

Questioning Gender and Sexual Identity: Dynamic Links Over Time

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Abstract Dichotomous models of gender have been criticized for failing to represent the experiences of individuals who claim neither an unambiguously female nor male identity. In this paper we argue that the feminist theoretical framework of intersectionality provides a generative approach for interpreting these experiences of gender multiplicity. We review our previous research on four young sexual-minority (i.e., nonheterosexual) women who are participants in a 10-year longitudinal study of sexual identity development, applying the framework of intersectionality to understand their exploration of transgendered experience and identification. Our analysis highlights the value of intersectionality as a framework for understanding not only multiplicity across identity constructs (e.g., race, gender, etc.) but also within identity constructs (i.e., female and male).

Keywords Sexual orientation · Sexual identity · Transgender · Gender identity

Introduction

Historically, research on both sexual identity development (generally understood as the process by which individuals come to acknowledge same-sex attractions and to gradually conceive of themselves as nonheterosexual) and gender identity development (understood as the process by which children come to think of themselves as unequivocally and

permanently male or female) have adopted dichotomous and essentialist models of gender and sexuality, in which individuals possess and seek to publicly embrace one and only one true identity (male or female, heterosexual or gay-lesbian). Individuals whose experiences of gender and sexuality involve multiplicity and fluidity have been ill-described by such models. For example, sexual identity researchers have long critiqued traditional sexual identity models for failing to account for the experiences of men and women who experience attractions for both men and women, and who do not consider one form of desire to be a “truer” representation of their sexuality than another (reviewed in Rust 2000d). Historically, such individuals’ resistance to dichotomous models of sexual identity and orientation has been attributed to denial, internalized homophobia, or false consciousness (Paul 1996; Rust 2000a, 2000e, 1993, 2001, 2003).

These views are now changing (Nichols 1988; Rust 2002; Savin-Williams 2005; Weinberg et al. 1994). Research increasingly demonstrates that categories such as “gay,” “lesbian,” and “heterosexual” are not, in fact unproblematic natural “types.” Furthermore, patterns of same-sex and other-sex desire show far more fluidity and complexity than previously thought (Chivers et al. 2005; Diamond 2007; Rust 2000b; Savin-Williams 2005). A similar adherence to fixed, categorical notions of identity has also historically characterized interpretations of transgender experience. Transgender is a broad category typically used to represent any individual whose gender-related identification or an external presentation either violates conventional conceptualizations of “male” or “female” or mixes different aspects of male and female role and identity. The word and concept “transgender” came into use specifically because many individuals with fluid experiences of gender felt that this phenomenon was not

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well-described by clinical discussions of transsexualism. The term “transsexual” is typically used to refer to individuals who feel that their true psychological gender is the opposite of their biological sex, and who seek surgical or hormonal modifications in order to bring these two into alignment (Henton 2006; Lawrence 2003, 2007; Sperber et al. 2005).

There has been increasing social scientific acknowledgment and investigation of transgender individuals, but much of this work presumes that the primary “dilemma” of all transgender experience is a conflict between one’s psychological gender and one’s biological sex that inhibits expression of the individual’s “true” gender identity (for examples, see Bailey 2003; Cole et al. 2000; Gagne et al. 1997; Prosser 1998; Rubin 2003). Hence, just as the healthy endpoint of sexual identity development was once presumed to be a stable, integrated, unambiguous lesbian, gay, or heterosexual identity (Cass 1979; Coleman 1981/1982; Lee 1977; Minton and McDonald 1983; Mohr and Fassinger 2000; Troiden 1979), the normative and healthy endpoint of transgender development is often thought to be adoption of a stable, integrated, unambiguous identification as 100% male or 100% female, often achieved via some form of physical transformation (for example some combination of clothes, makeup, demeanor, hormones, or surgery) aimed at bringing one’s psychological gender and one’s physical gender presentation into direct alignment (for reviews and critiques see Bornstein 1994; Roen 2002).

Yet just as research increasingly demonstrates the inadequacy of historical, dichotomous models of sexuality, there is increasing evidence that dichotomous models of gender fail to capture the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of transgender experience (Bornstein 1994; Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2000; Feinberg 1996). Numerous gender and transgender theorists and activists have argued that dichotomous, essentialist models which posit one gender identity as the “true” identity invalidate the experiences of individuals who claim multiple gender identifications. These theorists have argued against a “master narrative” of transgender experience in which all experiences of gender fluidity and multiplicity must be resolved in favor of a singular, unified gender identification/presentation. In resisting this universalized narrative, they challenge the presumed essential basis of sexual differentiation and the corresponding, sociopolitical (and fundamentally patriarchal) sex/gender hegemony (Bornstein 1994; Feinberg 1996; Roen 2002). Yet thus far, this view remains outside the mainstream. Although the phenomenon of conflict between one’s psychological gender and bodily gender has been granted cultural (and sociomedical) legitimacy (American Psychiatric Association 1980), the phenomenon of multiple, simultaneous, and context-specific gender identifications does not yet enjoy such legitimacy, nor is it

well-theorized at the level of subjective psychological experience.

