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Being Transgender: The Experience of Transgender Identity Development

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Being Transgender: The Experience of Transgender Identity Development

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This article is based on a grounded theory analysis of interviews with transgender-identified people from different regions of the United States. Participants held a variety of gender identities under the transgender rubric (e.g., crossdresser, transman, transwoman, butch lesbian). Interviews explored the participants' experiences in arriving at their gender identity. This article presents three clusters of findings related to the common processes of transgender identity development. This process was made possible by accessibility of transgender narratives that injected hope into what was a childhood replete with criticism and scrutiny. Ultimately, participants came to their identities through balancing a desire for authenticity with demands of necessity—meaning that they weighed their internal gender experience with considerations about their available resources, coping skills, and the consequences of gender transitions. The implications of these findings are considered in terms of their contribution to gender theory, research, and clinical support for transgender clients.

KEYWORDS transgender, gender, qualitative, gender identity development, identity, grounded theory

The current article presents a grounded theory study focused on under-standing the experience of gender for transgender people of differing sexes and sexual orientations within the United States. Although there are many transgender identities this research does not explore (e.g., hijras in India, fa'afafine in Samoa, two-spirit Native American and First Nations people), this study identifies the commonalities that people with a variety of transgender identities experience as they develop those identities within a modern-day U.S. context.

To discuss the intersections of gender, sex, and sexual orientation, one must first delineate these terms, which often are conflated in general dis-course or mistakenly thought to determine one another (e.g., Cole, Denny, Eyler, & Samons, 2000). Although it is not possible to discuss these terms in depth in this article because the terms themselves are under dispute (e.g., Monro, 2005), brief working definitions can be useful. *Sex* refers to a person's biological characteristics. Across most cultures today, people are categorized at birth as either male or female—a designation typically based on the genitalia they possess (e.g., West & Fenstermaker, 1995). However, intersex people may present with both male and female sex characteristics, and many babies born with intersex genitalia undergo surgery to construct genitals that are unambiguously male or female (Chase, 1998; Fausto-Sterling, 1993). *Gender*, in contrast, is a construct based on socially accepted ide-als of what it means to be male and female (cf. Unger & Crawford, 1993). Most societies structure gender by designating two categories, masculine and feminine, which are assumed to naturally emerge from dichotomous sex cat-egories and correspond to the qualities attributed to each sex (cf. Butler, 1999). *Transgender* is an umbrella term that refers to individuals whose gen-der presentation is so different from ideals for the sex assigned to them at birth that it defies traditional notions of what it means to be male or female, and it encompasses identities such as transmen (or FtM), transwomen (or MtF), butch women, and crossdressers (e.g., Denny et al., 2007; Feinberg, 1996) and is contrasted with being *cisgender,* or having a traditional gender presentation. *Sexual orientation* denotes sexual attractions to others or the lack thereof. An understanding of these three terms as independent will be instrumental in following consideration of transgender identity development.

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Transgender individuals often lack models of nontraditional gender to aid them in their identity development, and some (e.g., Bornstein, 1994; Feinberg, 1996) described believing that they were alone in their gender struggles due to the paucity of public acknowledgment. This lack of infor-mation appears to be in both public and educational sectors. For instance, a study by Macgillivray and Jennings (2008) found that textbooks used in teachers' training rarely defined transgender or addressed experiences of

transgender people. Other researchers (cf. Ringo, 2002) found that public representation of transgender people had both positive and negative implications. Transgender participants credited autobiographical or scholarly books and documentaries about transgender people and online newsgroups or journals as positive educational resources. However, nearly one third of the participants emphasized the inhibitory impact that negative portrayals in the media had on their coming-out processes. These studies suggest that the inadequate representation of transgender is not simply an issue of quantity but one of quality as well.

The psychological literature does not yet contain identity development models for each identity that falls under the rubric *transgender*, but models of transsexual and butch lesbian identity development have been put forth. Devor's (2004) foundational research on transsexual identity development described 14 stages of identity development. The initial three stages were marked by anxiety, confusion, and attempts to understand one's gender via interpersonal comparisons of one's originally assigned gender and sex with others. These stages often were characterized by interpersonal discomfort, difficulty recognizing oneself in available gender identities, and explorations of identities that support variation in gender presentation (e.g., lesbian identity). The next three stages described a process of discovering transsexualism, followed by confusion and comparisons between oneself and this identity. Often people conducted online research during this period and sought out relationships with transsexual people. Then, an initial tolerance of transsexual identity developed, though there tended to be a delay before experiencing a complete acceptance of this identity while people tested how well it fit their sense of themselves and others' perceptions (stages 7, 8, 9). Following an acceptance of this identity was a similar delay while people decided if they would like to transition or not (stages 10, 11). Following a transition to a new gender, people worked to accept, integrate, and develop pride in that gender identity (stages 12, 13, 14). This process, learning to live and relate to others with a new gender identity, involved learning to manage stigma and discrimination, to integrate their identities, and, ultimately, to engage in advocacy.

