

“I’m in Transition Too”: Sexual Identity Renegotiation in Sexual-Minority Women’s Relationships with Transsexual Men

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ABSTRACT. This qualitative research study examines the experiences of sexual-minority women in relationships with transsexual men (N = 20) using grounded theory analysis. This paper reports data on the core theme of “Sexual Identity Renegotiation” and reflects the process by which women manage their sexual-minority identities in the shifting social context of their partners taking on increasingly male signifiers. The research findings suggest that conflicts and strategies surrounding identity depend on the investment in, and the nature of, a sexual-minority identity. These struggles are also affected by the degree of visibility as a sexual-minority, influenced by both gender expression and the racialized experience of that expression. Clinical applications for work with this population are proposed.

KEYWORDS. Sexual orientation, sexual-minority, gender identity, female-to-male, transsexual

Social science research on transsexuality is growing, largely in feminist, and sexuality and gender programs. The most prominent stream of this work appears to be focused on transsexuality as evidence of the assumptions about sex as a stable category, and of the ways in which gender is “performed” (Green, 2006, critiques Hausman and Halberstam for these reasons; Namaste, 2000, cites Butler and Garber as popular examples of this kind of scholarship). Namaste (2000) argues that many academics are engaged with trans issues, and yet are producing knowledge that is both far removed from and of little relevance to the realities of trans people. She points to some of the more urgent and under-

investigated concerns of trans people such as how to secure access to health care and how to establish and/or maintain romantic partnerships. Research on the ways in which transition affects transsexuals’ significant others continues to be sparse (Lesser, 1999; Wren, 2002).

Within the transsexual literature across disciplines, there is a historical bias in favor of male-to-female transsexuals (MTFs) compared with female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs). This asymmetry has been well noted by a number of researchers (Cromwell, 1999; Devor, 1997; Lothstein, 1983; Pauly, 1974a; Tasker & Wren, 2002). By examining relationship issues with a focus on partners of FTMs, this research

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addresses these general critiques, and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of sexual identifications. Additionally, its standpoint is towards transsexuality as a core identity and it uses a community-based (i.e., non-clinical) sample of partners. In so doing, this study challenges and counters a history of the ways in which transsexuality and the partners of trans people have often been rendered “deviant” in the psychological and psychiatric literature.

The psychological and psychiatric literature has positioned transsexuality in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (the DSM—American Psychiatric Association, 2000) as “Gender Identity Disorder,” a contentious issue (e.g., see 2005 *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, 17 (3–4)). There is a significant psychological literature focused on the question of possible etiology; psychoanalytic and social learning theories, and biological studies have been considered (comprehensively summarized in Lev, 2004). No theory is conclusive, but these lines of inquiry generally share the assumption that transsexuality is the result of some “dysfunction” or “defect.” While these controversies pertaining to conceptualization continue, there appears to be remarkable professional consensus about the treatment of choice, sex reassignment surgery (SRS—see WPATH, 2001, for the most recent Standards of Care practices). There is a substantive literature pertaining to before and after outcome measures of SRS, most of which point to greater psychological and social functioning for those undergoing these procedures (see Pfäfflin and Junge, 1992, for an extensive review of such studies). Often included in these measures are assessments of sexological outcomes, of which partnership patterns may be seen as a meaningful indicator of success (Lawrence, 2005).

One recurring theme in the literature comparing trans men and women is the observation that significantly more females-to-males than males-to-females have stable, enduring romantic relationships (Green, 1974; Kockott & Fahrner, 1988; Tully, 1992). Lewins’ (2002) review of this literature and his own interview study argue for the influence of two factors that contribute to the greater relationship stability among FTMs: that of having a woman partner,¹ and that

of FTMs’ pre-transition gender socialization as women heightening their relational capacity and affective orientation. It is more common for stable partnerships to be formed post-transition; few partnerships survive the transition (Devor, 1997). We know little about how the transition process affects existing intimate relationships.

Hines (2006) investigated the issue of gender transition on partnering relationships through the use of case studies. She found multiple shifts and negotiations in intimacy. The first possibility was reconfigured partnerships in which couples remained together and emotional care practices were emphasized over sexual desire practices. The second possibility was that the relationship dissolved over “irreconcilable shifts in partnering roles” (p. 360), but where intimacy continued in the form of friendship. The third possibility was where transsexuals formed new romantic relationships in their post-transition lives. These different relational pathways have been found in other studies. Alexander (2003) argues that the more rigid and central gender roles were in the relationship before transition, the more likely the couple were to separate. Buxton (2007) also found the disclosure of transsexuality for heterosexual spouses raised questions about the continuation of the marriage. Most ended in separation and spouses struggled with the loss of social status and acceptance associated with their marriage.

Hines (2006, p. 368) suggests “the meanings and experiences of sexual identity and sexual desire and practice” shifted in relation to transition. Gurvich (1991) studied the impact feminization had on the wives of MTFs (N = 10). Although many wives continued to express feelings of love towards their partners, several of Gurvich’s interviewees discussed a loss of sexual interest in their partners and a deliberate end to sexual contact. Buxton (2006, p. 321) observed that the minority of mixed-orientation relationships (i.e., relationships in which one partner is heterosexual and one partner is not) continue in different configurations including “monogamy, open marriage, or closed loop (the GLBT spouse has a relationship with another married person of the same gender).” Many of the questions arising for partners across these studies appeared to revolve around sexual orientation.

Partners often struggled with whether transition affected their own sexual orientation, as well as how others perceived their sexual orientation (Alexander, 2003; Buxton, 2007; Israel, 2005).

