Trans governmentality: the production and regulation of gendered subjectivities

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To cite this article: Tam Sanger (2008) Trans governmentality: the production and regulation of gendered subjectivities, Journal of Gender Studies, 17:1, 41-53, DOI: 10.1080/09589230701838396

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589230701838396

Published online: 05 Jun 2008.

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Feminist theorists have long critiqued the hierarchical gender division inherent in Western societies, with the inequalities resulting from this divide being widely decried and some progress made in reducing these. Despite increased efforts to theorise trans identification in recent times, gender is still largely understood, both culturally and theoretically, as adhering to the dualism of male/female. I argue within this paper that consideration of the narratives of transpeople and their partners could expand our conceptualisation of gender and offers possible points of resistance from which to challenge the gender binary, thereby destabilising hegemonic discourses of gender. As such I explore the narratives of transpeople and their partners in relation to the construction and reconstruction of gendered subjectivities. Transpeople’s intimate partnerships, considered here due to the critique of gender norms often evident within them, are examined through the theoretical lens of Foucault’s notion of governmentality. This paper offers an example of how governmentality can be a useful tool in the effort to understand gender regulation, not least for those apparently on the margins of ‘normality’.

Keywords: governmentality; gender identity; discourse; transpeople; gender theory; narrative

Introduction

A number of recent debates in gender studies have focused upon the links between gender and sex, and the question of whether or not it is viable at this moment in time to ‘undo’ gender (e.g. Lorber 2000, Butler 2004, Ruspini 2007). Within this paper I aim to explore the usefulness of bringing the narratives of transpeople and their partners to bear on these debates. Firstly, I shall briefly review the current theories relating to trans, as well as introducing governmentality as the theoretical framework to be used herein. The research this paper draws upon will be described, in order to introduce the subsequent sections, which review and analyse the narratives of transpeople and their partners, firstly with respect to the overarching influence of the gender binary, and secondly with regard to the strategies employed by individuals to resist binary gender norms. The final substantive section explores the theoretical implications of involving the diverse narratives of both those who conform to and those who diverge from the norms of the gender binary, in debates concerning the undoing of gender. Concluding remarks include consideration of possible ways to move forward past the current
impasse between, for example, trans and lesbian feminist theorists, and feminists and post-structuralists.

Terminology relating to transpeople is highly contested and changeable, not least because, as Judith Butler recognises, discourse requires that the speaking subject participate in the very terms of their oppression (2004, p. 91). A major site of dispute is the naming of transpeople as either ‘transsexual’ or ‘transgender’. Transsexual is a label most often associated with those who place themselves unproblematically within the gender binary of female/male, with transgender describing a more complex relationship with gender norms. I shall employ the term ‘transpeople’ to describe those individuals whose gender identity does not match that assigned at birth. This could mean being assigned a female gender but identifying as male, or vice versa. It could also involve being assigned either male or female and identifying as neither or both.

My approach is underpinned by Foucault’s notion of governmentality. Mitchell Dean states that governmentality ‘provides a language and framework for thinking about the linkages between questions of government, authority and politics, and questions of identity, self and person’ (1999, p. 13). In addition, ‘an analytics of government removes the “naturalness” and “taken-for-granted” character of how things are done. In so doing, it renders practices of government problematic and shows that things might be different from the way they are’ (p. 38). This removal of the ‘taken-for-granted’ character of how things are done resonates with my problematisation of the ‘taken-for-granted’ norms of gender, which undergird society, and, therefore, our everyday lives. Foucault’s work, and in particular his theory of governmentality, is seldom utilised in relation to the narratives of those who are regulated and produced through power relations, instead focusing on generalised notions of societal governance. Within this paper I attempt to incorporate an exploration of narratives into a governmentality framework, in order to bring material and cultural concerns together, and thus avoid prioritising one over the other, as queer theorists (cultural) and feminists (material) have been charged with doing (see McLaughlin 2006).

