

Liminal Spaces and the Transgender Experience

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Transgender individuals are people whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not converge with gender norms associated with assigned sex at birth. A sub-category of people who identify as genderqueer are exploring gender expression along a continuum beyond the confines of traditional binary definitions of either male or female. We suggest that individuals who undergo some form of physical transformation may experience a temporary liminal state as they transition from one gender identity to the other. Others who fall under the transgender umbrella but are not transsexual may not fully transition but rather remain somewhere in-between the binary categories of female or male. This phenomenon illustrates the transient and complex nature of gender identity formation. Our study explores the many ways that transgender individuals and people who identify with the transgender community are managing their journey and negotiating their identities. Interviews with 21 people in various stages of transformation/transition demonstrate that coming to grips with one's true gender identity is reinforced by ritual experiences along with the support of friends, family, and other social networks. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: http://www.transformativestudies.org ©2015 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

This research explores the experiences of a sample of gender-nonconforming individuals who are attempting to achieve gender independence in a society that dictates gender identity based on genitalia and a rigid binary conception of male/female and woman/man. The expression of alternative forms of gender often meets with disdain and in some instances, violence. Individuals who change gender rules and refuse to conform in socially prescribed ways of gender expression often fall somewhere between female or male. In other words, they enter a liminal space. The term liminality was first coined by Victor Turner based on his field research in Zambia during the 1950s. We argue that at least for a time, some gender non-conforming individuals experience liminality as they transition from one gender identity to the other. Others may embrace this space and still others accept their liminal status with at least some amount of trepidation (Nestle, Howell, & Wilchins, 2002, pp. 98-99). For the purposes of this research project, liminality refers to an in-between status or what occurs before/during gender identity transition. In some cases, transitional liminality may result in a personal transformation that is helped along by ritual processes and the formation of supportive communities. In other cases, more permanent, socially imposed liminality may produce insecurity and/or vulnerability; especially for individuals who exhibit ambiguity in their gender presentation and may or may not be transsexual.

We examine the experiences of a non-random sample of 21 individuals who identify with the transgender community but may not necessarily be transgender. For example, several participants identified specifically as genderqueer but not transgender. One young woman, Olivia, identified as 'cisgender' which is technically a term for people who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth. However, she also identified with the transgender community in that she liked to play with her gender and explore other ways of "being." Her gender expression/presentation is somewhere in the middle of the gender binary and her sexual orientation is bisexual. Borrowing from Bornstein (1994), Olivia might just be a "gender outlaw" as are some of the other individuals who shared their stories with us. For the purposes of this study we apply the term transgender to every gender category not covered by the words man, woman, female, and male. Borrowing from Stone's categorizations (1991) we include the following in our working definition of transgender: transsexuals, transvestites, cross-dressers, individuals with an intersex condition, individuals who have chosen to

perform ambiguous social genders, and people who have chosen to perform no gender at all.

During the time of the interviews, some of our participants were in varying stages of physical transition while others were coming to terms with complex identity management issues that did not involve surgical/hormonal intervention. Some participants were attempting to step outside of the gender binary and identified in either bi-gender or multi-gender ways. Others chose to transition from either male to female (MTF) or female to male (FTM) and integrate into society by adhering to traditional ideas about sex and gender. The stories they share provide an opportunity to understand how a sample of gender non-conformists make sense of the world as they achieve and manage their identities.

Of particular interest to the researchers is the exploration of how individuals who do not conform to normative gender rules negotiate their identities either with the help of surgical/hormonal intervention or by moving between gender categories in pursuit of gender freedom. Transgender individuals are often in-between traditional binary gender labels or they may inhabit ‘outside boundaries’ of what is defined as male and female in Western culture. Many transsexuals make a break with existing gender expectations resulting from their sex at birth and forge new identities based on who they really are. As the new identity emerges, they often experience a “liminal happening” accompanied by rites of passage that occur with full or partial transition (Turner 1969, 1974). Other gender non-conforming individuals who are not transgender may also push the gender envelope by negotiating their identities in different ways depending on the social context or even the day of the week.

Turner’s liminality theory (1969, 1974) enables us to illustrate how the individuals in our study transition from one gender identity to another while others remain somewhat liminal as they move along a continuum from feminine to masculine and places in-between. During the process of aligning their bodies with their minds, transgender individuals may be relegated to second class status within social institutions such as schools, the work place, and the military; each of which is focused on binary gender conformity rules. Gender non-conformists, whether transgender or not, become marginalized in social systems that thrive on consistent and conforming gender identity presentations based on traditional definitions of female or male.

Even with the knowledge that gender rules do exist, gender non-conformists bring forth a range of creative human possibilities through their identity constructions. Identities that demonstrate variations on

gender and sexuality include female to male (FTM), male to female (MTF), transflag, boi, queer, and genderqueer, to name a few. In terms of sexual orientation, some transgender individuals may identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, and/or pansexual. Gender and sexuality intersect to create experiences that vary based on one's gender identity. This paper presents first person stories that give insights into how a sample of gender non-conforming individuals attempt to achieve gender freedom in a rigidly binary world. Our research contributes to literature on gender non-conforming individuals who identify with and/or do not identify with the gender and sexuality binary.

DOING GENDER DIFFERENTLY

Historically, what defines gender and sexuality in the United States has been an ongoing debate among sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, judicial systems, the government, feminists, the media and transgender activists. Although changing one's sex was a consideration in Europe as early as 1910, Meyerowitz (2002) points out that it was not until the mid-twentieth century that gender really came into the spotlight in the United States with the "sex change" of Christine Jorgensen in 1952. While most people supported the idea of biological determinism at the time, Jorgensen paved the way for others to question whether or not biology actually determined gender identity and if it were possible to change one's sex and assume a new identity.