There is some literature specifically addressing the partners of female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs), though most focuses on relationships that have been formed post-transition. The historical assumption that all FTMs are heterosexual² (Pauly, 1974b; Steiner, 1985) has been disproven (Blanchard, Clemmensen, & Steiner, 1987; Chivers & Bailey, 2000; Lothstein, 1983; Pauly, 1992). Despite this finding, many FTMs do identify as heterosexual. There has been an accompanying assumption that women dating FTMs are only heterosexual (Cromwell, 1999). While this is often true, Steiner and Bernstein's (1981) study and choice of language reflects the illegitimacy of, and suspicion of pathology in, heterosexual women choosing a trans man as a romantic and sexual partner: "What type of woman 'falls in love' with a female-to-male transsexual? Why would a woman choose a 'penis-less man'?" (p. 178). They report the couples (N = 21) as being conventional in their values and as adopting stereotyped gender roles. The authors describe the women as emotionally stable and the relationships as long-term and satisfying. They also suppose that the transsexual men may be a "safe compromise" for these women as "protection against further pregnancies or a defence against involvement with biological males with whom they have had unsatisfactory emotional [or traumatic] experiences in the past" (Steiner & Bernstein, 1981, p. 181). Pauly (1974a) also found that most relationships between FTMs and heterosexual women (N = 59) were stable and long-lasting and that in many cases the revelation of transsexuality did not break up the relationship. Of the women partners, "none was grossly psychotic, particularly unusual, or inappropriate in any way" (Pauly, 1974a, p. 504). These women had no history of same-sex experiences, had past pleasurable heterosexual experiences, and responded to their lover as heterosexual. Even so, Pauly (1974a, p. 504) felt these observations might belie "underlying passivity, dependence, or homosexual propensity." Huxley, Kenna, and Brandon's (1981a) study of paired

transsexuals (N = 35, including 26 MTFs and 9 FTMs) revealed fairly stable and committed relationships, many of which were formed post-transition. They concluded the success of these relationships could be attributed to a "folie-a-deux," a "shared delusion" that the transsexual was of the other sex (Huxley, Kenna, & Brandon, 1981b). The seeming disconnect between the empirical data on the nature of the relationships and the interpretation of this data may have to do with the psychiatrization of transsexuality itself and the social construction of transsexual bodies as inadequate (Cromwell, 1999; Lev, 2004). If the transsexual is considered a mentally and physically "defective" subject, then the transsexual's partner is inherently stigmatized and rendered suspect.

The more recent literature makes different assumptions. Fleming, MacGowan, and Costos' (1985) study on dyadic adjustment demonstrated the sexual satisfaction of spouses. When compared to a control group of non-transsexual spouses, spouses of FTMs (N = 22) reported no differences on measures of relationship satisfaction, cohesion, consensus and affection. The sample of FTMs and their spouses also did not differ significantly from control groups on measures of ego development (Fleming, Costos, & MacGowan, 1984). A similar matched comparison study by Kins, Hoebeke, Heylens, Rubens, and De Cuypere (2008) found no significant differences in relational or sexual satisfaction between women partnered with FTMs and women partnered with non-transsexual men (N = 9 pairs). They found a more "pronounced sex-typed partner relationship" among the group paired with a trans man (p. 429).

This body of literature brings visibility to transsexuals' relationships and marks some conceptual ground upon which to begin the development of a deeper and empirically-based discourse on the topic. However, perspectives of partners are still mostly missing from this body of work. Additionally, this literature does not adequately address the experiences of sexual-minority women (i.e., women whose sexual orientation is non-heterosexual) whose partners transition FTM and about whom there is almost nothing published.³ This is a critical oversight because the current literature focuses on

a same-orientation dyad—that is, that both the woman and FTM identify as heterosexual. In cases where sexual-minority women are paired with FTMs, this most often reflects a mixed-orientation dyad (where the woman partner identifies as non-heterosexual, and the transsexual man as heterosexual). This raises questions about what this difference means with respect to sexual identity within the dyad. These questions have been assumed to be central in the traditional literature but with close scrutiny do not appear to be true.

The important reasons for this research are two-fold. First, there is some evidence to suggest that a sexual-minority woman/FTM pairing is an increasingly common phenomenon. Cromwell (1999), Devor (1997) and Rubin (2003) report that a significant number of FTMs have had “lesbian careers.” As increasing numbers of these FTMs decide to transition, Califia (1997, p. 216) argues that there may be an “undocumented state of crisis” among their partners. Second, there is good reason to believe that the experiences of sexual-minority women would be significantly different from those of the heterosexual partners of FTMs represented in the existing literature. This has to do with the particular ways in which queer identity and community are organized (Nardi, 1999). People often build communities around identity. Community tends to be particularly exclusive, and of strong personal significance, when organized around a marginalized identity (Nardi, 1999; Weinstock, 1998). The sexual-minority community provides a shelter from the homophobia that bonds people together and also provides narratives and models for the social reproduction of queer selves (Nardi, 1999).

Partially because of this organization, trans inclusion/exclusion has historically been a divisive issue in queer women’s communities (Nataf, 1996). These ideological and value-laden debates are complex and their delineation is beyond the scope of this paper (see Scott-Dixon, 2006). Briefly, and thus necessarily oversimplified here, the debates involving FTMs with “lesbian careers” specifically are most often two-fold. The first debate takes up the question of whether or not FTMs continue to be welcome and belong in queer women’s spaces when they identify as

men. The second debate takes up the question of trans men’s allegiance. One side of this debate is the perception that they have “betrayed” and “abandoned” the queer community through transition and the assumed acquisition of “male and/or heterosexual privilege.” The other side of the debate argues that trans struggles with an oppressive sex/gender system are aligned with and enhance queer struggles (Cameron, 2000; Cook-Daniels, 1999; Scanlon, 2006; simpkins, 2006).

Without taking up these debates, how communities respond to FTM transition can have important ramifications for an FTM’s queer woman partner in terms of her sexual-minority “membership” and support network. Lev (2004, p. 306) has suggested that many transsexuals who previously identified as gay or lesbian have been exiled from those communities, and “their partners are often exiled with them.”

Preliminary work in this area suggests lesbian-identified partners of FTMs may experience identity confusion/crisis, feelings of loss, and doubts about whether they will continue to find their partners desirable. They may also face community rejection and social stigma (Cook-Daniels, 1998). Lev (2004, p. 279) argues “being perceived as heterosexual, and being sexually with a man, is deeply troubling” to many lesbians’ sense of identity, and sense of belonging to a political community. McCauley and Ehrhardt (1980) also note that lesbians as a group hold varied attitudes towards men as a group.

