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William B. Baker

To cite this article: William B. Baker (2018): Sexual and Gender Identities in Transgender Men: Fluid and Binary Perspectives, Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, DOI: [10.1080/19359705.2018.1458677](https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2018.1458677)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2018.1458677>



Accepted author version posted online: 04 Apr 2018.



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Publisher: Routledge

Journal: *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*

Sexual and Gender Identities in Transgender Men: Fluid and Binary Perspectives

William B. Baker, Ph.D.

Montclair State University

Abstract

Little is understood about how sexual orientation and gender identity actually interconnect with transgender men. Eight transgender men were interviewed in-depth, multiple times, and their perspectives gave insight into how sexual and gender identities are related, and how one informs the other. The present study found fluidity in gender and sexual identities among transgender men, but some trans* men were more binary than others with regard to gender. These binary-leaning trans men also tended to be more binary in their sexual orientation. Fluidity in gender in pre-transition often reflected fluidity in sexual orientation. Mental health professionals may gain a better understanding of how the intersectionality of sexual and gender identities manifests in trans men. Implications for practitioners are included.

Keywords: *Fluid sexual orientation, gender fluidity, intersectionality, trans men, transitioning*

* “Trans” as a modifier before the word “person,” or “men/women,” is commonly used today to include all transgender or gender non-conforming persons, defined as: “Individuals whose gender identity and expression does not align with their anatomical sex” (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011, p. 20).

Sexual and Gender Identities in Transgender Men:

Fluid and Binary Perspectives

Introduction

Although transgender persons are underresearched (Blumer, Green, Knowles, & Williams, 2012), they have

recently stepped into mainstream consciousness within various forms of media, such as the television shows *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013) and *Transparent* (Soloway, 2014). Despite this, the public and many mental health professionals are still quite unaware of the important gender and sexual identity issues that trans persons experience on a daily basis (Austin & Craig, 2015; Collazo, Austin, & Craig, 2013; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). Even less is understood about trans men who are studied less than trans women (Green, 2005; Rubin, 2003; Worthen, 2013). In a therapeutic setting, this lack of understanding can disrupt the client/counselor relationship where trans persons may feel unable to disclose the most personal parts of their lives. Understanding the connection between gender and sexuality that trans men experience will allow mental health professionals to explore that intersectionality and be more effective with their clients. Trans men, their sexual orientation and gender identities, were the focus of this qualitative study. The research question for this study was: How do sexual orientation, gender identity, and their intersection, manifest in the lives of transgender men?

The Intersectionality of Sexual and Gender Identities

Although included in the common LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning) acronym, trans persons often have different issues and experience different struggles than LGB persons (Dargie, Blair, Pukall, & Coyle, 2014; Worthen, 2013). Trans men are identified as female at birth, but now identify as male, and their expression of male identity will be quite varied. Some trans persons see gender identity as something that must be decided before addressing sexual orientation (Devor, 1997; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Dickey, Burnes, & Singh, 2012). In addition to facing gender issues, trans persons may also need to address sexual orientation, being that they may be gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, heterosexual, or somewhere else on the spectrum of sexual orientation. Even though sexual orientation and gender identity are different constructs, it does not mean that one does not affect the other (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). Completely separating the two constructs is not logical according to much of the literature (Diamond, 2012; Dickey et al., 2012; Valentine, 2007), and the intersectionality of sexual and gender identities is recognized by transgender theorists (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Stryker, 2008, 2013).

Concerned that scholars have the tendency to regard gender and sexual identities as completely separable experiences, Valentine (2004, 2007) claimed that the two constructs *do* affect one another. By constantly comparing and contrasting sexual orientation and gender identity, not wanting to conflate the two

constructs, it becomes difficult for some to see how sexual orientation and gender identity can influence one another. Many transgender scholars dispute that kind of thinking and cite examples showing how sexual and gender identities are obviously connected (Rowniak & Chesla, 2013; Rubin, 2003; Valentine, 2007). “The bald assertion of the ontological separateness of gender and sexuality ignores the complexity of lived experience” (Valentine, 2007, p. 62). In a qualitative study of trans persons of color, White (2013) found that gender identity and sexual orientation “cannot be fully understood in isolation” (p. 104), and other studies have shown a shift in sexual orientation for some with a change in gender identity (Auer, Fuss, Hohne, Stalla, & Sievers, 2014; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Rowniak & Chelsa, 2013). As trans persons deconstruct their gender, is it really surprising that that sexual orientation might also be affected?

With the recent public attention given to trans issues, there appears to be a more accepting affirmation towards trans persons (Beemyn, 2013). Along with this development, there is a change in the perception of gender, moving away from a binary perspective towards a spectrum of gender identity (Ehrensaft, 2015). This fluid gender spectrum is becoming more acceptable within the younger cohorts of trans men (Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2012; Yerke & Mitchell, 2011).

As younger trans men transition, there are fewer obstacles for trans men to surmount as society becomes more tolerant towards gender variant behavior (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Trans persons are feeling less pressure to choose a binary – male or female, straight or gay. It is common to find trans men refusing the sexual orientation label of “heterosexual” because that term is associated with “straight” culture, and many are choosing “genderqueer” or “queer” even when only attracted to persons with female gender expressions (Dargie et al., 2014). But with these important changes in perception and the acceptance of gender fluidity, there is the risk that with greater visibility more trans persons will be oppressed or victimized.

