QUEERING GENDER IDENTITY FORMATION

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Abstract

This paper presents findings of a qualitative study conducted via interviews with people of various gender identities. Themes that arose in interviews included a correlation of knowledge of trans* identities and higher education, the importance of trans* identified people in discovery of non-conforming gender knowledge, socially implicit privileges for gender conformity, and complicated intersections between race and gender. Analyses of responses shed light on how gender identity formation plays out, providing important information to be used to increase access to mental health services. This study highlights the needs for research that is inclusive of gender variance.

"I'm not exactly a transsexual. A transsexual is a man who becomes a woman, or a woman who becomes a man, and I'm not a man, and I'm not a woman. I break too many rules of both those genders to be one or the other. I transgress gender. You could call me transgressively gendered. You could call me transgender. Me, I call myself a traveler" (Bornstein 2006, 16). This is how Kate Bornstein describes hir[1] gender in *Hello, Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws.* In a book that exemplifies the healing and educational power of storytelling, Bornstein discusses hir personal experiences with suicide attempts, a tragedy that is all too often a consequence of the many layers of societal oppression facing individuals who transgress gender. According to *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey,* a staggering 41% of trans* respondents reported attempting suicide, compared to 1.6% of the general population (Grant et al. 2011).

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study that analyzes the influences on the knowledge of queer gender, factors that lead to current and past gender identities, and how other identities intersect with gender. It is my hope that such knowledge will be beneficial to social service

providers who serve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) clients. The article includes a discussion of the language of gender identity, a review of the sparse relevant literature on the experiences of trans* populations, followed by a description of the study. It concludes with a discussion of the study's findings, limitations, and implications for practice.

THE LANGUAGE OF GENDER IDENTITY

Common notions of gender are informed by a concept called gender essentialism. "Gender essentialism" refers to the perspective that there are two genders (woman and man) that correspond exactly with biological sex (female and male), and that the terms "gender" and "sex" also correspond (Davidmann 2010). To begin unwinding this notion of gender, there are more than two categories of sex. These include female, male, and intersex. "'Intersex' is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male" (Intersex Society of North America ND).

Beyond this definition of sex, an effective study of gender identity involves the use of many related terms that are sometimes confusing for those who are unfamiliar with the literature. These terms include: gender, cisgender, transgender, sex, and intersex. In this paper "gender" will be used to reference a system of meanings and cultural coding around masculine/feminine and the symbols and the rules, privileges, and punishments for their use. All the ways in which people express their bodies and communicate with the world can be gendered and encoded with meaning. A non-exhaustive list of examples of categories of gender include: woman, man, transgender, trans*, genderqueer, bigender, and gender fluid. Gender has two main aspects: identity and expression. Gender identity refers to the way individuals conceive of their own gender (e.g., "I am a woman/genderqueer persyn/trans*/man"), while gender expression refers to the way individuals outwardly express this inward conception (e.g., today I will wear a skirt/this month I will not shave my beard).

"Sex" is a word related to, but separate from, gender that will refer to a "category assigned to each of us at birth based on a variety of physical and biological characteristics, usually determined by genitals" (MN Campus Alliance 2013, NP). The gender identity "cisgender" thereby refers to those whose gender expression and gender identity are validated by the dominant culture and are congruent with societal expectations of the sex their doctor, nurse, or health care professional assigned them at birth (based on genitals and/or various secondary sex characteristics). "Transgender," on the other hand, is an umbrella term for those whose gender expression or gender

identity is not congruent with the sex assigned at birth and/or whose gender is not validated by the dominant culture. Gender pronouns are used to talk about people in the third person in many languages. There are an ever-increasing number of pronouns, but some include she/her, he/him, they/them, and ze/hir. They/them and ze/hir are two examples of gender-neutral pronouns that some people use in the English language. Pronouns are most closely related to gender identity, meaning that individuals should (although they too frequently do not) be able to choose which pronoun/s they would like others to use for them. All of the terms outlined above will be used throughout the literature review that follows and in the description of the qualitative study below.

