

Deconstructing the complex perceptions of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation among transgender individuals

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Abstract

Conventional heteronormative beliefs about the nature of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation are fundamentally challenged by the experiences of many transgender individuals. Eleven self-identified transgender individuals were interviewed about their definitions of, understanding of the relationships between, and perceptions of their own gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The questions focused on how transgender individuals define gender roles vs gender identity, how they defined themselves on these dimensions, and how they perceived the relationships among gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation. All of the participants understood gender roles to be social constructs and viewed gender identity as being more fluid, compared to essentialist, binary, heteronormative ideas about gender. Most viewed sexual orientation as being dynamically related to gender identity. These findings are discussed in terms of an emerging transgender theory of the nature of gender that transcends essentialist, traditional ideas, as well as social constructionist views of feminist and queer theories.

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The experiences and perceptions of transgender individuals fundamentally challenge society's normative beliefs and theoretical ideas about the nature of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Transgender individuals 'destabilize' gender categories 'not only through assertions of not fitting either gender, but also through claims to actually being a bit of both' (Broad, 2002: 256). The idea is that 'by being transgender, one really embodies an "intersexual" identity of being both man and woman' (Broad, 2002: 257). Guided by deductive qualitative analyses (Gilgun, 2010), this article presents the findings from interviews of 11 self-identified transgender individuals who were asked questions regarding the definitions of gender roles (masculinity vs femininity) and gender identity (male vs female, binary vs fluid), how they define themselves in terms of gender roles and gender identity, and what they perceive to be the intersectional relationships between gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation. While previous qualitative research with female-to-male transsexuals by Devor (1997) and Rubin (2003) has attempted to discuss these issues, the present research advances this knowledge by interviewing a more diverse sample of trans individuals using a comprehensive interview that explicitly gave participants a chance to compare and contrast concepts of gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation.

Gender roles, gender identity, sexual orientation, and transgenderism

Gender roles are how society expects an individual to behave based on the labels of either being born male or female. Gender roles are what a particular culture thinks one should do with one's life, including personality traits, mannerisms, duties, and cultural expectations, given one's gender (Bornstein, 1998). Gender identity is often described as an individual's self-defined internal sense of being male or female or an identity between or outside these two categories (Wilchins, 2002). At birth, a child's external genitalia begins a social process leading to the child being encouraged to exhibit masculine vs feminine qualities. Sexual orientation is the predominant erotic thoughts, feelings, and fantasies an individual has for members of a particular sex, both sexes, or neither sex (Savin-Williams, 2005). For heteronormative individuals growing up in our binary-gendered society, one's gender identity as male vs female is assumed to be consistent with an opposite-sex sexual orientation and a 'straight' sexual identity.

Transgender individuals live with a gender identity different from traditional binary gender roles (Bornstein, 1994) and their gender identification either violates the heteronormative conceptualization of male or female or mixes different identity and role aspects of being male or female (Diamond and Butterworth, 2008). The term 'transgender' reflects the concept of breaking gender roles and gender identity and/or transcending the boundaries of one gender to another gender (Green,

2004). Some transgender individuals are also transexual, because they typically seek genital surgery, and can be either pre-transition/operative, transitioning/in the process of hormonal and surgical sex-reassignment, or post-transition/operative (Hird, 2002).

Theorizing gender: Transcending feminist and queer theories

Feminist theory addresses and questions the cultural/historical context and biological premises of gender, noting that gender is key to how we identify people, organize relationships with others, and develop meaning through natural and social events (Harding, 1986). Gender is traditionally assumed to be based on a binary, mandatory system that attributes social characteristics to sexed anatomy (Hausman, 2001), with humans categorized from birth as male vs female based on their external genitalia. This essentialist view presumes that it is 'natural' for those born male to act masculine and be sexually attracted to women, while those born female are supposed to act feminine and be sexually attracted to men (Garfinkel, 1967), and feminist theorists note how society uses multiple methods of positive and negative reinforcement, including legal, religious, and cultural practices, to enforce adherence to these gender roles (Connell, 2002). Feminism challenged male social dominance by questioning the supposed 'naturalness' of the subordination of women in social relationships.

