



The role of the illusion in the construction of erotic desire: narratives from heterosexual men who have occasional sex with transgender women

Cathy J. Reback, Rachel L. Kaplan, Talia M. Bettcher & Sherry Larkins

To cite this article: Cathy J. Reback, Rachel L. Kaplan, Talia M. Bettcher & Sherry Larkins (2016): The role of the illusion in the construction of erotic desire: narratives from heterosexual men who have occasional sex with transgender women, Culture, Health & Sexuality, DOI: [10.1080/13691058.2016.1150515](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1150515)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1150515>



Published online: 11 Mar 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The role of the illusion in the construction of erotic desire: narratives from heterosexual men who have occasional sex with transgender women

Cathy J. Reback^{a,b}, Rachel L. Kaplan^{a,c}, Talia M. Bettcher^d and Sherry Larkins^b

^aFriends Research Institute, Inc., Los Angeles, USA; ^bIntegrated Substance Abuse Programs, Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, University of California at Los Angeles, California, USA; ^cDepartment of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences; Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health, University of California at San Francisco, San Francisco, USA; ^dDepartment of Philosophy, California State University, Los Angeles, USA

ABSTRACT

Little is known about men's sexual desire for and erotic attraction to male-to-female transgender women. To better understand how erotic desire is constructed, this study examined the narratives of a sample of heterosexual men who had had an occasional sexual encounter with a transgender woman. Open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 heterosexual men who reported at least one sexual encounter with a transgender woman in the previous 12 months. Using principles of Grounded Theory, three themes emerged: (1) the erotic desire that transpired from a transgender woman's construction of her femininity, (2) the sexual act that dictated the specific navigation of a transgender woman's penis, and (3) the sexual dissonance that resulted from being a heterosexually identified man having sex with a partner who had a penis. These themes reflected how participants defined and negotiated their sexual encounters, both psychologically through their understanding of sex with a transgender woman with a penis, and physically through the navigation of specific sex acts. The role of the 'illusion' was central to the meaning and construction of erotic desire. These narratives provided another framework for continuing discourse on the complexity of erotic desire.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 August 2015
Accepted 1 February 2016

KEYWORDS

Heterosexual men;
transgender women; erotic
desire; USA

Introduction

Contemporary social scientists have only recently begun to explore men's sexual desire toward transgender women (hereafter 'trans women'). Men who have sex with trans women have received limited attention in sexuality research (Bockting, Miner, and Rosser 2007). While some early studies viewed these men simply as anonymous partners engaged in impersonal sexual transactions (Pettitway 1996), other studies pathologised their behaviour. Money and Lamacz (1984) labelled men who expressed a sexual desire for biological males who feminised their bodies as 'gynemimetophiles' and suggested treatment, 'Clinicians can

contribute to the rehabilitation and welfare of gynomimetic youth in society, by providing overall healthcare, including endocrine treatment and mental-health counseling' (392). Similarly, Blanchard and Collins (1993) invented the term 'gynandromorphophiles' to define such men. Both studies identified the desired sexual partner as cross-dresser, transvestite, transsexual or she-male. Both lacked a specific understanding of a transgender identity and both viewed the object of sexual desire as paraphilia.

More recently, three studies have sought to understand the ways in which men describe their desire for, attraction to and sexual experiences with trans women. Weinberg and Williams (2009) interviewed men sexually interested in trans women at a bar about their desire for and experiences with trans women. Qualitative findings demonstrated the presence of 'objectified embodiment' among the men toward their trans women sexual partners, that is, the body of the trans woman was described as the object of the men's desire. Analysis of the men's desire was rooted in the trans women's bodily appearance and physical anatomy. The men found the atmosphere in the bar – in which they received flattery, flirtatious comments and physical contact – to be highly erotic.

In another study, researchers explored perceptions of identity and meanings of sexual behaviour among men who have sex with trans women (Operario et al. 2008). Three general patterns of erotic attraction were observed: (1) attraction to an individual who happened to be a trans woman rather than an attraction to trans women as a group; thus, the individual desire for sexual partnership dominated the interactions, (2) attraction to trans women because of their challenge to the traditional gender binary, in which case political or philosophical desire motivated sexual attraction, and (3) an explicit interest in the trans body, a trans woman's physical appearances and an attraction to eroticised femininity or hyper-femininity or the specific physical anatomical features of some trans women.

Finally, a recent study has sought to describe the ways in which men who have sex with trans women constructed meaning to their sexual practices (Mauk, Perry, and Muñoz-Laboy 2013). Three distinct themes of desire emerged: (1) the phallus-centric theme categorised by a man's attraction to a trans woman's penis and emphasising the physical body of trans women, (2) the social desire for a relationship or companionship, whereby an encounter with a trans woman may have started as a sexual fantasy but then developed into an intimate relationship, and (3) sex with a trans woman as a way to explore men's own femininity by dressing in women's clothes or performing as drag queens.