Early social researchers that include Garfinkel, 1967; Kando, 1973; Feinbloom, 1976; and West and Zimmerman, 1987 investigated ways in which transgender individuals learn to do gender differently while managing social stigma that often comes with gender non-conformity. During the 1990s, research on transgender and gender non-conforming issues began appearing in the literature more frequently with the work of Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1994; Bornstein, 1995; Mason-Schrock, 1996; Gagne, Tewksbury & McGaughey, 1997; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998; Ekins & King, 1999; Lucal, 1999; and Valentine, 2007, 2012. As we move through the twenty-first century, the transgender experience is beginning to attract more attention with high profile personalities such as Chaz Bono and his mother, Cher, who are speaking out for tolerance and understanding of gender variant individuals and their families.

Having given birth to three children, another public figure, Thomas Beatie, has been labeled the "world's first pregnant man" and "male mother." Beatie defies biological determinism and gender roles that have

dominated ideas about what it means to be a man and a woman in American society. According to Meyerowitz (2002), the definition of sex is not etched in stone and transsexual activists and scholars are reconstructing what sex means within the contexts of gender identity. Even transgender activists differ in how they define the term “transgender” (Davidson, 2007). As the debate continues, discussions help shape strategies to encourage more tolerant attitudes about gender non-conforming individuals and push the idea that there is much diversity within the category of gender.

Unfortunately, some individuals who actively live outside the sex/gender binary may be at higher risk for both emotional and physical abuse than individuals who align on either the male or female side of the gender binary (Gagne, Tewksbury & McGaughey, 1997). Because of tremendous social pressure, transgender individuals often find it difficult to resist conformity that comes with physical transition. Rather than remaining in a liminal or in-between status many transition and eventually align along either side of the male/female gender binary (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998). Although some transgender individuals embrace the idea of transcending gender, Wilson (2002, p. 433) found that in an effort to achieve “normalcy,” full transition was the preferred outcome since participants in her study were more likely to adhere to traditional gender norms in hopes of fitting in.

For many in the transgender community, the process of coming out is complete when they finally assume a social gender role that matches their gender identity (Lal, 2009). A sample of male to female transsexuals revealed how they produced transformations to embody womanhood even though establishing their true female identity was difficult because there was little support from friends and family (Schrock, Reid, & Boyd, 2005). They were sometimes harassed in public and they were not always supported by therapists. As they moved through the liminal stage and finally transitioned, they felt more secure within their bodies. The transition required that they retrain their bodies to articulate feminine movements and speech. This was followed by gender specific clothing and make-up. Finally, they engaged in cognitive training to help solidify their new gender identities. Transsexuals who effectively pass are less likely to have negative encounters in their day to day lives based on their gender presentation. Those who do not pass are often faced with scrutiny and uncomfortable encounters that range from stares, glares, and even physical harm.

Although some theorists frame gender as fluid and unstable, norms exist that control gender roles in unlikely places. For instance,

transwomen who do not look and act feminine enough are often accused by their peers of revealing their “male energy” (Davis, 2009, p. 109). In other words, if presentation of self is perceived as ambiguous, transgender individuals may be criticized by those in their own community for not adequately presenting and passing as either male or female. Lucal (1999) found that feminine males and masculine females who are not transgender also negotiate their lives in the boundaries of a dichotomous gender system. Because of their gender presentation they are at risk of being reprimanded mentally, emotionally and/or physically by people who expect gender conformity based on familiar binary arrangements.

Browne (2004) addressed the experiences of nine non-heterosexual women who were consistently mistaken as men. When accessing women’s public bathroom facilities their ambiguous gender presentation elicited questions about whether they were really female. In other day to day encounters they were referred to as ‘sir’ and/or ‘Mr.’ Because of their non-conforming gender presentation they exist in a socially constructed liminal space (between male/female) even though they self-identify as female not male. By transgressing mainstream gender expectations these women regularly experienced harassment or discrimination based on their gender presentation.

Coming out narratives for individuals participating in a transgender support group revealed a collective feeling of being in-between statuses (Mason-Schrock, 1996). This experience illustrates Turner’s liminality concept. The sharing of personal histories and mutual understanding enabled the group to form a communal bond based on their experiences as members of the transgender community. This phenomenon is an example of Turner’s related concept of *communitas* that develops among people who are experiencing ritual transitions (1974, p. 247). *Communitas* denotes intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging among a group of people who may be standing together outside the confines of mainstream society.

Relationships that develop during identity transition processes can be very important to long term stability for transgender individuals. Riggle, Rostosky, McCants & Pascale-Hague, (2011) focused on positive experiences of the participants in their study which included enhanced interpersonal relationships, increased empathy, a unique perspective on both sexes, and benefits from living outside of the sex binary. Overall, their findings suggest that a supportive community was critical to successfully coming out, transitioning, and establishing a new gender identity for gender non-conformists.

Ekins and King (1999, p. 581-583) use the term “transgendering” to describe “moving across” one pre-existing gender category to the other (temporary or permanent) or living “beyond gender” altogether. The modes of body transference are constructed in relation to gender binary arrangements and include migrating, oscillating, erasing and transcending. Some gender non-conforming individuals “migrate” from one side of the gender binary to the other, while others move within or outside of the binary which is illustrative of the fluidity of gender identity and expression. Transgender individuals can and do reconstruct gender through a process of remodeling or reinventing their bodies to match their knowledge of who they are regardless of their sex at birth. Some non-trans gender non-conformists may be able to transcend gender (at least for a time) by striving for gender neutrality or by adopting a gender identity in-between the fixed points of the male/female binary.