Language is especially important when it comes to discussing a community of people that are often excluded (Spade, 2011). With regards to this study, language, or rather, the mis-use of language, is recognized as an area for social workers and other mental health practitioners to improve upon in order to increase accessibility of services for trans* individuals. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) and the *Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Grant et al. 2011) both point out the almost extreme changes in the experiences and language of trans* individuals. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, "transsexual" was the only commonly accepted term to use for people outside of the gender binary. Grant et al.'s (2011) study showed that younger people (forty and under) are four times more likely to identify as transgender, trans*, genderqueer, or some other gender-non-conforming category than their forty-plus counterparts. This highlights the need for more studies that are focused on participants who are younger, to understand how their experiences differ from older trans* individuals and what this climate change might mean for the LGBT support community.

One of the most commonly neglected areas of research on gender identity is the study of gender in cisgender individuals that does not problematize gender non-conformity (Olesker 1990). This study highlights the needs for research that is inclusive of gender variance in cisgender individuals and the effects of gender essentialism on cisgender populations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is significant, telling scholarship (Grant et al. 2011; Beemyn and Rankin 2011; Doan 2007) on discrimination against non-conforming gender identities, there is presently very little research that is relevant to the vast array of experiences of gender non-conforming individuals and the processes through which such a non-conforming gender identity is formed. This is aligned with missing research on gender with regards to

cisgender identities and an analysis of counseling with trans* individuals and best practices for social workers. Some of this lack is explained by the barriers to conducting adequate research. Those who identify outside of or beyond the gender binary are a distinct minority, and it is also difficult for the majority, cisgender individuals with cultural privilege, to speak about that privilege. These factors contribute to the lack of attention to intersex individuals and those who are gender queer, and of color, and perhaps living in poverty, with disabilities, and so on.

In the studies we do have, the focus tends to be on a specific, more gender-normative sub-section of the trans* and gender non-conforming population. For example, Gangé, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997) conducted a strict study on "masculine to feminine transgenderists." Furthermore, these (cisgender) researchers conclude that "whereas many transgenderists believe that their actions and identities are radical challenges to the binary system of gender, in fact, the majority of such individuals reinforce and reify the system they hope to change" (Gangé, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997, 478). By this, the authors mean to communicate the idea that male to female trans* people are responsible for enforcing the gender binary in the ways that they conform to femininity. They thus exclude the oppression that trans* individuals face given the hegemony of gender essentialism and ignore the notion that transgender people have to over-perform the expression expected from their gender identity to lessen the possibility of violence and discrimination as they move through the world (Bornstein 2006).

Another kind of limitation is found in Devor's (2004) model of transsexual identity formation, which falls back on gendered terms and reifies a mainstream view of trans* people. Describing a move from a "Tolerance of Transsexual Identity (stage 7)" to a "Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual Identity (stage 8)," Devor frames trans* identities as inherently negative—something one must struggle to tolerate and then accept.

Of this already limited field of research on trans* individuals, only a small number of studies have included the experiences of individuals who do not declare themselves to be men or women (i.e., gender queer, agender, bigender, and many other people). Beemyn and Rankin (2011) do dedicate several pages of their book, *The Lives of Transgender People*, to outlining the category they call "different-gender" (ix).

In terms of race, *The Lives of Transgender People* is the most inclusive study, involving about 300 trans* participants of color. Because race interacts in multiple, intersectional ways with gender to create specific experiences and oppressions more analysis of the experiences of the gender in people of color is needed.

Intersex communities might seem like an obvious focus area when it comes to gender non-conformity, but it seems that only Preves (2000) has studied this while recognizing, as earlier studies had not, that biology (i.e., hormones) is just one of a very large number of possible determinants of gender. Even in that case, all of the participants in this study identified as one of the two binary gender categories, which limits the study's generalizability.

We can see that the psychological research on transgender people is missing a basic qualitative base—something that would best provide tips for social workers and fill other research gaps. The study outlined below was designed to fill some of these gaps in the research on gender identity formation and associated experiences.