The Relevance of Intersectionality

In this article we maintain that the feminist theoretical framework of intersectionality provides a generative starting point for theorizing women’s experiences of multiple, partial, and fluid gender identifications. Historically, intersectionality has been articulated as a framework for analyzing the way in which multiple social locations and identities mutually inform and constitute one another (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Stewart and McDermott 2004). A key tenet of theories of intersectionality is that the process of identifying with more than one social group produces altogether new forms of subjective experience that are unique, nonadditive, and not reducible to the original identities that went into them (Stewart and McDermott 2004). Collins (2000), for example, emphasized the ways in which intersections between different social locations and in particular, different sites of sociopolitical oppression (i.e., gender, race, class), created different types of lived experiences which were altogether transformed by their mutual interactions and hence irreducible to the individual strands braided together into the overall matrix. Collins’ approach, and also that of Crenshaw (1991), challenge categorical modes of thinking in which certain loci of identity (and oppression) are granted “primary” status. These theorists instead emphasize that social categories only take on subjective and political meaning in the context of the other categories within which they are nested.

Although intersectionality is perhaps most widely used as a theoretical approach for analyzing relations among different forms of oppression, our focus is more intrapsychic in nature, and emphasizes intersectionality’s challenge to the notion of primary sites of identity and selfhood. Contrary to interpretations of transgender experience which emphasize conflicts between an individual’s (true) psychological gender and (discordant) biological sex, the framework of intersectionality calls attention to experiences of multiplicity in gender identification, and how these experiences—embedded within specific social, cultural, and interpersonal contexts—create altogether new, emergent forms of experience and identity.

We also find intersectionality relevant to understanding how gender identity and sexual identity interact and co-create one another. Historically, gender and sexual identity have been viewed as orthogonal dimensions, and social scientists have taken pains to emphasize that variability in one dimension does not neatly map onto the other: Being gay/lesbian/bisexual obviously does not mean that one is transgendered (and being heterosexual does not mean that

one is *not* transgendered), just as being transgendered does not mean that one is necessary gay/lesbian/bisexual (Blanchard 1985; Devor 1997). Rather, the linkage between sexual identity and gender identity takes a wide array of forms. But in emphasizing distinctions between gender and sexual identity, social scientists may have given short shrift to the complex processes through which individuals' experiences of gender and erotic desire mutually influence one another over time. We believe that such intersections and reciprocal influences deserve closer analysis if we are to create developmentally accurate models of gender and sexual identification over the life course. In other words, when examining women with "non-mainstream" gender and sexual identities, we must account for the fact that their attractions and identities are in dynamic interaction with one another, yielding diverse constellations of identity and erotic phenomenology over time. Theories of intersectionality call direct attention to these processes via their emphasis on the ways in which intersections between different identities and social locations give rise to altogether novel forms of subjective experience.

To elucidate how the framework of intersectionality helps to interpret complex, multiple, partial experiences of gender, in this article we discuss experiences of gender/sexual intersectionality as experienced by four women, each of which has been interviewed intensively over the past 10 years in the course of an ongoing longitudinal study of sexual identity development (for the original reports of these data, including details on methodology, see Diamond 1998, 2000, 2005a,b, 2003, 2007, 2008). These four women's journeys through nonheterosexual sexual identities eventually—and unexpectedly—prompted each of them to explore transgendered identifications. Yet as described in the original report of their experiences (Diamond 2008), none of these women described feeling "trapped" in the "wrong" gender, and none sought to irrevocably replace her female body and identity with a male one. Rather, they all articulated experiences of multiplicity regarding their gender identities, and resisted selecting one form of identity as inherently "primary." These women's reflections about their own gender-sexual phenomenology resonate with the challenge that theorists of intersectionality have historically posed to dichotomous, essentialist models of identity and selfhood.

We begin with a snapshot of each woman, highlighting how each came to question her gender identity in the context of questioning her sexual identity. We then turn to a detailed discussion of four themes, drawn from their narratives, which are particularly relevant to theories of intersectionality: (1) multiplicity in gendered experiences and gender identifications, (2) how multiplicity in gendered experiences and gender identifications is manifested in attitudes and practices regarding bodily modification, (3)

how multiplicity in gendered experiences and gender identifications can give rise to multiplicity in experiences of desire, and (4) the difficulty of finding language to express and embrace the emergent modes of selfhood that result from these intersections.

Four Women's Unexpected Journeys

As described in depth in the original research reports cited earlier, the women whose experiences we describe were participants in an ongoing, longitudinal study of sexual identity development. Women were interviewed about their process of sexual questioning and their ongoing changes, developments, and self reflections regarding sexual attraction, behavior, and identity. Over the years, the majority of women underwent notable (and surprising) transitions in sexual identification, for example switching among lesbian, bisexual, and "unlabeled" identifications over the years as changes in relationships and social environments rendered different identities more or less relevant and salient (Diamond 1998; 2000; 2003; 2005a,b, 2007). Yet one of the most fascinating and unexpected developments was that 4 of the original 89 respondents ended up adopting *transgendered* identities (Diamond 2008). In short, whereas they began the study by questioning the role of gender in their *sexual desires*, each gradually reached a point of questioning the role of gender in her overall *sense of self*. Their voices are interspersed throughout the remainder of this article (all of the ensuing quotations are drawn from the interview data reported in Diamond 2008) but each warrants her own introduction:

Cynthia/Mark was an avid tomboy growing up, and greatly enjoyed boys' company and games. She first began questioning her sexuality at the age of 12, when she developed a strong crush on a female friend and sent her a love poem. This unfortunately triggered a barrage of social stigma and school harassment. Yet Cynthia persevered, becoming an active and proud bisexual at the age of 14, and identifying as lesbian by the age of 15. By her mid-20s she had met the woman of her dreams and the two of them were planning a lesbian wedding. Several years later, however, she was working at a male-dominated profession and found that she was increasingly adopting a masculine "stance" when interacting with colleagues. She gradually began reflecting on her own subjective sense of gender, and increasingly felt that she would be more comfortable adopting a more masculine gender identity. Her lesbian partner urged her not to do so, and once Cynthia finally made the decision to change her name to Mark and began dressing and appearing as a man (although not consistently identifying as "male," as we will see below), her partner left her. Mark now identifies as queer; he continues to present himself as male on a day-to-day basis, but has no plans to

pursue sex-reassignment surgery. At the time of the 10-year follow-up, Mark was 30 years old, and happily married to a bisexually-identified woman.