In 2005, Hiestand and Levitt independently developed a 6-stage model of butch gender identity development, which shared many aspects with the Devor (2004) transsexual model. Their first stage was focused on gender conflict, isolation, and confusion related to a feeling that one was essentially different from other children of the same sex. Stage two marked a collision of gender conformity and sexual orientation pressures that tended to intensify in high school. Stage three entailed a period when women sought out lesbians and became increasingly comfortable with their sexual orientation, although their gender differences remained unnamed. In the next stage, the participants described accepting a lesbian identity and beginning a period of more intense gender exploration, usually after coming into contact with butch-identified lesbians. By stage six, the women described a pride in their

lesbian identities and an acceptance of a butch identity. They reached a stage in which their sexual orientation and gender identities were integrated with each other and also among their other identities (e.g., race, gender, familial). Both the Hiestand/Levitt and Devor models shared initial periods of distress, confusion, and gradually testing out identities until the labels and gender enactments that best fit were identified. These processes were highly individualized, and the ways participants decided to label and enact their identity were understood largely in relation to the participants' sense of authenticity, that is, their sense of correspondence between their internal sense of their gender with their behaviors and gender expressions, and the meanings of these identities within their social contexts.

A number of other qualitative research projects also have documented some of the experiences emphasized in this research. The occurrence of early childhood harassment and invalidation for transgender people (Cashore & Tuason, 2009; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1999; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004) has been found repeatedly. Qualitative research also has highlighted that stark differences may exist in the ways one sees oneself and the expectations or stigma from others—and that transgender people can change their self-presentation for different social purposes, such as self-protection (Cashore & Tuason, 2009; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004), not entirely unlike cisgender people. Autobiographical writings of transgender people describe similar experiences of working through societal expectations and attributions around gender to find an identity that seems most congruent (e.g., Cromwell, 1999; Green, 2004; Kailey, 2005).

Survey research has suggested that transgender individuals report feeling positively about their transgender identities (72% report feeling "extremely positive" and 25% report feeling "somewhat positive"), and that claiming a transgender identity provides the means for understanding and conceptualizing their experiences (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011). Respondents reported that transgender identities allowed them an increased sense of congruence with themselves, personal growth, and enhanced personal relationships. Their participants also reported having a more complex understanding of gender, increased empathy with others, and experiencing personal growth and resiliency as a result of living as a transgender person. The similar themes in this literature suggest that there may be developmental experiences common across transgender identities that could be useful to articulate.

PRESENT STUDY OBJECTIVES

The article adds to a body of work conducted by Levitt and her colleagues in which gender identities that are associated with LGBT communities (i.e., butch, femme, bear, leathermen) have been explored in terms of their process of development as well as their distinct meanings and functions

across different interpersonal contexts (e.g., Hiestand, Horne, & Levitt, 2008; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Levitt, 2006; Levitt, Gerrish & Hiestand, 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004, 2005; Levitt, Puckett, Ippolito, & Horne, 2012; Manley, Levitt, & Mosher, 2007; Mosher, Levitt & Manely, 2006). The present study was an examination of the experience of being transgender for adults in the United States. The division of qualitative research projects into multiple papers or chapters of a book, to represent different themes in the findings, is not uncommon given the richness of the findings produced by these methods (e.g., Rennie, 1992, 1994a, 1994b). While a second paper has focused on the ways the transgender participants dealt with minority stressors in their lives after they had assumed a transgender identity (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), the current article explores the formative experiences entailed in the process of transgender identity development.

METHOD

Participants

This study included 17 self-identified transgender participants (though 18 people were interviewed for the study, one interview was lost due to a malfunctioning digital voice recorder). Although all the participants identified as transgender, many endorsed a variety of different sex and gender identities. Also, they varied in their desire for and use of surgical and hormonal interventions to alter their assigned birth sex. This diversity is valued in qualitative research as researchers seek to develop understandings that are as rich and encompassing as possible. Table 1 shows the participants' age, race, region, and sex/gender identity.

Researchers

The researchers were a White, Jewish, femme-identified, lesbian clinical psychologist and a White Italian American bisexual graduate student in psychology. Both are cisgender. The first researcher has conducted research on LGBT communities and identities, with a particular focus on butch-femme lesbians, and has methodological expertise in grounded theory—having taught graduate courses and led professional trainings on this method. The second researcher has been involved in LGBT advocacy and has completed a certificate in women's studies.

Procedure

RECRUITMENT

A process of theoretical sampling was used, as is typical in grounded theory, in which recruitment efforts centered on obtaining participants with

TABLE 1 Participant demographic information

Id #	Age	Race	Employment	Residence	Transgender Identities
1	18	White	Student	Memphis, TN	Transman (FtM)
2	28	White	Unemployed	Memphis, TN	Transsexual female (MtF)
3	43	Biracial	Artist	Memphis, TN	Transman (FtM)
4	28	White	Carpenter	Memphis, TN	Male (FtM)
5	51	White	Retired	Memphis, TN	Transsexual female (MtF)
6	48	White	Unemployed veterinarian	(small city) FL	Tranny boi or Queer (FtM)
7	36	White	Health researcher	Atlanta, GA	Male (FtM)
8	44	African American	Unemployed, minister	Atlanta, GA	Male or Transman (FtM)
9	43	White	On disability, Unemployed	Santa Fe, NM	Male (FtM)
10	58	White	Clinical psychologist	Atlanta, GA	Transman, possibly intersex (FtM)
11	42	White	Unemployed editor	Atlanta, GA	Female or Transwoman (MtF)
12	49	African American	Paralegal, student	Philadelphia, PA	Intersex female (raised male) (MtF)
13	31	White	Barista, Event coordinator	Atlanta, GA	Transwoman (MtF)
14	32	African American	Community organizer	Atlanta, GA	Male (FtM)
15	63	White	Retired counseling psychologist, Writer/pastor	(small town) PA	Male (FtM)
16	44	White	Sherriff	(rural) KY	Crossdressing male
17	56	African American	Photographer, Filmmaker	San Francisco, CA	Butch woman

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a range of gender identities and experiences. In this study, there was a concentrated effort to seek out a variety of transgender identities and also to recruit people of color. Participants were recruited from various LGBT organizations. Advertisements were circulated to a local transgender group, a local GLBT community center, as well as to two national support Web sites for transgender people of color. In addition, one participant posted the online advertisement to additional transgender community Web sites, and two interviewees were recruited through the first author's personal contacts. To qualify for participation, respondents were required to be over 18 years of age and to identify as transgender. Participants received $20 in return for their participation.