Many of these same themes are echoed by Mitchell (2001), who has mapped out the various ways in which women partners of FTMs communicate their sexual identities in response to their partner’s transition. While some women retain their identity as a lesbian, other women redefine themselves as bisexual, queer, transsexual,⁴ heterosexual, or choose to forgo identification altogether. Nyamora’s (2004) study of twelve femme⁵-identified queer women whose partners had or were transitioning FTM found that most participants struggled with their visibility and authenticity as lesbians. Supportive communities and positive relationships enhanced women’s sense of femme identity, and this support was especially evident in communities of color. Furthermore, Nyamora (2004) found that

positive experiences of transition were associated with femmes who had greater flexibility in their sexual orientation and good communication with their partners. For the most part, however, very little is known about the experience of partner transition for sexual-minority women and the core issues disclosure and transition may elicit.

The present article is drawn from a study of romantic relationships established prior to the realization or disclosure of FTM transsexuality. In order to best capture issues of process in identity development and transition, interviews with participants explored multiple domains and how these changed as a result of transition. Examples of areas probed included conceptualizations of sexual and gender identity, relational and sexual dynamics, partners' sense of inclusiveness in community, external stressors and sources of resiliency. Of these areas, issues of sexual identity renegotiation emerged as a core theme.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty participants were recruited through personal contacts and local and international listserves for partners of trans men. The recruitment advertisement called for female participants who were currently or were once partnered with a female-bodied person who disclosed being transsexual during their relationship. Prior to their partner's "coming out," all participants would have been in what they understood to be a "same-sex" relationship. At the time of their partner's "coming out," they had to have identified as non-heterosexual to participate in the study. The recruitment material explicitly stated they did not have to currently identify in the same way, and women now identifying as heterosexual were specifically named as welcome to participate. An additional eligibility criteria set to elicit particular issues of role transformation was that partners had to have transitioned publicly at least in name and pronoun.⁶

At the time of the interviews, 10 of the 20 participants were in active partnerships with the FTM of whom they were speaking (relationship

length varied from 1 to 9 years, with a median of 4 years). Ten individuals discussed past relationships (of a 1.5 to 5 year duration, with a median of 2.5 years). Eleven of their partners had undergone some transition-related medical intervention(s) and most of the others were actively planning to do so. Participants were Caucasian ($n = 14$), South Asian, Black and First Nations. One participant no longer identified as a woman, but as FTM himself.

Participants ranged in age from their mid 20s to 40s (median age of 31). Three participants were actively parenting. All participants had some post-secondary education. Class status varied among participants, half of whom described themselves as being poor, low-income, working or criminal⁷ class, and half of whom identified themselves on a middle-class spectrum. Participants were asked about the words they used to describe their sexuality both at the time of their partner's disclosure, and at the time of interview. At the time of their partner's disclosure, 12 participants identified themselves as primarily being a 'dyke', 'lesbian', or 'gay', and 5 identified as 'queer'. At the time of interview, only 4 of the 20 participants identified themselves primarily as a "dyke," "gay," or "lesbian" and 12 identified as "queer." There were also many more complicated and qualified identity responses (e.g., "bi dyke femme") that cannot be fully accounted for here. At the time of the interview, none of the participants identified as heterosexual.

Procedure

Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted between February 2003 and April 2004. A total of 22 questions (with additional probes) were asked regarding 3 major concepts: Disclosure of transsexuality, experiences related to transition, and community support and affiliation. Most relevant to the phenomenon of sexual identity renegotiation were the questions under the section of the interview related to "transition." The interview explored ways in which participants' partners had decided to transition and if they had, the ways in which they had supported the transition. Participants were asked whether there had been shifts in thinking or feelings

towards their partner's transition over time and the nature of these shifts. Further "changes over time" questions included their relationship, their sexual identity, and sex with their partner. If their identity was different from that of their partner, participants were asked how the couple negotiated these different identities. These negotiations included identifying strategies, agreements, and the degree to which they were successful and/or satisfying.

Participants from Canada and the United States were interviewed in person (11), or on the phone (6), or via email (3). Interviews lasted from an hour and fifteen minutes to over two hours, with most interviews being of approximately two hours duration. All interviews were recorded, transcribed by the author, and sent back to participants for comments. Three participants wrote back regarding additional identifying information to be deleted and/or altered. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory methodology, an inductive qualitative approach generating theory from data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative research is especially well-suited to new areas of study (Flick, 1998), and allows researchers to build a "complex, holistic picture . . . of a social or human problem" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). A grounded theory approach helps produce results that are relevant and meaningful to communities because it is both grounded in and accountable to the data (Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988).

Unlike many other kinds of research, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously. When themes begin emerging, participants are chosen with an eye to generating diversity within the category, and to "test" its inclusiveness and relevance (i.e., "theoretical sampling"). At the point at which new interviews do not add substantially to the current explanation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the data is said to have reached "theoretical saturation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Typical saturation estimates range from 12 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to 20–30 interviews (Creswell,

1998). The sample was kept to 20 as no new themes of significance appeared at that point.

In the analysis, text is divided into meaning units, and the units are subject to open coding. This coding is refined in the context of "the constant comparative method," the core analytic strategy requiring careful and repeated comparison of text and categories across transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The construction of higher-order codes (i.e., categories) to cluster and subsume first-order codes requires increasing abstraction and interpretation on the part of the analyst. The repetition of an issue that participants define as significant (i.e., a "phenomenon") and its emotional saliency functions as a guide to this process. An important aspect of the analysis is in elaborating the *properties* (i.e., specific characteristics) and *dimensions* (i.e., the range along which properties vary) of central ideas in the data. Formulating and differentiating patterns in the data is also referred to as "axial coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory is a methodology that helps map relationships or patterns between categories present in the data. Rather than make any claims about cause and effect relationships, phenomena are considered multi-determined and the process highlights the "factors operating in various combinations to create a context" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 130) that may make a particular phenomenon more likely to occur with particular people, at certain times, and under specific conditions. These interrelationships are concretized and organized into a theoretical explanatory scheme.