Lori was a proudly-identified bisexual woman when she first enrolled in the study at the age of 23. She had long-standing memories of experiencing attractions to both women and men, and enjoying satisfying friendships with both female and male peers, although her most substantive emotional ties were formed with women. As *Lori*'s college years progressed, she started reading about transgender issues and meeting transsexual people, and began thinking more and more about her own sense of gender. By the time of our third interview, when she was 27 years old, she had started identifying as transgendered, and an important part of this identification was a rejection of the notion of “two and only two” genders. Although she has never adopted a male identity, she began taking testosterone, and by the time of the ten-year follow-up interview, at age 33, she described her physical appearance as decidedly masculine. Over the years she continued to experience attractions and relationships with both women and men, but had become seriously involved with a woman.

Ellen first remembers feeling attracted to women at the age of 12 or 13, and by age 14 she had admitted to herself that she was a lesbian. She regularly attended gay-lesbian support groups, and felt both certain and proud of her sexual identity when she first enrolled in the study at age 19. Questions of gender identity had always been lurking in the back of her mind, from a very early age. Sometimes she thought that it would just be easier to be a man, given that she knew she was attracted to women. Yet toward the end of adolescence, she realized that she actually enjoyed being a woman. As she progressed through her 20s, her lesbian identity remained rock-solid, while her gender identity continued to fluctuate. She eventually began an intensive process of spiritual questioning that led her to affirm her own complex, multidimensional experience of gender and sexuality. She still identifies as a lesbian, but remains deeply ambivalent about identifying as a “woman.” By the 10-year point, at age 29, she was unsure whether she might someday pursue full-blown gender reassignment.

Karen identified as bisexual when she first participated in the study at age 17. She had long been aware of experiencing attractions to both women and men, and pursued relationships with both sexes. By the age of 18, she had also started to question her gender identity. She began taking testosterone and started describing herself as a female-to-male transsexual. Yet through this process, she became aware that “male” was not necessarily a more comfortable identity for her than “female,” and that she was more comfortable living and identifying “somewhere in the middle.” Around this time she also became increasingly aware that her attractions to other people, too, were not

strongly oriented around gender, but instead revolved around personal attributes. She continued to pursue relationships with both women and men, but by the time of the 10-year follow-up, at age 27, she was happily involved with a man.

Multiplicity of Female and Male Identifications

A longstanding assumption about transgender individuals is that they uniformly and unequivocally desire permanent re-identification as the other gender. This can be seen in many first-person accounts collected from transsexuals, in which they recount having dressed or acted as the other gender from an early age (Devor 1997; Prosser 1998). For individuals who seek complete re-identification as the other gender, this goal involves changes in self-concept and corresponding changes in the outward presentation of one's gender, including changes in name, in gender role behavior, and in physical gender presentation. The latter can be achieved through a variety of routes, pursued separately or concurrently, including alterations in hairstyle and clothing, hormonal modification of secondary sex characteristics, and most drastically, surgical modification of the genitals (Henton 2006; Lawrence 2003, 2007; Sperber et al. 2005).

This developmental trajectory presumes that female and male identities are irreconcilable, and that one of these identities must occupy a psychologically primary status. Hence, the process of becoming more and more masculine—in one's appearance, demeanor, and physicality—gradually supplants one's previous femininity, and is desirable for this specific reason.

Yet none of the women profiled here were following such a trajectory. Rather, despite adopting observably masculine gender presentations, they expressed ambivalence about taking on a male identity. *Lori*, for example, was taking testosterone and “passing” as male on a day-to-day basis, yet she noted that

I don't want to be a guy. I certainly don't want to be seen as a heterosexual white man in our society cause there's all these implications of being a boy ... I identify as gender queer and people just get really crazed about it because they feel this need to constantly see things in two boxes and if you switch the boxes you can be a boy who wants to be a girl and a girl who wants to be a boy but you can't ever be outside the boxes or change the boxes constantly or anything like that.

Lori was fully aware that her attempts to live between the boxes—especially because she maintained her female name despite her observably male body—were upsetting and challenging to the people around her.

[People] assume female-to-male and male-to-female, and don't realize that there's probably over a hundred

trans-identities. And so I identify as gender-queer. And, um, and basically, for me, that means I kind of blur or fall outside of those gender dichotomies. And so the result, you know, I kept Lori because I like Lori. And it means a lot to me at this point to keep my name and my identity.

Two aspects of Lori's experience stand out from the perspective of intersectionality. First, Lori is acutely aware—and wary—of the sociopolitical ramifications of taking on a conventional “male” identity in light of the other identity statuses that she would simultaneously occupy. Given her ethnicity and her sexual interest in women, she perceives that identifying as male would entail identifying as a heterosexual white male, suddenly placing her in a position of power and privilege that runs counter to her previous experience with, and political activism regarding, social marginality. Her ambivalence about “being a guy” reflects an implicit awareness—consistent with the framework of intersectionality—that she cannot simply subtract out the aspects of a male identity she finds troubling.