**(Trans)Gender theories and governmentality**

This section is intended to provide an overview of current theoretical positionings relevant to this paper; namely, debates about the feasibility of deconstructing the gender binary, theory relating to trans subjectivities, and governmentality.

My epistemological focus is based upon post-structuralism, and specifically, Foucauldian discourse analysis. Hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality rely upon the assumption, sex→gender→sexuality, where it is presumed that the physical sex assigned at birth through visual discernment of genitals precedes identification as a particular gender, and gender must be known before sexuality can be articulated and publicly recognised. The understandings of sex, gender and sexuality imaginable within this conceptualisation are figured with respect to the binaries of vagina/penis, female/male and homosexual/heterosexual, thus allowing for only a limited number of permutations. Further, it is presumed that these categories will only combine in specific ways, such that penis=male and vagina=female, and each in its ‘normal’ configuration will lead to a heterosexual sexuality. Foucauldian discourse analysis allows for reconceptualisation of hegemonic understandings such as these, thereby opening up discursive space for those who do not adhere to the norms implied above.

Contemporary feminists are divided with respect to the gender binary, often urging the end of gender but nevertheless retaining the use of gendered identity markers and understandings for pragmatic political purposes [see Hawkesworth (1997) and Hird (2000)]
for critique]. Despite efforts to move away from essentialism, gender is still generally mapped directly onto sex, not least because, as with critical race theory and other anti-oppressive perspectives, this is how gendered and sexualised identities are recognised, produced, and consequently positioned within matrices of power. Linda Nicholson (1995) uses the term ‘biological foundationalism’, as opposed to biological determinism, to describe the understanding which underpins many feminists’ theorisations of gender, with biology being refuted as a direct antecedent to gender identity, but still employed in certain circumstances:

Still maintained is the idea that there exist some physiological givens that are used similarly in all cultures to distinguish women and men and that at least partially account for certain commonalities in the norms of male and female personality and behavior. (Nicholson 1995, p. 49)

This notion bears similarities to that which is sometimes referred to as ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak 1985). I argue in this paper that notions such as biological foundationalism or strategic essentialism are limited, in that they ensure that those who challenge the gender binary and do not identify as either male or female remain largely invisible, continuing to exist at the margins of societal understanding.

Dave King, discussing transsexual and transvestite identities in 1993, argued for recognition of identificatory possibilities which could not be subsumed within an understanding of a ‘career’ progressing in specifiable stages [as discussed in Ekins (1993)]. Instead, King was an early sociological advocate of remaining open to the diversity of trans subjectivities which may exist, as well as the possibility of social change impacting upon the ways in which transpeople view themselves and are viewed by others. Since this publication in 1993 there has indeed been a proliferation of trans identities, as well as a seeming increase in the number of transpeople identifying with sexualities beyond the heteronorm (Sanger, 2007a). Sally Hines and Surya Monro are more recent proponents of the need to recognise diverse trans identifications, within everyday life, social theory and government policy, with Monro arguing that ‘[t]he inclusion of sex/gender diverse people in discussions about gender theory problematises existing Western approaches, including feminisms, masculinity studies, and queer theory’ (Monro 2007, 1.1).

Myra Hird (2000, 2002a) has problematised the sex/gender binary through consideration of intersexuality and transsexuality, arguing that these identificatory possibilities make clear the ways in which both sex and gender are discursively produced. Hird utilises the Foucauldian emphasis on power, knowledge and truth as central to the formation of those identifications generally deemed to be ‘natural’ and uninfluenced by culture and society. Judith Butler similarly theorises gender as produced through truth effects, which maintain it as a primary and stable identity. Gender is critiqued as coming into being through the ‘regulatory grids of intelligibility’ characteristic of modern-day Western society (Butler 1999 [1990], p. 166).