A theoretical lens: constructing sexual and erotic desire

Research has shown the importance of sexual desire and erotic fantasy (the mental representation of erotic desire) in the sexual lives of individuals, demonstrating their role in stimulating erotic excitement, relieving unfulfilled desires and meeting psycho-affective needs, such as reinforcing masculinity/femininity (Crépault and Couture 1980). Yet, while most agree that sexual desire plays a central role in sexual practices, few agree or attempt to define just what sexual and erotic desire is and how it influences sexual preferences and behaviours.

Debate about the nature of human sexual desire is ongoing (Tolman and Diamond 2001). Essentialists assume sexual desire is a 'biological mandate' that must be restrained by cultural mores (Weeks 2010). Some have suggested that sexual pleasure (McGeeney 2015) be given increased focus in determining drive and desire. They have tended to focus on

the prevalence and frequency of sexual thoughts and behaviours rather than exploring the meaning and subjective quality of sexual desire and its variations across sociocultural and interpersonal contexts. Social constructionist approaches suggest that differences in sexual and erotic desire are the products of cultural socialisation that dictate constructions of sexually appropriate feelings, preferences and behaviours (Foucault 1980; Tolman and Diamond 2001). Moreover, because desire is linked to previous instances of satisfaction, a constructionist approach suggests that desire is not a relationship to a real object but is instead a relationship to fantasy (Weeks 1985).

Plummer (2005) and others have advocated for a perspective of sexuality, wherein sexual expression can be viewed as malleable throughout an individual's lifetime based on sexual scripts and the meaning and importance of internalised culturally- and historically-specific directives that frame the interpretation of sexual interactions (Gagnon and Simon 1973). These directives are tied to gender, age, social class and ethnicity, and underlie sexual communication, partner selection, gendered power negotiations, decision-making and risk taking (Duby, Hartmann, and Montgomery 2016; Dworkin, Beckford, and Ehrhardt 2007; Whittier and Melendez 2004). Sexual scripts provide a framework for analysing sexual behaviour and interactions; in mainstream culture, practices are performed within a limited repertoire of scripts. Behaviours and desires that do not follow these scripts are seen as deviant, alternative or unnatural, while practices and norms that are perceived as acceptable within mainstream society fall into what Rubin (1984) refers to as the 'charmed circle of sexuality' (280–81). This leaves aspects of sexuality that are considered sexually abnormal and unnatural (Iantaffi and Bockting 2011; Rubin 1984).

Garfinkel (1967) similarly highlighted ideas of sexual practices as being either 'moral' or as 'illegitimate' and 'unnatural'. He described sex statuses as 'male' and 'female' in accordance with what he called the 'natural attitude toward sex'. These sex statuses are regarded as genitally determined, mutually exclusive, exhaustive and invariant. Although, the natural attitude toward sex typically maintains the illegitimacy of transfers in sex-status, it does allow for 'ceremonial transfers of sex'. Given that ceremonial transfers are only temporary and seen as mere pretence or masquerade, they can help to legitimise behaviours and facilitate sexual fantasies that might otherwise fall outside culturally acceptable sexual scripts.

To date, much remains to be explored about the male sexual spectrum of desire, erotic attraction to and fantasies involving trans women. To build upon earlier theoretical work in the areas of sexuality, fantasy and sexual and erotic desire, and to address the gap in the existing literature on the sexual practices of men who have sex with trans women, this study examined the narratives of men's sexual encounters with trans women. No prior study has specifically addressed sexual and erotic desire among heterosexual men who only occasionally engage in a sexual encounter with a trans woman, and excluded those men who engage in frequent or ongoing sexual encounters or develop a romantic or emotional relationship with a trans woman. Through in-depth qualitative interviews, this study sought to understand the meaning and construction of erotic desire among a sample of heterosexual men who occasionally have sex with trans women.

Methods

Participants

The results presented here were part of a larger study ($N = 31$) that examined heterosexually identified men who had an occasional sexual encounter with a trans woman and/or another

man (Reback and Larkins 2013). 'Occasional' was operationalised as being at least one sexual encounter in the previous year, but not more than one per month. Fifteen of the participants reported an occasional sexual encounter exclusively with another man and these participants were excluded from this analysis, leaving a sub-group of 16 participants who engaged in an occasional sexual encounter with a trans woman. This sub-group was the focus of this analysis. The eligibility criterion of at least one sexual encounter in the previous year, but not more than one per month was imposed as those who engaged in frequent and/or ongoing sexual encounters, or have developed a primary romantic/emotional relationship with a trans woman, were more likely to construct a different narrative of erotic desire, to engage in different sexual behaviours, to have integrated a trans woman sexual partner into their social sexual world, and to have trans-related cultural referents and social experiences. The inclusion criteria for study participation were: (1) identified as a heterosexual male, (2) had sex with a trans woman at least once in the previous year,¹ (3) had not had sex with a trans woman more than once a month, (4) 18 years of age or older, (5) resided in Los Angeles County, California, (6) had the ability to conduct an interview in English, and (7) was willing to provide voluntary informed consent.

