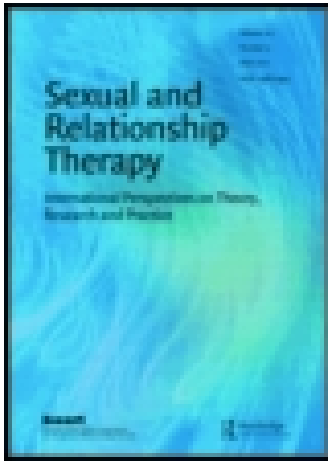


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Gender identity affirmation among male-to-female transgender persons: a life course analysis across types of relationships and cultural/lifestyle factors

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Disclosures of a transgender identity to others, and responses from others allowing for desired gender role behavior, are defining events for male-to-female (MTF) transgender persons. This study systematically examined these interpersonal acts of gender identity affirmation among 571 MTF transgender persons from New York City. Using the Life Chart Interview, biographical information about gender identity disclosure to others and desired gender role casting from others was obtained across stages of the life course (early adolescence, late adolescence, early adulthood, young adulthood and middle age) and types of relationships (parents, siblings, sexual partners, friends, fellow students and co-workers). Summaries of gender identity disclosure and gender role casting were then computed across the life course and relationships and associated with sexual orientation, ethnicity and sex work history (cultural/lifestyle factors). The two aspects of gender identity affirmation were, predictably, more likely in achieved (i.e. friends) as compared to ascribed (i.e. parents) relationships. Younger respondents (age 19–39) were generally more likely to report gender identity disclosure and desired gender role casting. Strong and highly significant differences were observed across cultural/lifestyle factors. Implications of these findings for the mental health of MTF transgender persons, and mental health therapy, are discussed.

Keywords: life chart interview; male-to-female transgender persons; gender identity affirmation; gender identity disclosure; gender role casting

Introduction

Presenting, being seen and acting in the female role in their personal and social relationships is a fundamental motivation of male-to-female (MTF) transgender persons (Cole, Denny, & Ayler, 2000). But in a society with rigidly defined norms for the presentation of mutually exclusive genders consistent with sex assigned at birth, disclosure of a gender identity at odds with one's sexual anatomy may be met with recrimination and interacting with others on the basis of a newly chosen gender role may be highly constrained and awkward (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2001; Whitlock, 1990). These broad tenets about the psychologically compelling, but

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socially challenging, nature of transgender identity affirmation have been described in previous small-scale studies. Building on this work, this research aims to provide a detailed quantitative description of gender identity affirmation among MTF transgender persons in the context of the life course and broader cultural/lifestyle factors.

Review of the literature and goals of the current study

Transgender identity affirmation in different types of relationships

The family is a “critical theatre” in which MTF transgender persons assert that they identify as women and have done so for a long time (Bolin, 1988, p. 93). A failure of parents to acknowledge a MTF transgender persons identity, as revealed, for example by continuing to use the pronoun “him”, represents a basic obstacle to achieving a sense of self-acceptance (Parker & Barr, 1984; Sipova & Brzek, 1983). Among MTF transgender persons, parents “were the source of their birth and nurturance as males and symbolically can be the source of their rebirth and nurturance as females” (Bolin, 1988, p. 93).

Siblings, by passively rejecting the transgender persons’ claim of gender, choosing to overlook it in the context of the brother-sister relationship or by actively engaging in ridicule or condemnation, can also demoralize transgender persons (Factor & Rothblum, 2007). Caught between their beliefs about proper gender roles and their personal loyalties, siblings are frequently dismissive and hostile (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984). Acceptance by siblings is seen as a type of “retroactive credibility” for transgender identity (Bolin, 1988, p. 93).

The consequences of disclosing transgender identity to long-term sexual partners (including a spouse) largely depend on whether or not this disclosure occurred during the initial stage of the relationship. Entering a committed sexual relationship as a “male” with a subsequent disclosure of being “female” may produce confusion about gender roles and relationship ambivalence. This often results in termination of the relationship (Steiner, 1985). If MTF transgender persons enter long-term sexual relationships with a disclosure of their gender identity, and their associated sexual interests, these relationships may be important resources for social support and gender identity affirmation (Steiner, 1985).

In the process of transitioning, MTF transgender persons typically sift through their friendship network, largely avoiding those individuals anticipated to be critical toward the newly proclaimed gender (Bolin, 1988). Some friendships may be re-established, based on one’s new gender, and new friendships may be developed. Whether old or new or formed in or out of the transgender community, friendships can be “celebrations of identity” that provide much-needed emotional support and legitimize a gender-variant lifestyle (Blumenstein, 1998).

Male-to-female transgender persons confront a related set of challenges and issues in academic settings (Zucker & Bradley, 1995). They may selectively divulge their gender identity only to those who are expected to be supportive (with appropriate discretion about dressing in the female role) or “come out” to everyone in this setting (perhaps dressing in the female role on a full-time basis) (Zucker & Bradley, 1995).

Changing one’s gender at the workplace is a unique challenge. Transitioning in the context of existing employment may be associated with loss of employment (voluntarily leaving or being fired) (Bolin, 1988). A failure to “pass” as one’s

proclaimed gender may result in alienation from co-workers and perhaps job termination (Gary & Elliot, 2008).