The model outlines conditions which are nested in various ecologies related to the degree of systemic and immediate influence on a phenomenon. What grounded theory calls the phenomenon's *causal* conditions are meant to address macro "happenings"; those that are embedded in the social structure or may be significant cultural events that influence the phenomenon. *Intervening* conditions are factors that "mitigate or otherwise alter the impact of causal conditions on phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 131). *Contextual* factors are "specific sets of conditions that intersect dimensionally at this time and place to create the set of circumstances to which persons respond through

actions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 132). These various levels of conditions influence people’s use of *strategies*, that is, the resulting responses or tactics used to handle or resolve the issues encountered in the renegotiation process.

Of the many categories, “sexual identity renegotiation” emerged from the analysis as the central phenomenon. It was named as the most substantive and affect-laden issue for almost all of the interviewees. The category was elaborated through the detailing of its properties and dimensions and the relationships among them.

RESULTS

Sexual identity is multifaceted—it has personal, relational, and social aspects. Regardless of how participants altered or did not alter their personal identity, how *others* read them began to change. For example, participant Cathy said:

I still identify as lesbian, but— to *myself* I identify as lesbian. To the world, I’ve become identified by the way I *look*, as heterosexual, or bisexual at best but that doesn’t represent me, and I can’t out him, so . . . I’m in a strange and uncomfortable place. . .

These “strange and uncomfortable” identity conflicts required negotiation on the same personal, relational, and social levels.

A significant number of the participants, 9 out of 20, shifted the way in which they described their sexual identity in response to their FTM partners, a number of whom began identifying as straight men. All participants identified as being somewhere on a spectrum of queer sexuality, both before their partner came out as FTM and afterwards, although *how* participants labeled themselves often shifted throughout the process. This was evidenced in the reporting of sexual identity labels, a majority of which swung noticeably from a greater affiliation with essentialist labels (e.g., “dyke,” “lesbian,” or “gay”) to a greater affiliation with imprecise and qualified identity labels (e.g., “queer,” “bi dyke femme”).

Sexual Identity Renegotiation: Causal Conditions

A partner’s transition often amplifies identity issues for sexual-minority women partners. Many of the participants were feminine lesbians and struggled with the erosion of their identity as queer. What is at stake is clearly articulated by participant Sherisse:

I felt like I spent however long I was out insisting, “Yes, I *really* am a lesbian”—going to lesbian clubs and being stopped at the door and the butch bouncer saying, “You know this is a lesbian bar, right?” and I would try and laugh it off and go, “Yeah, well I sure hope so,” wink at her and keep going, but it really pissed me off because . . . they always saw me as “not one of them” *so* I spent so much time fighting that . . . to then erase my whole identity just felt awful.

Comments by participants reveal the contentious status of bisexual women in lesbian and queer women’s culture. Further to some participants’ subjective sense of not identifying with bisexuality, the *political* importance of not being “read” as bisexual as a condition of community belongingness was evident. Said Jean, “I don’t think that my identity has changed, but I think that how others perceive me has changed. I worry that I will be taken for straight or an experimental bisexual by people.” Similarly, Lynn reported:

People started asking *me* about my identity and challenging me and *that* was really upsetting for me. I know some people started saying, “Well are you bisexual?” and I was so angry . . . I went through a huge struggle to come out as a lesbian and figuring out “okay I *am* a lesbian and I’m clear on that” and it’s like “*my* identity isn’t up for question here.” That really pissed me off when people thought that they could re-identify me.

Sexual Identity Renegotiation: Mediating Conditions

The degree to which a woman must renegotiate her sexual identity and how distressing this disruption is, if it is, depends on multiple conditions. A precondition of this renegotiation work was the degree to which participants fully understood the nature of their partner's identity as male. Assuming this, the most salient conditions were the nature of a participant's sexual-minority identity and her investment in it. Generally, the more one embodied and was invested in an identity that did not include a male partner, the more conflicted or challenging the renegotiation process. Increased investment was associated with struggle to arrive at that identity, fewer additional self-identities, and number of years of identification. Increased investment was also associated with increased level of political and community involvement, and greater status within the community. Level of challenge was affected by the nature of that community and how open its system was to difference and fluidity. This openness may be affected by geography, where participants reported greater openness in larger urban spaces, and by age cohort, where participants reported greater separatist politics in older cohorts.

In the early aftermath of their partner's disclosure as transsexual, there was a small subset of lesbian participants for whom the disclosure made little or no emotional impact. In retrospect, they discussed this period as one in which they were "in denial," or did not fully understand what "transsexual" meant (e.g., imagining it to exist on a continuum of "butch"). Tracy says she initially "dealt with it by just not dealing with it." For a time, she convinced herself that her partner was going through a "phase" and "not really trans." Julie remembered:

I guess in a way I was . . . making the details [of his feelings] fit into a lesbian [framework] and then maybe a year ago, he wrote me a really well thought out letter saying that he really loved me but needed to . . . [transition]. It took me a year or two years of exposure and of hearing the details, but kind of down-playing them, to

finally get to that point . . . but I guess that actual moment was the most clear point that I had that I couldn't avoid or down-play anymore, right? We were going to break up if it wasn't okay with me, if I wasn't going to accept his identity.

A precondition of sexual identity renegotiations is a full appreciation of the partner's identity as male. Once participants had this appreciation, the work of negotiating this difference could begin.