Second, and perhaps most notably, Lori's overall resistance to “picking a box” and designating either a female or male identity as her true identity resonates with intersectionality's challenge to the notion that any one particular identity status (i.e., ethnicity, social class, gender) must be personally and socially “primary,” such that other identity statuses are analyzable chiefly with respect to how they add or subtract from forms of social marginality associated with the primary one (Crenshaw 1991).

This particular aspect of Lori's experience was echoed by other respondents. Mark, for example, also resisted adopting a wholly male identity, despite changing his name and presenting himself as male on a day-to-day basis. He had specifically elected not to pursue sex reassignment surgery or to pursue a formal legal change to his gender status, instead crafting his own, hybrid combination of maleness and femaleness. For Mark, this multiplicity felt flexible and comfortable: “I have the ability to accept where I am, rather than always worrying about where I have been, or trying to do things I can't reach.” He also noted the feeling of being “something a little bit other” was an extremely familiar feeling, one that characterized most of his childhood. Thus, for Mark a feeling of “otherness”—which, from the perspective of intersectionality, can be interpreted as the emergent product of Mark's social marginalization on the basis of both his gender and sexual identity—was not necessarily undesirable, and was not something to be obliterated and replaced with a more fixed, categorical sense of self. Rather, Mark had come to embrace dynamic, partial, and intersecting experiences of gender and sexuality.

The notion of dynamism and continued change and transformation is important, because although all of these individuals embraced gender-ambiguity to some degree,

they did not turn it into its own fixed category (i.e., “androgynous”). Rather, their experience of gender identity involved continued movement between, around, and within gender polarities. Hence, for these women the experience of “transition” was not a unilateral movement from female to male, but an ongoing oscillation between more feminine and more masculine aspects of internal gender identity and outward physical presentation. This is perhaps the clearest challenge to conventional notions of transgender, because it posits change and transition as a potential outcome rather than just a temporary process. This, importantly, is consistent with feminist perspectives on intersectionality which emphasize the simultaneous occupation of multiple social and psychological identities, and how dynamic interactions among these identities, embedded within specific contextual, interpersonal, and developmental circumstances, create altogether new senses of selfhood. Because these notions of selfhood are context-specific, and sensitive to women's embeddedness in specific social locations (Stewart and McDermott 2004), they are inherently dynamic: As Lori noted, “it's like I'm constantly changing, constantly evolving, constantly bending and flexing.”

Written on the Body: Physical Transformation and Intersectionality

Many conventional understandings of transgender experience, particularly those drawn from the narratives and experiences of self-identified transsexuals (Bailey 2003; Prosser 1998; Rubin 2003), suggest that transgender women and men typically feel they were born with the “wrong body,” and hence experience a persistent hatred of their bodies which can only be remedied through bodily transformation. Such transformations are supposedly aimed at replacing all signs and manifestations of one's given gender with one's desired (and ostensibly, psychologically primary) gender. Yet among the women profiled here, the aforementioned phenomenon of multiplicity in gender identification extended to the way in which they perceived and experienced their physical bodies, and their corresponding motives for different types of body modification. Although all of them pursued some form of physical transformation, these “body projects” did not involve the straightforward erasure of femininity and the taking on of an unambiguous male role. Rather, women pursued complex, contradictory forms of gender presentation that seemed to inscribe, in physical terms, the multiplicity and partiality that characterized their psychological sense of gender.

Lori, for example, was an avid bodybuilder with a long history of body modification, including tattoos, body piercing, and experimenting with different modes of dress and posture. When she eventually sought a breast reduc-

tion, it was not because of any sort of “female body hatred”—in fact she stated straight out that she loved her breasts—but was linked to a certain muscular aesthetic:

Ever since I was a little kid I was really into body building and having muscles and that was always my goal... I got to the point where there was only so much I could do in a gym as a girl with my body and so I got to the point where I ended up with a breast reduction. My breasts were huge. They were 44 triple D. And I was having a lot of back problems and I wasn't really fond of having really big breasts. I love my breasts but not that big. So I got a breast reduction I think about two years ago and then I felt really good and I got back in the gym and I started working out again but once again I could get to only a certain point. So I moved to San Francisco and I got to this point where I was like O.K. it's time... time to take it to another level. And so I started on hormones.

Lori did, in fact, eventually have her breasts removed. Yet as with the breast reduction, her account reveals no persistent body hatred. Rather, she makes reference to a combination of two factors: First, because of the testosterone she was taking, she developed hair on her chest and shoulders, and she felt that the sight of her muscular, masculine, hair-covered chest with undeniably female breasts would draw too much attention at public pools and beaches. Combined with her family's breast cancer risk, she felt that a mastectomy was a reasonable route. But as she stated, “it wasn't like, I hate my breasts, I want to get rid of them. It was more like, how can I live by not going to a beach, or not going to a pool?”

Lori also expressed no desire to change her genitals. Despite the fact that she had been taking testosterone and was passing as male on a day-to-day basis, she noted that “I'm pretty happy with the way that my genitals are constructed and work and I really wouldn't want anybody mucking around with them.” In fact, by the 10-year interview she was considering going off of testosterone in order to get pregnant, and was clearly comfortable with the prospect of combining her masculine-appearing body with perhaps the ultimate symbol of femininity: A pregnant belly.