Gender Dysphoria (GD) in the *DSM-5*

At approximately the same time that homosexuality, as a diagnosis, was removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, Gender Identity Disorder (GID) was included, but has now been replaced with Gender Dysphoria (GD) in the *DSM-5*. GD has been separated from sexual disorders, and is defined as “the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender” (APA, 2013, p. 451). The new classification recognizes that the experienced gender may

not adhere to the male/female stereotypes and may include alternate gender identities, noted as progress by Arlene Lev (2013). Trans persons' expressed gender may not be clearly male or female, but somewhere on the spectrum, or a combination of both genders. People with this type of expressed gender may identify as genderqueer, dress androgynously, and use gender-neutral pronouns such as "ze" and "hir" (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011).

There is a debate as to whether GD should remain in the *DSM-5* (Lev, 2013). Seeing its inclusion as progress, Collazo et al. (2013) argued that replacing GID with GD would do much to humanize the transgender experience because the focus is on the distress caused by gender incongruence and does not pathologize gender variance. Removal of GD from the *DSM-5* might result in fewer trans persons receiving much needed treatment and counseling. Others believe Gender Dysphoria is still stigmatizing and encourages others to see trans persons as disordered (Sawyer, 2013). As aptly put by Lev (2013) the changes in the *DSM-5* are like "two steps forward, one step back," (p. 288) acknowledging an improvement for trans persons as the public discourse evolves in the 21st century.

Trans Men and Feminism

Trans men who claim to be feminists often decline to claim the status of "straight male" (Gardiner, 2013; Hansbury, 2005), and Rubin (2003) has claimed that trans men do not transition in order to become privileged, although some claim that the privilege status of men has been a buffer of sorts for trans men in the transitioning process, including factors such as higher income (Budge et al., 2013). Trans men, having been raised as women, will have a unique perspective on feminism having experienced both sides of the gender spectrum. Having been exposed to, or the victim of, misogynistic behavior might incline a trans man to embrace a strong feminist perspective and eschew misogyny, and hence some imply that trans men might make better men than natal born men (Devor, 1997; Gardiner, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how sexual orientation and gender identities play out in the lives of trans men as they transition. The research was focused on the intersectionality of sexual and gender identities. Intersectionality theory claims that personal identities cannot be understood in isolation, but need to be examined collectively along with other intersecting identities (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Crenshaw,

1991; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013). These identities, in sum, are greater than the whole. The present study aimed at understanding what sexual orientation and gender identity mean to trans men, and how it may change over their lifespan. It is important for mental health professionals to become more aware of the complexity of the transition process for trans men.

Method

Participants

Eight transgender men were interviewed (multiple times) while in the process of transitioning. Many were quite advanced in their transition process, but only one would consider himself in post-transition. Hormonal therapy and gender confirmation surgery were not required to be included in the study; however, six were taking hormones, six had breast reduction surgery, and only one had a phalloplasty. Using purposeful sampling, I was able to choose participants who inform an understanding of the main focus of this study – the intersectionality of sexual and gender identities (Creswell, 2007). The sample of trans men from the Northeastern United States was fairly diverse with regards to age and ethnicity. The purposeful sample included one Asian American, one African American who is also of Hispanic descent, four Jewish men, and four Christian men. Most of the participants were from a middle class background, with a range from lower-middle class to upper-middle class. Most of the participants were college educated, and two had master's degrees. Each participant's sexual and gender identities, before and during transition, appear in Table 1 at the end of the article.

Procedure

Using semi-structured interviews, there were at least two lengthy interviews for each participant. At first I inquired about their gender identity development, and after building trust with the participants, my questions became more personal as I inquired about their sexual orientation and whether their transitioning had any effect on their orientation. Because these questions required recall back to times that might have been painful for them, utmost care was taken to assure them that I was providing a safe place to relate their experiences. The IRB approved consent form provided referral to counseling services in the event a participant became visibly upset.

Positionality

My positionality in this study is explained in the following paragraph:

As an outsider, my etic perspective was that of an ally of the transgender community. I needed to bracket some of my own experiences with the transgender community along with some of my biases. Being a cisgender, heterosexual male, I thought it important to be open with participants about my background from the beginning and self-reflective regarding my biases. Being an ally, I have a bias towards this population, but my experience as a counselor served me well in that I always maintained a nonjudgmental approach. My focus as a counselor has been Rogerian in many respects, where the counselor has unconditional, positive regard for clients (Rogers, 1951). I believe my experience in this area helped me in the process of epoché, where I refrained from judgment. (-----, 2017, p. 73)

Data Analysis

Coding was an ongoing procedure, allowing the participants to influence the direction of the research (Merriam, 2009). As I coded, when I heard something new or oft-repeated phrases, I thought it important to share this with other participants as it might change the direction of the research or lead to different paths that may be important to the study. I began to compare and contrast various codes and categories that led to theme development. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) recommended not pursuing all new paths, and I often struggled to narrow the focus of the study. Codes such as “wrong body,” “tomboy,” and “knew I was male” turned into categories such as “born in the wrong body” and “binary gender identity.” During the process, I found that some trans men expressed a more fluid gender and new codes developed, such as: “happy with body,” “knew I was a girl,” or “go with the flow.” These codes led me other categories, such as “non-binary gender identity” and “fluid gender identity.” I created the codes, but I employed what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call debriefings by peers to interpret the codes. There was disagreement among my colleagues on the definition of fluidity. Does one who identifies as bisexual also have a fluid sexual orientation? Some believed that fluid meant a constant change in orientation, and a person who identified as bisexual may not move along the spectrum of sexual orientation, remaining stable somewhere in the middle. Others believed that having an attraction to both men and women could be considered as fluidity in orientation. It was then that I decided to include the term “non-binary sexual orientation” to be more inclusive, because there is disagreement as to what is meant by a fluid sexual orientation (Diamond, 2008, 2012; Ross et al., 2012).