While gender as a socially defined construct and its associated gender roles were actively questioned by feminist theorists, whether gender identity, in terms of an embodied male vs female identity binary, should also be questioned was controversial. Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, and Lydenberg (1999: 11–12) note how French feminists, such as Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julie Kristeva, seemed to 'establish the female body and maternity as foundational and symbolic sources of women's psychic and sexual difference,' i.e. that an essentialist view of 'femaleness' as being natural and different from 'maleness' was key to understanding and empowering women. As Heyes (2007) discusses, transgenderism/transsexualism's challenge to essentialist ideas of gender identity caused some feminist theorists, such as Janice Raymond (1979/1994) and Bernice Hausman (1995), to reject the idea that gender identity could be fluid. To the extent that transsexuals, in particular, were regarded as trying to assume a gender identity opposite from their born sex, Raymond and Hausman dismissed them as being complicit in reinforcing the dominant society's view that socially constructed aspects of gender were essentially linked to this gender identity. The degree and manner to which gender should be deconstructed continues to be both an issue among feminist theorists and a source of tension between feminist and queer theorists (Jagose, 2009).

Queer theory was, in many ways, a challenge to feminist theory. While feminist theory readily accepted and challenged the socially constructed aspects of gender expression, including sexual expression, for many feminist theorists the essentializing of gender identity meant that the theory was limited in accommodating the idea that both gender and sexual identity might also be social constructs able to be questioned, subverted, and self-constructed (Halperin, 1995). Rubin (1993), for

example, asserted that if feminism was framed as a theory of gender oppression, where sexuality was assumed to be tied to gender identity, it was questionable whether such a theory of gender oppression could also offer a valid theory of sexual oppression. Butler (1990) made the case that gender identity is a social construction that is the result of repeated performances of one's expected gender role that creates the illusion of an internal identity that underlies the expression of these behaviors. Performativity theories (e.g. Butler, 1990) are in part based on the idea of symbolic interactionism, i.e. 'the continuous interactive processes between how individuals establish and maintain conceptions of self by reflecting back images of the self as objects' (Hird, 2002: 585). Symbolic interactionism, in turn, challenges the authenticity of ideas of identity by not assuming that personal identity is a stable, coherent, and morphologically-based object (Goffman, 1971; Mead, 1934). While these presentations of behaviors defined by social conventions create the illusion of self that is consistent with our culture's assumptions about the supposedly universal aspects of gender, the self-questioning and construction of a central sense of self is not explored (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010). While the term queer offers the solidarity of a group identity through the creation of the perspective of the 'queer' outside of the heteronormative schema, 'it is (also) an identity without an essence' (Halperin, 1995: 62). Similar to feminist theory, queer theory established a collective identity, but at the expense of a full understanding of the individual's lived experiences, including the socially constructed and embodied aspects of these lived experiences, that create a sense of an individual and collective identity (Sullivan, 2003). Queer theory's critical analysis and application of intersectionality (Shields, 2008) is also problematic for both the identity and empowerment of trans individuals. Diamond and Butterworth (2008) note the multiplicity of intersectional identities associated with the transgender experience, but if multiple oppressed social identities are merely the product of multiple social forces, all of which can be queered, there is no explanation of how individuals navigate these multiple identities, nor is there a basis for using these identities as a source of empowerment for opposing oppression.

Transgender theory as a critique of queer theory developed from Roen's (2002) ideas that transgenderism included more than just an 'either/or' conceptualization that accepted the fluidity of gender identity but still retained the gender binary. Roen argued that transgenderism also included a 'both/neither' conceptualization of gender identity outside the male/female binary, where transgenderism is seen as transgressing the gender binary, not necessarily about physically transitioning from one gender category to the other. Monro (2000), in turn, argued for the need to understand the lived experiences of transgender individuals and the limitations on the fluidity of gender imposed by the body and biology. While essentialism was based on the positivist perspective that each entity has to have certain characteristics and traits that are considered to be permanent and unalterable, a postmodernist view not only recognizes the fluidity of intersecting identities (Shields, 2008), but it also recognizes the individuals caught between wanting an identity within a group and not wanting to be defined by this group identity (Hawkesworth, 2006). Monro (2000) pointed out that even the postmodernist model from which queer

theory developed fails to account for the sense of self or the impact of social structures on the fluidity and plurality of gender expression.