THE STUDY

Interviews were completed with thirty participants who represent a wide array of gender conforming and non-conforming identities so as to identify themes in gender identity formation. It is hoped that these themes might be used to improve the counseling of queer and trans* youth. My hypothesis was that these interviews would show evidence of a variety of experiences with gender, even among individuals who have the same gender identity. It was also hypothesized that these interviews would show a variety of ways in which cisgender individuals are affected and harmed by the prevalent current climate of trans*phobia. Finally, I suspected that the most common counseling tip participants would offer social workers is to be open and accepting, and not to assume anything.

METHODS
Participant Selection

Most of the interviewees were personal friends of the researcher and all were recruited, through phone calls, emails, or in-person interactions with the researcher. Participants were selected according to their ability to meet a pre-set range of gender categories. Of the 30 total interviews conducted, the 10 women participants included 5 transgender-identified women and 5 cisgender-identified women. The 10 participants who identified as men in this study included 5 transgender-identified men and 5 cisgender-identified men. The final 10 participants identified outside of the gender binary: "genderqueer," "tranny/girl," "agender," "trans*," and "unlabeled," etc. All of the thirty participants were over 18 years of age, with a mean age of 32.6 years. Seven of the participants identified as people of color, three stated their racial identity as "Black," two as mixed (one "biracial" and one "Native and Black"), one as "Asian American," and one as "Thai."

Two of the participants identified as physically disabled. Twenty-three of the participants had completed some level of college education. Three participants were part of the same family, a mother and her son and daughter; two other participants were siblings.

Interview Process

Interviews were conducted on the phone, via Skype, over email, or in person. Phone and Skype interviews were held on the Internet, with the researcher situated in their apartment. In-person interviews were conducted in a closed room at a library on the University of Minnesota campus. All interviews were one-on-one with the researcher and a single participant. All interviews began with verbal or physical agreement/signing of an informed consent information sheet, previously approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota.[2] The interviews lasted between one and two hours, with an average interview length of 1.67 hours. Each interview continued until the participant believed that their experience of gender and gender identity development had been thoroughly described. Interviews were audiotaped, and the researcher took brief notes during interviews. After the interviews were completed they were transcribed from the audiotaped recordings and thematically coded for common responses.

Past research and the specific hypotheses of the study were used to guide the development of the interview questions, which focused on experiences with gender and gender identity formation (contact researcher for the full set of interview questions). For example, the interview question: "4. How do you express this (gender) identity?" was reworded from Beemyn and Rankins' (2011) question on expression of gender. The question "What advice would you give to therapists/social workers working with trans*/queer individuals?" was asked to address the gap in research on best practice suggestions for therapists who work with trans* clients. The interview question "What life events (if any) do you think had a major impact on your gender?" was specifically developed to facilitate a discussion about how each participant's individual gender identity was formed.

Because of the sensitive nature of some of the research questions, guidelines set forth by Kvale (1996) for qualitative research were followed. According to Kvale (1996), "The outcome of the interview depends on the knowledge, sensitivity, and empathy of the interviewer" (105). As such, I attempted to facilitate an atmosphere in which each participant felt safe enough to talk freely about their experiences and to share their thoughts and emotions without fear of judgment. As suggested by Mishler (1991), the interviews were fairly unstructured. This is believed to facilitate

openness and honesty in participants' responses. I choose to apply this unstructured arrangement because the outcome goals of the interviews are the subjective experiences of gender of each individual participant. All questions were open-ended, in an attempt to allow participants more freedom to explain their own experiences (e.g., "1. (How) do you define your gender?"). The term "empathic reflection" is defined as mirroring the deeper feelings and meanings implicit in the words and communications of those interviewed (Mishler 1991; Kvale 1996). Paraphrasing and empathic reflections (e.g., "So, it sounds like you have a positive relationship with your gender due to various positive things that happened at your all-boys grade school?") were used throughout the interview to facilitate sensitivity and clarity of responses. These interview tactics were also intended to help deepen the exploration of issues raised by each participant and to elicit rich, detailed descriptions. Each interview ended with a question asking whether the participant had anything else to add, ensuring that participants had explicit permission to speak their minds.