All participants identified as a cisgender man.² Participants ranged in age from 24 to 55 years, with an average age of 37.9 years ($SD = 8.1$). Participants were predominately African American/Black (63%); 19% were Caucasian/White, 6% were Latino, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander and 6% were Native American. Over half (56%) reported a HIV-positive serostatus. Of participants, 69% were never married, 19% reported that they were divorced, 6% were currently married and another 6% were widowed. Income was low, with 75% of the participants reported earning less than US\$1000 per month. In all, 35% reported living in transitional housing (e.g., a homeless shelter, an inexpensive hotel, a friend's residence), 94% reported having a high school degree or higher education, 81% reported having ever been incarcerated, 44% reported ever engaging in sex work (i.e., exchanging sex for money, drugs, shelter or other material items) and 44% reported current substance use. Most (81%) reported being the insertive partner in anal intercourse, with only 13% reporting ever engaging in receptive anal intercourse with a trans woman sexual partner.

Procedure

Recruitment flyers, which were placed in adult bookstores, sex shops, video stores, parks, restaurants, bars, hotels and laundromats, provided information about the study to potential participants. Men were also recruited through social service agency referrals. Recruitment materials and agency staff members referred interested individuals to a toll-free phone number. Potential participants were screened via phone by the field researcher. The initial screening phone call consisted of a brief conversation that informed the potential participant about the research project and procedures and answered all questions. If the potential participant was interested, eligibility was then determined. Finally, if the caller was both interested in participating and eligible to participate, an appointment was scheduled to review the Consent to Participate Form and to conduct the interview. Participants provided written consent and then completed a brief demographic questionnaire before the in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interview. All participants were given the option to select a convenient location for their interview and yet most chose to meet at the study's research community site. Study participants were provided a \$50 cash incentive at the completion

of the interview. The Friends Research Institute, Inc. Institutional Review Board approved all study materials and activities. Additional and detailed study procedures, an analysis of heterosexual identity construction and the meaning participants ascribed to their sexual partnerships and an analysis of the HIV sexual risk behaviours during the sexual encounters have been reported elsewhere (Reback and Larkins 2010, 2013).

Data analysis

Open-ended, semi-structured questions focused on study participants' sexual histories, their marital status, their first and most recent sexual experiences with a trans woman, the meaning of sexual experiences with trans woman partner(s), the role of sex in their life, how they met and negotiated sexual encounters with trans woman partner(s), knowledge of these sexual encounters among their family and heterosexual friends, and substance use. Interviews ranged from one to three hours and were conducted by a trained field researcher. The field researcher presented questions and follow-up probes in a non-invasive and non-judgmental manner. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber who was bound to confidentiality. Study participants each chose a pseudonym for purposes of anonymity. Sampling was terminated when new study participants provided redundant data and themes became repetitious (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) guided data analysis. To ensure coder reliability, a first-level coding scheme was developed by the principal investigator and a qualitative data analyst independently after each had listened to the audio recordings, reviewed the transcripts and written interview notes. Interview data were classified by topic and code. After comparing codes and reviewing inconsistencies, a final thematic coding scheme was developed by which all transcripts were coded. ATLAS.ti®, a software program used for text-based coding and retrieval, was used to create a computerised database of the interviews. After manual coding, ATLAS.ti® facilitated theme development and code refinement. Quotations that best represented each theme were selected from the database for inclusion in this article.

Findings

Participants described their sexual experiences with a trans woman and what these experiences meant to them. Three themes emerged that reflected how the participants defined and negotiated their occasional sexual encounters with a trans woman, both psychologically through their understanding of sex with a trans woman with a penis, and physically through the navigation of specific sex acts: (1) the erotic desire that transpired from a trans woman's construction of her femininity, (2) the sexual act that dictated the specific navigation of a trans woman's penis, and (3) the sexual dissonance that resulted from being a heterosexually identified man who had sex with a partner who has a penis. Participants' narratives revealed the importance of femininity in descriptions of their sexual partners. However, 'femininity' is a subjective construct that depends upon each individual's perceptions and definitions, thus the participants explained the perspectives of femininity that were most important to them. Many participants also explained how their navigation of their partner's penis during sexual encounters was an area that played a significant role in ascribing meaning to their experiences. Some participants' desire was predicated upon interpreting a trans woman's

femininity as an 'illusion', requiring no contact with or visual awareness of her penis. Finally, participants highlighted their internal struggles with their construction of the illusion and actual knowledge that they were not having sex with a cisgender woman.³

