

# *The gender binary:* *Theory and lived experience*

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The acronym 'GLBTQ' (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) is widely used to describe those individuals who inhabit spaces outside of the heteronormative standard. Yet the term 'transgender' is often not well understood and may be treated as an afterthought, if considered much at all. This paper focuses on interrogating the gender binary (male/female) which has created the context for gender transgression. Examples of deconstructing questions that highlight the social construction of gender and an examination of therapy with non-trans-identified partners of transmen are offered as ways to apply queer theory in an effort to expose the impact of the gender binary on people's lives. Reflections from a queer-identified woman on her experiences as the partner of a transman are shared in response to this paper.

Keywords: gender binary, queer theory, transgender

## SUGAR AND SPICE ...

We live in a North American context in which the gender binary maintains hegemonic status. The gender binary is a discourse which demands compulsory conformity to individual gender performances of *either* male *or* female (terms which within the gender binary are supposedly mutually exclusive). Further, the gender binary dictates that this performance must be congruent with an individual's physical sex characteristics. Despite the power of this binary, when we were young, like most children, we transgressed its rules at times. My (JT) 'tomboy' behaviour didn't escape my own awareness and I embraced the label. By the time I was in the 4th or 5th grade, my mom had sewn on my jean jacket 'I'm a girl' embedded in the universal symbol for 'woman'. Her requests for me to wear pink sweaters, something on my feet other than sneakers, and a dress – *any dress* – were met with the characteristic fire-breathing irritation of a pre-teen with a parent on her back.

Throughout high school, I was all too aware of the gender normative expectations. I tried to comply. I tried to carry my books on my hip, elbow bent; I tried to dance at parties; I tried to dress the ways my girlfriends dressed. I knew and my friends knew I just wasn't a very good girl. That sounds bad now and it felt awful then. Little did I know that I was a gender transgressor.

My (DN) earliest gender memory is of my mother taking me to a toy store to buy a Barbie doll. I was three years old at the time and wanted a Barbie just like my next-door neighbour, Michelle, had. I was too young to have completely learned the narrow gender specifications of traditional boyhood. However, I soon had a formal lesson in masculinity from my father. When he found out that his wife had bought me the popular doll, he became quite angry and took it from me. He said, 'Boys play with GI Joes'. It was painful. I did not understand.

Yet, I quickly learned what it means to be a 'real boy/man' through the gender policing of my father. By elementary school, I had figured out the gender codes of normative masculinity. I learned that I needed to speak the language of sports to survive Detroit working-class male culture. To speak such sport knowledge earned me the respect of my male peers. I increasingly learned to show the world

only the parts of myself that the dominant culture defined as manly. I learned to shield my vulnerability and fears, only showing them to my mother. The transgressive nature of my gender performance was seen as both a problem and an embarrassment.

## ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION

While we may have transgressed certain gender norms as most children do, we are not, however, transgender. Consequently, it is critical that we acknowledge our privileged positions within the gender binary system. Furthermore, in order to avoid acts of cultural appropriation and exoticising transpeople as the 'mysterious other', our attention in this paper is focused less on trans-identified people than it is on interrogating the gender binary, examining the social construction of gender, exploring alternative performances of gender, and making an 'invitation to responsibility' (Jenkins, 1990) to others who, like us, have privileged positions within the gender binary. As such, we are interested in taking up activities that exist within the scope of critical multiculturalism. Therefore, we seek to be accountable to the trans community and remain open to their feedback about our work.

Finally, we feel it is important to identify the other markers of our social location. Too often, these markers are considered as separate and discrete, ignoring the critical intersection of multiple dimensions of identity and experience. Dave locates himself as straight, white/European American, able-bodied, professional, and middle-class. Julie locates herself as white/European American, able-bodied, Jewish, queer, professional, and middle-class.

## UNPACKING THE GENDER BINARY: QUEER THEORY, A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Because we live in a culture where gender is to people as water is to fish, remembering and reconstructing our earliest memories of gender can be challenging. But it is these very taken-for-granted contexts of social location that, if left uninterrogated, promote the subjugating hegemonic discourses of normality. As a child, my (JT) tomboyism was tolerated, as Halberstam points out, 'because it tends to be associated with a "natural" desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities

enjoyed by boys ... a sign of independence and self-motivation ...' (1998, p.6). As I approached adolescence, however, 'tomboy' started to be read as a problem, for it is at this time that 'the full force of gender conformity descends on' girls (Halberstam, 1998, p.6).