It has been argued that transwomen perform stereotypical femininities and undermine the work of feminists who have attempted to move beyond these (Raymond 1994 [1979], Jeffreys 1997, 2003). This conceptualisation of transpeople offers a homogenous understanding. A number of theorists in trans studies have argued, as I shall within this paper, that this is a simplistic understanding, which fails to consider the nuances of transpeople’s diverse experiences and conceptualisations of gender (e.g. Califia 1997, Monro 2005, 2007, Hines 2006, 2007). While those feminists who articulate an ‘anti-transsexual’ rhetoric (Califia 1997) claim that transwomen reify the female/male binary
and biologically determinist thinking, the same is claimed by transpeople in relation to radical lesbian feminists, who often employ ‘strategic essentialism’ and understandings of gender which reinforce biological sex as immutable. Transmen are also determined by some radical lesbian feminists to be seeking male privilege and attempting to escape their lesbianism by identifying as heterosexual men (Jeffreys 2003). Again, this argument rests upon an understanding of all transmen as individuals who previously identified as lesbians and wish to conform to hegemonic masculinity, whereas many remain (or attempt to) within feminism and concerned with gender equality (Hines 2005).

Tamsin Wilton (2000) and Myra Hird (2002b), in their exchange in Sexualities, made visible some of the tensions between feminist, lesbian and trans theories. Hird argues that Wilton, in her article about trans identification, has reified the psycho-medical discourse and binary gender, when in fact exploration of trans identities offers the opportunity to interrogate gender norms (Hird 2002b). She goes on, in line with a number of theorists, to argue for the importance of dialogue between transsex, lesbian and feminist communities. I shall discuss this possibility further below, in an attempt to move the debate away from differences between these discourses and toward their similarities (see Richardson et al. 2006).

Transpeople are often denied the opportunity to have their voices heard, particularly in medical and legal contexts, but also within feminism, sociology and queer theory, resulting in a homogenous conceptualisation of trans (Namaste 2000, Hines 2006, Sanger 2007a, 2007b). As such the diversity of trans subjectivity is an important addition to current understandings, enabling a more variegated approach, which may offer opportunities to move beyond some of the impasses evident between, for example, trans-identified theorists and radical lesbian feminists (see Califia 1997, Halberstam 1998, Namaste 2000, Rubin 2003, Hines 2005). I shall explore the narratives of transpeople, along with those of their partners, within this paper, in order to problematise binary understandings of gender, and further to explore the tensions that have become increasingly evident between some feminist and post-structuralist theories (Francis 2002).

It has been argued that Foucault’s assertion of power as omnipresent does not allow for any space in which its mechanisms may be overturned, and that his work is too abstract and separate from ‘lived experience’ to offer alternatives. This perceived lack opens Foucault up to critique from those who emphasise the political implications of theory and the necessity for theory to take account of, and for feminists, to facilitate, social change (e.g. Moi 1985, Alcoff 1990). The interlinking of social theory and politics has been a central component of feminism, a movement oriented towards gender equality and gender transformation. There are also concerns about Foucault’s, and other male post-structuralists’, androcentrism and lack of consideration of feminist positions in their work.

Despite such difficulties for feminists with respect to Foucault, some have engaged with his work and used some aspects of his theoretical ‘toolbox’ to interrogate and expand the underlying assumptions and aims of feminist thought. As feminisms are currently being challenged in terms of what a feminist identity actually means, with the category ‘woman’ being de- and reconstructed through inevitable debate with post-structural and postmodern theories, Foucault’s work is sometimes seen as offering an opportunity for feminists to think themselves differently (Bailey 1993). As Bailey states, ‘[i]t is at this crossroads – when the stable identity of “woman” has been called into question by many feminists – that the work of Michel Foucault holds some strategic possibilities for feminism’ (1993, p. 100).

In line with the governmentality approach drawn upon here, I critique the overarching conceptualisation of agency and power as conflictual and entirely separable, and of
individuals as capable of moving beyond structures of power and inequality. For Foucault, power is not a thing but a complex network of relations. The myriad discourses, norms and truths shaping society are produced through power relations. Therefore, none of these things can be conceptualised as existing outside of power, which produces the world around us, as well as our own subjectivities, and thereby regulates our conduct and sense of self. The linkages between power and freedom are complex and impossible to wholly untangle and consider as separate entities (Foucault 1994 [1982], p. 342). This conceptualisation of power and freedom problematises popular notions of a repressive power that must be overcome to allow for freedom (also see Foucault 1978). Instead, Foucault offers an explanation which focuses on power as productive and only existing insofar as those involved in power relations are free, as in they ‘are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available’ (Foucault 1978).