Attending the True Spirit Conference over a three year period, Hansbury (2005) examined a variety of transmasculine identities within the female to male (FTM) transgender community. He organized his discussion of gender identities into three subgroups that included: 1) woodworkers; 2) genderqueers; and 3) transmen. Rather than focus on the negotiation of gender identity from a binary perspective where male is on one end of the spectrum and female on the other end, the three subgroups were analyzed from the most essentialist (woodworkers) to the most constructionist (genderqueers). According to his typology, transmen fell somewhere in-between the essentialist and constructionist categories in that they fully embraced both the “trans” and “man” aspects of their identities. Woodworkers, on the other hand, identified as men, were stealth and “blended into the woodwork” while genderqueers were found to be “the most diverse, fluid, shifting and dynamic” (Hansbury, 2005, p. 256). Hansbury’s work contributes to the notion alluded to by Wilson (2002) that there is much diversity within the transgender category itself.

A DISCUSSION ABOUT THEORY

The term transgender includes identities and experiences of gender variant, gender or sex changing, gender blending, and gender bending people (Davidson, 2007). Definitions continue to evolve as more information becomes available about how gender non-conformists negotiate their identities in a binary world. We treat the concept of transgender as an umbrella term that includes a wide range of people who challenge binary gender norms. Activists in the LGBT community

stress the importance of allowing gender variant individuals to form identities outside of traditional gender binary arrangements as they redefine what it means to be female and male. Transgender individuals also challenge heteronormative ideas about whom individuals should be attracted to. The result is an array of many gender expressions and sexualities, some are fluid and some are not. Bornstein (1995) suggests that the broader transgender movement uses the concept of gender fluidity to reject gender regulation while stressing the concept of gender play which frees transgender individuals from rigid gender categories that do not allow for variation. She asserts that fluidity implies an escape from preconceived notions of gender. Davis (2008, pp. 99-100), on the other hand, argues that although gender identity is not static, it is also not an “unbounded” category for anyone, including transgender individuals.

Liminality and the Gender Transformative Experience

Turner (1974, p. 261) described liminal individuals as people in-between the roles assigned by custom and convention and in the case of transsexuals, biology. In effect, liminality is transformative and is guided by symbolic rituals such as changing one’s name, cutting or growing one’s hair, and taking hormone therapy. The liminal experience gives transgender individuals the freedom to transcend structural constraints and to refashion their identities. Liminality, the polar opposite of the rigid gender binary, opens up possibilities for freedom, rebirth, and eventual social change for gender non-conformists that fall under the broader transgender umbrella. Along the road to achieving gender freedom, some individuals are ostracized, shamed, rejected, and even physically harmed (Lucal, 1999; Nestle et. al., 2002; and Valentine, 2007). Those who successfully transition and eventually pass, re-enter the binary world as either male or female. Others who transition but do not effectively pass may continue to have negative encounters based on their gender presentation. Are these individuals still liminal even though they took all the steps to align with their gender of choice? This is a question we will address later in this paper.

According to Turner (1969), during the liminal phase, a community of support often emerges. Sometimes the community includes other outsiders who provide moral support along with their own ritual narratives. This support may come in the guise of organized groups and/or events such as the Southern Comfort Conference which provides the transgender community with a place to meet on an annual basis to discuss issues directly relevant to the trans community. Community may

also encompass supporters of gender non-conformists in academic, medical, and political arenas. OutServe, an organization advocating for gays and lesbians in the military, is also leading the debate about transgender military engagement and rights.

An emerging gender concept that bears mentioning is exemplified by people who self-identify as genderqueer. Technically, these are individuals who blur the lines between male and female but are not transgender; although one of our participants identified as both genderqueer and transgender. Some genderqueer identities include neither female nor male, both female and male, or something in-between female and male (Nestle et. al., 2002). This indicates a liminal status that may not be transitory. According to Halberstam (1998), many genderqueer individuals support the application of gender neutral pronouns and in some instances using no pronouns at all. Additionally, genderqueer activists advocate tolerance for the various sexual orientations that accompany multiple gender identities. They stand for free choice rather than forced transition through surgical intervention and/or hormone therapy. For some genderqueer individuals, liminality is sustainable because their conception of who they are is ambiguous when compared to normative binary thinking along traditional gender lines (Hansbury, 2005).

The concept of liminality represents possibilities from which social change emerges, especially in the case of the transgender movement. As the social constructions of gender and sex continue to evolve, so do cultural expectations. Individuals who challenge gender norms may bring about social change by changing how we perceive and define gender, which is structured through gender binary arrangements. Turner conceptualized liminality as emancipatory and freeing; bolstered by community and creativity. He wrote about rites of passage that enabled young boys to cross into manhood and supported women who experience childbirth. The question begs to be asked about the boys who do not accomplish tasks associated with their journey into manhood. What about women who go through an entire pregnancy and produce a stillborn infant? What are the consequences for transsexuals who have sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and do not successfully pass as their desired gender? What about a gender non-conformist who actively resists gender by growing a full beard, wearing gender neutral clothes, and keeping her breasts? In some cases, liminality may not produce an uplifting sense of freedom.

Many of the stories we heard from transsexuals and other gender non-conformists reflect their attempts to reject gendered rules and norms that

affect their ability to be who they are. For transsexuals, living life in an ill-fitting body is treacherous and they have no choice but to align their physical body with their gender identity. Gender non-conformists who were not transsexual remarked that in some instances they felt confined by social regulations that stubbornly define gender norms. Valentine (2012) discusses how non-transsexuals naturalize their own bodies while treating transsexuals as exceptional. He also argues that SRS is not a choice but rather a matter of life or death for people who are trapped in a body they do not own. For some gender variant individuals, the liminal experience may actually encourage human creativity by giving them agency to achieve their true selves through rites of passage and formation of supportive communities within the movement.

