved in mushroom cultivation on the WhatsApp group, others might be inspired to follow her lead.

Yet, Lakshmi's transgression occurred within limits. Like all other women from the mushroom cultivation training whom we interviewed, Lakshmi did not sell her mushrooms herself – which may impede the control she has over the money her business earns, limiting its potential to enhance autonomy. Moreover, it is unlikely that Lakshmi would have had the opportunity to start this business during an earlier phase in her life. It was only possible after her husband's business had become well-established and her children had almost completed their schooling, reducing other demands on her time and labor. Indeed, all women who attended mushroom cultivation training were either yet to have children, or had children who had reached an age of relative independence.

The fact that Lakshmi did not take her mushrooms to market may explain why her transgression did not generate the kind of social backlash – gossip, rumormongering – that Malini's had. Since Lakshmi was not able to draw on the social and educational resources available to Malini to ameliorate such a backlash, she could only engage in minor transgressions and negotiations of the limits of the patriarchal bargain. Had she wished to take her mushrooms to market, her family and community would have likely resisted. Lakshmi's nested, negotiated transgressions were thus safer, having less of an adverse social impact on her life. These negotiations at the boundaries of acceptable practice that Lakshmi and other female mushroom growers before her had enacted, meant that these moderately transgressive skills in mushroom cultivation and entrepreneurship could disperse throughout the community more readily, encountering less cultural resistance. Younger women in Lakshmi's neighborhood, for example, had similarly started their own mushroom ventures, though this still required some negotiations with family.

As such, although the acquisition and deployment of these skills may not cause shocking disruptions to the status quo, their gains are likely to have a more sustainable impact, gradually reshaping the contours of the patriarchal bargain in women's favor.

Conclusion

In the four cases we have explored here, social norms of caste and gender created resistances to the acquisition and deployment of new skills, limiting these skills' potential to enhance capabilities. This aligns with the findings of previous research on geographies of skills, which shows how power relations shape how skills diffuse across space and time (Richardson and Bissel 2019; Raghuram 2021; Carswell and De Neve 2018). Yet, when individuals and collectives acquired and developed skills that transgressed normative community expectations, they challenged these powers – often in ways that expanded capabilities (Powell and McGrath 2019). Not only do transgressive skills enable the individual in their possession to chart a broader canvas of possible futures, but they reshape community expectations, challenge stereotypes, and make it easier for subsequent generations to pursue a broader array of life pathways. In the cases presented above, transgressive skills gained some degree of acceptance within communities and thereby pushed the boundaries of discriminatory cultural codes that prescribe appropriate forms of livelihood based on gender and caste. Such findings suggest new avenues for research within geographies of skills, by highlighting how the diffusion of skills may facilitate social transformation. Our vignettes explored the socio-spatial conditions under which this may be possible. One condition that undoubtedly helped all four participants effect change was that their transgressions were income-generating – demonstrating economic value was key to negotiating their acceptability (see Cooke 2021, 59). Furthermore, self-narration – the capacity to invest

meaning in transgressive skills as sources of pride and positive identities – enhanced their personal and social impact.

Our findings also show how transgressive skills differ in form, often in ways that reflect social privilege and the possibilities enabled by place-bound histories of social contestation. For the relatively privileged, transgression may take the form of heroic campaigns against the status quo – bold assertions of one’s right to pursue a path regarded as unsuited to their social position. Their capacity to deploy “heroically transgressive” skills may rest on their privileged position within their locality, which insulates them against social backlash, or their superior access to networks, education, and non-local ideas, through which their aspirations are cultivated. For the less privileged, transgressions are typically more negotiated, incremental, and nested within long-term, struggles for change within their localities. If one has the educational resources and social support to articulate boldly transgressive skills as heroic, it may pay significant dividends, raising one’s profile in the community and enabling the accumulation of social, cultural, and economic capital. Yet, it also comes with risks of social backlash (as was the case for Malini) and, when faced with sustained community or family opposition, what begin as heroic gestures can culminate in more minor challenges to the status quo (as was the case for Tandav). Seemingly modest as they may be, nested transgressions may provide a pathway to more sustainable change. By working incrementally through collective structures and building on place-specific histories of struggle these transgressions may have more powerful flow-on effects, leading to more enduring shifts in social norms.

In practice, training providers often accept the normativity of restrictive social roles rather than challenge them (Colley et al. 2003). When the value of transgression is realized, the temptation might be to promote outspoken role models who have succeeded in heroic transgressions, whose

stories seem inspiring in a broader context in which neoliberal discourses celebrate the “heroic individual” (Madhok and Rai 2012). This was evident in our study, where trainers tended to showcase heroic transgressors and overlook nested transgressors. Yet, although heroic transgressors may exhibit powerful demonstration effects, their experience is by-definition atypical and comes with risks. Nested transgressors, by contrast, are not only engaging in less risky (and thus more sustainable) action, but mobilize already-existing and locally meaningful aspirations for social change and capability enhancement. There is, therefore, great value in building up these quieter transgressors, who too often go unnoticed.

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