The trans men who ascribed their gender dysphoria to the “born in the wrong body” narrative tended to have a binary sexual orientation. The trans men who did not identify with the “born in the wrong body” narrative tended to have a more fluid sexual orientation. This observation led to this theme: “A tendency towards fluidity in one aspect of identity may also show as fluidity in other identities” (-----, 2017, p. 80). I had incorrectly assumed that most trans persons share the “born in the wrong body” narrative. Realizing that not all trans men have a binary gender identity and do not say they were born in the wrong body, I decided to pursue this finding.

Results

Four themes developed from interpretation of the data: (1) Understanding the interconnection between gender and sexual identities in trans men, (2) trans men who identify as feminists struggle with male privilege as they transition, (3) being comfortable in their bodies fosters a sense of well-being, and (4) some trans men experience a change in their sexual attractions as they transition (-----, 2017, p. 97). For the sake of brevity, three of the four will be discussed here: (1) Understanding the interconnection between gender and sexual identities in trans men, (2) trans men who identify as feminists struggle with male privilege as they transition, and (4) some trans men experience a change in their sexual attractions as they transition. I will spend more time interpreting the first theme as it brings some new insights into the study of trans men, especially this subtheme: “A tendency towards fluidity in one aspect of identity may also show as fluidity in other identities” (-----, 2017, p. 98).

In this study, gender fluidity meant that some trans men in pre-transition identified as female at times, as male other times, or somewhere in between along the spectrum of gender identity. A binary gender identity meant that one would identify as either male or female regardless of biological sex. In this study, binary gender trans men strongly identified as male (as young girls) from their earliest memories. All the participants were distraught by the female changes in their bodies at puberty and eventually transitioned to men, but some were more fluid in gender than others, and some trans men took many years to finally decide to transition. An example of a gender fluid trans man may help to clarify: In pre-transition, a person who has been identified as female at birth may sometimes identify as female and at times male. This person may also tend to be not binary on the sexual orientation spectrum, being they may be attracted to various gender expressions. Mark, an African American/Hispanic trans man, is a good example of this. Mark in pre-transition (not just in childhood, but into

adulthood) was questioning gender identity. Before transitioning, he was not sure if he was male or female or somewhere in between. He also had and continues to have more fluidity in his sexual orientation. Mark reported sexual attraction and/or romantic feeling towards both male and female gender presentations. In this study, trans men like Mark are either fluid in their sexual orientation, or at least non-binary, and would place themselves somewhere on the spectrum of sexual orientation.

Those participants who were gender fluid in pre-transition presently report a fluid sexual orientation, or at least non-binary orientation, such as pansexual or bisexual. This tendency towards fluidity in identity (gender) may also show as a proclivity to be fluid in other identities, in this case – sexual orientation. In the reverse, four trans men in this study were strongly binary in pre-transition, and three of these four also are strongly binary in sexual orientation. This finding may add to the discussion about the connection between gender identity and sexual orientation.

Participants With Fluid or Non-binary Gender in Pre-Transition

Four men in this study, Mark, Alex, Dylan, and Rob, were conflicted about their gender and may have presented androgynous or fluid with regard to their gender in pre-transition (See Table 1 at the end of this document). These four fluid-leaning trans men may have taken different steps than the four binary leaning trans men on their transition journey. Mark, age 20, struggled with his gender identity and discussed fluidity in the following excerpt from this study (-----, 2017):

Mark: Out of high school [I was] trying to figure out – is this how I identify really? Or would I be okay just being genderqueer?

WB (W -----, interviewer): What does genderqueer mean to you – in your opinion?

Mark: Not necessarily female, but not necessarily male. It's just kind of like (pause) that gray area between the two binaries.

WB: So were you in that space at one point? (Mark: Yeah.) How long ago was that?

Mark: About two years – like before I decided, okay I want to put a label on it – I am a trans male; I use they/them pronouns. (p. 100)

Struggling with the concept of genderqueer, Mark, when at age 18, was not sure if he was male or female. He was using they/them pronouns, and he felt he was somewhere between the two binaries of male and female. At one

point he said he felt there were two people inside of him. Presently, Mark feels more male than female, uses male pronouns, and he presents male with a lowered voice due to testosterone.

Pre-transition body issues.

Mark, like the other gender fluid trans persons in this study, wrestled with his gender identity in a different manner than the binary trans men, but he eventually decided to embrace a male gender identity. The four gender fluid trans men (Mark, Rob, Alex, and Dylan) are now, and may have always been since puberty, more fluid in their sexual orientation. On some level, these men accepted the female side of their gender. When they were girls, they might occasionally wear the required dress and maybe *not* do this under protest. “In pre-transition, they may have disliked their female bodies and may have been labeled ‘tomboys,’ but accepted, perhaps reluctantly, that they were female, and yet at times felt drawn towards a male gender identity” (-----, 2017, p. 101). Alex, age 33, described his experience with gender identity:

I know you’ll find some people who say, “I was born a man, but my body is wrong. I’ve always been a man.” I don’t see myself that way. You know, I lived the first thirty plus years of my life as a woman even though I felt wrong doing that, that’s still who I was and that’s still part of what makes me who I am, part of my personality. (-----, 2017, p. 101)

Alex is currently presenting male, taking hormones and is hoping to get top surgery, but he cannot afford it at this time. During our second interview, he said, “I still feel like I’m a woman even though I shouldn’t be” (p. 102). Even though Alex, Dylan, Jeffrey, Rob, and Mark did not share the “born in the wrong body” narrative, they all had issues with the bodies to which they were born.