I argue within this paper that one way in which individuals can harness this freedom is through the questioning of the gender binary. Each individual has been inescapably structured by norms and discourse, but has the propensity to question and attempt to challenge those which cause them harm and discomfort. Thus, agency does have a role to play in Foucauldian accounts of being, but only within a framework where power is understood as not entirely escapable.

Transpeople’s narratives are seldom considered in academic discourse, even where trans identities are examined theoretically. Radical lesbian feminists have imagined transpeople to be a homogenous group who conform to binary gender and deny their sexualities by moving towards a heterosexual identity, whereas queer theorists often valorise transpeople as transgressors whose identities question binary gender. My own research has shown that transpeople are not a homogenous group, such that attention must be given to the diversity of subjectivities enacted. The following sections detail this heterogeneity.

**Telling stories**

This paper is based on research conducted between 2002 and 2006. The study was an analysis of the regulatory frameworks influencing, as well as influenced by, transpeople and their intimate partners. This section offers a brief overview of the research as an introduction to the narratives discussed below.

The method utilised was the in-depth face-to-face interview, 37 of which were conducted on a one-to-one basis with transpeople and their partners. These interviews were tape-recorded, with the interviewee’s permission, and pseudonyms were used. The majority of the interviews took place in England, with a small number being carried out in Ireland. Questions were based around issues such as changes in the law, sexuality, transphobia, medicalisation, gender identity, marriage, and family. The open-ended structure of the in-depth interview offered interviewees the opportunity to expand upon the areas of their lives they deemed most important. This led to the telling of stories (Plummer 1995).

In terms of diversity, the gender breakdown was skewed towards the female, with 27 individuals identifying as female, four as male, three as genderqueer, and a further three as either both male and female, or neither. These identifications were also sometimes articulated as changeable over time. Ages ranged from 23 to 58. Sexualities included bisexual (14), heterosexual (eight), queer (six), undefined (five), pansexual, asexual, queer/bisexual, and queer/lesbian (one of each). Twenty-six identified as monogamous
and 11 as non-monogamous, and six individuals had more than one partner at the time of interview. Six identified as disabled in some way. The following sections will explore the narratives of some of those interviewed as part of the research project, firstly focusing upon the regulations enacted through gender norms on individual subjectivities, and then considering the ways in which gender was critiqued and re-examined both by those who identified as trans and by their partners.

Norms demarcate which lives will be afforded societal intelligibility, advancing a notion of the ‘right’ way to fit into particular categories, such as the right way to be a woman or a man (see Butler 2004). As Butler notes, those who exist outside of the norms of society are already questioned as subjects (2004, p. 227), and therefore there exists a necessity to work to change the hegemonic discourse or else accept a positioning as less than human. The consideration of those who fail to conform to particular norms leads us to reconsider the underlying structures of those norms, and to question their taken-for-granted nature (Butler 1999 [1990], p. 140).

‘If you don’t know that gender doesn’t have to be male and female [. . .] you don’t necessarily consider the alternatives’: gender as regulatory

Within this section I shall consider the narratives of those who discussed their regulation through norms of gender, subsequently either adhering to these norms or challenging them in some form or another.

Foucault’s theorisation of governmentality involves a critique of common understandings of the state as all-powerful, and an emphasis instead on the ways in which the state has become governmentalised and the impact this has had on populations and individuals. Foucault has stated that:

[T]his form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. (1994 [1982], p. 331)

This subjectivisation fixes each individual with a particular gender, which, I shall argue, prescribes the ways in which individuals live their lives, as well as the recognition they give to and receive from others.