The multiple conditions that affect sexual identity renegotiation are considered in the differences between the following participants. Cathy was heavily invested in a lesbian identity after having devoted herself to years of gay rights activism and cultivated a community exclusive of women. "I'd been out as a lesbian for over 25 years and it's been my *life*." Ann, who grew up in a strict religious home where she sustained relational losses because of her identity, said, "I had to work really hard to be comfortable [laughs] with [a lesbian identity] in the first place." Dido said the prospect of calling her partner her boyfriend was daunting. "I haven't come out for nothing *either*, you know?" The less these factors were so, the easier the renegotiation process appeared to be. Julie was somewhat less attached to a label, "I came out as a lesbian fairly late anyways." For the women who identified as bisexual, their partner's transition seemed to be more easily accommodated. Collette remembered, "People asked me a lot whether my sexual identity was challenged by [transition], but I'm bisexual and to be honest, it wasn't really . . . I didn't leap over something huge . . . it wasn't threatening or unsettling." Similarly, Aisha supposed her relatively easy adjustment "boiled down to being bisexual." For her, "sex-specific desires" were "incomprehensible . . . It makes sense to me that I would end up with someone who's trans because those aren't relevant differences to me, erotically."

The woman's degree of visibility as a sexual-minority was a salient *contextual* factor, which was influenced by her own gender presentation, and her partner's stage of transition and his ability to be successfully read as male. This is implied by Ann, who acknowledged she required

fewer strategies for her own visibility “cause he doesn’t pass right now at all—and so the more he passes, how different is that going to be?” Mistress found as her partner began to pass as male with greater regularity, “people would read us as straight—I figured that—and so we had problems with that, *or* then we’d go out some place and get read as dykes—I would love that, he would hate that . . .” [Interviewer: While it would validate and affirm *your* identity. . .] Mistress: “Yeah, yeah, it *wouldn’t* for him. It’s so emotional.”

Many participants also described accompanying losses and gains related to visibility in the renegotiation process. Sherisse described the sadness she felt in the loss of solidarity and recognition within the lesbian community. A poignant example of this was the story of a same-sex couple dropping hands as they passed Sherisse and her partner on the street. This couple’s obvious fear of a homophobic reaction from them devastated Sherisse. For some women with straight-identified partners, this renegotiation has meant developing and incorporating ties to the straight community. Aileen had to rethink the nature of interactions like these and initially found herself at a loss socially. There was an unease in the lack of shared social references, in looking “the same” but being and feeling “different” from heterosexual couples. In “re-historicizing” their life to protect her partner’s identity, Aileen struggled with the loss of “stories” of significant events in their long-standing relationship. Both Collette and Cathy described some relief in this shift towards appearing heterosexual. They described not having to be as conscientious about scanning their environment for potential homophobic threats, and enjoying some amount of heterosexual privilege.

Strategies for Sexual Identity Renegotiation

Participants talked about numerous strategies for sexual identity renegotiation in the context of a transitioning partner. Their social strategies included the maintenance of queer visibility through strategic disclosure and continued participation in queer community and practices. Their meaning-making strategies relied on dis-

courses of independence or romance, as well as changing what labels they used to describe their sexual identities.

“*Strategic disclosure*” involved a negotiated naming of one’s partner as “she” in public, outing a partner as trans, or otherwise asserting a queer identity when one was rendered invisible. Said Jean:

At first, he wanted to . . . be referred to as . . . just a regular straight guy. This position has changed though, as I have let him in on my concerns about being constantly read as straight. We were talking about his passing and he told me that when people “ma’am” or “she” him, it just kills him, and I explained that I feel the same way as being thought of as straight. He really got that and so his position is that whenever I need to “out” him as a trans guy to keep my identity intact, I should feel free to do so. I think that helped the visibility/invisibility thing tremendously.

Another example of this came from Mistress, who said, “I never, ever wanted to be read as straight. And so that meant that if I was at a doctor’s appointment or somewhere else, I would name my partner as ‘she.’” As a Black femme, she felt her queerness was read by other Black people and not by White people, who consistently read her as straight. Being able to be visible carried particular importance for Mistress because of the interactions of gender, race, and sexuality:

What I was worried about was coming out with our relationship and I mean coming out as dating a white person, a woman of color with a white guy, which is just *really* a re-signifying of the Black woman with the straight white man, you know?

Another strategy practiced by participants was “*continued participation in queer spaces and practices*.” Some participants continued to attend queer community events such as dances and Pride. Said Cher, “I’ve been really clear I’m always going to be part of the queer community.” Despite a desire to, not all participants felt

able to continue to inhabit queer space. Cathy self-identified as lesbian and belonged to an outdoor group explicitly for lesbians. Her fears of judgment and exclusion if others were to discover she was “dating a man” led her to leave the group. For one participant, Jamie, “continued practice” meant the renegotiation of her relationship with her FTM partner as one that was non-monogamous so that she could continue to have women as sexual and emotional partners.

Participants’ private meaning-making strategies involved an “intellectual reconciliation” of their identities with the situation. One discourse relied on the concept of independence. Sandi held a strong belief that “my identity doesn’t necessarily reflect my partner’s identity.” She traded an “either/or” thinking for a “both/and” thinking that allowed room for their different identities to co-exist. Another discourse in the renegotiation process drew on notions of romance. Participants described the love for their partner and the relationship benefits outweighing the costs of the identity conflicts and issues. This was best illustrated by Jean, who explained:

Life has thrown me a lot of curveballs and I know good people when I see them. I think this is what has helped me to see that I love this person and that all the other stuff can be worked through.

The last common meaning-making strategy was the widespread adoption of “queer” as an identity marker, perhaps because it captures the variance and imprecision that some may argue is held in all sexualities. Some of the participants who incorporated the label “queer” into their identities were attempting to honor their desire for their partner although they viewed their orientation as fundamentally still lesbian. A few of the participants described their partner’s transition as prompting a reconsideration of their orientation as more open or flexible. The experience of loving a man made gender seem less relevant as a discriminating category for some participants, such as Lynn:

I guess I would describe myself as “open” as a result of Sally transitioning to Bob and watching that process and discussions

with him. I feel now like I’m not going to shut myself down from—I don’t care what somebody’s gender is. If I’m attracted to them, I’m open to them.

Strategies shape the phenomenon, and how they do so are accounted for in their *consequences*. Participants identified 3 types of consequences tied to their strategies—identity deferral, identity revision, and identity consolidation. Not yet having figured out an identity strategy may, by default, result in “identity deferral.” Said Cathy, “There’s no word for me . . . so I live in a kind of a no man’s land in terms of identity.” In her interview, Julie said in situations where she would like to identify herself as queer, “Jeff will do the, ‘I’m a man, you’re a woman, and that’s the way it is. We have nothing to come out [as]—we’re straight.’” Because they had not yet figured out a compromise, Julie had resigned herself to being understood by others as heterosexual.