Some gender fluid trans men accepted their pre-transition bodies and were not as concerned about appearing masculine. As an example, Dylan, an Asian American trans man in his thirties, described his body issues before he transitioned: “I was like, ‘Well, no, I like my body the way it is. I just would also not like to have breasts anymore’” (-----, 2017, p. 102). When still identifying as butch/dyke, Dylan had breast reduction surgery. Interestingly, he did not think he was transgender, thinking that all trans people adhered to the “born in the wrong body” narrative. After breast surgery, Dylan then realized that people were beginning to read him as male, and that was when he began his transition with hormones. “I transitioned because I wanted to, not because I was in the wrong body” (p. 102). A mental health professional with gender non-conforming clients, Dylan

understands that some trans men have serious body issues while others may not. He wanted to make this clear to me, from one mental health professional to another. Explained in another way, this is what Dylan said after a discussion of Gender Dysphoria as defined in the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) in our second interview:

Well, when I see dysphoria as a word, I see it as opposite of euphoria, you know? Yeah – did I feel bad?

Did I have bad feelings about my body my gender? That’s where I say “no.” I don’t think of it as bad feelings. I mean, I was on this journey; I was exploring things. Some trans people experience dysphoria very concretely – where they look in the mirror and they hate that body that they see.

WB: You said you were kind of like that too. You said, “I would look in the mirror and ask, ‘Whose body is that?’” That was you.

Dylan: I thought it was weird, but I didn’t feel bad about it. (Dylan in -----, 2017, p. 103)

Dylan was quite insightful about gender issues, and I learned much from him. Many of his clients have what might be described as Gender Dysphoria, and he talked quite a bit about their struggles. Dylan also talked about being uncomfortable in his body, adding “But I didn’t feel disgust.”

Four trans men (Rob, Alex, Dylan, and Mark) in the present study expressed a more gender fluid gender identity in pre-transition than the other four trans men who presented more binary. These four fluid trans men were more accepting of their femaleness during pre-transition, and yet also feeling male. Each of these men also tend to be non-binary or fluid in how they identify sexually in terms of sexual attraction to men and women, and attractions to different gender presentations. Alex identifies as “bisexual” and “heteroromantic.” Dylan identifies as “queer.” Mark identifies as homoromantic bisexual, or sometimes he simplifies things and just says “queer” when asked. Rob identifies as “straight with an aesthetic attraction to men.” In other words, the four trans men who were fluid in their gender identity (pre-transition) are now, and may have always been, fluid in their sexual orientation.

Participants With a Binary Gender in Pre-transition

Four of the trans men in this study reported a more binary gender in pre-transition (male in a female body) and always believed they were male. These men, as children, were biological females, but never accepted they were female. Three of the four ascribed their Gender Dysphoria to the narrative of “being born in the wrong body.” In

this study, the men with a gender identity that was more binary in nature tended to show a more binary sexual orientation.

Three of these four trans men, Peter, Jack, and Julius, all felt certain they were boys as far back as they can remember. They resisted becoming female, and to that end never considered themselves lesbians even when they were involved sexually with women as women. All were attracted to women and always had been. When asked to describe their sexual orientations, the answers varied, but all three were consistent in their attraction to women or female gender presentations. Julius identified as straight. Peter said he was attracted to feminine women, but on dating sites he often identifies as queer. Jack identified as queer, only attracted to women, but stipulated that he was not interested in straight women:

Jack: I don't like to date people that have like a strong defined sexual orientation, um, because I'm not physically very manly. Lesbians wouldn't be into me because, you know, my brain is just not a woman. They romantically wouldn't be into me. And, uh, I don't like having to educate someone on what trans means or trans issues. I prefer dating people that have dated trans people before. (-----, 2017, p. 111)

Jack realizes that many women will not be attracted to him. He will not use the word "straight" to describe his sexual orientation, but when asked about it, he simply said this: "I'm into women." He often uses "queer" to describe his sexual orientation explaining it this way: "So, yeah, when I'm using that [queer], I'm just using it as something different from the norm." Jack believes his gender and sexual identities are far from the norm, so identifying as queer is comfortable for him, yet his sexual orientation is mostly binary. Being somewhat androgynous, Jack does not mind being noticed as a "trans guy," his preferred identity. Jack would like others to see him as a "regular" guy who happens to be trans so that people will realize that trans people are "regular" people.

Rejecting lesbian identities.

Julius, age 62, claimed that he was attracted to women his entire life, although he never considered himself a lesbian. Before transitioning, a lesbian identity would have confirmed a female identity, and Julius was certainly male in his mind. I asked Julius if people viewed him as a lesbian before he transitioned, and he said, "Yeah, of course. I had a girlfriend for 20 years and that's what it looked like. But to me, I played the dyke. I didn't play it,

that's who I was. I mean I used to say life would be easier if I was a guy – I used to say that all time" (Julius in ----, 2017, p. 112).

"Playing the dyke" was something Julius could do as a female-bodied person with a male gender identity. This was somewhat acceptable for Julius for quite some time, but then after a 20-year relationship ended, Julius began to transition. Today, Julius passes as male and can live "stealth" if he chooses. Living "stealth," according to Hansbury (2005), refers to trans men who "live as men, are out only to their families and perhaps to their partners, and treat their female histories as something to keep hidden" (p. 246). Julius does not always identify as trans, but he will when it is pertinent to the conversation. I asked how he presently describes his gender and sexual orientation, and being the most binary of all participants, gave one-word answers. "Male."