Gender assignment at birth, and the overwhelming impact of the regimes of truth surrounding gender, were recalled by many of those involved in this study as regulatory and restrictive. Childhood was often discussed in terms of feeling different and being sanctioned for diverging from gender stereotypes (Kane 2006). Liz recalled:

anything that I’d ever done that would have sorta given an insight into my inner self my parents would’ve said things like ‘oh you don’t do that’ or ‘boys don’t do that’ or ‘don’t do that, that’s sissy’ and things like that, so you developed even ways from the earliest of age to disguise how you felt inside. (Liz, transwoman, age 47)

Liz’s experience was a common one, and such reactions from others were perceived as having been fundamental to a past inability to perform a gender identity other than that assigned at birth. Such ‘transgression’ invited punishment and was therefore avoided.

The acceptance of the binary gender system, which had been questioned in relation to earlier experiences, raises questions about the discursive articulations that have had an impact upon interviewees’ lives and subjectivities. Understanding gender identity as an essential aspect of the self, which must be accepted and enacted, encouraged many to transition (Hird, 2000, p. 354). Eimear articulated a feeling of inner femaleness: ‘when I’m dressed as a woman my attitude changes, my temperament really changes and I feel, now
sitting here talking to you I feel natural, I feel this is me and this is the way I want to be’ (Eimear, age 55). Thus, Eimear engaged in an essentialist discourse of natural or inherent gender identity.

Transpeople receive messages from society, and even those close to them, that to reveal their trans identification would be dangerous and could have negative consequences (Namaste 2000). Such silencings perpetuate the gender binary, with transpeople fearing harassment and violence, and therefore often presenting as either male or female so as to avoid others’ confusion about their gender identity. Louise, whilst she did not identify as fully female, was happy to be perceived as such, as she felt she would be more readily accepted by those around her if she presented as unproblematically female:

Only I need to know that I’m not entirely straight (laughs) and only I need to know that I’m not entirely female, but I don’t think anyone is really, I think if anyone says they’re entirely one or the other they’re probably misunderstood, and I think just some kind of balance somewhere between. Yeah I think I’m 90% female most of the time. (Louise, transwoman, age 23)

Thus, Louise’s problematisation of the gender binary is not visible to those others who may judge her and the dichotomy is reinforced. Whilst some transpeople may feel themselves to be not entirely of one accepted gender identity or the other there is still a strong feeling, for many, of needing to conform within particular contexts (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998). The self-regulation, and consequent frequent desire to ‘fit in’ and be ‘normal’, resonates with a governmentality approach, where regulation is more diffuse than simply being imposed by the state. The narratives of a number of interviewees reflected the regulation experienced from a variety of influential sources.

Regulatory mechanisms are not limited to those emanating from the state and non-trans Others. Transpeople themselves, perhaps through incorporation of medical notions of who should receive treatment and in an attempt to avoid stigma, forge regimes of truth relating to norms which must be adhered to in order to be accepted as a ‘true transsexual’ [King 1993; see also Prosser (1998) in relation to trans embodiment]. It is, of course, not the case that all transpeople categorise others in this way, but a number of those interviewed either directly or indirectly engaged in such policing of trans borders. Julie returned to the notion of the ‘true transsexual’ numerous times during her interview, arguing that ‘someone who can be TS but can live with their male body, I don’t think is in the same league’ (Julie, transwoman, age 56), and thus aligning trans with genital modification through articulation of a discourse of clearly and binarily gendered bodies. Julie felt that there were certain ‘rules’ in relation to gender roles, which must be conformed to in order to identify as truly transsexual. Those who defy their birth-assigned gender in a societally palatable manner are deemed ‘true transsexuals’ and others are excluded for ‘making a mockery of the female gender’ (Julie).