Through this kind of critical examination of early experiences, we are able to make meaning of gender in a way that stands in support of preferred, possibly transgressive performances. In the case of my (JT) tomboyism, a problematising discourse transforms to one of resistance. This kind of analysis is one example of how we have found queer theory to be a useful theoretical resource in our work with transgender clients and the important people in their lives.

Queer theory includes a range of critical practices that study the relations between sex, gender, and sexual desire (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990), and is based on the premise that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are. Butler (1990) asserts that gender should be seen as a fluid variable that shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times. By providing some conceptual freedom from the confines of the gender binary, these ideas have assisted us in challenging our own assumptions about essentialised gender, as well as those of our clients.

Transgender people are often in relationship with non-trans people, be it with parents, children, other family members, friends, or partners. When partnered with non-trans people, myriad issues emerge as the partner's own gender and sexual identity may come into question as the relational nature of identity narratives become so apparent. For example, a woman who identifies herself as queer or lesbian may be read as heterosexual by others when out with her FTM (female-to-male) trans partner. This can be experienced as a loss, as well as a re-subjugation of an alternative identity by the hegemony of heteronormativity that enforces rules of both gender and sexuality. This evokes many questions of identity and authorship, such as:

- Do I hold sole authorship of my identity or is it always co-authored by those I'm with?
- How does my audience's reading of me impact my claim to a particular identity?

- Regarding transgressive gender identities, how is it possible to hold onto an identity that stands outside of the gender binary when the binary is all around us?
- For GLBTQ people, how do you reconcile the dilemma of claiming an identity other than heterosexual – making yourself visible and out – without reproducing the binary of heterosexual/homosexual?

Queer theory may help us find a 'third way' out of some of these dilemmas, yet the realities of daily living often bump up against the promises of abstract theory. To illustrate this inherent struggle, we will consider some of the issues which have been illuminated in Julie's work with couples.

## LOVE THE ONE YOU'RE WITH

My clients represent a thin slice of the demographic: white, mid-twenties to thirties, employed, university educated, professional, and able-bodied. Further, they have all been well resourced enough to be able to afford therapy services (or they have had health insurance which covered outpatient psychotherapy), and their experiences with so-called 'helping professionals' have not pre-empted them from considering therapy as an option (probably due to their social locations as described above). The couples I have worked with have all involved a female-identified lesbian or bisexual partner of an FTM person in various stages of transition. Each person's and couple's stories have been unique and reflective of the intersection between (trans)gender factors and the multitude of other influential dimensions of their lives. Still, some experiences in particular have emerged as fairly thematic to several people that I've consulted. I will discuss two themes: co-construction of identity and corporeal realities. Although I name these themes separate from one another, it is important to bear in mind their relationship with each other as intertwined rather than as discreet.

Further, concerns about transgender-related issues have not always been the initial or primary reason for seeking therapy. Yet, because of the challenges of negotiating a world that doggedly demands a binary construction of gender, our conversations often focus on their experiences with

gender, both within and outside of their immediate relationship. Gender identity and performance emerged as pertinent to varying degrees with each couple I've seen.

## PERFORMING IDENTITIES: AUTHOR, CO-AUTHOR, AND AUDIENCE

The following statements are from women partners of FTM individuals:

- *He's thinking about his identity as a straight man ... I'm queer. I don't have control over his identity, and it feels like I'm losing control of mine ...*
- *I need to find a radical queer group for me ...*
- *There's no safe place for us to go to together – a queer place, a gay place, whatever ...*
- *It's like other queers are judging me if I don't want to stay – I'm not queer enough, I have no credibility if I question this.*
- *Other people don't even think I AM a lesbian when I'm out with him! And it would hurt him horribly if I claimed it somehow in public. I'm just another straight girl!*
- *I like the genderfuck, I'm kind of andro myself ... this changes that ...*

When trapped by the binary and essentialist notions of identity formation, the impact of the social construction of identity can hit partners hard. It is here where theory and lived experience collide, as partners are torn between their intellectual and political desires to resist gender normative mandates and claiming their own lesbian or queer identity. They discover that who they 'are' is affected by who they are with. Within the parameters of the male/female, hetero/homo binary, if your partner is male and you're a woman that makes you straight, right? If you're a male and your partner is a woman that makes you straight, right? The possibility for a multiplicity of conclusions is erased.