"Straight" (-----, 2017, p. 112).

Peter, age 53, never identified as lesbian and told me he hated that term. He lived as butch for quite a long time, always knowing he was male. He began his transition just a few years ago. When asked about his sexual orientation, Peter said:

So, I am attracted to feminine women. They have to be.... I don't want anybody that looks like me. I fit into that binary of transness. I've never really been gender fluid or genderqueer. I've never been any of those things – I've always been here on this end of the spectrum. (-----, 2017, p. 112)

Peter used his hands to show where he belonged on the spectrum – at the male end, opposite of female. Although Julius, Peter, and Jack, three binary-leaning trans men, are only attracted to women, they express differences in their attractions. Jack, for example, is only interested in women who are interested in trans guys. These men often spoke of the need for the binary in order to separate themselves from others and to make it clear that they were men. They emphasized the binary to show they were not lesbians in pre-transition, and stress the binary gender identity now in order to be perceived as men interested in women.

These binary-leaning trans men struggle with the intersectionality of sexual orientation and gender identity. They may not pass as men (Julius always does, Peter usually does, Jack sometimes does), and yet they stress the binary end of the spectrum with regard to sexual orientation and gender. Peter and Jack have trouble adopting heteronormative personas, and using terms like "straight" and "male" seem unnatural to them. Instead, they are

more comfortable with more fluid identities, such as “queer,” even though they present as male and heterosexual.

Changes in Sexual Behaviors and Attractions

During transition, sexual behavior varied among all eight participants. There was no clear pattern or trend for sexual behavior, but some experienced changes in attraction and changes in the way they had sex. All who used testosterone experienced heightened sexual arousal, but two participants were surprised in the direction of that attraction. Jeffrey, who was more likely to feel attracted to men, noticed an increased attraction towards women. Mark, who usually is attracted to women, noticed that when his testosterone dosage was increased, he felt an unusual attraction towards men.

Social norms regarding gender roles and sexual behavior dictated some of the behavior changes of a sexual nature. Jeffrey and Dylan spoke in depth about the expectations that society and their immediate environment had upon their sexual behavior as they transitioned to men. Jeffrey, who was mostly attracted to men, found that now as a man he could comment freely on a woman’s appearance, calling her “hot.” Jeffrey had an interesting explanation for this, saying he most likely always had an attraction to women, but suppressed the feeling as a woman because, according to Jeffrey, society frowned upon same-sex relationships. But now, as a man, these feelings of attraction to women have surfaced, and as society expects him to be attracted to women, he feels empowered or allowed to comment on a woman’s appearance.

Dylan, who lived in a butch/femme community that celebrated monogamy, felt liberated as a man while transitioning and began to experience sex with various persons with different gender presentations. Dylan said he had “social permission” to “take this body out for a test drive.” He did this because he said, “I’m single and I can.” Dylan may have been going through a delayed adolescence in his mid-twenties as he was changing his body and using hormones.

The participants who experienced body changes and were sexually active felt more comfortable having sex with a body more aligned with their gender identity. Participants who were using testosterone claimed robust results: ramped up sex drives, facial hair, and deeper voices. The direction of attraction changed for some, moving along the spectrum in one direction or another. Most participants did not experience a major change in

orientation, but as genders were changing there were often concurring changes in sexual behavior and attraction along the spectrum.

Struggling with Male Privilege

Having lived on both sides of the gender spectrum, trans men have a unique perspective on issues of privilege, feminism, and advocating for marginalized populations. Although not always seen as privilege, all the trans men in this study recognized differences in the way they were treated as they began to be recognized as men. Some noticed being taken more seriously, some realized that when they spoke with a deeper male voice, they were more apt to be heard. Peter and Dylan both had reservations about being associated with the misogynistic “baggage” that might accompany a male identity. But rather than focusing on misogyny, some trans men claimed to be better allies to women. Jeffrey said this about his experience:

What being a trans man means to me is that somebody who has lived as a woman for the majority of my life, it means that I can be a better ally to other women than most cis men are, because most cis men are garbage at that. And I’ve experienced both sides of the gender identity spectrum and like society’s reaction to gender, and it made me probably more of a feminist now than I was pre-transition because I have experienced first hand what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man, and how that’s differently treated (-----, 2017, p. 124).

Dylan said this about privilege: “I notice when I am in meetings my voice tends to be heard and not dismissed as much as my female colleagues’ [voices]. I think this is a responsibility for any man to be aware of and to do some social justice work around” (-----, 2017, p. 116). Dylan, Jeffrey, and Peter all spoke to this, being concerned about passing for male and the perceptions that might accompany that image.

Being raised as women, and considering themselves feminists for the most part, may have stimulated a sense of advocacy for oppressed persons among the participants in the present study. Being part of the LGBTQ community may have nurtured their sense of social justice to fight not only sexism, but to stand against homophobia and transphobia. Most of the participants were concerned of how their transitioning would be perceived by others. Some were outspoken about how as trans men they have a responsibility to use their privilege to advocate for others. Although not all participants believe they have gained privilege, considering the

myriad of ways in which they are not privileged, when a lower voice commands attention, that voice can be used to promote equality.

Discussion

An important finding from this study, which needs to be studied further, was that trans men with a proclivity for fluidity in one spectrum of identity, such as gender, may also have a proclivity for fluidity in other identities, and based on this study that would be sexual orientation. In the reverse, the trans men who embraced a more binary sense of gender tended to be binary in their sexual orientation – mostly attracted to women. Although this finding is new to the literature, Diamond and Butterworth (2008) did have a similar finding in their study claiming, “Women who began to explore multiplicity and fluidity with respect to their gender identity became progressively more aware of multiplicity and fluidity in their erotic attractions as well” (p. 371). It is important to note that this finding cannot be generalized across the population, but there may be a correlation between fluid gender and fluid sexual orientation yet to be discovered.