Colin had a unique story in the participant pool. Once a queer woman partner of an FTM, watching his partner begin to transition made him realize he too was a trans man. Colin’s emerging gender and sexual identity as a gay FTM (i.e., a trans man desiring other men, representing “*identity revision*”) sadly led to the relationship’s dissolution. His partner Randi was not able to accommodate Colin’s transition, the irony of which Colin noted: “So *I* was supposed to be able to be a lesbian who could date a man, but he couldn’t be a straight man who dated a man.” Aileen was one of the many participants who revised her identity by adopting the label “queer.” She decided the term “dyke” no longer clearly encompassed her desires, which were clarified through her partner’s transition. She said “queer” is “closer really to my reality anyways. Dyke wasn’t quite right. It was the closest thing—I still like women sexually, but I find trans men really sexy.”

Partners who engaged in identity-affirming activities and community or named themselves as queer experienced a confirmation or enhancement of their identity (“*identity consolidation*”). This was most true of the bisexual women, but also of lesbian women who made active attempts to participate in queer life. Said Mistress, “I

claimed the space of lesbian cause that's who I am, you know? . . . I don't give up that title."

DISCUSSION

As demonstrated by this research, issues of sexual identity negotiation and renegotiation are likely relevant for most if not all sexual-minority women partners of FTMs. "Identity is dynamically constructed in relation to a social environment" (Halperin, 2004, p. 103). When a partner transitions, core aspects of sexual identity are rendered incongruent, often disrupting both self-coherence and the community of reference.

It became clear that the labour to establish a legitimate subjectivity⁸ was true for both queer women and trans men. Furthermore, the context of transition could pit these struggles against one another. As an FTM's identity as male becomes increasingly visible, he feels increasingly authentic and becomes increasingly recognizable to others as he sees himself (Rubin, 2003). His partner's own identity as a *sexual-minority* woman, however, may become increasingly *invisible*, often bringing *her* sense of authenticity and interpersonal recognition into question. This tension was discussed by participants as a central dilemma within relationship negotiations.

How distressing this dilemma is depends on multiple factors, but generally the more one embodies and is invested in an identity that does not include a male partner, the more conflicted or challenging the renegotiation process. Furthermore, the less someone is able to be understood as queer by themselves, their partner and the social world, the more distressing transition is likely to be (at least, and particularly, initially). Based on participant interviews, priorities revolved around *restoring congruence* (i.e., social strategies), and in *resolving coherence* (i.e., personal meaning-making and identity repair work).

Nyamora (2004) observed a grieving process for the loss of femme visibility was common among his participants. This process was particularly powerful for those who had long struggled to establish their authenticity as lesbians, a finding also supported by this research. In queer and

straight communities where masculinity continues to be privileged, femme subjectivity is often unrecognized and signaled relationally—by the *subject* of her desire. Furthermore, the authenticity and political commitment of femmes are often considered suspect—representing a particular sub-cultural struggle. The origins of this historical suspiciousness come from the medical and sexological literature identifying her desires as misguided (and "soon to become" heterosexual," Hemmings, 1999, p. 454), and what emerged as a dominant social justice strategy. The privileging of "identifiable marks of difference" (Walker, 2001, p.1) as political acts of resistance frame the feminine appearance as complicit with one's oppression.

These dual issues of visibility/legitimacy are further magnified by a partner's transition and the sudden violation of intracommunity norms—"lesbians don't date men" (Esterberg, 1997)—in which queer women find themselves. As example, for all the time that Sherisse felt compelled to repeatedly "prove" her belongingness, she was aware that these community concerns suddenly appeared "true" to others when her partner transitioned. The understanding of this violation and its imagined consequences were what motivated Cathy to leave her "lesbian" group. The research highlights the additional challenges to visibility and legitimacy that may exist within racialized communities, where "the signifiers most easily read as femme and/or lesbian in our culture are those of white femininity" (Noble, 2006, p. 99). Femmes of color often wage a "dual battle"; "visibility is often conditional: either she is read as her sexuality or she is read as her race" (Noble, 2006, p. 99).

Furthermore, this research provides preliminary support for Califia's (1997) suggestion that bisexual women may be best prepared to "handle the contradictions of a relationship with an FTM" (as cited in Mitchell, 2001, p. 9) wherein gender is not as salient an issue. It may be that bisexual women as a group are practiced in identity and visibility challenges. Despite the well accepted theory that sexual behavior does not determine sexual identity and vice versa (Esterberg, 1997), bisexuals are often faced with assumptions about their sexuality based on their partner (The Bisexual Anthology Collective,

1995). Even so, Lev (2004, p. 306) warns that issues of “sexual desire and compatibility” are complex and constitute more than simply bodies or preferences.

Participants in the present study managed potential identity challenges in various ways, and their negotiations are best described as continuous and dynamic processes. Successful renegotiations led to identity consolidation while compromised or unsuccessful renegotiations often led to identity deferral. Another identity path was a transition to a qualified, altered or new identity that felt a more accurate characterization of one’s sexuality.

In issues of sexual identity renegotiation, sexual-minority women partners of trans men are not reacting to transsexuality *per se*. They are reacting to the mixed-orientation relationship in which they suddenly, and to some extent unwittingly, find themselves. The utility in having widened the focus of transsexuals’ partners to include sexual-minority women is that it exposes and challenges the continued collapse of sex and gender in the traditional literature. Past researchers have clearly been preoccupied with the transsexual *body*, surprised by the unremarkable data suggesting FTMs and their female partners were happily paired. In generating unsubstantiated claims that called into question the legitimacy of these women’s sexual desires and relationship motives, researchers were privileging the material body. The results appear better understood through the partners’ ego-syntonic gender difference and shared heterosexual orientation. Researchers were often looking for identity conflicts and crises when there were none.