Karen, in fact, actually lived out this experience, having served as a surrogate mother for one of her relatives despite having transformed her body through years of testosterone. She, too, had gravitated over time to her own idiosyncratic combination of femaleness and maleness. She recalled that when she first started taking testosterone, she assumed that she would eventually want to adopt an unequivocally male gender identity. Yet as her body changed, so did her goal-state:

“After I had been taking testosterone for about nine months, I just found that I was physically comfort-

able where I was, and then at that point I started thinking about not needing to surgically go all the way.... So I guess I tend to identify both in terms of my own gender and in terms of how I relate to people, and more of a transgendered or anti-gendered sort of way.”

The framework of intersectionality is relevant to Karen's and Lori's approaches to their bodies because intersectionality directly counters essentialist assumptions about the primacy of biologically-based forms of identification over others. Similarly, Karen and Lori have rejected the implicit assumption that physical signs and markers of femaleness must be eliminated in order to take on desired aspects of masculine roles and identifications, and instead have elected to combine and craft their own idiosyncratic experience of physical and psychological gender based on multiplicity rather than singularity. The framework of intersectionality also helps to make sense of Karen's awareness, in particular, of the embeddedness of her sense of gender within interpersonal interactions rather than particular physical characteristics.

Of all the respondents, Ellen was the only one who gave voice to a distinct dissatisfaction with the gendered nature of her body. She could remember being drawn to the notion of male identification from a very early age, and felt that she could never quite achieve the degree of masculine gender presentation that she desired. But even so, she was notably ambivalent about whether straightforward male identification was the goal. As she expressed, “I actually have no idea if I will ever go through any type of gender reassignment. It's gone through my head, but there's a lot involved and there's a lot of other issues, um, going on so that's, that's just not one that I'm concentrating on right now.”

In the meantime, Ellen enacted her own questioning process by pursuing other forms of body modification, and at the time of the 10-year interview was engaged in a long-term tattoo project which would eventually cover 75% of her body. For her, the tattoo was a way to take ownership of a body that, in her words, had never allowed her to feel “at home.” As she described, “I think if my body looked the way I wanted it to look, I would definitely be more at harmony with a lot more things, and that's probably the reason why I'm getting another tattoo that's gonna cover my body. A form of control. If I can't make my gender look the way I want it to look, at least I can control everything else about the way it looks.”

Ellen's tattoo had everything to do with her own personal experience of identity transformation and emergence, and replacing old scars (both psychological and physical, in her case) with powerful, healing images whose

symbolic meaning was contextualized within her own personal history.

The main part of the tattoo is actually of a bear coming out of my body—that is the illusion. And I’m sure that very much ties in with gender and how I view myself. The bear is totally bursting out of my body. which for me, represents re-born almost, is the one word that I use over and over again with this tattoo. And then, the landscape that is on my back is actually of a bear, just his head, and he’s rising out of a lake. And sometimes when I look at the face that he has, it very much reflects how I feel inside, and it reflects the merging. And so there is a lot of duality in my tattoo, there’s some gender issues with my tattoo, and actually, my next project that I’m working on is a face, and actually, half of it is going to be my face, and the other half is going to be morphing into a bear, and there is going to be some conversion from the bear that is basically seen as a symbol of strength, but also healing, it’s a powerful healing symbol.

Ellen’s experience demonstrates that motives for physical transformation are complex and multifaceted, and cannot be simplistically reduced to “replacing” one identity status with another. Just as theories of intersectionality emphasize the way in which different identity statuses co-create one another, resulting in new and emergent identity experiences (Stewart and McDermott 2004), in this context they help to clarify the way in which these women’s experiences of femaleness and maleness are not “competing” for psychological (and physical) primacy, but instead interact in unique, highly contextualized ways to create new, emergent senses of selfhood.

Links Between Gender and Desire

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of these women’s experiences of multiplicity regarding gender identity is the effect that it has had on their erotic attractions. Of course, the notion that gender identity and sexual desire are fundamentally linked has a long history: In the 19th and early 20th century, it was widely believed that same-sex sexuality was caused by gender “inversion,” as if the only way to be attracted to a woman was to be male, and the only way to be attracted to a man was to be female (Block 1909; Forel 1908; Greenspan and Campbell 1945; Krafft-Ebing 1882). In this formulation, all desire is fundamentally heterosexual desire. Accordingly, if you possess same-sex desires it is not because you are homosexual, but because your natural, heterosexual desires are trapped in the wrong gender identity.

Now, of course, the pendulum has shifted, and gender and sexual identity are considered to be orthogonal

constructs, as noted above. Yet the experiences of the women profiled here indicate that for many women who have undergone substantive processes of sexual questioning, it is impossible to completely disentangle one’s own sense of femaleness and maleness from one’s own understanding, experience, and interpretation of sexual desire for female and male partners.

Theories of intersectionality provide useful conceptual tools with which to make sense of this phenomenon. Whereas conventional understandings of gender identity and sexual identity presume that each has its own independent, essential basis, making it possible to analyze each separately from the other, intersectionality challenges this notion. According to the theoretical framework of intersectionality, no identity status is experienced—or can be meaningfully understood—in isolation. Hence, a sexual-minority woman’s experiences of same-sex and other-sex desires are always embedded within the social and interpersonal context of her gender presentation and gendered experience, and changes in one domain necessarily shape the other. The relationship between gender and desire is dynamic and reciprocal, relating not only to a woman’s own sense of gender, but her appraisal of how social others appraise and understand her.