As Emily, the non-trans partner of a transwoman, stated, ‘if you don’t know that gender doesn’t have to be male and female […] you don’t necessarily consider the alternatives’ (Emily, age 24). Transpeople may be perceived as inhabiting a unique position from which to consider alternatives to binary gender, but societal and cultural regulations, and fear of harassment or worse, render problematisation of the gender binary risky and alienating. The narratives considered above show that the regulation of gendered subjectivities is extremely pervasive and difficult to resist, such that the vast majority of individuals, as Emily stated, do not even consider that there is an alternative to the gender binary. The following section deals with the narratives of those who have attempted to resist binary gender in some way, whether theoretically or in a more practical manner.
‘I now identify as somewhere in between, somewhere [...] just neither female or male, or both’: undoing gender?

Butler’s notion of ‘working the weakness in the norm’ speaks to the narratives of a number of interviewees who found it difficult to conceptualise their identifications within a hegemonic discourse, and attempted to rearticulate these to make room for their personal subjectivities (Butler 1993, p. 237).

As discussed above, the gender binary is an extremely influential discursive framework. However, not every individual identifies within the binary, as illustrated by many interviewees, who problematised it in some form. These disruptions to binary gender may still be perceived as constructed in relation to it, rather than as forcing its reconsideration in any palpable manner. Of the 37 interviewees, six identified as neither male nor female in some form when asked, ‘Do you identify as the gender you were assigned at birth?’ Those who did identify themselves within the gender binary did not always do so unproblematically, with a number disrupting this dualistic understanding later in the interviews, and formulating a more nuanced positioning with respect to their gender identification.

Susan, who identified herself as non-trans and female, stated: ‘I don’t really see anybody as 100% male or female really. I think a lot of people are sort of in the grey area in the middle’ (Susan, age 27). Despite initially having attached the female category to herself, she then went on to trouble that assertion, arguing that she and her partner are both ‘quite androgynous’ in relation to gender identity (Susan). The use of dichotomous gender categorisations indicates the impact of the hegemonic discourse, and a desire (or understanding of others’ desire) for a coherent, unitary identity marker.

Sam also understood these ‘norms’ of gender as limiting and incapable of encapsulating all possible individual experiences:

I’d really like everyone to just be able to, if someone doesn’t feel male, female, feels both, feels something else, it would be nice if there was some representation of that. Or alternatively there was no representation of gender and everyone was just a person. That would be nice. 
(Sam, genderqueer, age 24)

Sam’s problems with gender arise because of the societal acceptance of only maleness and femaleness, and the imposition of these categories on every individual. There is very limited cultural awareness of anything ‘beyond’ binary gender, so that Sam, who identifies as genderqueer, faces a lack of understanding and recognition within society at large.

Some interviewees found themselves unable to pinpoint their gender identity precisely, such as Lisa, who stated: ‘depending on what mood I’ll tick whatever, I’ll tick female and male sometimes, but there’s more female’ (Lisa, non-trans woman, age 35). Lisa felt relatively comfortable with her female identity, but also questioned this:

In terms of where I am in that spectrum I’m not [...] that sort of clear-cut, one pole or the other. I’m very, very sort of borderline sort of genderqueer kind of stuff, particularly through knowing people that are way more so. (Lisa)

Thus she did not identify as trans as such, but her identity fluctuated somewhat and this was enabled by her knowing others who identify as trans and having those narratives and discourses available to frame her own experiences.

Theoretically, deconstruction and recognition tend to be decoupled, but considered at an individual level, deconstruction of gender norms as enacted by one individual and recognised by another or even by the state, can, in some cases, encourage further problematisation and movement beyond hegemonic discourse. As such, these two concepts, and the theories relating to them, can perhaps work together at an individual level if not a group one, due to the lack of need for a stable, homogenous identity categorisation.
Marina situated her gender identity as follows: ‘I now identify as somewhere in between, somewhere [. . . ] just neither female or male, or both. Neither or both is how I identify’ (Marina, genderqueer, age 35). This identification outside the gender binary is still positioned with respect to the categories of male and female, underlining the impossibility of discounting this discourse altogether. As West and Zimmerman have argued, ‘[i]nsofar as a society is partitioned by “essential” differences between women and men and placement in a sex category is both relevant and enforced, doing gender is unavoidable’ (1987, p. 137). If this is the case, are individuals such as Marina and Sam doing gender or have they somehow managed to undo their own gendered subjectivities? Perhaps those who do not identify as male or female could be said to exist ‘beside’ the gender binary, rather than beyond or outside it (Sedgwick 2003, p. 8). This positioning indicates a more contingent relationship.