Transgender theorists thus proposed ideas about gender and sexual identity that incorporated both a fluid self-embodiment and a self-construction of identity that dynamically interacts with this embodiment in the context of social expectations and lived experiences. Tauchert (2002), for example, accepted that an 'essentialist' view of gender based on the body reinforces traditional stereotypes about gender and gender roles, but argued that conceptualizing gender as being solely a social construct is also problematic in denying the sense of identity that comes from a body that continues to exist as a seeming self between the social performances of gendered behaviors. Tauchert's 'fuzzy gender' approach recognized the essential continuity between the body and the mind, where everything consists of 'shades of grey' in moving between more physical vs more mental aspects of gender. Such an approach allowed for recognizing the variations in gender identity and gender-related behaviors and sexuality, while also acknowledging the range of experiences, from physical or essentialist to wholly socially constructed, that are associated with gender.

Hird's (2002) history of theories of transsexuality similarly moved from essentialist to social constructionist ideas of gender to even more progressive ideas about the nature of gender identity, arguing that transsexualism purposefully violates and transgresses society's naturalization of sexual differences. Beginning with theories concerned with 'authenticity,' which assumed a real, presumably biologically-based and measurable, binary gender paradigm from which transsexuals were deviant, feminist theory spurred the shift from an emphasis on authenticity to one based on 'performativity,' where gender identity is seen as solely an expression of learned social behaviors and cognitions. Where Hird's (2002) ideas go beyond feminist and queer theories is when she proposes that transgender theories lead to notions of 'transgression,' where the nature of the transsexual 'renders obsolete the modern relationship of sex and gender.' Norton (1997) described how 'the m-t-f transgender who is attracted to men radically destabilizes the meaning of heterosexuality, in that *hir* desire constitutes a homo-heterosexuality that deprives the regulatory homo/hetero binary of its force. Amidst the convolutions of transgender sexuality, it is no longer clear who it is that is desirous of whom, and in what kind of role relation. Here we see how transgenderism invokes the issue of the intersectionality of gender and sexual identities. The extent to which transsexual individuals can 'pass' as 'real' men or women supports the assertion that sex and gender do not naturally adhere to particular bodies.

Shotwell and Sangrey (2009) further proposed a 'relational' model of feminist theory to better conceptualize the complexity, experiences of oppression, and gender formation of transgender individuals. In this model, as in transgender theory (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010), embodiment is seen as an essential component of the self. Shotwell and Sangrey also explicitly argue for the role of self-construction as a narrative process and that this autonomous aspect of self exists in relation to and in interactions with the social environment. Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) built on Shotwell and Sangrey's ideas by explicitly incorporating the social

constructionist/performative aspect of gender and sexual identity into the dynamic narrative process that includes embodiment and self-construction. Consistent with Butler (1990), the social environment does essentialize social identity by enforcing individuals to conform to the expectations of identity categories, and the repeated performances of these individuals in conformity with these expectations also acts as an essentializing force. This is, however, a different kind of 'essentializing' than what is derived from embodied experiences in that it is the society that enforces a seemingly objective identity. The autonomous self here exists only in relationship to and interactions with these embodied, self-constructed, and socially constructed aspects of identity. In turn, this autonomous self can only be understood in terms of the narrative of one's lived experiences that actively integrates these aspects of identity (Johnson, 2007).

The analyses of the interview data presented in this article, of transgender individuals' ideas about gender roles, gender identity, sexual orientation, and their intersecting relationships with each other, were guided by deductive qualitative analysis theory (Gilgun, 2010). The research questions were driven by a trans theoretical framework and sought to explore whether: 1) consistent with feminist and queer theories, gender roles would be perceived as being social constructs; 2) consistent with queer theory, gender identity would also be perceived as being a social construct; 3) consistent with emerging transgender theory, gender identity would nevertheless incorporate a necessary but fluid embodied aspect; and 4) consistent with the intersectional aspect of transgender theory, gender and sexual identity would be perceived to be dynamically intersectional identities.

Method

Eleven self-identified transgender individuals were interviewed on their definitions of, understanding of the relationships between, and perceptions of their own gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Half of the participants were recruited through community contacts, who asked prospective participants if they were willing to be contacted by the principal investigator for a possible interview; half were recruited through a posting on the Ubiquity bulletin board for GLBTQ students and staff at a university in the Southwest United States. This posting for GLBTQ participants described the interview as an exploration of the nature of gender identity and left a phone number and email address of the principal investigator (JN). JN contacted prospective participants via phone, briefly explained the nature of the interview, and set up a time for a meeting at the participant's place of residence, on campus, or at a public location.