The illusion of a woman: erotic desire through the construction of femininity

The participants expressed a desire to have sex with a trans woman if she possessed physical characteristics that were stereotypically feminine. Many participants explained the importance of viewing their trans woman sexual partner(s) as 'real' women or cisgender women. Some participants were able to incorporate trans women into their personal definitions of women, while others emphasised the differences between trans women and cisgender women and did not perceive trans women as 'real women'. Although the participants reported that their trans woman sexual partner(s) had not had gender confirmation surgery, most had other feminising procedures such as breast augmentation, facial surgery including lip and cheek implants, rhinoplasty and tracheal shave. The results of such feminising procedures physically attracted the participants to their sexual partners, as Joe (35 years old, African American) described:

It has to be a beautiful, beautiful transgender for me to go there. They've got to be exceptional. No signs of manliness whatsoever, none. The only way you can even tell that they're men⁴ is by looking inside their underwear, that's it. Everything else has to be extremely feminine. No big hands. No Adam's apple, nothing.

Similarly, Howard (42 years old, African American) explained that his desire was specifically directed toward a trans woman who was a man but who looked like a beautiful woman. His sexual excitement was focused on the construction of femininity that materialised from a male body:

It's just the beauty. It turns me on that a man can look so beautiful like a woman, with the breasts, with the hips, with the big butt, nice legs, dressing nice. I just get excited. I look at her like she's another woman. But I know in my mind that she's not, but it's just the excitement of how she looks. And that's what turns me on.

Howard continued to delineate how his desire revolved around the beauty of a masculine body reaching heightened femininity. For him, this was the ultimate fantasy. Without achieving feminine beauty, the fantasy was not achieved and there was no sexual desire:

A fantasy that's come true. It's just a fantasy to me. The beauty of it – how they make their self up to be a woman, and I like that. Because they do a good job. If they make themselves up and the job is not good, then it's not appealing to me. It's the same as being with a man, but knowing he's professing himself as a woman. The excitement of it is because he's transformed from a man to a beautiful woman, and I like that, and that turns me on.

Although the trans women had feminine attributes such as breasts and hips, some of the participants described their sexual partners as men who had 'transformed' themselves into women. However, from the perspectives of the participants, this transformation was not a gender transition. Instead, the transformation was viewed as an illusion or a 'fantasy', which motivated and aroused their desire. Many participants explained the importance of viewing and describing their trans woman sexual partner as the illusion of a cisgender woman. Jim (40 years old, African American) narrated how, during the process of oral sex, his sexual partner 'became' a real woman to him:

I'm actually watching him suck my dick and it's like a man, but he's sucking my dick. And his face, it looks like a woman now. The more I imagine him being a woman, the more he even looked like a woman, and this was a real female now. But as he was sucking my dick and he's even moaning and making those noises that a female would, so it's like he's into it and I'm into it.

Jim's narration exemplified how the illusion of a 'real woman' was created during the sexual encounter. Jim's words highlighted the transformation that took place for him – through the eroticism of desire, his sexual partner transformed in his mind into a real female.

For many participants, erotic desire was experienced as a result of the awareness that femininity had been constructed, which enabled them to fully realise their fantasy.

Navigating her penis

Although participants seemed similar in their attraction to attributes considered feminine, they differed in their sexual navigation of their sexual partner's penis. Some men described discomfort with any interaction with a trans woman's penis, while others viewed her penis as an essential component of their sexual desire. For participants who maintained their illusion that their trans woman partner was a cisgender woman, it was very important not to interact with or see their sexual partner's penis. These participants reported that interacting with or looking at a trans woman's penis ruined the fantasy of having sex with a cisgender woman. Jay (40 years old, African American), a participant who preferred not to have contact with his partner's penis, detailed how he avoided such contact:

When I'm dealing with the transgenders, a lot of them still possess their penises. So, that's kind of like a turn off for me. But most of the time, I'm doing it from the back anyway and I don't particularly care to see it ... I won't participate, if a transgender still has his penis and whatnot, I won't play with the penis or whatever ... I won't participate and put my mouth down on [her penis], no nothing.

Like Jay, Terry (32 years old, African American) also navigated the sexual encounter with a trans woman to avoid interaction with her penis. Jay, Terry and others, reported not being specifically attracted to a trans woman or to a woman with a penis, rather these participants explained that they were attracted to the illusion of sex with a cisgender woman while actually having sex with a trans woman. In order to realise that fantasy, interactions with her penis were eliminated:

Now a transgender, I guess it's the illusion of a woman. I've found myself, sometimes affectionately drawn to them In the sex part with transgender women, when I'm with them I don't even want to see their penis because then it totally would mess up my thing I've got going on in my head, however strange that is ... I think with the transgender, they give me that woman thing.