I am not suggesting that bodies do not matter.⁹ I am suggesting that bodies are not the *only* thing that matter, nor do they necessarily take priority for participants in the present study. What was clearly the central dilemma for lesbian women was the differing gender and sexual orientation of her partner, which often put her at odds with her partner in ego-dystonic ways. Some of the strategies employed by participants are reflected in the existing literature on mixed-orientation relationships. One example of this was the negotiation of a non-monogamous arrangement as a condition of the relationship’s continuation (Buxton, 2006).

Confirming findings from this study, Cromwell (1999, p. 132) reports that some of these relationship couplings survive transition, and women partners “may or may not shift their identity from lesbian to straight or bisexual or queer.” Cromwell quotes Hale’s (1995) work to highlight the importance of the couple committing to a process of “recoding” bodies and sexual acts “to produce an internally consistent [and understood] descriptive truth”, in which “dominant cultural gender categorizations are . . . reorganized” (as cited in Cromwell, 1999, p. 134). Similarly, Schleifer (2006, p. 68; italics added) argues that categories of sex, gender and sexuality “serve to constitute each other” and that “sexuality creates meaning about and through the sexed bodies and gendered identities of *both* individuals involved in an erotic interaction.” Based on participant accounts, Hale’s task appears to be central to the relationship’s survival. However, the recoding itself is insufficient if it cannot be reconciled with the partner’s own identity, and the demand falls short in that it implicitly leaves sexual-minority partners with this responsibility. Schleifer’s interpretation calls for a shared task of mutual consideration and integrated meaning-making. Driver’s (2006, pp. 116–117) experiential account echoes this point with the insistence that “the point is . . . to allow each identity claim to be received with full attention and acknowledgement”; ultimately, it is this “recognition” between partners that is prioritized over “the simplified mental images of what others assume we are from afar.”

Clinical Applications

This research has clinical implications for therapists working with sexual-minority women partners of trans men and suggests some key areas of therapeutic work. In identity development and support work, the therapist can help a client explore the meaning and importance of her identity in the shifting context of her partner’s transition. Lev (2004, p. 279) warns that “clinicians have often assumed that female partners of trans men would welcome the transition and embrace being in an apparently heterosexual relationship,” and the heterosexist belief that this would be desired that underlies such an

assumption. While Lev's point is clearly relevant given the many perceived losses from lesbian women, "female partners" are a heterogeneous group that include some who report being largely unaffected, as well as those who report being conflicted by their partner's transition. Cathy was an example of this latter group, in which a part of her was devastated by her invisibility, while another part of her enjoyed the privileges brought by this invisibility. As clinicians, we want to make as few assumptions as possible to create a space where clients can bring their multiple, complex experiences.

Lev (2004, p. 282) observes that "issues of disclosure are often less pronounced [in FTMs], since the masculinity of the female partner was usually not as hidden or disguised." She notes that disclosures can nonetheless be shocking and difficult for cisgendered¹⁰ partners. While some cisgendered partners genuinely had little to renegotiate in terms of their sexual identity, others remember only feeling so initially because they did not fully understand a transsexual identity and/or were in some amount of denial for a time. That is, these partners' sense of sexual identity was intact because they did not fully see their partners as male. The therapist must be able to co-assess these distinctions with the client and to ensure that the significance and meaning of partner disclosure are being adequately processed.

The therapist can play an important role in supporting the client's identity, whatever it may be, as having equal value to that of her partner. Sexual-minority women may need to negotiate their visibility. As demonstrated by study participants, this visibility may involve disclosure with particular people, or in particular settings, and/or ongoing participation in queer events and community.

Participants who had an agreed upon set of strategies had an easier time with transition than those who did not, or those whose "default" strategy was to forfeit being visible as a sexual-minority. Unless a transitioning partner's physical safety would be placed in jeopardy, the non-trans partner should feel empowered to choose the degree to which she publicly identifies herself as non-heterosexual, and to access support from others. Community resources vary enormously by geographical location, however

regional support groups and/or on-line communities may be able to offer important perspective and validation, particularly if women's existing communities are lacking knowledge or are judgmental.

Limitations of the Research

One of the limitations of this research was that no women who were once queer-identified and who now identify as heterosexual responded to the research advertisement. This likely reflects a particular recruitment conundrum. There exists a significant subset of FTMs who, once they have transitioned, no longer consider themselves transsexual. They no longer, if they ever did, affiliate with transsexual communities (Cromwell, 1999). This dis-identification makes these men, and their partners, difficult to locate. Although advertising specifically welcomed straight-identified women partners, it may be that such women are partnered in higher proportion with men who identify simply as men, and not as "transsexual men." There may not have been enough in the language of the recruitment advertising that resonated with them, or they were not affiliated with the spaces in which advertisements were circulated. There may have also been some other unknown factor that played a role in them not coming forward. The increased variation in identity transitions might have increased the variation in categories and told us something different about role exits and the ways in which they are managed.

Another limitation of the study is that many of the participants were younger in age (75% of the sample was between the ages of 26 and 35) and perhaps as a by-product of this skew, most relationships were also of limited longevity. Interviewing partners in more long-standing relationships would have elicited a perspective "over time" on this work. Moreover, because of the way in which subjects were selected, the results of this study may have limited generalizability to other FTMs' significant others.

Future Research

One potential future direction for research in this area is to obtain quantitative measures with the population of queer women partners of FTMs

in order to test out some of the hypothesized relationships between concepts raised by the qualitative analysis (i.e., can the level of distress be correlated with measures of identity investment such as years spent in and degree of involvement in a community?). Similarly, future researchers may want to use measures such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and Relationship Satisfaction Scale to both substantiate participant self-reports and establish data against which other populations can be directly compared. The advantage of a method that includes qualitative aspects is that it reveals this population as the heterogeneous group that they are, and allows for the identification of relevant issues at a stage of research that is still exploratory in nature.