Gender was not always perceived by interviewees to be a stable marker of identity. Those interviewees who presented in a way that evaded dualistic gender categorisation were often aligned by others with a gender other than that with which they identified. Alex stated:

I was assigned female [. . . ] which I identified with for a large amount of time but [. . . ] then I sort of shifted into more androgyny, and currently I’m very much identifying male but that’s, I think my stable gender is more androgynous, or in between. (Alex, genderqueer, age 23)

Alex clearly perceives his gender as having been in flux rather than as essential, stable and unitary.

Marina’s identification as genderqueer was reinforced by others’ attraction to her: ‘I’ve very clearly had straight women attracted to me because they thought I was a boy, and conversely I’ve had gay men attracted to me thinking I was a man, and I like that androgyny, definitely thrive on that’ (Marina). These encounters were understood as bolstering the male facet of her identity, which, interlinked with her body, understood as ‘female’, and other encounters where she was categorised as female, verified to her the ambiguity in her presentation of gender. Marina further stated:

On one hand on a superficial level I actually thrive on just letting people be confused and I want them to stay confused. I don’t want them to just only see me one way or the other way. On a deeper level I also, I don’t want to be explaining myself all the time, because it’s more than just one thing. (Marina)

Thus, interacting with non-genderqueer others presented an opportunity for confusion and problematising of the taken-for-granted truths about gender, but Marina found her gender identification necessitated explanation for those who adhered to dichotomous gender norms, and her gender identity was something which could not easily be elucidated.

Consideration of the ways in which some transpeople and partners resisted hegemonic discourse in relation to gender points to the limitations of current understandings as well as clarifying some of the junctures at which norms may fail and therefore be open to reconstruction. It is these weak points which, as Butler has suggested, may offer a starting point for moving beyond regulatory discourse. The next section explores the theoretical implications of considering such weak points, focusing, as with the narratives above, on the possibilities of theoretical gender resistance being acted out in practice.

**De/re-gendering**

Queer theorists are often accused, particularly by feminists, of abstract theorising which has no place in ‘real life’ situations. I argue in the remainder of this paper that theory and
practice can compliment one another to some extent, and that this interaction may offer some optimism for challenging the points of rupture between feminists, trans theorists, post-structuralists, and so on.

Transpeople are produced through hegemonic discourses of sex, gender and sexuality, as are all individuals, but the narratives of transpeople and their partners clearly indicate the impact of these productive forces, the limits of the norms inherent in this production of the self, and the possibilities for attempting to resist such norms (Sanger 2007a). Therefore, these narratives, when considered through the lens of governmentality, may open up new avenues for challenging binary gender, which move beyond the stalemate between deconstruction and emancipation. Working towards gender equality, or indeed recognition of gender difference, involves more than equality between men and women, as not every individual identifies within this narrow dualism.

Whilst deconstructive theories offer possibilities for moving beyond hegemonic norms and discourse there are also limits to such approaches. Transpeople, as evidenced above, occupy a diverse range of positions with respect to gender, and many do in fact perceive themselves as essentially of one gender or the other. These experiences should not be denied in an attempt to more easily theorise and compartmentalise trans as a transgressive identity. Human experience is messy and complex, and for this reason one single theoretical approach is arguably not adequate for the purpose of theorising gender. Despite the limits of ‘biological foundationalism’ for gender theory, in a world where gender is still so central it does have its uses, and it would be extremely difficult to entirely move beyond the importance of identity politics in the current climate. However, we do need to critique such politics at the same time, and be wary of using this approach in a way which marginalises and excludes those who do not fully adhere to, for example, gender norms.