METHOD

This paper is based on a study with 21 transgender individuals who identified in various ways that included trans, male, genderqueer transguy, female, and 100% gay male. We conducted face to face interviews with eight people. Since not all our participants agreed for their statements to be recorded, we administered questionnaires to 13 others who emailed, mailed, or personally delivered their responses to the investigators. The data from these documents is used as anecdotal material rather than direct quotes in the narratives section. The face to face interviews lasted from one to two hours, were recorded, and then transcribed by one of the investigators. Twelve participants were born male and nine were born female and one MTF transsexual alluded to a possible intersex condition that was never diagnosed. All of our participants were non-Hispanic white and came from various regions of the United States. They ranged in ages from 18 to 71.

We used non-probability sampling techniques to recruit participants that included distributing flyers at an LGBT youth organization and lesbian group in Central Texas, two coffee houses in North Texas, and a coffee house in East Texas. Flyers stated the purpose of the study, the requirements for participation and contact information. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling techniques and email contact to individuals who were involved with OutServe, a not-for-profit association for actively serving LGBT military personnel. Participants were given pseudonyms for confidentiality. Data gathering began on October 15, 2010 and ended on July 5, 2013.

Table 1: Sex at Birth and Gender Identity (transformative)

Name*	Sex at Birth	Gender Identity
Angie	Male	Lesbian female
Caroline	Male (suspects intersex condition)	Female
Christi	Female	A-gender; multi-gender; genderqueer
Cynthia	Male	MTF transsexual
Erin	Male	Transwoman
Jaye	Male	Female bisexual
Jimmy	Female	Transgender male
Ken	Female	100% gay male
Kyle	Female	Male
Lee	Female	Genderqueer
Linda	Male	Female
Linn	Male	Female
Llewelyn	Male	Female
Lucas	Female	Genderqueer transguy
Michael	Female	Transman
Olivia	Female	Cisgender, somewhere in the middle of the gender continuum
Robyn	Male	Female
Sherith	Female	Genderqueer
Sherry	Male	Female
Valerie	Male	Lesbian female
Wendy	Male	Female

*Each participant was given a pseudonym to help protect their confidentiality.

The goal of the research study was to ask a wide range of questions in order to gain insights into everyday life experience, sexual orientation, and important rites of passage that impact the lives of gender variant individuals. We analyzed recorded data with the help of NVivo that was utilized to help identify themes and organize and code conversations. Several themes emerged from both the recorded interviews and the questionnaires that were used to guide our analysis. Some of these themes included: 1) the importance of name change in identity transformation; 2) family/community support issues; 3) awareness of

being different; 4) coping with challenges in work, school, and daily life; and 5) striving for gender freedom and equality.

Questions that framed this study (both for interviews and questionnaires) are listed below.

- 1) What was your assigned sex at birth? Have you ever been diagnosed with an intersex condition? If so, explain.
- 2) How would you presently describe your gender identity?
- 3) How would you describe your sexual orientation?
- 4) Can you describe some of the rites of passage you have experienced during coming to terms with your gender identity?
- 5) Are you out to any of your friends or family regarding your gender identity? If so, do you have their support? What are some of your experiences as a member of the LGBT community? Please explain.

The following section contains important ritual narratives shared by participants in our study as they make their journey toward gender freedom.

RITUAL NARRATIVES

Each of the names used in this research study are pseudonyms. Transgender individuals represent an array of gender and sexual identities that transcend binary arrangements. The areas of concentration that frame this part of the study include: gender identity, sexual orientation, rites of passage, and the importance of community. Since many transgender individuals deviate from gender and sexual norms, they may experience social constraints on both a micro and macro level of interaction. They negotiate their daily lives with family, friends, co-workers, and strangers. They also navigate public spaces that include but are not limited to restrooms, workplaces, and educational institutions. The data that follows brings to light not only how participants see themselves but how they deal with a society that rarely accepts individuals whose gender and sexual identities deviate from hegemonic norms. Even though gender non-conformists in this study encounter many obstacles, they are also hopeful that by sharing their experiences, they can help the world acquire a greater understanding of gender diversity.

Michael (FTM) identifies as a transman and had this to say about why he decided to share his story:

Well I think a lot more research needs to be done about transgenderism in general. There isn't enough done. I think a lot of research that scientists are doing who are not transgender seem to focus on why it happens. I don't think that's what is important. I think we need to focus on research that actually helps us to deal with living in this society. So it's not really that important why we exist. It's just important that we do. So any small way that I can contribute to that is awesome to me.

Gender Identity: How would you presently describe your gender identity?

Some transgender individuals may identify on either side of the binary spectrum (male or female; heterosexual or homosexual) while others experience an in-between status regarding gender and sexuality. Comments indicate that gender identity for the following participants is not fixed but dynamic.

Normally, I define myself as trans. That's how I identify myself usually. But for gender identity I'd definitely say I identify as male. Definitely. Throughout my life I've realized based on how I've felt, I've come to that conclusion. So how I currently identify is a transgender male (Jimmy FTM).

I identify as a transman I guess. Like I mostly, solidly identify as a guy now but I think the trans part of my identity is kind of important too. Like adding that trans part in there, you are reluctant to sometimes because it might make you seem like you are a different kind of man but you're not. Like being some lesser class or oddball. You are a bit different in your background but that's it. But I really identify with the trans community in general so that's how I always think of myself (Michael FTM).