Qualitative Method

INTERVIEWS

The first eight interviews were conducted in person at a location agreed upon by both the interviewer and the interviewee, and the others were interviewed by phone. The semistructured interview protocol was adapted from studies of other LGBT communities by this research group (described previously); however, questions were adapted to the participants' different identities and were refined as the interviews continued. The central question of the interview was: What does your gender (being transgender) mean to you? Questions were asked to explore how their transgender identity developed and influenced their relationships.

GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS

Grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is a method of study based on the inductive categorization of text in order to develop a theoretical model. This method of analysis is designed to develop rather than to validate a theory (Fassinger, 2005). The researchers based their approach to this method and their epistemology on the work by David Rennie and his colleagues (see Rennie, Philips, & Quataro, 1987). This approach views the analysis as rooted in the hermeneutic interpretation of interviews (Rennie, 2000).

Also, this approach has borrowed from phenomenology the process of initially dividing the transcribed interviews into *meaning units* (Giorgi, 1985) that each convey one main idea related to the experience of gender. Using the process of constant comparison, these units were compared to one another and organized into descriptive categories to reflect similarities in their meanings. Then these initial categories were compared to one another, in turn, and grouped into higher-order categories according to their common meanings. This process continued until a hierarchy of categories

was developed, and, finally, one core category was formed. This core cate-
gory reflected the central meaning in the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
Interviews were collected until the point of *saturation* was reached—in other
words, when the introduction of new transcripts into analysis no longer
resulted in new categories and these data appeared to be redundant. In this
analysis, saturation occurred after the 15th interview was added, and the last
two interviews did not result in new meanings.

   The researchers kept a log of their beliefs and perceptions with regard
to gender, as well as method-related and coding decisions, called *memoing*
in grounded theory method. By explicitly acknowledging their biases and
addressing them when able, the researchers attempted to limit their influence
on the data collection and analysis.

CREDIBILITY CHECKS

Three credibility checks were used to assess the thoroughness of the
interviews and analysis.

1. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they had any
   thoughts about their experience of gender that were not discussed over
   the course of the interview. This question served as a check that data
   collection was complete. Also, they were asked about their comfort level
   in interviewing with someone who was not transgender-identified. All
   participants expressed comfort with the interviewer, and three reported
   that they thought their explanations might have been less in-depth with
   a transgender interviewer because they would have assumed that the
   interviewer shared much of their language and experiences.
2. To add to the rigor of the grounded theory analysis, consensus between
   the two investigators provided evidence that the interpretations of the
   data could be seen by more than one person. The two investigators met
   weekly for a period of 2 years and discussed the creation of meaning
   units and categories together. They came to agreement about the analysis
   not by trying to override one another but by seeking interpretations that
   made sense to both parties and by including multiple interpretations when
   helpful.
3. Finally, all participants were asked to review the study findings and pro-
   vide feedback on the results. Those who responded heard a summary
   of the findings (a description of the clusters and categories therein) in a
   telephone conversation with one of the investigators. They were asked
   to rate how accurately each cluster represented the experience of being
   transgender on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very well*). Also,
   they were invited to voice any concerns they may have had about what
   needed to be stressed more or less in the findings.

Of the participants included in the analysis, nine provided feedback and the other eight could not be reached for comment. Participants' feedback overall was very positive; when asked if the findings overall represented the experiences discussed in their interview, the nine participants gave an average rating of 6.6 ($SD = 0.7$) on a 7-point scale. Furthermore, when asked if the findings contradicted the experiences discussed in their interview, these participants gave an average rating of 1.5 ($SD = 0.7$), indicating minimal contradiction. Specific feedback with regard to each cluster and the core category is discussed in the following section.

RESULTS

The hierarchy that resulted had eight levels and included 1,275 meaning units. The levels at the top of the hierarchy will be reviewed in this section because they describe the main findings in the analysis. These levels were labeled as follows: (a) the *core category* was uppermost level and reflected the central theme expressed across all interviewees, (b) seven *clusters* were the categories just below the core category, and (c) *categories* referred to the third level of the hierarchy. A listing of the core category, cluster, and category titles can be found in Table 2.

The results section begins with descriptions of three clusters followed by the core category. The remaining four clusters that are discussed in a companion article (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) focus on participants' experiences within different social contexts and relationships. The following language is used to describe the number of participants who contributed units to the clusters and categories: *all* denotes 17 interviewees; *most* denotes 15–16, *many* signifies 9–14, *some* indicates five to eight, and *few* signifies that two to four participants contributed an idea to that category or cluster. As the participants were not asked to comment on all the thoughts that emerged for other participants but described issues that were salient within their own experience of being transgender, these numbers are best understood as an assessment of how many participants spontaneously referred to a specific experience as a significant to them.

Cluster 1: From childhood treated like damaged goods: Pressure to be closeted about gender can lead to self-hatred and isolation; all while under others' scrutiny

This cluster included data from all 17 participants as they described pressures that had been placed on them since childhood to conform to cisgender ideals. These pressures often were unrelenting and tended to come from multiple sources, both distal (e.g., media) and proximal (e.g., family members). Two categories describe their nature and effects in more depth.