Of the 11 participants, 8 stated on the demographic forms that they were 'born female,' 2 'born male,' and 1 'born intersex.' They ranged in age from 19 to 43 years; 10 were White and one was Hispanic. Five indicated having had postgraduate education or having earned a postgraduate degree; the remainder indicated having had some college education. We did not distinguish for our participants an identity that was transgender vs transsexual. All of the participants stated that

they were trans, but did not necessarily distinguish themselves as transsexual, except for one individual.

Confidentiality of the data and participant anonymity were maintained in the following ways: the demographic forms and the interview tapes only had study-generated identification numbers on them; the interviewer made sure that participant's names were never spoken during the interview; and the only record linking these ID numbers with participant names was kept on a file accessible only to JN and destroyed upon the completion of tape transcription. In addition, this article utilizes initials that were created by the research team in order to protect the identity of the participants. It should be noted that the procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Arizona State University.

All interviews were conducted by JN from October 2005 through December of 2005. While the interviewer was not a self-identified trans individual, which brings in an outsider perspective during the interviewer process, the research team included a trans researcher in the design of the study, the analysis of the themes, along with the writing. At the beginning of the interview, the nature of the interview questions was briefly described to the participant, who then read and signed an informed consent form. This consent form assured participants that no data obtained for the research would have any identifying information attached and that participants were free to withdraw from participation in the research at any time without penalty. Participants then completed a one-page, mostly open-ended demographic form capturing age, sex, gender, region of the country participants grew up in, educational attainment, and occupational status. Interviews took between 40 and 60 minutes, and were recorded on a microcassette audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. The interview schedule was set up to include questions in places to encourage participants to elaborate on the relevant topic (e.g. What caused you to see yourself that way?), and the interviewer was free to deviate from the scripted questions to pose follow-up questions to participant responses. JN was sensitive to participant distress and ready to respond in ways that would reduce that distress, including ending the interview if needed and having available phone numbers for counseling services.

The intent of the project was to capture the unique perspectives on the bases of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation of a sample of transgender individuals. Based on a review of the feminist, queer, and transgender theoretical literature on the perceived bases of gender, the interview questions focused on issues of maleness-femaleness vs masculinity-femininity as they related to biological sex, physical appearance and function, social norms and privileges, and sexual orientation, as well as experiences of discrimination. For the present analysis, we focus on questions related to: 1) the stereotypical definitions of the expressive behaviors and physical characteristics that define masculinity and femininity (How would you define masculinity and femininity?, How do you see yourself in terms of masculinity and femininity?, What caused you to see yourself that way?), 2) the distinction between masculinity-femininity and maleness-femaleness and a biological basis for maleness vs femaleness (How would you define being a male and a female?, How do you see yourself in terms of male and female?, What caused

you to see yourself that way?), 3) the ‘either/or’ vs ‘both/neither’ orientation to gender identity and the dynamic negotiation between one’s belief in a fluid gender identity vs the expectations of a gender-binary (Is your gender identity fluid or categorical?, Does your body need to match your gender identity?), and 4) the idea that sexual orientation is independent of gender identity vs the possible intersectionality of gender and sexual identity (Does your sexual orientation define whether you think of yourself as male and/or female?).

From the verbatim transcripts of the responses to these interview questions, deductive qualitative analysis (Gilgun, 2010) was used as a guide for the researchers. DQA strives for the creation of theoretically based interview questions. Subsequent analysis of the interviews thus continuously made links from the theory to the participants’ responses. In turn, themes were then created based on the link between the theoretical literature and the number of similar participant responses. For example, participants’ defining masculinity and femininity in terms of social expectations and constructions vs proposing a physical basis for maleness vs femaleness produced a theme contrasting socially constructed gender roles vs embodied gender identity. Explicit assertions by participants that gender identity was fluid, along with agreement that one’s body needed to match one’s gender identity, produced a theme around conceptualizing gender identity as both embodied and fluid. The expression of dynamic relationships between gender identity and sexual orientation, in contrast to regarding sexuality as being independent of gender identity, produced a theme around the intersectionality of gender and sexual identities. Themes were also developed from identifying contrasts between interviewees’ perceptions of these issues in general vs how they defined themselves. It should be noted that these analyses are specific to the normative and theoretical beliefs about gender in U.S. society of both the participants and the researchers. Particularly given the researchers’ beliefs about the importance of the interactive, socially constructed, and embodied aspects of gender and sexual identities, the previous statement is not just about the limits of generalizing the present findings but also about the importance of always considering the social and cultural context of these findings.