It is not surprising, then, that 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. This is perhaps most evident in the case of Mark, whose attractions were predominantly directed toward women prior to the point at which he began to question his gender identity. But as Mark delved deeper into the masculine sides of his personality, and took on an increasingly masculine role in self-presentation and interpersonal interaction, he found himself unexpectedly attracted to men.

I started dating lots of people, of both genders. Or mixed gender. Yeah, so, it was really quite an eye-opening experience for myself because for so long I’d pretty much like lived in lesbian space. And now here I am in this very fluid gender space, and my sexuality kind of went the same way....I started looking at men again....I was extremely surprised. I guess guys would flirt with me, and I would be like, “Hey, I don’t mind that. That doesn’t turn me off or make me angry or whatever”....Having solidified my maleness, uh, I think has opened me up to a wider variety of experiences. Whereas before, for instance, my desire to be intimate with men, was almost none, unless they happened to be particularly feminine,

Clearly, Mark’s own experience of desire for men was, to some degree, constituted by his appraisal of men’s social location with respect to his own. Previously, men’s position

of power and privilege rendered their erotic reactions to Cynthia troublesome. Yet now that Cynthia identified as Mark, a man's desire was no longer experienced as threatening, and in fact represented a willingness to threaten conventional gender locations (because male desire for Mark was now same-sex desire). It is also notable that Cynthia/Mark experienced changes in the types of men she/he found attractive after taking on a masculine gender presentation, and these changes were directly related to issues of power and social location. Previously, Cynthia had found only "feminine" men attractive, but after identifying as Mark, he found a broader range of men—and masculinities—to be desirable. This suggests that the critical "trigger" for Cynthia/Mark's desire was never, in fact, some sort of stable, trait-like "degree" of femininity or masculinity, but instead a particular interpersonal dialectic regarding gender and—necessarily—social power. Mark noted that it was the traditional male-female heterosexual dynamic that he had always found distasteful, and which he had subverted—as Cynthia—by seeking "feminine" men. Now that he identified as Mark, all desires for men now fell outside the purview of the conventional male-female heterosexual dynamic, thereby opening up new erotic possibilities.

Notably, although Mark was increasingly experiencing a more fluid sense of gender and desire, this was not always the case for his potential sexual partners. Surprisingly, he had found that men tended to be more accepting of his fluid, transitional sense of gender than were women:

If a girl is straight, she's straight. And therefore she pretty much doesn't respond at all to my sexual overtures. Because all she sees is the female body. Masculinity is kind of like a moot point. And women who identify as lesbians are only attracted to women, and tend to be much more political about their labels, and a little more focused on identity politics....Most guys just don't care. It's not an issue for them. It's not that they have an opinion one way or another. It's a non-issue....Any male person I've interacted with on an intimate level has been extremely supportive of my gender identity. They're very respectful of however I choose to be addressed.

Mark's experiences of mutual respect, however, were not altogether accidental. He had learned to avoid becoming involved with heterosexually-identified men who desired Mark's female/male body, but could not validate his complicated, multiple gender presentation: "I find myself a lot less attracted to, um, straight guys, because ... well, I think that in that case it really does kind of conflict with my gender identity. You know, straight guys just don't tend to be attracted to gay men! And since they ... they cannot or will not acknowledge that part of me then, you know,

there's this self preserving part of me that's, like, I'm not going to put myself up for that kind of rejection."

Reflecting this dynamic, Mark found that over time, his attractions to men were largely focused on gay men and "tranny men." Hence, although he was still biologically female, he viewed his other-sex acts as reflecting a "gay male" part of himself. He might "be" female and the object of desire might "be" male, but he experienced the desire and the sexual dynamic as fundamentally homosexual rather than heterosexual. Perhaps because this form of desire permitted him to maintain more control than is typically afforded heterosexual women in their interactions with men, Mark felt much more comfortable with his attractions to—and relationships with—men than had been the case when he was a teenage girl.

Similar intersections among gender, desire, and power were voiced by the other three respondents, making it clear that our culture's complex interbraiding of gender and power fundamentally shapes individuals' experiences of erotic attractions. Thus, some of the new desires for men that women began experiencing as a function of their increasingly masculine gender presentations had to do with the distinct changes they began to experience in their relative power vis-à-vis men. Ellen, for example, noted that as a woman, she did not experience desires for men, because male-female interactions always placed her in a sexually submissive position. As she stated, "My sexuality is all about doing, I guess... and maybe in the back of my mind I think I can't do anything to [a man].... The way that I identify sex a lot of times is about—I don't want to say 'having the upper hand'—but a lot of it is control for me. I'm a very dominant partner, I guess....Being a top, I normally don't even take off my own clothes, and so maybe the hardest part of my sexuality is allowing someone to be physical with me completely." As Ellen began to question and explore the masculine sides of her gender identity, she found that adopting a male subject position put her in a framework where she could imagine satisfying sexual encounters with men because a male identity would allow her to maintain a dominant—or at least equal—position in the sexual interaction.

For Lori, too, maintaining a position of power within a sexual interaction was an important aspect of how she experienced male-identified sexual interactions with other men. Just as she was always the "top" in her interactions with women, she was also a consistent "top" with men: "I've had sex with men in the past year, year and a half where I've penetrated them anally but I've never had a boy penetrate me vaginally and that's not how I see my interaction with boys.... It's more about me being on top."