Most trans men, being raised as women, experienced more tolerance when expressing gender variant behavior, where girls acting “boyish” is more tolerated by society than boys expressing femininity (Devor, 2004; Grossman, D’Augelli, Salter, & Hubbard, 2005; Pollock & Eyre, 2012). As a society, we are more accepting of women who are gender variant. A man wearing a dress will draw more attention than a female wearing a man’s suit. Therefore, trans men, identified as female at birth, may be more likely to be gender fluid and more likely to self identify as “queer” (Dargie et al., 2014; Kuper et al., 2012; Tate & Bettergarcia, 2014). Having the predisposition to fluidity, as has been documented (Diamond, 2008, 2012; Ross, Daneback, & Mansson, 2012), it may not be surprising to find that gender fluid trans men, as found in this study, might be more likely to have a fluid sexual orientation.

The intersectionality of gender and sexual identities was evident with the participants in the present study, as Diamond and Butterworth (2008) have claimed that these two constructs “co-create” each other. For example, Mark, being attracted to women more than men, reluctantly accepted that he was female and decided that a lesbian identity was the best fit, maybe the only identity that made sense at his young age. Mark’s attraction to women helped him to define his gender and sexual identities at that time. His identity later changed to a male gender role with attraction to mostly women, but also with an attraction to men. Another participant, Rob, was

confused about his sexual attraction to women, but later understood himself to be male seeing himself as a man in a dream. Rob talked about his dreams in interviews and emails, and claimed his sexual orientation helped to shape his gender identity.

The findings in this study affirm Rubin's (2003) finding, that trans men who were "straight" were compelled to differentiate themselves from a lesbian identity. To do this, they defined lesbians as women who were attracted to women, comfortable with their bodies, and content to be women. In pre-transition, the participants in this study were *not* comfortable with their body bodies, *not* content to be women, and even those who identified as lesbian in pre-transition were reluctant to fully embrace that identity. Some persons wrongly assume that trans men were once lesbians (Rowniak & Chesla, 2013; Rubin, 2003; Stryker, 2008), and many assume trans men abide by the "born in the wrong body" narrative (Sawyer, 2013). It is important that these stereotypes be dispelled based on the present study and other studies (Dargie et al., 2014; Fontanella, Maretti, & Sarra, 2014; Schulz, 2012; Vegter, 2013; Yerke & Mitchell, 2011). Most of the trans men in this study refused to be recognized as lesbians in pre-transition because they knew they were men. About half of the participants did not adhere to the "born in the wrong body" narrative and were sometimes accepting of being female before transitioning. It is important to understand that trans persons are quite unique, some more binary in identities than others. The importance of honoring each trans person as an individual is paramount.

Regardless of their perception of gender and sexual identities, binary or fluid, during transition all participants in this study felt a sense of liberation as their bodies began to align with their identified sense of gender. Gender identity and sexual orientation are separate constructs, but based upon these interviews and other studies cited in this article, there seems to be a connection in that gender identity can affect, and develop along with, sexual orientation. This supports my premise that fluidity in gender may show as fluidity in sexual orientation, because gender and sexual identities may develop at the same time. If the former is fluid, the sexual orientation may develop as a fluid identity as well. Sexual orientation may not be fixed and is too complicated to ignore its developmental stages and changes (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007) Romantic orientation, sometimes referred to as affectional orientation, may also be a factor with regard to fluidity, where romantic orientation may not include sexual desire (Pinto, 2014; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007).

Implications for Mental Health Professionals

Many of the participants in the present study sought mental health professionals for a variety of issues, not necessarily gender dysphoric issues. In fact, most of the participants did not see Gender Dysphoria as a problem associated with their mental health. I asked the participants about their experiences with mental health professionals and what they thought counselors working with trans clients ought to know. Some mentioned they felt disconnected when their counselor seemed unaware of trans issues. Subtle negative messages received by trans men from counselors can lead to negative self-beliefs, and some practitioners are still pathologizing genders expressed outside of the binary, male and female (Austin & Craig, 2015). Using the wrong pronoun or not inquiring about which pronoun to use could be an example of how a trans man might disconnect from the therapeutic relationship. A continued reliance on a heteronormative, binary conception of gender will oppress fluid gender identities. Counselors will also want to be wary of focusing on binaries as well, as they may unwillingly add to the oppression their gender non-conforming clients may have to endure.

One of the participants, Dylan, a 35-year-old Asian American, is a mental health professional whose clients mostly identify as LGBTQ. He said this about counseling:

I've definitely have heard from clients who have come to me who are trans or non-binary identified, or even who are cisgender and are lesbian or gay, come in and say, I'm coming to the [clinic] for therapy because I could not convince my counselor elsewhere that me being gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender – that was not the problem. And they weren't competent enough to see that is separate from my depression, or my anxiety or whatever. So, I think we are slowly starting to move away from the idea that our gender or sexuality is part of our diagnosis. (-----, 2017, p. 145)

Counselors are beginning to depathologize gender non-conformity as many trans persons see their gender variant expressions as perfectly natural (Austin & Craig, 2015; Lev, 2013). It may be counselors who are unable to get past thinking about their clients struggling with gender. The men in this study were not suffering from Gender Dysphoria, but were instead exuberant about telling powerful stories of resilience. Changing their bodies to be congruent with their male identities fostered as sense of well-being. Trans persons who remain closeted and unable to transition will suffer, as many spoke to the misery they experienced when they felt their bodies did not reflect their internal sense of gender.