TABLE 2 Cluster and category titles including number of contributing interviewees

Core Category	Cluster	Category
The struggle to develop color vision in a monochromatic world: the experience of being transgender entails (1) developing constructs to represent one's gender authentically; (2) finding ways to communicate one's gender to others and be seen; and (3) balancing these needs with my need to survive under discriminatory political, social, and economic conditions. (n = 17)	1. From childhood treated like damaged goods: Pressure to be closeted about gender can lead to self-hatred and isolation; all while under others' scrutiny. (17)	1.1 Hiding or ignoring my true self: Early pressures to conform to traditional gender were traumatizing to my gender development and could lead to using a means of escape from inner turmoil. (15) 1.2 The danger of isolation amid stares: Transgender people often are treated as objects of curiosity, and the fear of gender nonconformity is manifested not only in transphobic but also in homophobic terms. (14)
	2. The power of language in fostering acceptance: In hearing transgender narratives and becoming aware of social processes that enforce traditional gender standards, the possibilities for self-exploration expand. (16)	2.1 Affirming communities can be life-saving: They provide safety and support in exploring gender and promote self-acceptance by countering transphobia and by transforming beauty image. (16) 2.2 Language can shape gender formation process: It creates more possibilities but also carries a political history and generates social and personal expectations that might not fit. (10)
	3. Identity formation is an ongoing process of balancing necessity (safety, how much I can cope with, resources, legalities) and authenticity; with purposeful shifts may come unexpected ones. (17)	3.1 Identifying in my preferred gender feels right because it feels authentic: Gender exploration was essential to my happiness and can undergo multiple shifts. (17) 3.2 Physical transition is a process of acting on the truth about myself: Balancing health risks, costs (financial and social), and personal comfort to bring body in line with mind (resulting in full transition, some, or no changes). (15) 3.3 Sexual orientation may shift with gender identity: In deconstructing gender and aligning my gender presentation with my inner sense of self, I might also re-evaluate my sexual desires. (12)

Note. LGBT = gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender.

CATEGORY 1.1. HIDING OR IGNORING MY TRUE SELF: EARLY PRESSURES TO CONFORM TO TRADITIONAL GENDER WERE TRAUMATIZING TO MY GENDER DEVELOPMENT AND COULD LEAD TO USING A MEANS OF ESCAPE FROM INNER TURMOIL

The 15 participants' experiences reflected within this category related a long period of hiding or ignoring their inner struggles with gender identity. Many participants ($n = 12$) described their childhoods as a time wrought with confusion because they did not understand why adults (i.e., family members and teachers) were treating them as someone with the expected characteristics of their birth sex and pressuring them to behave in accordance with those assumptions. However, a few participants ($n = 3$) of a lower socioeconomic status reported more pressure to conform to cisgender presentations in public situations than within their families, who were more concerned with maintaining financial stability than pressuring their children about gender. Although participants described their behavior (judged as inappropriate for their sex) as that which came naturally to them, a sense of being different was inculcated most strongly by peers who harassed or ostracized them.

> I think it was like kindergarten or first grade. . . . And . . . some older girls came up to me and were like, "We hear you wanna be a boy and that you prayed to God that you were gonna be a boy!" Like, I just thought, "Oh well, what's wrong with that? What's the big deal?" . . . But then there was like, giggling and stuff and then other girls came to see me . . . and were like, "You're the one who wants to be a boy!" And I realized, like, "Oh God . . . There's something wrong me." So now I need to, I need to drive that under. (P #07)

Although these social pressures could include verbal taunts and social alienation, they could also include being physically threatened or beaten.

Many participants ($n = 12$) reported that as pressure to conform to cisgender standards was placed on them, they began to believe that their gender was dysfunctional, which sometimes led to self-hatred and profound loneliness. These interviewees reported long periods of hiding or ignoring their true feelings about gender and trying to adapt to the expected role of their birth sex for fear of being ridiculed. Often, enacting this traditional gender role took a tremendous amount of effort. As one transman recounted his persistent and largely unsuccessful efforts to conform to standards of femininity through childhood and into adulthood, he said:

> It just didn't ever feel right—for reasons I could never explain to myself . . . but I did not realize that I felt like a man, like I just couldn't . . . it was just completely traumatic. I think I drove that wanting to be a boy stuff so far down inside me that I just would refuse to look at it . . . it's

just dawning on me now, I *wanted to* try! Like, why wouldn't it work for me? . . . Oh God, it was so maddening! (P #07)

Even at the time of his interview, which was years after the experience he described, he was realizing just how fervently he had suppressed his gender struggle as a young person.

As this struggle to stifle their natural inclinations and adopt a more cisgender presentation persisted, many participants ($n = 9$) described using various ways to escape the pain of their internal battle. A few participants ($n = 4$) turned to healthy distractions such as school, work, or other extracurricular activities. One crossdressing participant described how his involvement in theater allowed him to be part of the social fabric but escape expectations of masculinity:

> I got involved in theatre because in theatre you could be somebody you weren't. And so I, I played all the character parts, right, the funny parts, and I made everybody laugh . . . I could find, find a place on earth by making everybody laugh. (P #16)

This participant thought he could be accepted only when he was in character because an authentic self-presentation was not acceptable.

A few other participants ($n = 3$) used drug and alcohol addictions as an attempt to numb themselves of this emotional tumult. For example, one participant said, "Drinking was a useful escape. I mean, 'cause you just didn't have to deal. . . . [I shut off] to the pain of it all (P #07)." This participant's drug and alcohol addictions went on for years, and it was not until he achieved sobriety that he was able to fully engage himself in an exploration of his true gender.