Both young men emphasize the "trans" part of their identity. They see themselves as male but acknowledge that being transgender also shapes who they are. Erin (MTF) identifies as a transwoman. In describing her gender identity, she had this to say:

Oh a female through and through and I love it! Incredibly feminine to a hilt so that's either overcompensating for not doing it for a few decades or it's just what I like and that's how I like to

present and obviously how I like to be treated. Definitely no questioning of what I am and who I am at this stage.

Christi, born female, identifies in various ways that include agender, multigender, and genderqueer:

I see myself somewhere between genders. I would say that I lean somewhere towards the female side of things but definitely in the middle somewhere. I just kind of feel like I'm multi-gendered or sometimes I've thought of myself as a-gendered because I certainly don't see myself as either male or female and I don't know how to really wrap my brain around the in-between.

Any given person's in-between is different than anyone else's in-between. I mean if you have someone who looks very stereotypical male or female saying that they don't feel at all like that gender, it's an individual definition of what in-between is and what that looks like. What's hard too is when I tell people that I identify as a-gender, multi-gender, and sometimes genderqueer or whatever and they kind of look at me like well but you look like a female to me.

Because gender can be fluid, individuals who live in-between male and female categories or outside of the binary construction of gender are free to define their gender identity based on their own internal sense of self. However, it is still difficult to define what "in-between" means. For instance, Lucas, Lee, and Sherith say they are genderqueer and describe their identities in various ways. Lucas identifies as a "genderqueer transguy" with feminist tendencies. During his transition he discovered that he is evolving into an "effeminate male." Sherith's identity as genderqueer enables her to dive deeply into gender by playing different gender roles depending on her mood. Rather than denouncing gender all together, Sherith performs gender in multiple ways regardless of her sex at birth which is female.

Lee identifies as genderqueer and locates herself on the male end of the gender spectrum. She does not plan on any type of physical transition and does not bind her breasts. She does not like gender specific pronouns but acknowledges a pronoun shift will take a long time – maybe a lifetime. Being mistaken for a male also does not bother her with the exception of public bathroom usage. She is uncomfortable with any type of confrontation about using the women's bathroom and she is always happy to see the rare gender neutral toilet facility.

Although Olivia's gender aligns with her sex at birth (female), we included her in this study because her gender expression and gender identity (somewhere in the middle) challenges the binary system of gender. She also identifies with the transgender community.

I prefer the little spectrum sheet, like the gender spectrum. I'd say that I was born female and I identify as female but I feel that my gender expression isn't always feminine in that way. I tend to be more completely on the masculine side most of the time unless I'm doing something like going to church or seeing my family. In my daily life I tend to be just more neutral by wearing jeans and no makeup. And I usually have my head shaved.

Olivia's identity brings to light how the gender binary can be challenged in a variety of ways that include deviating from gender norms and forms of expression that are expected from biological males and females. Throughout her life she participated in and was more interested in masculine activities than feminine ones. She saw this behavior as ultimately going against the binary construction of gender in which she was raised.

Sexual Orientation: How would you describe your sexual orientation?

During the first interview Kyle (FTM) was exploring a relationship with a biological male that he met online. Before his transition, he identified as a lesbian and had been in a relationship for four years. In a follow-up interview, he said that he and his former girlfriend were back together and he was happy in a "heterosexual" relationship. Ken (FTM) identifies as 100% gay male. He was married for six years to a biological male and he has never been attracted to women. When he makes the physical transition he intends to pursue "homosexual" relationships. Llewelyn, a 64 year old MTF transsexual, is attracted to both males and females because she sees the beauty and possibilities in both types of relationships.

Other participants talked about sexual orientation apart from gender identity and how changing one impacted the other. When asked questions about their sexual orientation, participants provided various answers, supporting the contention that sexual orientation, like gender identity, can be fluid and flexible. Jimmy (FTM) expresses some uncertainty in how to label his sexual orientation:

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Before I identified as trans I was lesbian. But I'm not sure what I'd identify as now because I am normally attracted to women but it's the whole gender thing so I'm not really sure it would work out. But as far as who I'm attracted to now, it depends on the personality of the individual more than anything else.

Michael (FTM) identifies as a transman as well, but states that his sexual orientation is asexual.

I was never interested in dating. I had one very minor crush in my entire life when I was in the 9th grade. That was about it...I'm honestly not interested in sex at all but I might end up being interested in someone in the future but I'm in no hurry to get there.

Erin and Christi describe their sexual orientation in the following ways:

As much as I'm not for labels, I am happy to label myself a lesbian just because it's really exciting for me. It's still got the newness of it. Like "Hey awesome!" I can finally be like "Hey I'm a lesbian! It's awesome!"... I'm happy to embrace it. I'm happy to throw my sexuality out there as an example of "Hey I'm a transwoman and I don't like guys. It's completely possible and it's ok!" (Erin MTF)

That's another one where I like to be kind of fluid. I don't have a label not because I want to be label free but because I don't know how to label it. I mean I dated before I was dealing with both sexual orientation and gender issues. I dated guys but I haven't in a while and I don't know if I'd be open to it or not....but I know there has definitely been times when I've been attracted to males. But for the most part I look for female identified females. I've also had times when I've been attracted to transguys you know female-to males. So I don't know if there is necessarily a label for all that. I hate the word bisexual because it implies a) two sexes and b) that there is an equal balance of things and I don't feel an equal balance of things. I also don't think I'm sort of pan or omni-sexual because I'm not completely across the spectrum. Usually I just identify with whomever I'm dating at the time. But I think for a long term relationship, I'd prefer to be with a female identified person. (Christi, agender/multigender/genderqueer)

For Sherith (genderqueer), sexual orientation is not a “big deal.” Her gender performance is flexible in that she lives gender differently from one day to the next. She has dated both women and men and had a boyfriend at the time of the interview. When asked how her boyfriend feels about her gender play, she remarked that he is very supportive and never judges her. As the discussion regarding sexual orientation illustrates, gender identity was often a guiding factor in how some participants negotiate definitions for sexual identities and the relationships they choose to engage in.