Later in the interview, Terry described his partner's ejaculation as 'weird' for him because at that moment, the 'illusion' that he was having sex with a cisgender woman was destroyed. Like other participants, Terry navigated the sexual activity ('doggie style'), which avoided contact with his partner's penis. When she ejaculated, he was reminded of her penis and his illusion was forced to end:

It was intense for me. We had started doing it doggie style, and apparently she had began to masturbate as I was screwing her. And right after I came, I guess she came too. And that was weird for me. It was kind of weird for me because it took away from the whole illusion thing that I was looking at, which was important to me.

Similarly, Jim reported discomfort with his partner's penis. Below, Jim detailed a specific sexual encounter that illustrated how he negotiated, either verbally or nonverbally, sex with his partner so that he could maintain his illusion of having sex with a cisgender woman:

He had on nothing but his little bikini underwear. But I couldn't see his penis, it was tucked or whatever, but it wasn't there. And I wasn't trying to see it because I was trying to keep the illusion that this was a real female. And, the way he just did everything, it wasn't hard for me not to imagine, because I never, I never seen the penis. And he had little nipples like, like little titties was growing and it was like, I mean, the look, he was a female. So, with the towel he was able to conceal himself and lay back, fix the pillows. He did all of this stuff like the [cisgender] women I'd been with would do, like getting everything ready. ... Once he threw the towel over him, concealing himself, and put his legs up and it was like, come on. I'm like fucking him like a real woman, but I didn't want to look down there.

Although for many participants it was extremely important to maintain the illusion of a sexual encounter with a cisgender woman, others like Anthony (34 years old, African American), enjoyed having sex with a woman who could ejaculate and her ejaculation served to heighten the sexual experience. These participants welcomed and desired their trans woman sexual partner's penis and were sexually aroused by seeing and hearing her ejaculate 'like a man':

[I like] the way that they can sound and act like a woman at the time of orgasm. It's a heightened experience for me sexually. It's a trip to be looking up at [a] woman, and see a woman's face and then hear her sound like a woman that's sexually excited, but to cum as a man. I like that.

As Anthony and other participants explained, their partners' penis was an important part of their desire and sexual experience. Josh (27 years old, Caucasian) also explained his comfort with his trans woman partner by pointing out, 'It's not like messing with another man.' Thus, Josh did not find it problematic that his trans woman sexual partner had a penis as he embraced her female identity. Rather than problematising the concept or experience of a sexual partner who had a penis, these participants embraced and included their partners' genitalia as integral to the sexual encounter. However, regardless of whether the participants integrated or avoided a sexual partner's penis, the illusion of having sex with a cisgender woman was somehow integrated into the sexual encounter.

Sexual dissonance: confusion versus acceptance

Within the context of a transphobic society that problematises attraction to trans women, many of the participants did not accept their sexual partners as 'real women'. Although many participants fantasised that they were engaged in a sexual encounter with a cisgender woman, they were aware that they were having sex with a woman with a penis. Some referred to the trans woman's anus as her 'pussy', a term commonly used among trans women. Adopting the word 'pussy', which historically has been the vernacular for a woman's vagina, to mean a trans woman's anus, helped some to maintain the illusion that his sexual partner was a cisgender woman. Jim's narrative most clearly articulated this theme. Here he detailed his experience of learning this terminology, which was introduced to him by his trans woman sexual partner:

I started touching him on the ass. And he's like, 'You want this?' And he was calling it pussy.

Many participants, like Vince (42 years old, Caucasian), reconciled the dissonance of being a heterosexual man having sex with a sexual partner who had a penis by imagining the trans woman as a cisgender woman:

And then he was guiding me into him and his breasts were somewhat enlarged. It was like I was actually, felt like I was having sex with a woman.

Vince described sex with a trans woman as feeling like sex with a cisgender woman, which was a pleasurable outcome for him.

While some participants explained that sex with a trans woman felt the same as sex with a cisgender woman, other participants' narratives revealed a lack of complete comfort about having sex with a trans woman. The use of the term 'pussy' to refer to the trans woman's anus and the use of male pronouns raised questions about the participant's acceptance of their sexual partners as 'real women'. Again, Jim's word choice and narrative suggested an inner conflict about his trans woman's partner's gender that he had not reconciled:

I don't want to look at him like another man. So I can feel good about myself, I want to look at him like a female. He's a woman. But in my right mind I know he ain't, but in my fantasy mind he is a woman. And that's the way I want to leave it. He's sucking my dick and was looking up at me, and I'm looking at the look [in] his eyes and it's like I see lust there. I see the looks that I actually get from a real female and it almost scared me.