Life course and generational differences in transgender identity affirmation

Transgender identity affirmation (and conflict) in different types of relationships, as portrayed in the above literature, should ideally be seen in the context of life course and generational factors that potentially bear on these relationships. Disclosure of a transgender identity to one's parents, for example, may be more problematic during early adolescence as compared to parental disclosure of this identity during later stages of life. As individuals mature, different sets of roles and relationships typically become more dominant (e.g. school mates during adolescence, co-workers during post-adolescence).

The relationships of transgender persons may also be changing historically, perhaps with younger generations more likely to disclose their gender identity and to interact with others on the basis of a desired gender role. Male-to-female transgender persons over the age of 40 were born in 1969 or earlier and experienced adolescence and young adulthood at a time when knowledge about transgenderism was non-existent or rudimentary and attitudes toward transgender persons were typically ambivalent or negative. Male-to-female transgender persons under the age of 40 were born in 1970 or later and experienced adolescence and young adulthood at a time when attitudes toward transgender persons were, at least marginally, improved.

Cultural/lifestyle differences in transgender identity affirmation

Transgender identity affirmation, in different types of relationships, should ideally also be seen in the context of cultural/lifestyle factors, including sexual orientation, ethnicity and involvement in the sex trade.

Male-to-female transgender persons are heterogeneous with regard to sexual orientation (Pauly, 1998). Most of them are attracted to biological males only (androphilic); some are attracted to biological females only (gynephilic); some are attracted to both biological males and biological females (androphilic/gynephilic); a few are attracted to neither biological males or biological females (asexual); and a few are attracted primarily to other transgender persons. Male-to-female transgender persons attracted to biological males only are regarded by some (but not all) sexologists as developmentally different from the other sexual types (Pauly, 1998). Compared to the other types, MTF transgender persons who are only attracted to biological males are said to form a gender self concept as "female" during an earlier stage of development (pre-adolescence) (Pauly, 1998) and are more likely to "come out" in different types of relationships during adolescence (Nuttbrock et al., submitted b).

The phenomenon of transgenderism also varies in basic ways across cultural and ethnic groups; in part because of the overlap between ethnicity and sexual orientation (Hwahng & Nuttbrock, 2007). In American society, compared to Caucasian American MTF transgender persons, Hispanic and African American MTF transgender persons are significantly more likely to "come out" in different types of relationships during adolescence (Nuttbrock et al., submitted a).

An additional lifestyle factor potentially associated with transgender identity affirmation is involvement in the sex trade. Performing the female (typically anal receptive) sexual script or role in conjunction with commercial sexual relationships is

apparently an accessible and powerful mode of gender identity affirmation. Long-term involvement in the sex trade may promote a life style centered on the presentation of a female identity, with a corresponding decision to “come out” in all relationships and interact with others on the basis of a female role (Nuttbrock et al., submitted b).

The current study

This study quantitatively describes two inter-related dimensions of gender identity affirmation among MTF transgender persons (gender identity disclosure to others and desired gender role casting in interaction with others) in the context of the specific types of relationships and contextual variables reviewed above. This will be accomplished using an innovative technique for the collection of retrospective data, the Life Chart Interview (LCI).

The LCI was developed and initially employed in conjunction with the National Co-morbidity Survey (NCS) (Lyketsos, Nestadt, & Cwi, 1994). It uses time-focused interviewing (all questions are referenced with regard to a particular time frame) and multiple sets of personal and social memory cues or anchors to improve the accuracy of symptom recall. Using the LCI, reports of DSM-IV major depression, initially reported during a baseline interview, were remembered in a follow-up interview twelve years later (Eaton, Antony, & Gallo, 1997). The LCI has since been used in major mental health surveys around the world and its scope has been extended to include other disorders and domains of mental health functioning (Hunt & Andrews, 1995). Social scientists have employed techniques similar to the LCI to recall changes in relationships over the life course (Furstenburg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987). The present authors have successfully applied the LCI for a study of the psychiatric impact of gender-related abuse across the life course of MTF transgender persons (Nuttbrock et al., submitted a) and lifetime risk factors for HIV/STI infection in this population (Nuttbrock et al., submitted b). The LCI is used here to describe lifetime patterns of gender identity affirmation in this same population.

Methods

Sampling procedures and features of the study

A total of 571 MTF transgender persons were recruited for the baseline component of a large cross-sectional/longitudinal study of MTF transgender persons in the New York Metropolitan Areas (The New York Transgender Project). All study participants were assigned as male at birth but subsequently did not regard themselves as “completely male” in all situations or roles (transgender identity). In addition to transgender identity, eligibility for inclusion in the study included age of 19 or older and the absence of psychotic ideation (two were screened out).

Study participants were broadly recruited from the streets, clubs, newspaper advertisements, transgender organization in the New York Metropolitan Area (e.g. TRIESS, Cross Dressers International and the Mid Hudson Valley Transgender Association), the Internet and through referrals of other transgender persons by study participants. They were paid \$30 for the baseline interview.

Transgender or gender variant individuals were actively involved in all aspects and phases of the research design. The Institutional Review Board of the National Development and Research Institutes approved all of the research protocols.

Instrument

Face-to-face interviews, which typically lasted about 90 minutes, were conducted in conjunction with the Life Review of Transgender Experiences (LRTE). The LRTE adopts and extends the protocols of the LCI. It is designed specifically for a MTF transgender persons population and includes a broad range of social, behavioral, economic and psychiatric assessments.