Jimmy (FTM) mentioned that he has had three relationships in the past. His first relationship was with a female, his second relationship was with a female who also had “trans ideas” and was therefore “kind of in the same boat.” His third relationship was with a female who also had an FTM transgender identity. They broke up because the relationship felt more brotherly than intimate. Michael (FTM) recounts his one date with a biological male while he was in college:

I said yes because I’d never been asked out and I didn’t know how to say no. But I kind of wanted to be friends with him so I said well sure why not. I did have a lot of fun but just thinking of the night as a date made it really awkward. We went to dinner and he paid for it. And then we went to his house and played video games for the rest of the night and I was like “Sweet!” But the date part was more like a guy in a relationship with another guy, that’s what I think will happen if I ever do have a relationship.

Transgender people identify their gender and sexuality in numerous ways that range from one end of the binary spectrum to another, between, or outside of binary categories. For some participants, changing their gender identities resulted in re-categorization of their sexual identities. For instance, Kyle and Ken (both FTM) were open to being with men (straight or gay) following their gender identity transformation. Erin (MTF) has always been attracted to women. Finally, some participants did not have a way of identifying their sexuality because they felt their gender was somewhere in that in-between category. According to Christi (genderqueer) who self-identifies in multiple ways:

It’s really hard to feel like we are flip flopping and having to explain ourselves to the world...There is definitely still some tension or stress around this being in-between thing and how do you negotiate

that in the world and how do you sort of express your authentic self on a daily basis when other people just don't get it.

These interviews reveal that gender and sexual identity are deeply connected and sometimes overlap as Meyerowitz (2010) aptly suggests.

Rites of Passage: Can you describe some of the rites of passage you have experienced during coming to terms with your gender identity?

Rites of passage enable individuals to move from one stage of life to the next. They often involve a sequence of activities that transform human attitudes and behaviors. The rites of passage mentioned by the participants in this study include: 1) changing one's birth name; 2) changing clothing and hairstyles; 3) binding breasts; 4) taking hormones; and 5) surgical intervention. Rites engaged in by the participants depended on the individual's gender identity.

I think the one thing that has helped make me more comfortable with how I look is definitely my clothing. Because you know I hate super tight clothing. Like everything I'm wearing right now is men's clothing. I think that is beneficial to me...to make me more comfortable (Jimmy FTM).

Jimmy also mentioned that he would like to take "T" or testosterone when he moves out of his parent's house. For Caroline, a 71 year old MTF, the biggest rite of passage is her name change which will be official in 2013. Michael (FTM) mentioned that one of the most important ways of aligning his gender identity with his sense of self was binding his breasts. Kyle (FTM), Ken (FTM) and Sherith (genderqueer) emphasized wearing a binder as an important rite of passage. Kyle and Ken say that binding is temporary until they can afford to pay for top surgery. Sherith, on the other hand, wears the binder only on occasion which allows for flexibility in her gender performance. Hair cuts are also an important rite of passage.

I started cutting my hair gradually shorter for several months. The first time I got a haircut after I decided that I wanted to transition, I didn't manage to tell the person that I wanted a masculine looking haircut. I was way too freaked out for that. I ended up with a really short but still feminine looking haircut. But the first time I got a masculine looking haircut it was great (Michael FTM).

Rites of passage involve physical, psychological, and social transitions for many transgender individuals.

I've done pretty much all the normal male-to-female transition steps. I've been on hormone replacement therapy for I believe ten months now. I've gotten my legal name changes. I've come out to my entire family, job and friends so I've not lived as a boy since I believe August of last year. So really everything that doesn't involve major surgical procedures I've done. I guess those would be rites of passage. Of course I've gone through multiple, multiple hours of excruciating soul searching therapy on top of that. But I'd say all the little trials by fires have been gone through so far (Erin MTF).

Unlike Erin who is in the process of fully transitioning, Christi (genderqueer) insists, that for her, gender is a fluid experience that changes from day to day:

I've learned to be more comfortable in aligning my expression to how my identity feels on any given day. It was really hard for me for a while to realize that my gender identity is not a fixed thing. Even if I feel in between, where I feel on that spectrum shifts daily or can even shift during the day or shift all the time. I've been through periods of my life where I've been really feeling like "God I want to be a guy" and other times where I go "Wow, I'm so glad I didn't do that!" So I've had to really become comfortable with sort of having two wardrobes and giving myself the patience to open my closet in the morning and say "Ok which Chris are you today? Are you the female or the male?" That's sort of been freeing to me to align my identity with my expression.

Unlike many of the participants who gravitate to one end of the gender binary or the other, living gender in a liminal state has allowed Christi to express her gender in multiple ways. As she mentioned, this requires patience. It also provides a "freeing" experience. For Wendy, a 40 year old MTF transsexual, her transformative rite of passage occurred when, at age 12, she secretly tried on a brunette wig that belonged to her sister. When she saw her image in the mirror, she knew (just as she suspected) she was female.

Rites of passage for the participants in this study brought them closer to realizing their true sense of self. Some of the participants identified

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with a gender identity that gravitated more closely to one end of the binary while others lived between or outside of binary confines. The rites of passage experienced by each participant helped confirm personal identities while influencing the ways in which they want the world to see them.

Community: What are some of your experiences as a member of the LGBT community?