CATEGORY 1.2: THE DANGER OF ISOLATION AMID STARES: TRANSGENDER PEOPLE OFTEN ARE TREATED AS OBJECTS OF CURIOSITY, AND THE FEAR OF GENDER NONCONFORMITY IS MANIFESTED NOT ONLY IN TRANSPHOBIC BUT ALSO IN HOMOPHOBIC TERMS

Within this category, 14 interviewees described the gaze of others as a potential sign of danger or rejection. Furthermore, some participants ($n = 8$) reported that they were discriminated against on the basis of homophobic prejudice that was conflated with the fear of gender nonconformity. In any case, the two forms of discrimination often were conflated, and participants experienced both. For example, a queer participant recalled when, as an adolescent, his peers insulted him using a heterosexist slur. He said, "That was the first time I heard the word 'Lezzy' [when my peers called me one] and I didn't, I didn't know what it meant—I knew, I knew that it meant that they

hated me (P #06)." This participant could clearly sense the malicious intent of the word, and this emotional meaning endured, influencing feelings about his gender and sexual orientation.

Many participants ($n = 10$) also spoke of how, because people generally do not see gender outside of cisgender norms, others consider them to be freaks. This reaction could be rejecting, alienating, or idealizing. One participant experienced this treatment at the hand of a health care professional; he explained, "I still got the feeling that she [a doctor] saw me as—um, some sort of exotic being. . . . Um, I think she was scientifically fascinated with me, but I don't think she ever really saw me as a human being (P #17)." In medical situations, where many people might feel vulnerable, this dehumanization could heighten vulnerability for transgender people and, in fact, led a few participants ($n = 3$) to avoid seeking health care.

In addition, some participants ($n = 7$) offered accounts of being treated as sexual objects by people who were interested only in their bodies, an experience that made many wary of potential romantic partners. Also, a few interviewees ($n = 4$) reported that they sometimes encountered people who dismissed their gender identities (e.g., assumed they were drag queens or prostitutes instead of women or transgender women). In contrast, a few interviewees ($n = 2$) described people treating them as a sort of superhero because they had come out as transgender and survived amid discrimination. Though this treatment was intended to be positive, participants felt embarrassed by the attention because they felt that they had dealt with their life circumstances as any human being would. Participants were not only objectified through words but could even be debased through the curious gaze of an onlooker. One female-identified participant described this experience in chilling terms:

> I just felt like . . . I'd always be stared at . . . it was just like, extremely oppressive. . . . It was like I had no, I had no identity . . . there was just like a, a photograph of me that kinda walked around and people laughed at. . . . And I mean . . . there's always the knowledge that a stare can turn into a laugh, can turn into a fist, can turn into a gun. You know, like it, that's a pretty easy move between things. (P #02)

Her sense of safety in public contexts was disrupted by constantly being looked at as something less than human, and this experience made it difficult to form genuine connections with others.

When asked to rate how well this cluster represents the experience of being transgender on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very well*), nine participants gave it an average score of 5.7 ($SD = 0.6$). In general, participants strongly agreed with the content of this cluster. However, they reminded the researchers that this pressure and scrutiny could end for those who began

passing successfully within a desired and socially recognized gender (i.e., male or female).

Cluster 2: The power of language in fostering acceptance: In hearing transgender narratives and becoming aware of social processes that enforce traditional gender standards, the possibilities for self-exploration expand

Within this cluster, 16 participants described how crucial it was for their gender formation process to hear transgender narratives and find safe spaces to express their gender. Affirming language and positive social support tended to build on each other to help bolster participants' self-esteem and grant them courage to explore more comfortable gender identities. The benefits (and limitations) of these forces are discussed within each cluster summary.

CATEGORY 2.1: AFFIRMING COMMUNITIES CAN BE LIFE-SAVING: THEY PROVIDE SAFETY AND SUPPORT IN EXPLORING GENDER AND PROMOTE SELF-ACCEPTANCE BY COUNTERING TRANSPHOBIA AND BY TRANSFORMING BEAUTY IMAGE

This category consisted of data from 16 participants who spoke of their experiences in finding social groups (e.g., punk, goth, drag queens) that were supportive of nontraditional gender expression. Although talk shows or the media were frequently mentioned as an initial exposure to the concept of transgender, it was upon finding their first affirming social group that many interviewees ($n = 9$) found the courage to explore their own gender. These groups provided safe spaces for participants to experiment with different gender presentation, without feeling the vulnerability they had felt in exploring gender presentation within mainstream spaces (if they were able to do so at all). Furthermore, in finding communities that were transgender-affirming, many participants ($n = 11$) came to understand transphobia as a product of gender socialization and a manifestation of people's fear of difference. A few participants ($n = 3$) also reported that the transgender-positive community they had found also endorsed different standards of beauty than those held in mainstream culture and valued the redefinition of gender and sex. This ability to redefine established beauty standards was another important step in accepting their gender and gender expression.