Practitioners cannot assume that trans men were once lesbians, just as one cannot assume a trans woman was once a gay man before transitioning. Many participants made an effort to distance themselves from a lesbian identity. Counselors must also not assume the issue that brought their client to therapy is related to being transgender. It would be important to inquire about gender expression, pronoun preferences, and sexual orientation early on in the counseling process, and inquire if trans-specific issues need to be addressed, such as medical issues or dealing with social stigmatization. These may not be pressing issues; the client may have depression, but the depression may be unrelated to being transgender.

Misgendering

Mark, a 20-year-old trans man, who was just beginning his transition and starting to use testosterone, said this about his counseling experience:

Yeah, and it's kind of a learning process for her, how to sort of gauge the issues and sort of how to approach different things in terms of.... When I was first telling her about people I dated, and she would kind of say, "As a woman? As a man?" Just kind of be careful in how you use pronouns, even if they were from the past; make sure they're okay to use first. Ask what are you okay with me saying – or what are you okay with me asking, that sort of thing (Mark, 2nd interview).

Mark and others in the study hated being misgendered and would get quite upset when this happened. So there was an incentive for Mark to continue with testosterone, which enhanced his masculine traits. That said, some trans persons are perfectly comfortable appearing androgynous. Jack, a 21-year-old trans *guy* (he prefers *guy* rather than *man*), who was not using hormones, said he comes out almost every day as a trans person. I inquired more about this and he responded:

Because I don't pass as a cis man, and sometimes I look like a woman trying to look like a guy, and people misgender me all the time. Especially in the LGBTQ activism that I do, I am constantly talking about these issues and bringing my own personal anecdotes.....like being on testosterone, where after a few years no one would have any idea that I was born female, then I think my life would be different then, then I wouldn't have to be talking about it all the time. People wouldn't question my gender, so I wouldn't have to be coming out unless I wanted to disclose that information. But now, like it's something very prevalent, but in a good way.....Because I think it's important for people who are questioning their

gender or questioning whether they want to come out and transition, I think that it's important to see that there's people who are doing that and living happily right around you. (Jack, 2nd interview)

Jack, being much different than Mark, welcomes the teacher role, explaining to others about being transgender. Jack said that he wanted people to see him as transgender so that they will know that trans guys are "regular" guys.

Diversity Among Trans Men

Jeffrey, a 27-year-old trans man who identifies as pansexual, stressed that counselors need to diversify their thinking and not put all trans men into one box:

I think it's important to recognize that trans people who seek to medically transition are not obligated to fit any specific check list of what must or must not be done, because that is an extremely personal decision and in some places medical technology is just not there to make it desirable enough or attractive enough. Even if one wanted to, there's also problems with accessibility for medical care, financial support, or just anything of that sort. Everybody thinks that you have to have quote/unquote the surgery to be a trans person, which is completely, entirely false. (Jeffrey, 1st interview)

Jeffrey made good points about medical treatment in that there are many choices. Most trans men, but not all, will take testosterone. Some persons identify as trans with only a social transition with no medical treatments. Breast reduction surgery is widely acceptable, but often unaffordable. All the participants who were able to choose breast reduction surgery were quite ecstatic about the results. Only one had bottom surgery, as most were reluctant to opt for a procedure with questionable results (Devor, 2004). This type of surgery, a phalloplasty, is often not popular with younger cohorts of trans men (Rubin, 2003; Yerke & Mitchell, 2011), and many trans men claim that one does not need a penis to be a man (Forshee, 2006; Green, 2005; Vegter, 2013). The pressure to "pass" as male has lessened in younger cohorts of trans men, and some trans men are happy to present more androgynous resulting in fewer bottom surgeries (Hansbury, 2005; Spicer, 2010).

Changes in Sexuality

If practitioners are helping clients move through the transition process, it would be important to discuss possible difficulties with ongoing relationships. There may be changes in sexual practices, sexual orientation, and existing relationships may suffer (Brown, 2010; Schilt & Windsor, 2014). A trans man's attraction to his partner

may not change during transition, but his partner may not be open to having a relationship with a man. As Schilt and Windsor (2014) noted, "Aligning bodies with gender identities can disrupt sexuality in unanticipated ways" (p. 733). As was noted in the present study, some participants noticed their sexual habits and desires changed somewhat after medical/hormonal treatments. New bodies will usually give a sense of comfort and validation of gender, but at times, these new bodies triggered a change of desire for some, and this was found in other studies (Dickey et al., 2012; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013). A mental health professional aware of the dynamics of gender and sexual identities and their connection will be better able to counsel a trans person transitioning to their desired gender.

Cisgender Privilege

Among the many privileges counselors have that may affect the therapeutic relationship, such as being predominately White, cisgender privilege is one that counselors may not consider. Cisgender, when one's gender aligns with his/her anatomical sex, is a position of privilege. Trans persons may struggle with gender identity on a daily basis, while cisgender persons rarely, if ever, consider their gender to be in flux or marginalized. As trans men become male, and possibly privileged in part, there could be a power differential shift in the client/counselor relationship. It may be subtle or even nonexistent, but the changes in power and privilege should not be taken lightly. In fact, many of the men I interviewed struggled with this very issue.