Thematic Coding

Following interviews, responses were reviewed and transcribed. At the conclusion of all thirty interviews, the researcher's in-interview observation notes and the interview transcriptions were studied using qualitative content analysis procedures (Syed et al. 2011) to identify themes associated with gender identity formation and best counseling practices. Thematic coding was done by highlighting all quotes from transcriptions that were repeated in at least two separate interviews. Examples of repeated themes include: "I first learned about trans* identities through my daughter or son, who is queer" and "I found out what 'transgender' is when my brother's friend, who was thirteen or fourteen at the time, told me that they wanted to be called Brad instead of Valerie." Then, these highlighted quotes were reviewed to identify the themes that were most common and related to the goals of this study. Thematic coding was conducted for common themes in all thirty interviews and notes together, and then for each gender category separately.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

My hypothesis that the interview responses would show evidence of a variety of experiences with gender was supported, even among individuals who have the same gender identity. Some non-binary-identified people experienced immense transphobic oppression and negative mental health outcomes. For example, one transgender-identified man had been beaten

to the point that he needed treatment in an intensive care unit. A gender-queer respondent reported that hir had been fired from two jobs for "inappropriate" clothing choices and that hir had been "correctionally raped" by a family member to "cure" hir of hirs non-conforming gender expression. However, other non-binary interviewees had encountered almost no blatant transphobia. For example, one transgender-identified man who works for the Air Force reported slight name-calling and rudeness, but had never been physically assaulted, had never experienced occupational or housing discrimination, and was overall graciously accepted and supported by his family.

There were, however, particular identity categories of interviewees that were related to particular experiences. For example, all of the respondents of color reported harassment and gender policing, even those who identified as cisgender, while only a few of the white cisgender respondents reported any negative gender policing. Additionally, all of the trans* women in this study had been physically assaulted and all of them had been fired from a job (all but one were explicitly told that their firing was due to the way they dressed). This is compared to the two of the five transgender men who had been fired from jobs, and the three of ten gender-non-binary respondents.

I also predicted that the interview responses would show the various ways in which cisgender individuals are harmed by a climate of trans*phobia. This hypothesis was supported in part. All of the cisgender participants who were under age 35 described at least one unwelcome experience of others policing their gender. For example, one cisgender-identified man indicated that he was often mocked and ridiculed in school for his slightly feminine masculinity. A 56-year old cisgender woman spoke briefly to being teased for wearing jeans nearly all the time, but could not identify any specific cases of other gender-related policing.

My assumption that gender would be tied to a variety of factors was supported. There were no coherent themes that respondents could identify as a source of their gender identity. However, respondents from many different identity categories talked about similar experiences with gender in their interviews. For example, the religious identities of the gender-non-binary respondents were all different, and responses to the question about whether religion had affected their experiences with gender ranged from "Not in my personal life, no," to "Completely, I honestly do not know how I would conceptualize my gender if my parents had raised me in a different religion." Some of the factors that participants described as influencing their gender expression included physical attractions, family and societal culture, and class.

Finally, my hypothesis that the most common counseling tip participants would suggest for social workers is to be open, accepting, and

not rooted in assumptions was partially confirmed. The most common tip for social workers was not to make any assumptions about any aspect of their clients' lives. Openness and acceptance were also suggested, as were: "ask clients for their pronouns," "advocate for trans* and queer identities and equality in your community," "have friends that have the same identities as the people you are serving in your job," and "educate yourself—read a book and reflect on your own gender."

Common Themes

Four common themes were discovered: 1) a relationship between knowledge of trans* identities and higher education; 2) the importance of trans* identified people in discovery of non-conforming gender identity/knowledge; 3) areas of privilege for gender conforming people; and 4) intersections between race and gender.

The relationship between knowledge of trans* identities and higher education was indicated by 23 of the 30 participants, who all spoke in support of trans* equality, having had some level of college-education. Of the seven who had not attended college, all but two had graduated high school (six of these seven people and both of the two non-high school graduates were trans*). Additionally, four of the gender non-binary people referenced finding community through their higher-education institution, while only one spoke to an inclusive community in high school. Several of the cisgender respondents (6 of the 10) referenced meeting people at college that educated them about gender non-conforming identities.