In addition, some interviewees ($n = 7$) described how, upon finding a community of transgender people, they realized that they were not alone in their gender struggles. For example, an African American transman described how he was not particularly interested in seeking physical transition until he became integrated into a community of transmen of color, many of whom were transitioning or had transitioned. When asked why being in

this particular community brought him to a point where he was ready to transition, he responded:

> I could see people who looked like me who had done it. Like, I mean before the only examples I had were White folks or White guys who had [transitioned] . . . we didn't have anything in common outside of our education. But . . . seeing people who . . . came from a similar experience. . . . It was like, "oh yeah, no I *don't* have to be lonely . . . and it's not just the . . . very highly educated kids that are doing this". . . . But you know, I think that for me it was really important to see . . . the range of people of color who was, who were being able to do it [transition], um, that just was, just inspiring to me. I mean it was like, yeah, they can do it, so can I. (P #15)

By finding support and mentorship from people that he related to on a level that transcended gender and education, he realized that he could present his gender more genuinely and still lead a fulfilling life. Another participant spoke of his experience in finding a LGBT youth group where, after years of ostracism and harassment in school, he found people who did not judge him based on his gender presentation and who shared some of his experiences of harassment. He said:

> P: I never had friends until I went there. It was a lifesaver . . . . I mean that quite seriously.
> I: Mmhmm, what does that mean, when you say "lifesaver?"
> P: I had gotten to the point of having suicidal ideation. (P #01)

This participant went on to describe how his ability to make friends in this LGBT youth group helped him navigate other social situations as well. He explained that because he had people who loved and supported him regardless of his gender presentation, he developed the confidence to fight gender-based discrimination that he experienced in other settings.

CATEGORY 2.2: LANGUAGE CAN SHAPE THE GENDER FORMATION PROCESS: IT CREATES MORE POSSIBILITIES BUT ALSO CARRIES A POLITICAL HISTORY AND GENERATES SOCIAL AND PERSONAL EXPECTATIONS THAT MIGHT NOT FIT

Many participants ($n = 10$) described that learning the term *transgender* and hearing transgender people's experiences was pivotal in their gender development processes. In hearing these transgender narratives, they realized that a category did indeed exist that represented their experiences of gender and validated their existence. For some ($n = 8$), that previous exposure included narratives of other nontraditionally gendered people, such as butch- or transsexual-identified individuals. For example, a queer-identified participant explained how his butch identity did not fit because it was

predicated on a female sex (i.e., being a butch woman), but at the same time, he did not see a transsexual identity as being appropriate because it implied intent to transition physically or identify completely with a male sex. He stated:

> Before that [transgender] conference I hadn't really thought about [the comparison between] transgender or transsexual . . . it was kinda like waking up. . . . Um, it legitimized, sort of legitimized being in queer space. Yeah and you know it, it's, it also like, gave words, names to things that maybe I had thought about, but when you think about stuff without words then they're just kinda loose and fuzzy. . . . Sometimes naming is confining and then sometimes it also legitimizes stuff. (P #06)

In learning about the diversity of transgender experience, his experience of gender was validated, and he had found an identity that fit.

Some participants ($n = 7$) spoke of how language (and thus gender labels) held different meanings across communities and how the fluidity of these meanings caused them to define themselves in relation to their context. For example, a few participants ($n = 4$) stated that they preferred to maintain a transgender identity even if they were passing as another sex because this identity preserved a piece of their history and was politically empowering. Furthermore, a few participants ($n = 4$) identified under the general category of transgender as well as in a second gender identity that more specifically represented their self-concept (butch, crossdressing, queer, intersex). At the same time, identifying as transgender did not make sense in mainstream settings because that identity was not understood and could invite hostility; in these situations, participants were more likely to use a traditional sex identity (i.e., male, female). In addition, being in racial minority or feminist contexts sometimes influenced participants' gender identity. For example, a few participants ($n = 3$) avoided identifying as transgender because within their communities this term was associated with a White, misogynistic, or middle-class movement.

The average rating that nine participants gave this cluster on a 1–7 scale was 5.9 ($SD = 1.4$), suggesting strong endorsement, with some variability. In their feedback, a few participants ($n = 4$) said that the language and concepts proffered by the transgender movement might resonate less with older participants, with those in rural settings where transgender community was unavailable, or with those who identified using traditional sex identities. As a participant said in his initial interview, "The question for me is not, you know, a choice of aligning with who I am [male], it's a question of how do I deal with the fact that my anatomy tells people I'm somebody else [female] (P #16)?" He did not have a desire for recognition as transgender (e.g., build an identity as transgender or as a transman) but sought to be recognized as male.

Cluster 3: Identity formation is an ongoing process of balancing authenticity and necessity (e.g., safety, how much I can cope with, resources, legalities); with purposeful shifts may come unexpected ones

Participants ($N = 17$) generally portrayed the formation of their gender identity as a continuous process in which they examined and reexamined their notions of gender and negotiated these ideas with their own sense of self. Decisions made during this process about gender presentation, identification, or physical transition involved finding an idiosyncratic balance between one's sense of gender authenticity with safety and social and material considerations. Furthermore, shifts in gender identity often resulted in new understanding about oneself and one's gender and sometimes were accompanied by shifts in sexual orientation.

CATEGORY 3.1: IDENTIFYING IN MY PREFERRED GENDER FEELS RIGHT BECAUSE IT FEELS AUTHENTIC: GENDER EXPLORATION WAS ESSENTIAL TO MY HAPPINESS AND CAN UNDERGO MULTIPLE SHIFTS

Within this category, all 17 participants described how their gender identity at the time of the interview fit the way they naturally behaved. Most interviewees ($n = 15$) reported that having this sense of authenticity increased their self-confidence. At the same time, a few participants ($n = 4$) discussed how with their gender identity came new pressures to fit expected standards (e.g., pressure to be thin that comes with presenting as a woman). In addition, a few participants ($n = 3$) explained how their mannerisms and perspectives did not fit into traditional gender identities (man and woman), which they felt necessitated either choosing one to identify in or finding an identity in between these categories. One transman spoke of why he identified as a man by saying, "Society gives you two choices. . . . This [identity] is the lesser of two evils. . . . I still feel like the way I look physically and the way I present [as a man] doesn't match my mind, but it matches so much closer than it did when people perceived me as female (P #03)."