Jim's account, which switched back and forth between describing his partner as a man and as a woman, highlighted the confusion that he and other participants experienced when having sex with a partner who possessed physical attributes he considered to be both feminine and masculine. Although the heterosexual male participants frequently used male pronouns and referenced their trans woman sexual partner as a man, there was no indication of a threat to their heterosexual identity.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to better understand the meaning and construction of erotic desire among a sample of heterosexual men who occasionally had sex with a trans woman. In line with the eligibility criteria, all participants reported a minimum of one sexual encounter with a pre- or non-operative trans woman in the previous year but not more than one such sexual encounter a month. Limiting eligibility to participants who engaged in an occasional sexual encounter with a trans woman was effective as the themes that developed were from those who were not familiar with or involved in a trans cultural community. Thus, among this sample, three themes emerged from the participants' narratives: (1) erotic desire from the construction of femininity, (2) navigating the sexual encounter either away from or toward the trans woman's penis, and (3) sexual dissonance regarding sex with a partner who possessed a penis. One of the most important findings of this study was the role an illusion played in the meaning and construction of erotic desire among this sample of heterosexual men.

Among this sample, trans women were found not to be objects of erotic interest as trans women, but, rather, as 'illusions of women' where 'woman' or 'real woman' were taken to mean a cisgender woman (Terry: 'Now a transgender, I guess it's the illusion of a woman.'). This was the case even when a trans woman was allowed by the participant to, in some sense, 'count' as a woman (Jim: 'I was trying to keep the illusion that this was a real female.'). While participants' individual fantasies helped shape the illusion, it was also true that certain forms of social role-play provided the necessary sexual scripts (Plummer 2005) for those individual fantasies. Many participants felt their trans woman sexual partner was playing the part of a cisgender woman (i.e., generating an illusion) through the construction of her femininity (a necessary part of the fantasy). For these participants, erotic desires and fantasies were dependent upon what Garfinkel (1967) called ceremonial transfers of sex.

Garfinkel viewed sex as a common-sense, pre-theoretical notion dependent upon the three components of the 'natural attitude about sex'. According to Garfinkel, the natural attitude about sex is normative in that adherence to the axioms is thought to be natural and proper. Those who subscribe to this view (i.e., 'normals') are consequently suspicious of any scientific, medical or theoretical views that challenge the natural attitude about sex and view any exceptions as 'unnatural' or 'abnormal'.

While stressing the invariance of sex-status in the natural attitude, Garfinkel also noted that ceremonial transfers in sex-status are permitted (e.g., masquerades, play-acting, party behaviour). In such cases, the transfer is subject to strict social controls requiring it to end at some point. Moreover, it is viewed as a form of pretence that stands in contrast to the way things 'really are'. Both the temporary and unreal qualities of the ceremonial transfer are necessary for preserving the natural attitude that sex is invariant.

From Garfinkel's perspective, sexual encounters with trans women were viewed by participants as erotic sites of ceremonial transfer that worked to sustain their private fantasies while simultaneously maintaining their natural attitude about sex. As sexual encounters, the ceremonial transfers were necessarily time-limited, ending with the participant's sexual satisfaction. The role-play was taken to stand in contrast to the reality of the situation, primarily on the basis of the trans woman's possession of a penis, the essential marker of sex status in the natural attitude. What facilitated the ceremonial transfer was the feminine gender presentation and overall physical appearance of a trans woman insofar as the trans woman could be successfully incorporated into the participant's sexual desire. As also noted in Operario and colleagues' (2008) theme of hyper-femininity, it was, in all cases, imperative that the trans woman maintained a high degree of femininity in order to be an object of erotic interest (Joe: 'No signs of manliness whatsoever, none.'). This theme is also consistent with Weinberg and Williams' (2009) work, which found that men's sexual desire toward a trans woman was embedded in her physical appearance. Similarly, although none of the participants in the Weinberg and Williams study used the term 'illusion' to describe the trans woman's presentation of femininity (illusion was an interpretation made by the researchers but not quoted by the participants), many did differentiate a trans woman from a 'real' woman and noted the element of fantasy as a component of sexual embodiment. Weinberg's and Williams' study, however, was comprised of both heterosexually and bisexually identified men, and both men who engaged in sexual encounters with a trans woman as well as those who had not engaged in a sexual encounter with a trans woman but were interested in doing so. Findings from this study differed greatly based upon the participants' sexual identity; whereas, those who identified as bisexual incorporated the trans woman's penis into the sexual encounter and those who identified as heterosexual did not. Thus, sexual dissonance was restricted to those who identified as heterosexual. As embracing the identity of a heterosexual male was an inclusion criterion of this current study, navigation away from or toward the trans woman's penis was irrespective of sexual identity.