The importance of trans* identified people in discovery of non-conforming gender identity/knowledge was shown by the fact that all but one cisgender participant had learned of trans* and gender-non-conforming identities by meeting a trans* person or by having someone they knew come out as trans*. This theme manifested slightly differently for transgender folks, who reported Internet research, specifically YouTube videos, as the most common source of knowledge of trans* identities. For gender-non-binary respondents, discovery of trans* identities was also often from the Internet, but less so from YouTube specifically.

That areas of privilege for gender conforming people was important was made evident by the higher rate of reports of physical and verbal assault for trans* respondents. Also, none of the trans* people had a role model in their real life that shared their gender identity, while all cisgender respondents did.

The importance of intersections between race and gender was indicated by the stories that revealed complicated intersections. All of the non-binary-gendered people of color verbally identified the feeling that they had to compartmentalize their identities in their interviews. One said of their

early experiences coming out, "I could be Black at the BSU, Native at home on the res, and queer for drag shows, but there was nowhere to be just me."

Other themes that were less prevalent that these main four include: a loss of importance of gender identity through age; first memories about gender centering on policing; the importance of connection in competent mental health care; and the variability of gender expression over time for all identities.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to the reach of this study. For example, it was small, with a total of just 30 participants. This makes it precarious to generalize the findings of this study alone to work with clients without consulting other sources of information. Additionally, there is little data on intersecting identity factors such as race, class, and disability status. A mere seven of the participants identified as people of color and only two identified as living with a disability. Other possible limitations of this study include specific identities of the researcher. For example, the fact that interviews were conducted by a white person who identifies as trans* could potentially make cisgender participants less comfortable sharing their stories or lead to participants of color feeling less comfortable discussing instances of racism. Finally, only vocal questioning was used to gather information from clients in this study, there were no quantitative surveys, observation, or arts-based forms of information gathering that may have painted a fuller picture of the data.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The respondents in this study referenced a variety of experiences with gender identity formation and strongly suggested social workers should avoid making assumptions about the experiences of their clients of all genders. Here it is relevant to note that many people of trans* and queer identities are often not "out" to their service providers and thus we should begin with the simple recognition that providing room for people to tell their own stories facilitates client connection and understanding, both of which are vital for competent mental health care.

Additionally, results of this study can be applied in counseling to help therapists realize some of the daily difficulties trans* individuals face that contribute to higher rates of mental health issues in trans* communities. The responses of interviewees tell us that discrimination and harassment fall in line with past research that showed high levels of physical violence and job and housing discrimination for trans* people (Grant et al. 2011; National Center for Transgender Equality 2011). This societal oppression

was even more intense for this study's participants of color. Again, all of the respondents of color reported harassment and gender policing, even those who identified themselves as cisgender.

Two of the tips for social workers that I was most surprised to hear were that social workers should get involved with trans* advocacy and should reflect on who is/is not in their personal friend groups. The fact that these tips relate to personal reflection make them rather simple to enact. While it would be impossible for social workers to advocate for every stigmatized group they counsel, counseling can work to become more accessible and component for people of all identities. As for friendships, close relationships are how we learn and connect readings about transphobia to real life, and who we consider our friends has impact on how we view other identities. Thus, having people of non-normative gender identities in one's close circle of friends would facilitate greater acceptance and knowledge of trans* experiences.

In conclusion, I believe that the themes identified in this study can be used in some way to improve counseling. Given its limitations of the small sample size, I hope that this study can show the way for more inclusive work that will inform service providers and facilitate mental health care that is accessible for the trans* people who face daily discrimination.

ENDNOTES

[1] Some English writers use "ze/hir/hirs" as gender-neutral pronouns, and this practice is adopted in this paper as some cited authors and interviewees use ze/hir/hirs as third-person pronouns. Other writers choose to employ "they/them" as gender-neutral third-person singular pronouns. Kate Bornstein uses both pronouns like ze/hir and they/them.

[2] IRB number 1301E26661.

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