Conversely, another participant lived and presented his gender comfortably within the traditional expectations for his birth (male) sex on a daily basis. However, to live genuinely, he needed the freedom to switch back and forth from his everyday masculine identity to another, feminine identity. His gender experience was not one of existing between two genders, like a few participants ($n = 3$) had described themselves. Instead, he described his gender in this way: "Each personality [the masculine and the feminine] is that much more masculine, or that much more feminine. . . . So it's like—a pendulum. OK? It swings from all boy to really girly . . . —and there's no medium. I mean it keeps swingin' (P #17)." Most participants ($n = 16$) spoke of how their gender identity underwent multiple shifts throughout their life.

For example, some female-born participants ($n = 7$) were satisfied having a butch identity for years before they decided to identify as men or transmen, and one male-born participant was most comfortable identifying as androgynous or as a third gender before deciding to identify as a transwoman. In continuing to explore themselves and their gender, these participants decided which transgender or sex identity was most true for them.

CATEGORY 3.2: PHYSICAL TRANSITION IS A PROCESS OF ACTING ON THE TRUTH ABOUT MYSELF: BALANCING HEALTH RISKS, COSTS (FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL), AND PERSONAL COMFORT TO BRING MY BODY IN LINE WITH MY MIND (RESULTING IN FULL TRANSITION, SOME, OR NO CHANGES)

The data included in this category came from 15 interviewees and depicted the process of physical transition as an act of balancing their personal sense of what body-gender identity combination best fit them with social, legal, and financial considerations. Participants varied greatly in their level of comfort with their birth sex characteristics and fell anywhere along a continuum of identifying strongly with their non-birth sex (e.g., their sense of authenticity was contingent upon having physical characteristics of their non-birth sex) to identifying strongly with their birth sex but also with the gender traditionally assigned to the another sex (e.g., they were comfortable with some or all of their birth sex characteristics but expressed a gender presentation typical of another sex). Thus they had different goals with regard to physical transition (and, indeed, three participants regarded any physical transition as being inconsistent with their identity). In addition, participants varied in terms of when they decided to make physical modifications as identity shifts, and physical transitions were not always decided on simultaneously. For example, one participant identified as a new sex for years before considering physical transition. Another participant, however, underwent a physical transition to a male body years before he considered adopting a male identity, as he was certain of his male sexual identity before he was certain that he would be comfortable with a male gender identity.

Regardless of what their specific physical goals were, many participants ($n = 10$) viewed decisions regarding physical transition as considerations of how to bring their body in line with their internal experience. These participants explained that their self-confidence increased with transition because they felt more congruent with their self-presentation. In addition, many participants ($n = 14$) described taking into account social consequences in making decisions about physical or identity transition. For example, some ($n = 9$) were motivated to undergo physical transition partly because looking like another sex led others to treat them in a manner more consistent with their gender. As one transman spoke about his pursuit of physical transition, he explained that one of his many reasons was to help ensure that he was perceived by others as male. When asked why, he replied:

> Um—mostly, so that other people aren't confused. . . . I just want to be (participant's name), the guy. I don't want [to be treated as] (participant's name) the transsexual, you know . . . I just want to be (participant's name). And—I want people to treat me like that! . . . So in order to be treated that way, I need to appear that way. (P #09)

Being that this participant's demeanor naturally was masculine, if others perceived him as a male, then interactions would proceed more smoothly than they would have if he was perceived to be female. At the same time, legal and financial considerations (e.g., Does state law allow me to change the sex marked on my driver's license so I can provide documentation safely, and if so, what surgeries are required before I am allowed to do this? Can I afford surgery, even if I'm fired for transitioning?) also were paramount in interviewees' transition decisions. As such, the transition process could take years. For few of these participants ($n = 4$), financial barriers to transition were exacerbated by their difficulty in finding work, while, at the same time, their need for physical procedures (e.g., facial feminization surgery) made it more difficult for these participants to be hired, binding them into a vicious cycle. One female-identified participant discussed how she was constantly self-conscious about her appearance and frustrated by her lack of financial resources for surgery. She stated:

> It comes back to my appearance and my, if I know my appearance is all feminine, then I'm gonna feel totally feminine. . . . And just that I know, I, I, I know I, I can improve myself a little better if I just had the extra money. . . . I'd pass completely all the time and I wouldn't have to have this inner, inner conflict and awareness about my passing, you know, what are they gonna [think], you know, I mean, do I have to act a certain way now? Put up my defenses? (P #05)

Because she had little control over many aspects of her situation (e.g., physique, job discrimination), she struggled to maintain constant control of her physical appearance (e.g., hair, makeup, clothing) and mannerisms in order to protect herself.

CATEGORY 3.3: SEXUAL ORIENTATION MAY SHIFT WITH GENDER IDENTITY: IN DECONSTRUCTING GENDER AND ALIGNING MY GENDER PRESENTATION WITH MY INNER SENSE OF SELF, I MIGHT ALSO REEVALUATE MY SEXUAL DESIRES

The 12 participants in this category revealed how their sexual orientation was influenced by their gender identity journey. Many of them ($n = 9$) spoke of how shifting into a more authentic gender identity allowed them to take a more comfortable role during sexual intimacy, and this, in turn, opened them up to more sexual possibilities. One male-identified participant explained

how he was always attracted to men but faced a major challenge that prevented him from dating men prior to transition. He said, "I couldn't be a man myself . . . as a man having sex . . . and I could not love them as a man would love them. You know? I could not act out who I was as a man in a sexual relationship (P #16)."