Such experiences highlight the value of attending to the complex, mutual, dynamic influences between gender identity and sexual identity, and their embeddedness in

specific social locations. Although it is common to think about desire as located “within” individuals, and expressed outwardly through behaviors and expression, these women’s experiences demonstrate that desire itself takes shape (and is reshaped) through direct engagement with different social partners across different social contexts. Just as no form of identity is inherently “primary,” neither is any specific form of “desire.” Changes in one domain necessarily change the terrain on which the other is experienced. Intersectionality provides a valuable framework for interpreting this phenomenon because of its emphasis on the nonadditive relations among different social categories, and the potential for intersections between these categories to create novel forms of experience. The new and unexpected forms of desire experienced by these respondents—especially in response to the changes in power relations that they perceived with male and female partners—might appear bizarre from traditional perspectives on sexual orientation which presume that same-sex and other-sex desires are stable, “internal,” trait-like experiences. Yet theories of intersectionality call into question the notion that *any* subjective experience is truly “internal,” and instead place primary analytical emphasis on how an individual’s (changing) social location reconstitutes such experiences. From this perspective, the fact that women’s radically altered social and interpersonal contexts gave rise to corresponding changes in their sexual desires becomes intelligible.

Giving Voice to Multiplicity

Each of the women profiled has made a certain amount of peace with her own experience of multiplicity in gender identity and sexual desire. Yet according to conventional norms regarding sexuality and gender, no such peace is truly possible. Rather, it is presumed that the most desirable, psychologically healthful state is to have a unitary, primary identity which provides not only a solid foundation for ego development, but a permanent social location that is understandable to the rest of the culture (reviewed in Diamond 2005b). The women profiled here have already experienced society’s relentless pressure toward categorization in the domain of sexual orientation and identity. All of these women experienced attractions to both men and women (even if they did not all identify as bisexual), and all of them were well-aware of the cultural unintelligibility of such attractions. In order to avoid being misunderstood, some of them actively censored themselves with friends or family members to present a more categorical portrait of their desire/behavior than was actually the case:

I actually don’t talk about men with my family, I talk about women. And they’ve been introduced to a

number of girls....I think part of it is I don’t wanna confuse them. (Lori).

Before I always felt very threatened by [my attractions to men] as if expressing my desire to be with a man would somehow negate my lesbianism....And there was a long period through my teenage years, my adolescence, when, like, all of my relationships with women were pretty much in the closet, but my heterosexual relationships with men were well supported by the community that I lived in, including my family. It gave me a really weird kind of view of sexuality and ... and ... and it tainted, to a certain degree, my experiences of sex with both of those genders. (Cynthia/Mark)

Our culture’s difficulty in making sense of individuals with multiple identities, multiple subjectivities, and multiple social locations is manifested in the lack of language to describe such experiences. As noted earlier, the word “transgender” came into use because many individuals with fluid experiences of gender felt that this phenomenon was not well-described by discussions of transsexuality, which instead emphasize experiences of conflict between psychological gender and biological sex.

Similarly, each of the women profiled here expressed dissatisfaction with the term “bisexual,” feeling that it failed to adequately convey the open, expansive way in which she experienced her sexual desires. Some found it ironic that although the phenomenon of bisexual attraction posed a challenge to categorical models of sexual orientation, slapping the “bisexual” label on this phenomenon seemed to be an attempt to revise and reinvigorate such categorical models. Why is it so difficult, some wondered, to get beyond these categories? Some noted that their main problem with the word bisexual was that it placed so much emphasis on gender as a category of desire. For some, like Lori and Karen, their experiences as transgendered women distinctly influenced their views on this issue. As Lori indicated,

Bisexual relies on two genders, and I don’t really believe in that anymore... it makes it very problematic. Yeah. I mean, yeah, for the sake of the whole homosexual-heterosexual-bisexual-whatever scale, it’s bisexual, in my mind. But in a sense of believing in two genders and the whole box theory of categorization of gender, doesn’t really fly for me anymore....

Lori’s solution was to adopt alternative labels, such as “queer,” “pansexual,” or “omnisexual,” and her preference for these terms was directly influenced by her increasing familiarity and experience with the transgender community, and with the prospect of “looking past the two genders” and acknowledging the possible existence of more than two

genders. She was acutely aware of the fact that all conventional notions of gender and sexual orientation started to break down in the context of intersectional gender identities: “What if I’m trans and I’m dating someone, what does that make me? Or what if I’m dating someone who is trans and doesn’t identify as male or female? What is my sexual orientation? So I think [identifying as pansexual/omnisexual] is more about saying it doesn’t really make a difference what their gender is, it’s more about who you’re attracted to.”

Mark, too, expressed dissatisfaction with the range of labels available. Although he had previously identified as lesbian, that term is no longer applicable given his masculine-leaning gender identity. But bisexual, too, seemed insufficient. Like Lori, he had gravitated toward the use of the term “queer,” but was generally ambivalent about the prospect of identity labeling altogether. In his opinion, the only real point of labeling was to “find others like yourself.” Yet even this was problematic given that “nobody ever agrees on exactly what a label means, there’s never ever been a consensus you know, as to who qualifies as queer or not.”

This ambivalence about labeling was also reflected in the way that these women dealt with “the pronoun thing.” In other words, did they think of themselves—and prefer to be called—“he,” or “she?” None of the four respondents expressed a preference for a single pronoun usage across all contexts. Rather, each reported using both “he” and “she” in different contexts. Lori, in particular, reported that she had actually come to enjoy “messing with” people’s conventional notions of gender by retaining her female name in spite of her masculine gender presentation:

I do want to mess with people to help them think about why they need to shove people in these categories and for those who don’t fit we’re going to torture them. And so I’m used to someone going, “what’s up with that?”, and kind of going through that educational process and explaining things.