As difficult as it is to feel affirmed in a society that does not see beyond two categories of gender, participants spoke about the importance of having a community that understands and supports them. One of the main benefits of a supportive network of people is assistance with both physical and emotional transitions. Michael (FTM) expressed how important the transgender community was to him when he first came out.

Coming here has helped a lot because I'm not out to that many people and I'd never met a transgender person before or at least not to my knowledge anyway. The only person who knew about it was my mom who has kind of ignored the subject since then and my therapist. It's been just amazing knowing people. My mom is awkward around me now. If anything is mentioned slightly related to the gender thing she kind of stiffens up about it and gets tense. That's probably a lot of why I haven't talked to her about it. She's still pretty hostile about it but I think I need to have a talk with her once I get the courage to see how she's still feeling about it and tell her that it's not going to go away.

Unlike Michael, Erin (MTF) has family support. However, community provides other avenues to help complete her transition. She is also lucky enough to work for a company that provides insurance benefits for transgender employees. Older transwomen have provided advice and support to Erin; however, she thinks it is important to "hang out" with women her own age.

In the trans community I guess I'm a little young. I know I have always responded well to meeting other transwomen around my age because we are kind of growing up in the same time. We are kind of tuned in with what the issues are for women in their mid to late twenties.

Cynthia, a 56 year old MTF transsexual, has support from friends in the LGBT community. Most of her family accepts her gender identity and she is slowly coming out to some people whom she trusts at work.

By giving back to the community, some participants also found self acceptance. According to Jimmy (FTM):

One thing is definitely about accepting yourself. This is one thing I'm still struggling with personally because it's hard to have your life chosen for you. I think one thing about acceptance is that you can help other people even if you are still trying to accept yourself. You are still helping other people. Like there is someone who is younger than me that attended _____. I've helped him change his pronouns and helped change his name on Facebook. He's accepted himself more...I love listening to others. I love helping. And so when I figured out that I helped him just by talking to him or listening to him, it felt awesome!

Unlike most of the other participants in this study, Ken (FTM) found his support online where he spends more time than in face to face interaction. He thinks that once his transition is complete, he will be more comfortable being "out there" in the broader community.

Christi (genderqueer) gets involved in the community by educating students at the university she attends about LGBT issues. Interestingly, the population that is most interested in the workshops is "a bunch of very heterosexual, cisgender, mostly sorority girls."

I thought it was fantastic because these several girls ended up leaving the series with their minds blown and with so much more knowledge. They said they were talking about it within their houses. I just thought that was so cool that we didn't intend to get the message out there but we did. That was my inspiration to continue doing that. I think the LGBT community even needs to have a lot of education. That's why I put on workshops for three years in San Diego because the minds were blown by so many people within that community...the more you talk to people about it the more open minded they become and the more it starts to make sense especially if you try to relate it back to their own lives. They all realize that nobody really fits in the box so this genderqueer thing is not that different from them not fitting into the box either.

Erin (MTF) was critical of the LGB community overall because of her perception that leaders do not focus on transgender rights and other issues important to the “T” part of the broader movement.

The gay marriage thing just drives me crazy. I understand it's important for a lot of people. I just don't understand that...if a transperson loses their job for being trans, that's a death sentence. I mean, I'm scared that if I lose my job it's going to be hard for me to be hired on somewhere else. I may be living in _____ but I'm not going to be able to get a comfortable living as I have now. I might be able to get a job working at Amy's Ice Cream scooping stuff for people maybe. And to see so many hundreds of millions of dollars spent to get marriage and to be wanting it as such an all or nothing deal. Civil unions, they don't see it as an option. It's not going to be like this one step at a time but I feel transpeople are asked to take it incrementally. Like take your rights at an increment while we are spending millions and millions of dollars to get marriage...There was something like eight million dollars spent fighting Prop 8 in California. It's hard to even fund simple things like AIDS awareness programs for the homeless GLBT people in California. And all of this money is going toward gay marriage so people can have their weddings and get Prop 8 overturned. I think that's such a freaking messed up priority sheet.

Although having a supportive community is important to most of the transgender individuals who participated in this study, there seems to be a question about where trans people fit into the broader movement. Christi (genderqueer) feels that there should be more education within the LGBT community about gender identity and issues that transgender people face on a daily basis. Until there is more inclusion, transgender individuals will continue to form their own groups apart from the LGB segment of the community, whether in face-to-face groups, in virtual spaces online, and/or getting support from friends and family members.

DISCUSSION: THE ART OF BECOMING

Not all the people in our study were in the process of transitioning; however, each of them had some unique gender characteristic that influenced their world view. The transsexual participants reflected Valentine's (2012) findings that achieving a legitimate gender (who they really are) is not just a matter of choice but an essential step to becoming

a whole person. As Erin so eloquently stated: “I am a real woman with everything (good and bad) that goes along with it.”

For our transsexual participants, passing successfully as their preferred gender was the goal, along with overcoming a lifelong marginalized status based on their gender identity and in some cases, presentation of self. Many of the rituals they shared with us reflected performance of their preferred gender such as wearing gender specific clothing, binding breasts (FTM), and cutting or growing out their hair. Even though the transition represented an in-between or liminal status (that most were anxious to pass through), rituals helped their coming out (to friends and family) or coming into status (achieving true self).