My clients and I have found it useful at times to reflect back on their early gender training in order to bring to light taken-for-granted assumptions about gender. By sharing their memories with their partners and serving as each other's audience to their earliest constructions of meaning around

gender, they have found ways to co-create new meanings that make room for their preferred notions about gender identity. Some of the questions I may ask include:

- What are some of your earliest memories of knowing a difference between maleness and femaleness?
- What kinds of implications did you sense or hear about these differences – good, bad, or benign?
- Thinking of various influences – familial, cultural, religious, pop culture, media, etc. – what are some of the strongest and some of the most subtle messages about gender that you have been influenced by?
- Based on your early gender training, where would you say you came to understand gender as being located within an individual? (In their head, their heart, between their legs, in their actions, their words, their thoughts, their dreams?)
- What would a job description for a so-called 'Normal' Male and a so-called 'Normal' Female involve?

These and other questions that serve to deconstruct reified notions of gender may help couples create new meanings around gender, clearing the way for new identity constructions that support gender transgression, fluidity, and personal meaning. I find that these questions and my clients' answers invite me to constantly reconsider my ideas about gender and identity construction. By staying open to being touched by their experiences, I am better able to avoid imposing ideas about gender that may close off opportunities for clients to construct their own meanings.

While the previous questions can be helpful in addressing general notions about gender, other questions may be more productive when exploring specific ideas. For example, some partners speak of 'male and female energy' while others name particular characteristics or qualities that they value as uniquely male or female. I make efforts to help them deconstruct and explore the origins of these ideas in order to make space for alternative meanings of gender representations. Below are sample questions that some clients have found useful toward this end.

- What would you say is uniquely your partner's energy? Is it female, male, a blend, something that sits outside of all that?
- Do you think that maleness and femaleness – these energies – exists only in bodies?
- Can you say something about what influences your ideas about these energies?
- Are there any performances of masculinity that could entail so-called female qualities in a way that would have meaning for you?
- As a woman yourself, how have these categories of gendered characteristics impacted you in your life and in your gender identity?

Many partners maintain their position that these essences of maleness or femaleness exist without finding the words to articulate just what they mean. They also hold steadfastly to their love for their partners. This very collision of feelings (clearly expressing love for their trans partners) with the essentialist nature of gender constructions (female and male 'energies' for example) illuminates the restrictive and totalising impact of the gender binary.

So as not to impose unhelpful (possibly hurtful) theoretical ideas onto clients, I seek frequent feedback from them regarding their experience in therapy. For many couples, they spend a great deal of time talking about transition (if that is still in progress) and (trans)gender issues. Together we make efforts to have conversations that are different from those they may have already had. Some examples of questions that I have asked trans partners include:

- In what ways do you think your partner hears and sees the fluidity you're speaking of and representing?
- How do you describe what you're transitioning from and transitioning to?
- Would you say that you're a better 'woman as a man' than you were as a butch dyke?
- As you've been transitioning from one kind of you to another, how have you also been transforming and transgressing ideas about what it is to be a man or a woman?
- How do you account for these emerging identities, what are you doing to make room for them?

- Did you have to find freedom from the confines of the flesh, the limits of the body in order to stay open to such possibilities?
- Can you track the history of this? When did you start opening up in this way? Any particular turning points or definitional moments?
- What transitions have you noticed or would you expect to notice in your relationship in response to your trans identity?
- How does what you offer as a partner and what you hope for from a partner change or stay the same?
- In what ways does your transition/transgender identity impact or inform your mission as a partner, and in what ways does your mission impact or inform your transition/trans identity?

During these interviews, I am very aware of my own struggle as I, too, feel the collision of theory and lived experience. Deconstructing the gender binary and inviting stories of resistance to its rigidity can be very powerful. But for some women, hearing their partner tell the story of something he celebrates that causes conflict and pain for her is heart-breaking. These are women like me – women who love other women – listening to their partners describe a transformation into someone they feel they may not be able to love completely.

Guilt recruits partners into believing that 'if only I had/could/would ...' the problems in their relationship would be null and void. As one woman put it, 'If I were a better person, if I could look beyond societal views of gender ...' This statement in particular drove home for me the perniciousness of a guilt that can exploit peoples' preferences for a gender-just world. Because guilt renders feelings of being judged and invalidated, I focus on legitimising clients' experiences and feelings, letting them talk without asking lots of questions. I do want to challenge the location of the problem being in them and externalise (White & Epston, 1990) 'societal views' for example, and the residue of guilt and shame.