Those who identify ‘beside’ the gender binary will still be situated within it by others whose worldviews are bounded by the discourse of binary gender, such that it is impossible to escape this discursive framework altogether (Foucault 1978, Butler 1999 [1990]). I argue that it is not possible to move entirely ‘beyond’ hegemonic discourse [as some feminists, such as Raymond (1994 [1979]), would wish transpeople to], whilst leaving room for the possibility of resistances emerging from within. While societal transformation may be a distant possibility (Barker 2004) it is important that it is not entirely dismissed, as those whose experiences and identifications remain unacknowledged in terms of citizenship norms are still figured as ‘less than human’ (Butler 2004, see also Monro 2005, Hines 2007).

The application of a governmentality approach to notions of gender adds to our understanding of the ways in which gender has been produced and continues to be rearticulated, through the tying of the self to a particular gendered identity and the use, even by many of those who do not identify as male or female, of clearly gendered identifiers, due to the lack of recognition afforded those who exceed binary gender. Foucault’s work may be enriched through reflection on the increasing range of ways in which individuals are narrating and giving meaning to their lives. I argue that the research this paper is based upon, as such, usefully expands the possibilities for thinking ourselves differently.

**Conclusion**

Within this paper I have discussed the narratives of a number of transpeople and partners of transpeople in order to critique the ways in which contemporary society continues to be based upon the gender binary. Despite feminist breakthroughs in many arenas the critique of binary gender remains largely under-explored, particularly with respect to the consideration of the narratives of those currently problematising the male–female dualism.
in a variety of ways. As such, I have proffered a number of individuals’ critiques of this binary, evidencing that such critique may, at least to some extent, exist in practice as well as in theory (see also Sanger, 2007a).

The extent to which hegemonic understandings of gender may be altered remains unclear. However, the gender (dis)identifications explored within this paper offer a number of possibilities for examining the various fissures which could be said to be emerging and offering space for rearticulations within contemporary society. As some of the narratives discussed have shown, individual explorations of gender often involve the reconceptualisation of hegemonic discourse, through a focus on its weak points. Whilst recognising that we cannot move entirely beyond normalisation, I have argued that resistance is possible, albeit perhaps inciting only gradual, and partial, change.

While the impasse evident between some transpeople and feminists is a very real issue for many and causes great distress, it is also true that feminists and transpeople are working together in order to challenge gender norms. This can be seen where conferences, edited collections, online communities, and so on have engaged with the intersections between trans and feminisms, and indicates a fairly recent move which could prove useful for both camps, and in particular those who are involved in both. Some examples of this recent alignment include the Trans-Forming Feminism conference held in New York in 2006 and the transfeminism community on LiveJournal (http://community.livejournal.com/transfeminism/profile; see also Koyama 2003, Hines 2005, Green 2006, Halberstam 2006, Scott-Dixon 2006). As Emi Koyama has stated, with respect to feminisms including those previously excluded, ‘[a]lthough the process sometimes leads to a painful realization of our own biases and internalized oppressions as feminists, it eventually benefits the movement by widening our perspectives and constituencies’ (2003, p. 244). Consideration of the narratives of transpeople may offer possibilities for feminists, trans-identified individuals, and indeed transfeminists, to work together to end oppression of all those who subvert hegemonic gender norms, including transmen and those non-trans men who are perceived as gender non-conformists.

In theoretical terms, it seems that queer theorists, feminists and trans theorists need to work to understand each others’ positionings with respect to gender, and indeed sexuality, and thereby devise new ways of moving forward in a changing and diversified world. Richardson et al. (2006), among others, have shown that there are strengths and weaknesses within each of these theoretical frameworks, but also opportunities for collaborative efforts. Working through some of the problems that have been encountered between these positions may lead to illuminating debates and discoveries, and a more inclusive platform from which individuals can challenge hegemonic discourse and inequality, and perhaps find productive ways to ‘undo’ gender, incorporating both material and cultural, political and theoretical, concerns.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Queen’s University of Belfast for the postgraduate funding award which made the research this paper is based upon possible. Also, Lisa Smyth and Megan Kean who commented on earlier versions of this paper.

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