In contrast to the largely arbitrary time spans and reporting intervals used in the NCS and other studies using the LCI, we adopted a life course perspective and incorporated reporting intervals corresponding to life stages. “Early adolescence” is age 10 thru 14; “late adolescence” is age 15 thru 19 (for all respondents). For younger respondents currently between the ages of 19–39; “early adulthood” is age 20 thru 24; “young adulthood” is age 25 thru 29; and “early middle age” is age 30 thru 39. For older respondents currently between the ages of 40 and 59, “early/young adulthood” is the age 20 thru 29; “early middle age” is age 30 thru 39; and “later middle age” is age 40 thru 59. Because of variation in the duration of post-adolescent life stages for younger and older respondents, the analysis is stratified by current age. The longer time frames in the life stages past early adulthood, for both younger and older respondents, should be considered when evaluating changes in prevalence across time.

Sets of personal and social memory cues or anchors were utilized to define and personally characterize each age period. Calendar years and (as appropriate) levels of education bounding the life stages were elicited and recorded. Salient personal and social events occurring within these time frames were also elicited and recorded. To facilitate memory, the life stage boundaries, and the personally meaningful events occurring during them, were periodically repeated during the course of the interview. The interview proceeded in a time-sequential manner. All items were asked with reference to the first time period (early adolescence) followed, in sequence, by asking these same questions with regard to later time periods. As the interview proceeds, respondents were reminded about their responses to items during earlier life stages.

In sum, the LRTE represents a semi-structured narrative approach to the research interview in which respondents are encouraged to “tell their life stories” in a personally meaningful and coherent way (Mischler, 1986).

Measurements

Gender identity affirmation

The disclosure of a transgender identity in relationships is conceptualized as one dimension of gender identity affirmation. This was measured, in the context of memory cues during specific stages of life (discussed above), with a single item about the number (or percentage) of individuals associated with a particular type of relationship the respondent’s were “out with”. This terminology was well understood by the respondents to include the intentional act of verbally informing others about one’s gender identity or having this identity unintentionally revealed (the term “gender identity disclosure” will be employed to denote either an intentional or unintentional disclosure).

Gender identity disclosure was assessed during five stages of the life course in six types of relationships: parents, siblings, long-term sexual partner, friends,

fellow-students and co-workers. Spouses were not specifically included as a type of relationship because of issues associated with comparisons across respondents with different types of sexual orientation.

Life course and relationship-specific measurements of gender identity disclosure were computed to reflect the extent to which gender identity was disclosed to available individuals. Gender identity disclosure to no available individuals was coded as “0” (no disclosure); gender identity disclosure to some but not all individuals was coded as “1” (partial disclosure); gender identity disclosure to all available individuals was coded as a “2” (complete disclosure). Partial identity disclosure in contexts with less than three individuals (e.g. parents) was not coded. This measurement device prominently features the possibility of partial gender identity disclosure (a significant consideration) and provides a useful standardization across types of relationships and stages of the life course that will allow for the computation of more general summaries of gender identity disclosure. Gender identity disclosure, aggregated across types of relationships, sums the measurements in the six possible relationships (0–2) at a given stage of the life course to form a life stage specific measurement of gender identity disclosure that ranges from 0 to 12. Gender identity disclosure, aggregated across types of relationships and the life course, sums the measurements across relationships and time to form a lifetime measurement of gender identity disclosure that ranges from 0 to 60. A critical parameter in these measurements is obviously the availability of the types of relationships during given stages of the life course. This will be measured and included as a covariate in some of the analysis.

Desired gender role casting is a second dimension of gender identity affirmation, which is, in this analysis, completely contingent on gender identity disclosure (i.e. role casting was not assessed if gender identity was not disclosed). Desired gender role casting was measured, again in the context of memory cues during specific stages of life (discussed above), with a single item about the percentage of time individuals associated with a particular type of relationships “treated them the way they wanted to be treated”. This terminology allowed the respondents to subjectively consider the gender-related responses of others in relationship to their individualized sense of gender identity.

The “total amount of time” given types of relationships were associated with desired gender role casting was trichotomized as 0 (none of the time); 1 (a small amount of time or some of the time); and 2 (much of the time or all of the time). Desired gender role casting sums the measurements in the six possible relationships (0–2) at a given stage of the life course to form a life stage specific measurement of desired gender role casting that ranges from 0 to 12. Desired gender role casting sums the measurements across relationships and time to form a lifetime measurement of desired gender role casting that ranges from 0 to 60. Evaluations of gender role casting necessarily need to simultaneously evaluate relationship availability and gender identity disclosure.

Cultural/lifestyle factors

Sexual orientation, ethnicity and lifetime involvement in the sex trade are broadly described as cultural/lifestyle factors. Sexual orientation was measured conventionally as partnerships attraction, dummy coded (0,1) as: attracted to biological males only; attracted to biological females only; attracted to both biological males and

females; attracted to neither biological males nor biological females. This measurement does not fully capture all the dimensions of sexual orientation among MTF transgender persons, but it is a useful conventional typology that is broadly employed in the general literature. Ethnicity was dummy coded (0,1) as Hispanic, non-Hispanic African American, non-Hispanic Caucasian American and non-Hispanic other. Any lifetime involvement in the sex trade was broadly coded as 0 (indicated) or 1 (not-indicated).