Peter, at age 53 said this about changing his gender:

I'm just saying that to *not* call yourself a man because you don't want the misogyny – or maybe they don't want to look at it as being privileged, but if they're passing as men, then they should own it, because once you're passing as a male, then the male privilege is automatic. (-----, 2017, p. 116)

And Peter also said this being concerned about becoming male and privileged: "Walking through with male privilege, it's going to be difficult because I've allied myself so much with oppressed communities that I want to make sure that I'm doing the right thing" (-----, 2017, p. 122). Many of these trans men had reservations about stepping into a privileged male role. Some were reluctant to adopt a "straight male" persona, even if they were physically and emotionally able to do so; they felt more comfortable identifying as queer and remaining part of the LGBTQ community, a group that has been a strong source of their support.

Many transgender persons consider transitioning to be a lifelong process (Spicer, 2010). Counselors reviewing transgender identity development models may perceive the transition process as something with a beginning, middle, and end. We may assume a trans man is finished with transitioning if he passes for male, and although his body may appear to be aligned with his sense of gender, he still may have many unresolved psychosocial issues. "It may take a lifetime to become completely integrated and at peace with a different gender and sexual identity" (----, 2017, p. 208).

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

The somewhat diverse, but small sample, limits the ability to generalize findings to the larger population. There was some diversity with age range, religion, and race, but it was still mostly a White population that limited the scope of the study. Although the age range was high, most of the participants were under age 40, which may have limited the understanding of generational differences. Adding to this, the group was mostly well educated with middle class backgrounds. Since the focus of this study was limited to the intersectionality of gender and sexual identities in trans men, the other intersecting identities, such as race and socioeconomics, were not addressed. An important finding in this study was how fluidity in gender in pre-transition tended to show as fluidity in sexual orientation during the transition process. And in the reverse, a strong binary-leaning gender identity in pre-transition tended to reflect a binary sexual orientation. A quantitative study measuring this dimension might reveal a correlation between fluidity in gender and fluidity in sexual orientation. Quantitative research may also show a relationship between binary gender identities and binary sexual orientations in transgender men. Similar studies to the one presented here focusing on trans men of color, including trans men of all races with lower socioeconomic statuses, would be a welcome addition to the literature. There are trans men who do not have access to much needed medical care, where trans men of higher socioeconomic means may readily obtain such care. There are trans persons who would like to transition but remain in the "closet," hiding their true identity. This may be because of a lack of knowledge and awareness of transgender support groups, and also due to a lack of economic resources to successfully transition.

The participants in the present study lived in the Northeastern United States, which limited the scope of the study. Other areas of the country may not have as many accessible agencies that are open in supporting trans issues. For the most part, the trans men in this study were comfortable in expressing their gender identities. A

similar study in a more remote area of the United States might bring a different perspective as some trans persons in a remote area may not have been as open about their gender expression for fear of reprisal or being “outed.”

A qualitative study focusing on the developmental process of sexual and gender identities would add to the literature. As posited earlier, it may be that sexual and gender identities often develop simultaneously, and a study such as this may add shed light on the intersectionality of sexual and gender identities.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine how sexual and gender identities intersect and manifest in the lives of trans men, especially how they experience this while transitioning. These two constructs, gender identity and sexual orientation, are usually viewed as completely separate entities, but the data from this study and others show that there can be a connection and that gender identity and sexual orientation can affect one another. The results of this study add to the literature with a deeper understanding of the unique perspective trans men have regarding their sexual and gender identities. In the present study, trans men who were more fluid in their gender identity in pre-transition, tend to be, and may have always been, more fluid in their sexual orientation. It was also found that trans men in pre-transition who were quite binary in their perception of gender (knowing they were male and only male) were also binary sexual orientation, meaning in this case only having a sexual attraction towards women. Of course, one cannot generalize this concept to the entire transgender population, and this needs to be studied further.

Transgender persons are leading the way with the postmodern meaning of gender and sexuality. “By identifying themselves in multigendered ways, transgender and other gender-nonconforming youth are radically changing the definition of gender and how gender identity will be viewed in the future” (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 166). There is more gender and sexual fluidity among transgender persons than in cisgender society where heteronormativity is still prevalent. Even among scholars and practitioners, there is often a reliance on heteronormative values that embrace binary definitions of gender and sexual identities. These concepts are deeply ingrained in our culture, and it is difficult to break from the pattern. As professionals and scholars, we can learn from transgender persons, possibly the most fluid or queer among us.

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Table 1
Gender Identities, Expressions and Sexual Orientations of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity/ Expression Before	Gender Identity/ Expression Now	Sexual Orientation Before Transition	Sexual Orientation During Transition ^a	Born in Wrong Body Narrative	Non-binary gender identity pre- transition
Rob	19	Female/ Boyish	Male/Trans man	Lesbian	Straight with aesthetic attraction to men		X
Mark	20	Female/	Male/Trans man	Lesbian	Queer or Homo- romantic bisexual		X

Jack	21	Androgynous Male/Mixed and tomboyish	Male/Trans guy or boy	Into women	Queer	X
Jeffrey	27	Male/Man	Male/Man	Pansexual with aesthetic attraction to male presentations	(Into cis women) Pansexual with aesthetic attraction to male presentations	
Alex	33	Female/ Androgynous	Male/Trans man	Bisexual	Bisexual and Hetero- romantic	X
Dylan	35	Butch woman/ Androgynous	Male/Trans guy	Queer	Queer	X
Peter	53	Butch/dyke Butch/ Male	Male/Man	Gay (Hated term lesbian)	Attracted to feminine women (Heterosexual)	X
Julius	62	Male/Dyke	Male/Man	Interested in women, not lesbian	Straight	X

Note. The participants are listed by age, from youngest to oldest.

^a There is no category for post-transition as most of the participants are still in transition.

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