A particularly disturbing source of this guilt is from the LGBTQ community itself. All of my clients have identified 'other queers' as a source of guilt

and stigma. Non-trans partners have heard the message that having doubts about being partnered with a transgender person made their 'queer credibility' suspect. The notion that someone is not 'gay enough' or 'queer enough' reveals not only that essentialised ideas about identity are alive and well even within the relatively transgressive culture of GLBTQ people, but also how effectively marginalised communities have taken up the task of subjugating and policing their own in the name of hegemonic dominance.

At the same time, some self-identified feminist groups within the GLBTQ community have shunned FTM transgender individuals, while many so-called queer spaces read the couples as straight and can be unwelcoming as a result. Below is a brief excerpt from a session with a couple that illustrates some of the effects of all this. The female partner is speaking while her trans partner listens.

Partner: It's the transitions. He's lost people each time he transitioned, from straight to gay to trans ... he doesn't trust anyone will be there for him. Lots of tranny couples have broken up. I'd like to see him have feminist male friends but he's lost them, too.

Julie: Has there been some experience of hostility and rejection from the feminist community?

P: Oh, yeah, more from queer women, who have said things like, 'the queer community was good enough for you when you needed it – now you're a straight man.'

J: Like the tranny guys feel abandoned?

P: Oh, yeah ...

J: From your perspective, how has this contributed to the difficulties you have been experiencing in your relationship?

P: (tearful) A lot. Originally dating him was embracing my feminist side (before he transitioned) and we were surrounded by this great queer community ...

J: Can you say what your tears are about?

P: Loss ... a lot I connected with disappeared because my boyfriend was tranny ... there's less support since his transition.

One of the most important tasks in work with couples living between the binary is helping them connect to communities that will respect and make room for identity claims that are dynamic and transgressive. An audience that is both appreciative and meaningful is necessary: appreciative in that it understands and values the importance of what the couple is doing; meaningful in that this appreciation comes from people in relationships with them and in social locations that are significant to the couple.

### **BODY MATTER AND OTHER BODY MATTERS: BREASTS, HIPS, AND CORPOREAL REALITIES**

- *He was so repelled by his chest. I like breasts but I don't want to touch something he doesn't like.*
- *Since taking 'T'(testosterone) he does it (sex) like it's eating or breathing and I feel like I'm filling some biological need.*
- *What I see is not there because he doesn't celebrate it.*

The struggle with the conflict between theory and lived experience seems to reach a peak where matters of the body and desire are concerned. Female partners often describe experiencing trans bodies as 'not exactly a man's body but not a woman's body either'. Breasts and hips in particular are areas of the body that reportedly cause both partners a great deal of frustration. Transmen may experience them as unmistakable signifiers of womanhood that, for some, they must mask in order to feel 'good in their skin' and engage in their preferred gender performance. Women, too, see breasts and hips as markers of womanhood, as well as sources of erotic and sensual pleasure. Several of the women I've consulted describe being caught in several dilemmas where body matters are concerned. For example, one woman I spoke with identified herself as 'a queer bisexual femme' and stated, 'When I'm with guys I like softer, kinda gentle, girly-guys but when I'm with a woman I like a real butch look. Now she's going from that butch-dyke-but-still-a-woman kind of presentation to transitioning and I can't know what's okay about his body for me to like because *he* doesn't seem to know what's okay to like.'

Women who have been very supportive of transitioning partners often find themselves struggling with the dilemma of resisting societal pressures that lead women toward body hatred and self-subjugation while dealing with a partner that is hating his own fleshy hips, thighs, and breasts. Said another woman, 'It's taken me forever to start to feel okay about my own body and about being sexual and present with someone else, to celebrate it all. I see his hips, his breasts and I want to celebrate that, too. What I see I can't celebrate because he doesn't see it.' One of the consequences of these bodily dilemmas is that women describe feeling guilty for being 'shallow' or 'superficial'. One woman felt great humiliation, seeing her focus on physical attributes as 'gross and objectifying', further evidence of the grip guilt had on her. Michel Foucault (1980) has pointed out that certain dimensions of human experience have been privileged over others, highlighting that knowledges of the body often get labelled as superficial while other ways of knowing are elevated as superior.