Data analytic techniques

Data analytic techniques will include comparisons of percentages across categories of other variables and linear regression. Two-tailed tests of statistical significance will be employed in some of the analyses. A central analytic problem in the analysis is three contingent outcome variables (availability of interpersonal contexts; gender identity disclosure in available interpersonal contexts; and desired gender role casting in those contexts where gender identity was disclosure). Advanced techniques have been devised for the analysis of limited and contingent response variables (Demaris, 2004). These techniques allow for a fuller modeling of the processes involved and potentially correct for selection biases. The multivariate regression analyses of the above contingencies of gender identity affirmation will simultaneously include two or more of these contingencies into the analysis with a zero coding, as appropriate. This analysis provides a detailed description of the processes involved and produces theoretically valid findings that are consistent with our previous work in this area.

Results

Respondents

The 571 respondents ranged in age from 19 to 59 with a mean age of 37. Less than half (41.9%) completed twelve years of education, with 18.9% completing sixteen years of education. Hispanic identification was 43.9%, with 26.8, 21.6, and 7.6% identifying, respectively, as non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black or some other category. With regard to sexual orientation, 68.6% were attracted to men only (androphilic), 12.5% were attracted to females only (gynephilic), 16.8% were attracted to both men and women (bisexual) and 2.1% were attracted to neither men nor women (asexual). Lifetime use of hormone replacements for the purpose of gender presentation was reported by 77.6 and 61.9% of the younger and older respondents, respectively.

Gender identity disclosure across types of relationships and the life course

Detailed summaries of gender identity disclosure across different types of relationships and the life course are displayed in Table 1.

Because of the differences in time spans associated with the five stages of life course for the younger (age 19–39) and older (age 40–59) respondents, and also to examine potentially significant age cohort effects, much of the analysis will be stratified by these two age categories. In evaluating the percentage of respondents with the three measured levels of gender identity disclosure (none, some or all), two types of attrition (aging and relationship non-availability) are necessarily reflected in

Table 1. Gender identity disclosure across types of relationships and the life course.

Relationship/identity disclosure	Stage of the life course				
	1	2	3	4	5
Current age of 19–39 (life course $n =$)	333	333	307	213	152
Parents (n with a parent)	331	330	302	209	131
None	75.5	50.3	34.7	31.7	26.1
Some	11.2	17.3	30.2	31.2	40.3
All	12.5	32.4	35.1	37.2	33.6
Siblings (n with a sibling)	303	307	281	197	123
None	69.0	42.3	33.8	28.9	26.0
Some	10.9	14.7	13.3	12.2	12.2
All	20.1	43.0	53.0	58.9	61.8
Sexual partners (n with a partner)	90	188	188	130	81
None	25.6	19.7	12.2	3.1	1.2
Some	0.0	4.8	4.3	3.8	3.7
All	74.4	75.5	83.5	98.1	95.1
Friends (n with a friend)	257	283	251	170	103
None	45.0	21.6	10.8	11.2	1.9
Some	14.0	12.0	6.8	7.1	6.8
All	40.5	66.4	82.5	81.8	91.3
Fellow students (n at school)	320	333	108	20	15
None	66.1	44.0	40.2	350	133
Some	17.2	21.4	23.4	20.0	20.0
All	16.6	34.6	36.4	43.0	66.7
Co-workers (n with work)	91	223	196	125	70
None	74.7	49.8	36.5	28.8	22.9
Some	9.9	16.6	23.4	18.4	17.1
All	15.4	33.6	40.1	52.8	60.0
Current age of 40–59 (life course $n =$)	238	238	238	238	238
Parents (n with a parent)	234	233	225	213	173
None	76.5	66.5	61.8	57.7	43.0
Some	8.5	11.6	15.6	21.1	34.9
All	15.0	21.9	22.7	21.1	22.1
Siblings (n with a sibling)	221	223	223	222	208
None	79.2	69.1	62.8	56.8	40.4
Some	4.1	6.3	8.1	9.5	13.5
All	16.7	24.7	29.1	33.3	46.2
Sexual partners (n with a partner)	36	84	135	112	114
None	41.7	42.9	25.9	16.1	7.9
Some	2.8	3.6	5.9	7.1	3.5
All	55.6	53.6	68.1	76.8	88.6
Friends (n with a friend)	192	198	208	195	188
None	65.6	56.1	45.2	34.9	12.2
Some	6.3	8.6	8.2	14.9	18.1
All	28.1	35.4	46.6	50.3	69.7
Fellow students (n at school)	320	333	108	20	15
None	66.1	44.0	40.2	350	133
Some	17.2	21.4	23.4	20.0	20.0
All	16.6	34.6	36.4	43.0	66.7
Co-workers (n with work)	78	168	201	196	160
None	91.0	80.4	65.0	57.1	36.3
Some	3.8	9.5	19.5	18.9	25.0
All	5.1	10.1	15.5	24.0	38.8

the percentage denominators. The life course n (for both younger and older respondents) indicates the subset of respondents who aged into a particular stage of the life course (for example: 152 of the 333 younger were 30 years of age or older). There was, by design, no age or life course attrition associated with the older respondents (all of whom had a current age of 40 or older). Relationship availability (non-availability) is indicated in Table 1 as the sub-set of respondents indicating at least one individual associated with types of relationships (for example: 331 of 333 of the younger respondents had at least one parent available during early adolescence).