Effectively passing as the gender of choice is not always guaranteed. Most, but not all of our transsexual participants, were making progress in that area and for Erin, in particular, she achieved a very feminine status from perfect makeup to French manicure to general presentation. She was the first to admit how much work her transition took in the last couple of years, especially with regard to voice training. That was her biggest challenge and happily “everything else was cake.” For Lucas, things did not seem to be going as well as he had hoped. Having recently undergone top surgery, he expected a much different outcome in terms of passing as male. Several times during the interview, he commented on how ironic it was that he was “becoming” an effeminate male. He was very concerned about how his male colleagues would react when they discovered he was no longer a lesbian female. As he continues his transition, he hopes he will become more masculine. If that does not occur to his satisfaction, he may remain in an in-between status until he comes to terms with his evolving gender presentation.

In U.S. society, gender variation is not very well tolerated. We tend to reward people for conformity and transsexuals who are trying very hard to pass are acutely aware of the need to present correctly. Some of the other participants in our study were more concerned about their freedom to pursue a gender non-conforming lifestyle. They reveled in abandoning rigid gender stereotypes in their daily lives and voiced no desire to conform to any social standards with regard to gender. Lee was very vocal about her right to push the gender envelope in her day to day life even though that process came with many challenges. Uncomfortable with arbitrary gender rules, she stated that her gender presentation was “more political” than anything else. She also acknowledged that her choice of male clothes and shaved head adds to her uniqueness. Unlike the transsexuals in our study, Lee has no desire to establish a ‘legitimate’ gender beyond that liminal space or in-between status that she currently

occupies. She embraced her ambiguous gender persona and proudly accepted the label 'genderqueer' while at the same time identifying with the broader transgender population.

The people in our study exemplify gender diversity and in some instances echo stories from other "voices from beyond the sexual binary" (Nestle, et. al., 2002). Their stories are important examples about how individuals strive for gender freedom whether they are transsexual or genderqueer or some other type of gender non-conformist. These individuals add to the accumulation of data that helps us understand marginalized and oppressed communities and how they make sense of their everyday lives despite enormous pressure to conform to rigid gender stereotypes. The people in our study represent how certain segments of the population continue to challenge (in different ways) the social construction of gender.

CONCLUSION

Human beings are inundated with gendered expectations from childhood to adulthood and into old age. Individuals who deviate from traditional gender norms and who perform gender differently often encounter what Browne (2004) refers to as genderism or more precisely gender discrimination. Lucal (1999), a woman who refuses feminine gender presentation, has achieved discreditable status for her choices. The consequences she faces are sometimes brutal and frequently unsettling for herself and the people she encounters who insist on gender conformity. As Butler noted, people who fail to do their gender right, get punished (1990, p. 140).

The people who participated in this study demonstrate the diversity that exists within the transgender community. They revealed many of the challenges that individuals face who do not conform to rigid gender and sex stereotypes. Transsexuals who pass through the liminal stage and eventually reintegrate as either male or female achieve a semblance of security depending on how well they pass. Lucas (genderqueer transguy) expressed some reservations about his transition from a lesbian female to an effeminate male. He was clearly nervous about how his co-workers (mostly males) were going to react and one of his more troubling revelations was that he was probably going to have to find another job.

Ritual passages were very important for the participants in this study. For some of the genderqueer individuals, rituals such as selecting gender specific clothing vary from day to day, depending on the mood. Discussions about gender play were exciting because of the options that

people like Sherith make available to themselves. She was especially “lucky” because her boyfriend enjoyed her creativity and supported her gender whims. Other participants were very happy about changing their names, wearing makeup, and watching their own transitions. The people we met during this research study were optimistic about becoming who they were born to be, even though they encountered many obstacles along the way. Throughout the interview process, we heard over and over regarding the importance of a supportive community to help with coming out and transition issues. Most of the participants in the study reported positive interactions with the LGBT community whether online or face to face. The youth group where we met several participants was particularly impressive and provided a safe haven for all its members.

Transgender individuals are opening up all kinds of new possibilities in terms of identity formation and sexual expression. They are helping to redefine the binary gender system that is entrenched in Western cultures like the United States. They are also providing a theoretical synthesis for the work of Turner (1969, 1975), Goffman (1976, 1977), West & Zimmerman (1987), Butler (1990), Lorber (1994) Meyerowitz (2002, 2010), and Valentine (2012). The participants in this study demonstrated that coming to grips with their true gender identity is reinforced by many of their ritual experiences along with the support of friends, family, and other social networks. Some of the participants in this study were in the process of transitioning or reintegrating into the social structure as either male or female. Others were negotiating their identities somewhere along the gender spectrum, sometimes from day to day. We did not encounter any subversion of gender even though the people we met are doing it differently.

Our research explored how individuals negotiate their gender and sexuality within the confines of binary social constructs. However, it is important for future studies to focus more specifically on how gender and sexuality are as Meyerowitz (2010, p. 102) suggests, “inextricably knotted, not only conceptually but also in vernacular usage and everyday life.” We have presented data that demonstrates that these concepts are not always analytically separate constructs. For example, Erin was born male and has always been attracted to females. Even though she is successfully transitioning to female, she identifies as lesbian and is in a relationship with a female born lesbian.

As gender and sexuality continue to evolve, new identities are created and recreated. In addition, future research in this area might focus on policing mechanisms that reinforce gender conformity and gender stereotypes that result in gender discrimination. The creation of social

policy to include human rights initiatives for gender variant people continues to be an issue and must be addressed in scholarship surrounding the transgender experience. Valentine (2012) notes that non-transsexuals problematize sex reassignment surgery by categorizing transsexuals who elect to have the procedure as exceptional. This way of thinking continues to separate transgender individuals from the general population and stigmatize them. Additionally, medical evaluations for transsexuals are often loaded with gender stereotypes that do not account for the diversity within the population. Medical professionals must become more knowledgeable and tolerant of gender variant individuals. This can only be accomplished through an educational system that is free from intrinsic heteronormative values.

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