She had also noticed that individuals’ decisions about whether to call her “she” or “he” had more to do with their own subject positions: “when I’m around trans people they’ll call me ‘he’....they are like ‘it’s a boy so we have to be respectful.’... which is fine I take it as a compliment on some level depending who it comes from. And then when I’m around like you know dykes then they’re going to ‘she’ me because you know ‘she’s a butch dyke.’ So it doesn’t really make a difference to me a lot of it is the person who is saying it.”

Mark, like Lori, did not consistently think of herself as either “she” or “he,” although many people referred to him as “he” because of his male-identified name. According to Mark, settling on a single gender identity felt like yet

another way of confining and categorizing something that inherently resisted categorization:

I’m not even going to tackle the pronoun thing because that’s too confusing. And I find that “none of the above” pretty much is how I tend to label myself, only because I hate boxes. Hate them. Hate them. And I hate this whole like dichotomy paradigm that our society tends to revolve around. It’s black—it’s white/it’s male—it’s female/it’s straight—it’s gay/whatever. None of those fit.

The difficulty that society continues to experience in giving voice to complex, multiple, fluid experiences of gender is exemplified by the difficulty that we encountered in choosing and using pronouns for Mark. In deference to his own unwillingness to consistently use “she” or “he,” we initially experimented with randomly alternating among “he,” “she,” “her,” and “him.” Yet it soon became apparent that to readers (and writers!) accustomed to consistency in linguistic gender-markers, this proved both confusing and distracting. We therefore settled on consistently male pronouns for Mark, despite our own ambivalence about the erasure of multiplicity that this necessarily entails.

Conclusion

The struggles recounted by the women profiled here in reaching awareness and acceptance of the multiplicity in their gender status demonstrate the importance of fostering an increased appreciation for intersectional gender and sexual identities. Continued longitudinal observation is obviously critical for understanding how the experiences of multiplicity that we have emphasized play out over time, and the degree to which theories of intersectionality can, in fact, make substantive contributions to their interpretation. It is also critical to examine how the dynamics described in this article manifest themselves with younger cohorts of transgendered individuals, who have greater awareness and appreciation for social constructionist perspectives on gender than do older generations. For example, Lori noted that in her own activism and advocacy work with transgender youth, she was continually amazed at how the youngest generation of transgender teenagers rejected many of the categorical notions of gender and sexual identity that Lori was used to thinking about when she first came out:

So many of my kids were like “I don’t identify.” And I said “With nothing?” And they’re like “It’s not important.” It’s fascinating because I came from a culture where to identify was huge... It’s your history, your family... I think what’s happening now with youth, for example with queer youth—which completely blows me away—is their ability to not only

transcend the categories, but create language. I just remember one of the kids I know, his dad's a male-to-female transsexual, so it's like next generation, right? He identified as "gender queer," and he's just telling me about what a pain his dad is, the transsexual, because his dad says "Dude, just pick a box," and he's like "I don't want a box." And it is just fascinating that even among transsexual men you still can have that "pick a box" mentality. But here you have a child going "Hmm, no. Just doesn't work for me. I'm queer, and that's really who I am."

Clearly, much has changed, and continues to change. The last 20 years have witnessed incredible strides with respect to conceptualizations of sexual identity and orientation. Multiplicity and fluidity in patterns of sexual attraction—which were long considered "impossible," "invalid" or "transitional"—are now widely acknowledged and even celebrated by both activists and social scientists, and have become one of the most exciting and productive areas of social scientific inquiry into sexuality (as exemplified by Rust 2000c).

Multiplicity in gender identification deserves similar theoretical attention, and the framework of intersectionality provides a valuable starting point for such analyses via its dismantling of the historical emphasis on "primary," "core" loci of identity. This does not necessarily suggest that we are—or should be—headed toward a future in which there are *no* terms or concepts to represent gender and/or sexual identities. As Mark pointed out, identity labels play a potentially important role in helping individuals to "find others like yourself," to build alliances around salient or personally significant aspects of one's experience and identification. A greater appreciation of intersectionality, however, helps to guard against the fallacy that these identities—once claimed and named—function as stable and essential "types" of selfhood. From the perspective of intersectionality, adopting and proudly embracing an identity is fully compatible with a critical appreciation for the fact that these identities are always moving targets, reforming and reshaping themselves across diverse social and interpersonal contexts.

Along these lines, perhaps the greatest potential contribution of intersectionality to our understanding of transgender experience is the way in which it recasts and reconstitutes the phenomenon of *change*. Traditional perspectives on transgender experience examine change from the perspective of *transition*: men transitioning to a new (and purportedly permanent) female identity, or women transitioning to a new (and purportedly permanent male identity). Yet the women described in this article described ongoing transitions and transformations as they moved in and out of different relationships and social

contexts. Change, for these women, was an ever-present possibility rather than a temporary phase. Theories of intersectionality help to make sense of this experience by emphasizing how *all* subjective experiences of selfhood are continually transformed, reenacted, and renegotiated as a function of shifting landscapes of social context. From an intersectionality perspective, instead of representing a woman's journey to transgender identification as having a distinct beginning, middle, and end, we should treat each successive stage of her life course, each of her (fluid) social locations, and each of her intimate relationships as continually interacting with her experiences of gender and desire to produce multiple, dynamic senses of self over time. Theoretical models which specifically focus on explaining such complexity, fluidity, and multiplicity in sexual and gender identification can lead to more productive and progressive ways of modeling female identity over the life course.

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