Among the younger respondents, 75.5% indicated no disclosure of female gender identity to available parents during early adolescence. This percentage decreased across the life course, with 26.1% indicating no disclosure of female gender identity to available parents during early middle age (current age of 30–39). The percentages of older respondents (current age of 40–59) who did not disclose a female gender identity to available parents was marginally higher at all stages of the life course. Significant percentages of both the younger and older respondents indicated parental disclosure of gender identity to some but not all of their available parents (indicating selective disclosure to one but not both parents). This percentage also decreased across the life course, with 26.0% indicating no gender identity disclosure to available siblings during early middle age. The percentages of older respondents (40–59) who did not disclose gender identity to available sibling was significantly higher (10–20%) across all stages of the life course. Across available relationships and the life course, significant percentages (from 4–40%) of both the younger and older respondents disclosed their gender identity to some but not all of their available siblings (selective identity disclosure).

Among the younger and older respondents, 74.4 and 55.6%, respectively, indicated disclosure of their gender identity to all of their long-term sexual partners during early adolescence. In both age categories, disclosure of gender identity to long-term sexual partners tended to increase across the life course. In both age categories, the disclosure of gender identity to some but not all long-term sexual partners was comparatively low (0–7.1%).

Among the younger and older respondents, 40.5 and 28.1%, respectively, indicated disclosure of their gender identity to all of their available friends. In both of these age groups, gender identity disclosure to available friends increased significantly (roughly 40%) across the life course. Selective gender identity disclosure to available friends decreased across the life course for the younger age group (from 14.0–6.8%) but decreased across the life course for the older age group (6.3–18.1%).

Among the younger and older respondents, 66.1 and 45.2%, respectively, indicated no gender identity disclosure in an available academic setting. Non-disclosure of gender identity to fellow students in an available academic setting decreased substantially across the life course for both age categories (13.3 and 0.0% for younger and older respondents, respectively, during the fifth stage of life). About one fifth of the younger respondents (17.2–20.0%) disclosed their gender identity to some but not all of their fellow-students (selective disclosure). Selective gender identity disclosure to available fellow-students decreased significantly across the life course among the older respondents (from 28.8% to 7.7%).

Among the younger and older respondents, 74.7 and 91.0%, respectively, indicated no gender identity disclosure to co-workers in an available work setting during early adolescence. Among both age groups, the percentage of gender identity non-disclosure to co-workers decreased by about 50% across the life course.

Desired gender role casting in “outed” relationships across the life course

Table 2 displays the percentages of time (summarized as none, some or all) interaction partners in particular types of relationships treated the respondents the “way they wanted to be treated”. In addition to the two types of attrition used above for identity disclosure, this analysis incorporates an additional attrition parameter associated with the non-disclosure of gender identity to anyone in the context of an available relationship context. The base percentages used in the percentage denominators are summarized in Table 2 as the number of respondents “out with” a particular type of relationship.

Among the 80 younger and 55 older respondents “out” with at least one parent during early adolescence, 45.0 and 63.5%, respectively, reported no desired gender role casting. For both age groups, the percentages of respondents with a complete lack of desired gender role casting from parents decreased by about one-half across the life course (with a corresponding increase in percentages of desired gender role casting all of the time). Among respondents “out” with a parent, in both age groups, significant percentages of the parents (14.6–33.5%) were regarded by the respondents as casting them in a desired gender role some but not all of the time.

Among the 94 younger and 46 older respondents “out” with at least one sibling during adolescence, 20.2 and 34.8%, respectively, reported no desired gender role casting. For both age groups, the percentages of respondents with a complete lack of desired gender role casting from siblings decreased by about one-half across the life course (with a corresponding increase in percentages of desired gender role casting all of the time).

Among the 67 younger and 21 older respondents “out” with at least one long-term sexual partners during early adolescence, 73.1% and 66.7%, respectively, reported desired role casting all of the time (with these percentages increasing marginally across the life course).

Among the 145 younger and 67 older respondents “out” with at least one friend during early adolescence, 76.6 and 67.2%, respectively, reported desired gender role casting all of the time (with these percentages also increasing marginally across the life course).

Among the 108 younger and 42 older respondents “out” with at least one fellow-student in an academic setting, 35.2 and 31.0%, respectively, reported desired gender role casting all of the time (with these percentages more than doubling across the life course).

Among the 25 younger and 7 older respondents “out” with at least one co-worker during adolescence, 72.0 and 57.1%, respectively, reported desired gender role casting all of the time (with these percentages remaining relatively constant across the life course).

Life course summaries of gender identity affirmation

A more general life course perspective is provided by aggregating the three parameters of gender identity affirmation (availability of interpersonal contexts; gender identity disclosure; and desired gender role casting) across relationships. As shown in Table 3, the availability of interpersonal contexts (range of 0–6) is relatively constant across the life course for both the younger and older respondents. For younger respondents, disclosure of gender identity in available interpersonal

Table 2. Desired gender role casting in “outed” relationships across the life course (percentages).