There are many other aspects of the effect transsexual transition has on the functioning and adaptation of others. For example, little is known about the experiences of male partners of FTMs or MTFs. Are there gender differences in meaning-making and coping strategies when partners come out as transsexual and decide to transition? Furthermore, there are no studies on the sexual-minority partners of lesbian-identified MTFs despite an acknowledgment of their existence in the literature (Feinbloom, Fleming, Kijewski, & Schuler, 1976; Pauly, 1992). How children make meaning of a parent's transition is a seriously understudied topic. How do they conceptualize transsexuality at different developmental periods, and what factors do they identify as making their lives through transition easier or more difficult?

While there are many potential directions for future research, transsexuals are a vulnerable population given their lack of human rights protection. This is an important consideration in the formulation of any research question and methodology that includes them. Marginalized peoples and communities have, with good reason, little trust in the reasons for, the process, and the implications of findings of research generated by institutions of privilege. Historically, these have often been used as a tool for the further oppression of already oppressed groups of people (Tuhwai Smith, 1999). Indeed, Huxley, Kenna and Brandon (1981b) account for the neglect of the study of partners of transsexuals as related to the great difficulty in securing

agreements for interviews. Besides this, sexuality research requires special sensitivity. Researchers are encouraged to do the necessary groundwork to form alliances with these communities, as well as to use community samples to help correct the more general and problematic pattern in the literature of relying on clinical samples that likely constitute a much smaller and more distressed group than non-patient samples.

NOTES

1. Although Lewins (2002) found this to be true regardless of the trans person's gender identity (MTF or FTM) or surgical status (pre- or post-operative), trans men partner statistically more often with women than with men.

2. The literature is discrepant in its sexual identity terminology with respect to people with gender identity issues and their partners. Much of it follows what Cromwell (1999, p. 111) calls a "biological-determinist argument," in which sexual identity labels are decided on based on people's bodies rather than their gender identity. Here, "homosexual" appears in quotes to draw attention to its inaccuracy. Although it is termed "homosexual," FTMs desiring women is actually reflective of a heterosexual orientation.

3. The literature also does not address cisgendered husbands or male partners of FTMs, nor does it address partnerships in which both partners are transgendered.

4. A term thought to be coined by Susan Bolus for people who are particularly attracted to transgendered and/or transsexual people. <http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Cafe/6603/about/theory.html>.

5. Historically, "femme" meant a feminine lesbian, and was often linked with a "butch" counterpart, a term to signify a masculine lesbian. More than an aesthetic, femme is also "a set of behaviors used as codes of desire" (Harris & Crocker, 1997, p. 3). Femme is currently described as a "sustained gender identity" (Harris & Crocker, 1997, p. 1) that is both "distinct from and critical of naturalized notions of femininity" (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002, p. 14). It is a "subversive" femininity because the objects of desire are other women and a "chosen," constructed femininity rather than an "assigned" one (Harris & Crocker, 1997). More recently, femme has been recognized as an identity unto itself, independent of butch (Harris & Crocker, 1997). Moreover, the term is used more variedly and can include bisexual women femmes (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997), gay male femmes (effeminate men) (Robertson Textor, 1997), as well as drag queens and straight sex workers (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002). For more on femme, see the writings of Nestle (1992) and Hollibaugh (2000).

6. Transsexuals are often motivated to pursue changes in order to bring their physical bodies in line with their sense of gender. Rubin (2003, p. 149) argues that for transsexuals,

the notion of a core self is tied to the idea of “expressive errors” and “the belief that their bodies fail to express what they are inside is the central tenet legitimating their transitions.” In this way, transition is not simply about social recognition, but a means “to be recognizable to themselves” (Rubin, 2003, p. 151), that is, “a project in self-realization” (p. 152). The process of transitioning is complex, and can be open-ended or unfinished for years sometimes. Transitioning can include a social and/or medical process. Social transition may include a change in name, pronoun use, and presentation such as clothing, hair, and for FTMs, chest binding. Medical transition may include hormone replacement therapy (for FTMs, testosterone), and some form of sex reassignment surgeries (for FTMs, including bilateral mastectomy and chest contouring, hysterectomies, and/or genital surgery of various forms such as metoidioplasty, phalloplasty, or scrotal implants). What constitutes “transition” and its completion is contested, and aside from legal definitions, may vary by individual. SRS is difficult to access and is accompanied by high costs, which may be prohibitive even when some aspects of it are covered by health plans. Other reasons trans men may not pursue SRS include strong self-identification (Scanlon, 2000), a physical disability (aj & kandis, 2001), religious prohibitions (Lev, 2004), and/or dissatisfaction with the current sophistication of surgery (Cameron, 1996). Trans subjectivity (i.e., self-identification) can exist independent of transition.

7. Two of the interviewees made their primary income from sex work. Participants denoted “criminal” to draw attention to the criminalization of their labour from an institutional perspective, and to the particular stigma and risks their employment carries.

8. Namaste (2005) brings an important historical perspective on the criminalization of transsexuality to bear—that up until the 1970s in Canada, “changing sex” was actually prohibited under provisions of the Criminal Code that prevented “the removal of healthy organs and tissues in the absence of disease” (p. 13). Even today, with the exception of Nunavut, “gender identity” is not a protected human rights category (EGALE, 2005). Transsexuals are largely excluded from the institutional world and cannot access many basic social services, and where “transsexual” is still taken to mean MTF, FTMs in particular are forced to negotiate contexts “in the absence of policies concerning them” (Namaste, 2005, p. 30). It is clear issues of authenticity are not mere tropes; their consequences can be dire, and even fatal (see Davis’ 2001 documentary *Southern Comfort* in which 52 year old FTM Robert Eads of Georgia dies of ovarian cancer because no hospital or doctor will treat him).

9. Participant descriptions of the ways in which transition affected their sexual practices is beyond the scope of this paper (see Brown, 2005). Briefly, the larger study revealed some participant concerns with respect to sexual arousal and physiological post-traumatic responses in the embodied practice of a sexual relationship with their transi-

tioning partner. These phenomena communicate that bodies clearly *matter* to some extent.

10. “People who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned” (Serano, 2007, p. 12).

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