When approaching concerns around bodies, attractions, and sex, I invite clients to consider that their preferences are not superficial, that bodies matter, and that, in matters of attraction and desire, bodies in fact may take precedence at times. The idea of 'celebrating' bodies (language used by several women I've consulted) suggests to me the idea of double description (White & Epston, 1990) when juxtaposed with the fear that some women experience over 'objectifying' their partners and their body parts. I highlight their intentions and values to celebrate and honour the body rather than objectify and devalue it. Furthermore, I situate their efforts within the larger context of a culture which is simultaneously body- and sex-phobic – we don't have educative, normalised conversations about natural parts and processes – and hypersexual – we are over-focused on our bodies' attractiveness and advertisers sell everything with sex. I invite them to consider how their desire to celebrate bodies is, in fact, an act of resistance, one worthy of honour and reflective of their best intentions as partners.

Another painful corporeal dilemma described by some partners of FTM people surrounds the effects of testosterone ('T'). Some women have a great deal of trepidation about their partners' use of 'T' for reasons ranging from the impact on his health to

fears that it will make him overly aggressive. While whole-heartedly supporting their partners' performance and embrace of masculinity, many women have seen the use of 'T' as a line they don't want to cross. For some, it is somewhat on principle, seeing a chemical intervention as going too far, as one woman explained, 'It's not just about *gender* anymore when you do that – it's like messing with biology'. One troubling aspect about their partners' use of 'T' often surrounds its impact on their sex lives.

Several women I have consulted described feeling objectified and disengaged from sex once their partner started 'T'. Their accounts often left me struggling against essentialised notions of men being 'over-sexed' and unable to be in control of their sexual desires. In order to resist these invitations to reduce transmen to biological pawns, I make efforts to explore the complexities of their newfound sex drive and to solicit from both partners their visions for a mutually meaningful sexual relationship. Many transmen explain that, for perhaps the first time in a long while, they are experiencing not only the physical desire to be sexual (in part thanks to 'T'), but also the confidence to engage sexually now that they are able to 'be' the gender that they want to be. Furthermore, by considering their sexual relationships within the context of the guiding cultural narrative of patriarchy, couples often find motivation to resist the reproduction of male/female power relations in their own sexual relationship.

## **HEROES/SHEROES: STORIES OF COURAGE, RESISTANCE, AND TRANSFORMATION**

The guilt and shame that come to grip many of the women I consult underscore the conflict between theory and lived experience. Butler (1990) and Halberstam (1998) point out that, just because gender identity is a social construction, it doesn't mean it's not real and that the effects of gendering are not real. As Halberstam states, *the revelation that gender is a social construct does not in any way relieve the effects of that construction to the point where we can manipulate at will the terms of the gendering* (p.119).

As lesbian/queer-identified women themselves, my clients have embraced the politics of resisting

heteronormativity, homonormativity, and the hegemony of the gender binary. They celebrate and stand by the gender and sexual transgressions of others and understand that their own existence and performance of identity represent transgressive versions of gender and sexuality. It is not hard to understand then that, when faced with ambivalence and uncertainty about their partners' gender transgressions, they experience intense shame and guilt as they believe they are somehow not queer enough, progressive enough, or fluid enough. In effect, by trying to resist the essentialisms of heteronormativity and the gender binary, other norms are produced. These are norms that construct monolithic constitutions of queerness and of transgression. These are the norms that can have my clients caught between a rock and a hard place.

Through consultation with several women partnered with FTM transpeople, I (JT) have been moved by the complexity of their stories. Sitting alongside feelings of loss and pain, these women have also revealed counterplots full of hope and strength. The guilt and enticements to over-responsibility for the making or breaking of their relationships have been met with declarations of personal independence and commitments to relationships as projects in collaboration. The struggles over biology and body parts have given birth to confident claims to sexual pleasure and erotically meaningful relationships. And the fear stirred up by the potential loss of identity has rallied the clarity and courage requisite for the performance of preferred identities in the face of colonising cultural forces. These women and the transmen they love have contributed immensely to my commitment to exposing and interrogating binaries wherever they may try to trap us.

By writing this article, we hope to contribute to conversations in the field of therapy and community work that may make our work as practitioners more relevant to those whose partners live beyond or between the gender binary or who are transitioning from one gender to another. Can we find ways to accompany people on these journeys? And, in the process, can our work contribute to challenging and questioning cultural norms?

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of a collective effort among the three authors as they provide support and inspiration to each other in their efforts to challenge the gender binary in their personal and professional lives. While Julie functioned as the primary author, Dave assisted in the integration of queer theory with the practice-based material and in the editing. In addition to providing her personal reflections, Lorraine contributed to the editing of the final paper. The ideas and experiences of all three are embedded within the work represented in this paper.

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