Relationship/desired role casting	Stage of the life course				
	1	2	3	4	5
Current age of 19–39 (life course $n =$)	333	333	307	213	152
Parents (n out with a parent)	80	161	189	136	89
None	45.0	35.4	25.5	23.0	19.1
Some	20.0	33.5	25.5	19.3	14.6
All	35.0	31.1	48.9	57.8	66.3
Siblings (n out with sibling)	94	177	186	140	91
None	20.2	23.2	16.7	15.0	12.2
Some	34.0	28.2	24.7	21.4	17.8
All	45.7	48.6	58.6	63.6	70.0
Sexual partners (n out with partner)	67	151	165	126	80
None	4.5	1.3	5.5	4.8	7.5
Some	22.4	17.2	19.4	12.7	13.8
All	73.1	81.5	75.2	82.5	78.8
Friends (n out with friend)	145	236	231	157	104
None	2.8	2.5	0.4	1.3	1.0
Some	20.7	14.4	14.7	10.2	9.6
All	76.6	83.1	84.8	88.5	89.4
Fellow students (n out at school)	108	152	65	13	13
None	25.9	17.1	13.8	0.0	7.7
Some	38.9	34.2	36.9	23.1	30.8
All	35.2	48.7	49.2	76.9	61.5
Co-workers (n out at work)	25	113	125	89	54
None	8.0	7.1	9.6	10.1	7.4
Some	20.0	23.0	32.0	32.6	24.1
All	72.0	69.9	58.4	57.3	68.5
Current age of 40–59 (life course $n =$)	238	238	238	238	238
Parents (n out with parent)	55	79	86	91	99
None	63.5	79.4	36.0	35.2	31.3
Some	23.6	22.8	22.1	16.5	21.2
All	12.7	27.8	41.9	48.4	47.5
Siblings (n out with sibling)	46	69	183	96	124
None	34.8	26.1	24.1	24.0	28.2
Some	21.7	36.2	25.3	26.6	21.8
All	43.5	37.7	50.6	50.0	50.0
Sexual partners (n out with partner)	21	21	100	94	105
None	9.5	38.1	12.0	6.4	6.2
Some	23.8	4.8	25.0	25.5	18.1
All	66.7	57.1	63.0	68.1	75.2
Friends (n out with friend)	67	88	47	129	164
None	7.5	3.4	6.8	3.1	2.4
Some	25.4	23.9	14.5	19.4	11.6
All	67.2	72.7	78.6	77.5	86.0
Fellow students (n out at school)	42	57	28	11	13
None	45.2	26.3	21.4	9.1	0.0
Some	23.8	42.1	53.6	63.6	7.7
All	31.0	31.6	25.0	27.3	92.3
Co-workers (n with work)	7	33	71	83	102
None	14.3	15.2	12.7	21.7	11.8
Some	28.6	36.4	49.3	38.6	30.4
All	57.1	48.5	38.0	39.8	57.8

Table 3. Availability of interpersonal contexts, gender identity disclosure and desired gender role casting across five stages of the life course (mean values).

	Range	Stage of the life course				
		1	2	3	4	5
Current age of 19–39						
Availability of interpersonal contexts	0–6	4.22 (.85)	4.80 (1.05)	4.33 (1.19)	4.03 (.98)	4.12 (.94)
Gender identity disclosure	0–12	2.45 (3.02)	4.92 (3.92)	4.82 (3.75)	3.39 (3.70)	2.12 (3.35)
Desired gender role casting	0–12	2.19 (2.69)	4.39 (3.36)	4.50 (3.30)	3.27 (3.43)	2.18 (3.21)
Current age of 40–59						
Availability of interpersonal contexts	0–6	4.20 (.84)	4.20 (.89)	4.67 (.98)	4.09 (.91)	3.78 (1.04)
Gender identity disclosure	0–12	1.67 (2.77)	2.63 (3.47)	3.37 (3.51)	3.29 (3.46)	3.46 (3.51)
Desired gender role casting	0–12	1.15 (2.06)	2.00 (2.83)	2.85 (3.16)	3.01 (3.00)	3.95 (2.76)

contexts is curvilinear across the life course (highest during late adolescence and early adulthood). For older respondents, disclosure of gender identity in available contexts increases in a linear manner across the life course (highest during later middle age). (These differences may partially reflect the longer time frames used to define stages of the life course for the two categories of current age.) Similar levels and life course trajectories of desired gender role casting were observed in the two age groups.

Lifetime summaries of gender identity affirmation

A more general lifetime perspective is provided by aggregating the three parameters of gender identity affirmation (availability of interpersonal contexts; gender identity disclosure; and desired gender role casting) across relationships and the life course. As shown in Table 4, the lifetime availability of interpersonal contexts (range of 0–30) was somewhat higher among the older respondents (21.25 compared to 17.05). Despite the lower level of availability, lifetime levels of gender identity disclosure (range of 0–60) were higher among the younger respondents (17.71 versus 14.44).

Table 4. Lifetime availability of interpersonal contexts, gender identity disclosure and desired gender role casting (mean values).

	Range	Current age	
		19–39	40–59
Availability of interpersonal contexts	0–30	17.05 (5.00)	21.26 (3.14)
Gender identity disclosure	0–60	17.71 (11.61)	14.44 (13.34)
Desired gender role casting	0–60	16.54 (10.51)	12.95 (11.17)

This overall difference in identity disclosure was observed across current age groups, even though the life course trajectories of identity disclosure were different across age groups (as discussed above). Lifetime levels of desired gender role casting (range of 0–60) were likewise higher among younger as compared to older respondents (16.54 versus 12.95).