Findings

The analysis is presented first in terms of how transgender individuals conceptualized gender roles as social and self-constructs, then how they thought about the socially constructed, embodied, and fluid aspects of gender identity. Finally, interviewees’ ideas about the intersectionality of gender and sexual identities are discussed. In the quotes presented, extraneous words (e.g. ‘um’) have been deleted, and ‘...’ indicates where a sentence or two was deleted to save space, while otherwise preserving the meaning of the quote.

The social and self-construction of gender roles

Consistent with our research question of whether the expression of gender-related behaviors would be perceived as social constructs, all 11 participants responded to

the questions on what defines masculinity and what defines femininity primarily in terms of socially defined expressive behaviors, with a lesser emphasis on easily observable physical characteristics and dress. Two of the participants, in fact, explicitly stated that these defined expressive behaviors were ‘social constructs,’ and all of the participants in some way noted the social bases of these behaviors. Gendered constructs remained very stereotypical: masculinity was characterized by aggressiveness, dominance, and lack of emotion; femininity was characterized by empathy, nurturance, communication, and emotion. For instance, DN noted that masculinity is ‘generally about being more dominant in relationships, it’s about social roles, it’s about being the one who opens the car door and the restaurant door and pulls out the chair. More than it is about facial hair or chromosomes.’ They described femininity as contrasting with masculinity as ‘men see a thing that they want, and they ask themselves, “How can I get that thing?” Women see a thing that they want, and they ask themselves, “How will getting that thing affect those around me?”’

Two participants noted how a transgender individual’s decision to express the female gender identity meant a loss of social power and privilege. BT stated:

Men can understand one taking power. But they can’t understand wanting to lose power. So our society, and I still think the world in general – there are some exceptions to this comment, but in general – are still dominated by the male of the species. So as such, moving from male-to-female is almost a slap at masculinity. However, moving from female-to-male is an atonement for that, and saying, ‘Well, this girl wants to be a guy, obviously she knows what she’s doing, because she’s moving from the weaker sex to the power sex.’

In contrast, two of the participants described the different bases of power and/or privilege that femininity may hold in our society. KL noted that women are regarded in society as being more ‘moral’ than men, while DN described feminine power in terms of sexuality:

It’s a bartering system. The societally-imposed differential of power. Women have all the pussy, men have all the money. Bring the two together, you have dating rituals. And the expectation that the men will pay and the woman will put out.

The idea that masculinity and femininity were defined by different sets of socially constructed expressive behaviors was consistent with the findings from Green’s (2005) interviews of eight female-to-male trans-men that similarly found agreement that masculinity was different from maleness and consisted of behaviors and actions defined by others’ social expectancies. Rubin’s (2003) sample of 22 FTM transsexuals also differentiated between the socially-constructed behaviors that define masculinity vs the personal and embodied identity that defines maleness. One interpretation is that some of the participants in the present study were simply giving the societally-correct definitions of gender roles and gender identity, even though the participants themselves did not believe these definitions. Unfortunately,

participants were not asked if they *personally* agreed with their stated definitions of masculinity, femininity, maleness, and femaleness.

When asked about whether they considered themselves masculine or feminine, all 11 participants in the present study readily responded that they expressed both masculine and feminine behaviors and physical characteristics, e.g. BT described, 'I fall at both ends of the spectrum. I'm very feminine in some of the things I do, and very masculine in the other things I do.' Beyond that, however, participants differed in their perceptions of their perceived masculinity-femininity, with some participants noting that they were more masculine than feminine or vice versa or that it was more difficult to express one gender role vs the other. FW said, 'the feminine side of me came very naturally. The masculine side I had to cultivate intensely. It was not... it wasn't natural to me at all.' Two of the participants expressed a view of their masculinity-femininity that transcended traditional categories, e.g. GP, 'I'm just accepting the fact that I believe my gender is all encompassing or it is something completely different of what our society knows, of outside the gender binaries.' When applied to their own selves, participants thus seemed to regard gender roles more in terms of self-construction and embodiment.