The construction of a trans woman as an illusion was found to have different roles in descriptions of the participants' sexual desire; furthermore, the ceremonial transfer and the penis of a trans woman was found to have different roles with regard to the maintenance of the illusion. For some participants, the trans woman was simply fantasised as being a cisgender woman (Vince: 'It was like I was actually, felt like I was having sex with a woman'); the trans woman served as a stand-in for a cisgender woman. With such narratives, neither the perceived ceremonial transfer from male to female status nor the penis were part of

the erotic content and, consequently, it was necessary for the participant to have excluded the penis entirely from the sexual encounter in order to maintain the fantasy that the trans woman was a cisgender woman (Terry: 'When I'm with them I don't even want to see their penis because then it totally would mess up my thing I've got going on in my head'). The penis signalled the unreality of the trans woman's womanhood, while the successfully eroticised feminine appearance facilitated the ceremonial transfer that enabled the sexual fantasy that she was a cisgender woman. For these participants, from Garfinkel's (1967) perspective, the sexual encounter with a trans woman was an erotic site of ceremonial transfer, which served to resolve their sexual dissonance. Additionally, consistent with Weeks (1985), the desire here could have been a manifestation of a previous instance (perhaps a previous relationship with a cisgender woman) and, thus, the relationship with the trans woman was a relationship to an illusion. Although sexual dissonance existed for some participants, no participant experienced concern about his own heterosexual identity.

For some, however, the penis was central to the erotic encounter. These participants were reminiscent of Mauk's and Muñoz-Laboy's (2013) phallus-centric theme whereby the penis was emphasised in the attraction. While some participants had reconciled their sexual desire for a trans woman, others traversed through a sexual dissonance (Jim: 'He's a woman. But in my right mind I know he ain't'). In some cases, the illusory 'transformation' of a man into a woman was itself part of the erotic content (Howard: 'The excitement of it is because he's transformed from a man to a beautiful woman, and I like that, and that turns me on'). For these participants, the ceremonial transfer itself was part of the erotic content. In such cases, the penis was central to the encounter because, as the essential insignia of sex in the natural attitude, the penis served to establish the eroticised reality of the trans woman's sex status (male) that stood in contrast to the eroticised ceremonial transfer facilitated by trans woman's femininity (the illusion of a woman). For other participants, what contributed to the sexual desire was the illusion of a cisgender woman with a penis (Anthony: 'It's a trip to be looking up at [a] woman, and see a woman's face and then hear her sound like a woman that's sexually excited, but to cum as a man').

Although the ways in which the participants eroticised and constructed meaning about erotic desire with a trans woman were not homogenous, the interpretation of a trans woman as pretending to be a cisgender woman played an important role in what was eroticised and how that eroticism was understood, and consequently provided the basis for categorising the various different types of erotic desire. Thus, the importance of social meaning and sexual scripts in understanding men's sexuality (Plummer 2005) as well as underscoring the fact that some of these scripts and systems of meaning may reflect culturally oppressive values (e.g., transphobia). Given the complex nature of some of the erotic content (i.e., the eroticisation of sexual transformation, the eroticisation of a woman with a penis) in stimulating sexual arousal, the biological nature of the erotic content was far from clear. It was not surprising that the construction of a trans woman as an illusion of a cisgender woman tended to correspond with the participants' view that trans women were not 'real' women. Even when participants suggested that a trans woman was a kind of a woman or used the vernacular 'pussy', male pronouns continued to be used in their narratives.

This study was limited by the nature of self-reported qualitative data, which may include recall error and social desirability (Elliot, Huizinga, and Menard 1989). The study was limited by the methodology of using a convenience sample. Findings could differ if data were collected using a different recruitment strategy such as respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn

1997) or time-space sampling methodology (MacKellar et al. 2007; Semaan 2010). Finally, the specific characteristics of the sample also served as a limitation as findings could differ from data collected in different geographic regions or among participants with different sociodemographic profiles. Despite these limitations, these findings are useful in understanding the sexual desire, erotic attraction and fantasies of a sample of heterosexual men who have occasional sexual encounters with a trans woman. Together they provide impetus for continuing the discourse on the complexity of erotic desire.

Notes

1. Given that heterosexually identified men were the targeted sample, a trans woman was defined as such by the study respondents. Although not an eligibility criterion, none of the trans women sexual partners of the study respondents had gender confirmation surgery.
2. A cisgender man was defined as an individual who was assigned the male sex at birth and whose gender identity was man.
3. A cisgender woman was defined as an individual who was assigned the female sex at birth and whose gender identity was woman.
4. Many participants used a male pronoun or referred to their trans woman sexual partner as a man.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the participants who provided their invaluable narratives.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This study was supported by the City of Los Angeles, AIDS Coordinator's Office [contract number C-102523] and the National Institute of Mental Health [grant number P30 MH58107].