Cultural/lifestyle factors associated with gender identity affirmation

Associations of selected cultural and life style variables (ethnicity, sexual orientation and lifetime involvement in sex work) with lifetime summaries of the three parameters of gender identity affirmation (availability of interpersonal contexts; gender identity disclosure; and desired gender role casting) are summarized in Table 5.

In model 1 (the basic model), lifetime availability of interpersonal contexts is the outcome variable estimated from the indicated categories of ethnicity, sexual orientation and sex work, controlling for current age. In model 2, lifetime gender identity disclosure is the outcome variable estimated from the indicated categories of ethnicity, sexual orientation and sex work, controlling for current age and availability of interpersonal contexts. In model 3, lifetime desired gender role casting is the outcome variables estimated from the indicated categories of ethnicity, sexual orientation and sex work, controlling for current age, availability of interpersonal contexts and gender identity disclosure. Associations are expressed as linear regression coefficients (unstandardized Betas with their associated standard errors and standardized Betas). The three models are estimated with the indicated variable categories for ethnicity, sexual orientation and sex work entered separately (Panel A) and with all of the indicated variables associated with these three predictor variables simultaneously entered into the equations.

In the single category predictor models (Panel A), compared to Caucasian Americans, Hispanics, African Americans and others, indicated significantly lower levels of interpersonal contexts during their lifetime (Betas from $-.16$ to $-.22$). Controlling for this lower level of availability, all categories of non-white ethnicity were much more likely to disclose their gender identity during their lifetime (Betas from $.22$ to $.65$). Lifetime disclosure of transgender identity was highest among Hispanics (compared to Caucasian Americans). Controlling for availability and identity disclosure, the three categories of non-white ethnicity were also more likely to report desired gender role casting during their lifetime (Betas from $.07$ to $.24$). In the multiple category modeling (Panel B), non-white ethnicity remained strongly associated with less context availability but more gender identity disclosure and more desired gender role casting.

In the single category modeling (Panel A), compared to MTF transgender persons attracted to biological females only, those attracted to biological males only or those attracted to both biological males and biological females (bisexual), reported lower levels of lifetime context availability, but (controlling for this availability) were significantly more likely to disclose transgender identity during their lifetime (Betas from $.14$ to $.55$). Lifetime disclosure of transgender identity was the highest among MTF transgender persons exclusively attracted to biological males. Controlling for age, context availability and transgender identity, MTF transgender persons exclusively attracted to biological males also reported higher levels of desired gender role casting (Beta = $.17$). In the multiple categories modeling

Table 5. Selected cultural and life style variables with lifetime summaries of interpersonal context availability, gender identity disclosure and desired gender role casting (linear regression coefficients).

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
PANEL A									
SINGLE CATEGORIES ENTERED									
Ethnicity									
Caucasian American (reference category)									
Hispanic	-.2.13	.48	-.22**	15.22	1.13	.65**	4.08	.77	.19**
African American	-.2.51	.55	-.21**	12.41	1.32	.41**	6.52	.84	.24**
Other	-.1.76	.76	-.16**	10.70	1.78	.22**	2.99	1.09	.07*
Sexual orientation									
Attracted to biological females only (reference category)									
Attracted to biological males only	-.1.66	.59	-.16*	14.94	1.40	.55**	3.93	.92	.17**
Attracted to both females and males	-.28	.68	-.02	4.60	1.61	.14**	.87	.97	.03
Involvement in the sex trade (any lifetime)	-.1.02	.38	-.10*	9.12	.95	.36**	2.31	.59	.11**
PANEL B									
MULTIPLE CATEGORIES ENTERED									
Ethnicity									
Caucasian American (reference category)									
Hispanic	-.1.89	.65	-.19**	8.99	1.45	.36**	2.62	.98	.10**
African American	-.2.35	.70	-.20**	6.22	1.55	.21**	5.07	.98	.19**
Other	-.1.58	.81	-.09*	7.50	1.82	.16**	2.22	1.14	.05*
Sexual orientation									
Attracted to biological females only (reference category)									
Attracted to biological males only	-.01	.73	-.00	7.76	1.62	.29**	1.50	1.01	.06
Attracted to both females and males	.24	.80	.02	2.79	1.56	.08**	.35	.96	.01
Involvement in the sex trade (any lifetime)	-.29	.44	-.03*	3.97	.99	.16**	1.25	.61	.05*

Notes: Base $n = 536$ with respondents indicating an asexual sexual orientation not included. * $p = .05$; ** $p = .01$.

Panel A enters the single categories of the indicated predictor variables (with reference group).

Panel B simultaneously enters all six categories of the three predictor variables (with reference groups).

Model 1 in both Panels A and B includes a categorical measure of age as a covariate (coefficients not shown in Table).

Model 2 in both Panels A and B includes age and availability of interpersonal contexts as covariates (coefficients not shown in Table).

Model 3 in both Panels A and B includes age, availability of interpersonal contexts and transgender identity disclosure as covariates (coefficients not shown in Table).

(Panel B), sexual attraction to males only (sexual orientation) remained as moderately associated with greater levels of gender identity disclosure.