Essentialist vs socially constructed identities

In contrast to their seemingly easy responses defining masculinity and femininity, participants had more difficulty and gave more diverse responses to the questions of what defines male and what defines female. Consistent with queer theory, which would conceptualize gender identity as being as much of a social construct as gender roles, two participants defined maleness and femaleness in terms of heteronormative masculinity and femininity – for instance, CR commented:

I don't think your genitalia defines your gender at all, really. I think that's definitely up in your brain, and what you believe that you are. And you can tell that a man is a man, because of the fact that he's very masculine and very... I guess aggressive.

One participant justified claimed behavioral differences in terms of evolutionary biological needs, 'The male of the species – and this goes back to the cave days – was required to be more aggressive, more assertive, go out and do the dangerous things, and not because he wanted to, but because he was better suited for it. Males are, by nature, larger in bone structure, larger in muscle mass, less body fat. It makes them stronger, faster, quicker, all those wonderful things for a hunter' (BT). This response also located gender identity as physically based. Four participants clearly defined being male and being female in terms of physical characteristics, genitalia, or chromosomes. For instance, AJ commented:

Male... what is being a male? For me, that is probably more to do with physicality than anything else. Having pecs as opposed to breasts, having body hair, facial hair, having a lower voice, having more testosterone in your body, having more of a sex drive, and for the most part, having a penis.

Participants in Green's (2005) study, when asked to define maleness, as opposed to masculinity, also tended to define maleness in terms of genitalia and other physical characteristics.

The fluidity of gender identity

All 11 of the transgender participants supported Bornstein's (1998) assertion that gender identity was both on a continuum and fluid/changeable. CR stated:

I think it's more fluid [compared to the binary of gender identity]. Because I think people switch back-and-forth. Even your 'man' and your 'female' or 'woman,' they flow and if you look at adolescent children, they flow between, you know... they're not very rigid about this is this, and that is that, they just kind of flow between both of those worlds.

AJ echoed Bornstein's (1998) idea that gender identity was 'something else entirely':

I identify as gender queer, it's the closest thing I can find that can really identify me. Some days I feel more male, some days I feel more female, but for the most part I feel I'm really neither or both... I feel it's such a socially-constructed thing, and I feel that it's not something that's as stable as a personality, I feel like it's always changing with every year, I feel like I'm becoming more of who I am.

Consistent with the findings from Roen's (2001) interviews with 11 transsexual and transgender individuals, DN noted the active negotiation between the 'either/or' of the socially imposed binary of their gender identity vs the internal 'both/neither' position asserted by all of the transgender individuals we interviewed with one interviewee stating:

It (gender) can also be situational. In certain situations I'll play a more masculine role. In certain situations I won't. With certain women I'll play a masculine role... When I'm talking on the phone about somebody, about fixing my car, I don't speak with a high voice, though I can. I speak with a masculine voice, because it gets me a better price. When I'm trying to go out and pick up a girl at a bar, I'll moderate my tone, just so it's not quite so confusing. So, you know, it's situational. Gender is not a black and white construct. You can use it to your advantage.

Although all participants in the present study asserted the continuity and fluidity of gender identity, the difficulties of socially manifesting a gender identity of 'both/neither' were reflected in all of the participants' responses to the question of whether one's body needed to match one's gender identity. Two participants answered no to this question, with HM commenting that 'I identify as female

because it was what I was born as but I really don't care which one you think I am. But I definitely don't look female stereotype.' Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey's (1997) interviews of 65 MTF transgender individuals also found that these individuals were unable to overcome the social constraints that enforce the gender binary, and thus tended to stay within that binary as masculine men or feminine women.