References

- Blanchard, R., and P. I. Collins. 1993. "Men with Sexual Interest in Transvestites, Transsexuals, and She-Males." *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 181: 570–575.
- Bockting, W., M. Michael, and B. R. Rosser. 2007. "Latino Men's Sexual Behavior with Transgender Persons." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 36 (6): 779–786.
- Crépault, C., and M. Couture. 1980. "Men's Erotic Fantasies." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 9: 565–581.
- Duby, Z., M. Hartmann, and E. Montgomery. 2016. "Sexual Scripting of Heterosexual Penile-Anal Intercourse amongst Participants in an HIV Prevention Trial in South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 18 (1): 30–44.
- Dworkin, S. L., T. Beckford, and A. A. Ehrhardt. 2007. "Sexual Scripts of Women: A Longitudinal Analysis of Participants in Gender-Specific HIV/STD Prevention Intervention." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 36 (2): 269–279.
- Elliot, D. S., D. Huizinga, and S. Menard. 1989. *Multiple Problem Youth: Delinquency, Substance Use, and Mental Health Problems*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Foucault, M. 1980. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage.

- Gagnon, J., and W. Simon. 1973. *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Books.
- Garfinkel, H. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Glaser, B., and A. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Hekthorn, D. D. 1997. "Respondent-Driven Sampling: A New Approach to the Study of Hidden Populations." *Social Problems* 44: 174–199.
- Iantaffi, A., and W. O. Bockting. 2011. "Views from Both Sides of the Bridge? Gender, Sexual Legitimacy, and Transgender People's Experiences of Relationships." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 13 (3): 355–370.
- MacKellar, D. A., K. M. Gallagher, T. Finlayson, T. Sanchez, A. Lansky, and P. S. Sullivan. 2007. "Surveillance of HIV Risk and Prevention Behaviors of Men Who Have Sex with Men – A National Application of Venue-Based, Time-Space Sampling." *Public Health Reports* 122 (Suppl 1): 39–47.
- Mauk, D., A. Perry, and M. Muñoz-Laboy. 2013. "Exploring the Desires and Sexual Culture of Men Who Have Sex with Male-to-Female Transgender Women." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 42: 793–803.
- McGeeney, E. 2015. "A Focus on Pleasure? Desire and Disgust in Group Work with Young Men." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17 (S2): S223–S237.
- Money, J., and M. Lamacz. 1984. "Gynemimesis and Gynemimetophilia: Individual and Cross-Cultural Manifestations of a Gender-Coping Strategy Hitherto Unnamed." *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 25: 392–403.
- Operario, D., J. Burton, K. Underhill, and J. Sevelius. 2008. "Men Who Have Sex with Transgender Women: Challenges to Category-Based HIV Prevention." *AIDS & Behavior* 12: 18–26.
- Pettitway, L. 1996. *Honey, Honey Miss Thang: Being Black, Gay, and on the Street*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Plummer, K. 2005. "Male Sexualities." In *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, edited by M. S. Kimmel, J. R. Hearn, and R. Connell, 178–195. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Reback, C. J., and S. Larkins. 2010. "Maintaining a Heterosexual Identity: Sexual Meanings among a Sample of Heterosexually Identified Men Who Have Sex with Men." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39: 766–773.
- Reback, C. J., and S. Larkins. 2013. "HIV Risk Behaviors among a Sample of Heterosexually Identified Men Who Occasionally Have Sex with Another Male and/or a Transwoman." *Journal of Sex Research* 50: 151–163.
- Rubin, G. 1984. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory about the Politics of Sexuality." In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Sexuality*, edited by C. S. Vance, 267–319. Boston, MA: Routledge.
- Semaan, S. 2010. "Time-Space Sampling and Respondent-Driven Sampling with Hard-to-Reach Populations." *Methodological Innovations Online* 5: 60–75.
- Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Tolman, D. L., and L. M. Diamond. 2001. "Desegregating Sexuality Research: Cultural and Biological Perspectives on Gender and Desire." *Annual Review of Sex Research* 12: 33–74.
- Weeks, J. 1985. *Sexuality and Its Discontents*. London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Weeks, J. 2010. *Sexuality*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Weinberg, M. S., and C. J. Williams. 2009. "Men Sexually Interested in Transwomen (MSTW): Gendered Embodiment and the Construction of Sexual Desire." *Journal of Sex Research* 46: 1–10.
- Whittier, D. K., and R. M. Melendez. 2004. "Intersubjectivity in the Intrapsychic Sexual Scripting of Gay Men." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 6 (2): 131–143.