In the single category modeling (Panel A), lifetime involvement in the sex trade was likewise associated with lower lifetime levels of context availability but higher lifetime levels of gender identity disclosure (Beta = .36) and desired gender role casting (Beta = .11) (using the above model parameters). In the multiple categories modeling (Panel B), sex work remained as significantly associated with both gender identity disclosure and desired gender role casting.

Summary and conclusions

The process of disclosing gender identity and “coming out” to others is a complex one that involves a series of developmental stages (Bockting & Coleman, 2007). To describe and better understand this complex process in current American society, we examined disclosure of transgender identity to others and desired gender role casting from others in a broadly-recruited and diverse sample of 571 MTF transgender persons from the New York Metropolitan Area. Information about these interrelated interpersonal acts of gender identity affirmation was obtained with the LCI, an innovative technique for the collection of retrospective biographical data that has been successfully used in previous studies of this population.

Gender identity disclosure and desired gender role casting were typically more likely in achieved as compared to ascribed types of relationships. This probably reflects the tendency for MTF transgender persons to select and retain relationships with those individuals anticipated to have positive attitudes toward a gender-variant lifestyle. In both achieved and ascribed relationships, both aspects of gender identity affirmation (identity disclosure and desired role casting) were more likely during later (post-adolescent) stages of the life cycle. This may reflect a greater societal acceptance of gender variance among post-adolescents or, perhaps, a greater level of interpersonal sensitivity associated with long-term relationships. Positive gender role casting by parents, in particular, was reported to be more likely in middle age as compared to adolescence.

Gender identity disclosure and desired gender role casting were virtually normative in long-term sexual relationships at all stages of the life course. This may reflect the largely achieved nature of these relationships and, perhaps, role relationships that are more narrowly grounded in terms of sexual behavior. In contrast to relationships in the context of the family, school and work, where gender roles are defined in terms highly ingrained and often subtle aspects of demeanor, gender in the context of sexual relationships is, in large part, a matter of following clearly defined traditional sexual scripts indicative of gender (i.e. receptive anal intercourse as indicative of the “female” role).

More general life course summaries of gender identity disclosure and gender role casting were created by aggregating these aspects of gender identity affirmation across types of relationships. Even more general lifetime summaries were created by aggregating the aspects of gender identity affirmation across relationships and the life course. These broad measures reveal age cohort or generational differences in life course patterns and lifetime levels of gender identity disclosure and desired gender role casting (Alwin & McCannon, 2000). Compared to those with an older current age (40–59), the younger respondents (age 19–39) in this study were more likely to

disclose their transgender identity (especially during adolescence) (controlling for availability of relationships) and more likely to interact with others in terms of a desired gender role (controlling for availability of relationships and gender identity disclosure). This is suggestive of long-term historical changes in attitudes and perceptions toward transgenderism, with younger generations more likely to seek social validation of a self-recognized transgender identity and to interact with others in terms of a desired gender role. There are clearly limitations in the extent to which gender identity affirmation occurs within the younger generation (especially in relationships with family), but the historical trends reflected in this sample of MTF transgender persons suggests an increased levels of acceptance and tolerance of transgenderism.

Lifetime summaries of gender identity affirmation (collapsed across categories of age) were significantly lower among Caucasian Americans compared to all the other measured ethnic groups (African Americans, Hispanics and an “other” category). This finding was maintained across models of gender identity disclosure (controlling for relationship availability) and desired gender role casting (controlling for availability and gender identity disclosure) and with controls for potentially confounding covariates (age, sexual orientation and sex work). The social difficulties of Caucasian American MTF transgender persons in affirming their gender identity may arise, in part, from the gender-related traditions, customs and culture that have been historically relatively specific to this ethnic group in American society (see Hwahng & Nuttbrock, 2007).

With statistical controls for ethnicity and sex work, compared to those classified as gynephilic (heterosexual), those classified as androphilic (homosexual) or gynephilic/androphilic (bisexual) were more likely to disclose their transgender identity to others (controlling for relationship availability) but no more likely to interact with others in terms of a desired gender role. The comparative difficulties of the non-gynephilics in negotiating a desired gender role may reflect their status as sexual minorities (in addition to being transgender).

Lifetime involvement in the sex trade (coded as a dichotomy) was (predictably) associated with a lower lifetime availability of types of relationships; a higher lifetime disclosure of transgender identity; and also a higher lifetime level of desired gender role casting. Male-to-female transgender persons may be motivated to enter the sex trade by the prospect of gender identity affirmation associated with sexual relationships (including commercial relationships). Involvement in the sex trade may be associated with a lifestyle that promotes “coming out” in all one’s relationships and (somewhat surprisingly) comparatively successful attempts at negotiating desired patterns of gender interaction in these relationships.

These data about MTF transgender persons gender identity affirmation, broadly analyzed across the life course, types of relationships and cultural/lifestyle factors, should provide a useful framework for better understanding the complex issues associated with the presentation of gender identity in American society (Lev, 2004). The negotiation of transgender identity in the context of ascribed relationships, especially the family, is clearly complex and often problematic, especially during adolescence. On the other hand, the comparative ease and power of gender identity affirmation in sexual relationships, including commercial sexual relationships (sex work), raises a concern that the psychological benefits of identity affirmation may need to be balanced against potential health risks (especially HIV).

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