Consistent with transgender theory, gender identity for many participants incorporated a necessary but fluid embodied aspect. Participants in the present study felt that their gender identity was to some extent embodied in their physical being, with some participants believing in the necessity of a surgical transformation to make their body conform to their gender identity. Those who didn't express that view gave many reasons for preferring one's body to match one's gender identity. FW noted, 'If you look in the mirror and it doesn't match, number one, it's confusing as hell, that's not a good thing.' BT described how:

It makes life much easier. Imagine a transsexual going to a gym who had not had bottom surgery. Might cause a bit of a stir in the women's locker room. The same would be true for a female-to-male walking into the men's locker room... I guess the hypothetical is that you're in a car accident and your clothes are torn, and the paramedics show up and they're like, 'She's a girl. Wait, wait, what's this?' So that identity is better for everyone else on the outside. But myself? It really made no difference, whether I had surgery or not. The surgery completed me, a complete transformation, and since my personality type said, 'Let's finish the job,' that made the most sense. But part of the reason I had the surgery was not only for me, but was for society, just to make society feel more at ease.

In addition, consistent with Devor's (1997) interviews of 45 FTM transsexuals, two of the participants in the present study agreed with the conclusion of gender identity being a social construct. On the other hand, the remaining participants, in accordance with transgender theory (e.g. Monro, 2000), supported the idea that gender identity may have an embodied aspect independent of the social construction of gender.

Intersectionality of gender and sexual identity

We aimed to explore whether gender and sexual identity would be perceived to be dynamically intersectional identities. When asked if sexual orientation defined gender identity, almost half the participants explicitly rejected any connection between the two. For example, HM asserted that:

because I like girls doesn't make me a male. So even if you walked up to someone and said this person likes females, they would be like oh this person is a male. But as far as stereotypes go, some of them are more, it's not like everyone who is gay is going to act like this.

Their accounts are consistent with many of Rubin's (2003) participants who rejected any connection between their gender identity and their sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Rubin (2003) found that becoming a lesbian was part of the developmental process for over half of the female-to-male transsexuals interviewed, but that most of these individuals nevertheless did not feel that being a lesbian was consistent with their gender identity, i.e. that having a lesbian sexual orientation was not the same as being male. When the female would transition to becoming a male, s/he would then see his or her orientation as being different. Prior to the surgery, s/he would be viewed by society as being a lesbian, yet s/he would identify him/herself as being heterosexual. After the surgery, he would see himself as being male and would continue to see himself as being heterosexual.

In contrast, Dozier's (2005) interviews with 18 trans-identified individuals found that sexual orientation was not only based on the object of attraction, but also on the gendered meanings created in sexual and romantic interactions. Similarly, the remaining participants in our study described how their sexual orientation changed with changes in their manifested gender identity, which in turn reinforced those changes in gender identity (see also Devor, 1997). Consistent with this, many of the interviewees reported changing their sexual orientation after transitioning to a more physically male identity, in terms of genitalia and/or other readily visible physical characteristics, and that changing their sexual orientation, in turn, reinforced their transformed gender identity. FW, for instance, seemed to track their gender identity changes by the changes in their sexual orientation:

So like I dated women. I even had sex with one and wasn't my thing, but damn it I did it, you know, because that's what you're supposed to do. You know, and when I started transitioning, in general, I didn't even want to think whether I liked a man or a woman and the only boyfriend I ever had, because I just started dating again like eight months ago, and I actually went, my first boyfriend was like long-term relationship, it was like seven months and that probably wasn't such a great idea . . . It happens by accident when you discover your sexual orientation, because you change. You know what I mean? You're so busy figuring out your gender that you're just attracted to somebody and you're like, 'Oh, um, ok.'

Somewhat similarly, AJ described gender identity as defining their sexual orientation:

My gender identity helped define my sexual identity. Because prior to finally admitting that I didn't really fit in this binary system of male and female, I realized that . . . how can I identify as someone who's gender queer and be a lesbian, it doesn't make sense to me. Right now, I identify as queer, as my sexual identity and my gender identity as gender queer. I just feel like . . . I don't really see that there really is a binary. So I wouldn't even say bisexual, because that's still acknowledging that there's a binary system.

The relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation was thus both complex and dynamic. Sexual orientation was viewed as being fluid by some. GP, for instance, commented:

I try not to define it, but I would say that the closest thing I can come to is to say omni-sexual or transsexual, something that includes every gender because I believe that I include every gender and I believe that's who I tend love, or who I can fall in love with is every gender.

Others described an intersection of gender and sexual expression, such that gender identity became malleable depending on different sexed partners. EY described how:

when I date women, I tend to be bossier, more controlling, and more "my way or the highway." Less flexible. I call the shots, I pay, I drive. I say, "this is what we're doing now." Most of the time, when I date men, I wouldn't even call them boyfriends. They're just kind of people I'm seeing. When I date women, there tends to be significantly more talking and sharing and mutual decision making.

A closer examination of interviewees' narratives of the changes in their gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientations over time often reveals complex interactions among these domains. Diamond and Butterworth (2008) in turn suggest that it is difficult to disentangle one's own gender identity from one's own experience, understanding, and interpretation of sexual desire, an account borne out by some of the participants in our study.

Discussion

Our study is unique in trying to conceptualize transgender individuals' perceptions of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation/identity in terms of theoretical formulations derived from feminist, queer, and transgender theories. This latter theoretical framework, in turn, explicitly considers the intersections of multiple oppressed social identities not only in terms of socially defined, enforced, and performed roles, but also in terms of intersections of embodied and self-constructed aspects of identity (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010). It challenges societal beliefs that gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation function within an exclusively heteronormative system. Results from these interviews with 11 transgender individuals confirm theoretical ideas and earlier empirical findings that such individuals actively differentiate between gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Consistent with social constructionist ideas (Butler, 1990) about gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation, participants in the present study were mostly in agreement as to the kinds of expressive behaviors that defined masculinity, as opposed to those that defined femininity, and most of the individuals interviewed viewed gender roles in general as being socially constructed. Many participants, however, went on to express for their own selves the tension and

active negotiation of being within the socially constructed gender roles they are expected to manifest and the seemingly physically embodied, subjectively experienced bases of their gender identity.

What is unique about the responses of transgender individuals is that, while most believed that gender identity has a physical basis, they all, nevertheless, supported Bornstein's (1998) and Roen's (2002) assertion that gender identity was both on a continuum and fluid/changeable. As was found in Rubin's (2003) and Dozier's (2005) studies, and consistent with theorists such as Monro (2000), participants in the present study felt that their gender identity was to some extent embodied in their physical being, with some participants believing in the necessity of a surgical transformation to make their body conform to their gender identity. Past theorists (Hird, 2002; Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010; Shotwell and Sangrey, 2009; Tauchert, 2002) have proposed that transgender individuals compel a more dynamic approach to gender identity, which transcends essentialist ideas about gender identity that come from traditional heteronormative societal beliefs. Our study also supports prior research (Diamond and Butterworth, 2008; Dozier, 2005; Rubin, 2003) on the complex and dynamic intersecting relationships between gender roles, gender identity, and sexual identity.

The results from our study also found that sexual orientation had a complex relationship with gender roles and gender identity. Four participants categorically rejected any connection between gender identity and sexual orientation, which is consistent with the findings from Rubin's (2003) study. For other participants, the relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation was more complex and dynamic, with particular sexual attractions seeming to define aspects of the participants' gender role and gender identity at the time. Consistent with Dozier's (2005) interviews, sexual orientation for these latter participants was not only based on the object of attraction, but also on the gendered meanings created in sexual and romantic interactions. This is also consistent with theoretical ideas about the dynamic complexities associated with the intersectionality of different social identities (Shields, 2008).

It should be noted that the transferability of the present findings is limited due to varying demographics within the sample. Also, a larger sample size would have lent itself to a more comprehensive (Yardley, 2000) overview of themes and the ability to address the research question from multiple viewpoints of transgender individuals who may or may not be seeking sex reassignment surgery. Another important methodological note for the present research was the prioritizing of theoretical distinctions in the design of the interview questions that were not necessarily upheld by the participants, for example, the distinction between gender roles and gender identity. Since participants were able to disagree with these concepts through a qualitative methodology, we have a better idea of their conceptualizations of gender, than if we would have constrained them to the theoretical distinctions made by the authors or made by the use of quantitative methods.

Future research should address the question of how the social construction of gender and sexual identity, including the intersectional experience of multiple gender-based social oppressions, interacts with the need to reconcile what might

be understood as embodied vs socially constructed aspects of gender-related identity. Future research should also consider how the intersectionality of multiple oppressed social identities may provide opportunities for empowerment to oppose oppression (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010). It would also be interesting to contrast these participants' perspectives with non-transgender gay/lesbian individuals and heteronormative individuals to see if there are similar beliefs across groups about the fluidity of these intersecting gender identities.

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