On the other hand, a few participants ($n = 3$) portrayed their sexual orientation as becoming more narrowly focused because, as they were coming to accept themselves more, they also were becoming more confident in their sexual orientation identity. For example, a transman described how he had been identifying as bisexual (to himself as well as to others), even though he was primarily attracted to men, because he was concerned about taking on the stigma associated with being a gay man in the African American population. However, as he became more at peace with his male identity, he also came to terms with his identity as a gay African American man. In addition, some participants ($n = 5$) expressed the feeling that, in deconstructing sex and gender to formulate their own identities, they also had become open to having partners who represented a variety of sex and gender identities.

When asked to rate how well this cluster reflected the experience of being transgender on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very well*), the average score was 6.4 ($SD = 0.6$). In response to this cluster, one participant pointed out that, at times, decisions about transition do not require balancing. In his case, the best decision with regard to his sense of authenticity, his acceptance in his social sphere, and his financial wellbeing all converged, leading to his decisions to take on a male identity and take male hormones. On the other hand, another participant said that this cluster resonated strongly with her, as she had to cope with profound discomfort with the male genitals assigned to her at birth (as she was born intersex) because she was financially and medically unable to have bottom surgery. Across cases though, safety, material, and social factors tended to be considered when making decisions for or against transition.

Core Category: The struggle to develop color vision in a monochromatic world: The experience of being transgender entails (1) developing constructs to represent one's gender authentically; (2) finding ways to communicate one's gender to others and be seen; and (3) balancing these needs with my need to survive under discriminatory political, social, and economic conditions

The themes that emerged in the analysis seemed to illustrate a core theme of trying to cultivate a multifaceted identity within a stringent and ill-fitting paradigm, much like trying to illustrate a vibrantly colored landscape when only black and white paints are available. We developed a metaphor to describe the challenge of growing up and living in a culture where most

people lack the concepts and language that describes one's gender and so have a markedly different vision of the world. Participants described confusing and painful experiences of ostracism and invalidation as they struggled to understand their experience of gender and why it was so different from what was expected of them. Though they may have already been experimenting with nontraditional gender presentation, often it was through narratives of other transgender people that they were able to recognize some of their own experiences and see the possibilities for their own gender identity expand. In broadening their conceptions of sex and gender, participants often were able to form a more genuine identity for themselves. Gender identity was not based solely on their sense of authenticity, however, as participants also considered material resources and needs to protect themselves from discrimination or physical harm—too frequent repercussions from endeavoring to be multichromatic in a monochromatic world.

The first segment of the core category related primarily to participants' gender identity development, and the other segments pertained more to their experiences as transgender people living in society today and are discussed further in the companion article (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). The nine participants that provided member checks indicated that the core category resonated well with them; they gave it a high score ($M = 6.4$; $SD = 0.9$) when rating how well it represented the experience of being transgender on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very well*). One participant even said that he "got goosebumps (P #10)" in hearing the core category because it represented his experience so well. The implications of this category are discussed in the following section.

DISCUSSION

Whereas most individuals are exposed to representations of their sex and gender experience throughout their lifetime, transgender people often develop with few models of transgender experience and little or no language that accurately describes their internal sense of sex and gender. The process of developing a positive gender identity and gender expression might entail harsh compromises in their sense of authenticity in order to secure their relationships or economic and physical safety. While the experiences of isolation, stigma, and harassment and the experience of learning about transgender identities have been documented in other research as well (Cashore & Tuason, 2009; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1999; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004), the main contributions of this study are (1) the identification of commonalities across transgender identities in their identity development processes and (2) the articulation of the process by which gender identity is developed in relation to a sense of authenticity but also in relation to an understanding of the constraints within one's resources and social sphere. The following discussion

considers how these findings refine understandings of the nature and func-
tions of gender, how differences and stereotypes emerge within transgender
identities, and how an understanding of transgender identity development
can be useful in clinical and advocacy work.

Limitations and Strengths

While the interviewees included participants who identified as White, African
American, and Biracial, this study lacked participation from other racial-
minority participants. In addition, most interviewees came from a Christian
background, although some followed Buddhist, Pagan, or Wiccan traditions,
individualized forms of spirituality, or held atheist views. Readers should
use caution when generalizing the findings to people of racial or religious
groups not represented because there may be differences in experience.
For instance, Sanchez and Vilain (2009) found that participants who were
non-White were more likely to disclose their gender identity to others, and
Nuttbrock et al. (2009) found that White MtF people reported less affirma-
tion of their gender identity from others in their lives when compared with
non-White MtF transgender people.

   Also, the analysis offers one possible interpretation of the data that was
gathered, as is the case with a hermeneutic approach to data analysis (see
Rennie, 2000). That being said, the study design incorporated elements that
support the current interpretation of the data. Multiple credibility checks
were used throughout this study to ensure that data collection and analysis
procedures were thorough and minimized the influence of personal bias.
Also, the analysis reached the state of saturation, indicating that the analysis
was comprehensive.

Defining Gender

Some sex and gender scholars (e.g., Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Feinberg, 1996)
have long argued that transgender cannot be defined using traditional lan-
guage of sex and gender. The present analysis adds that the traditional
language of sex and gender has implications for transgender people's identity
formation and suggests ways of expanding the meaning of gender.

   The findings in this study contribute to a complex understanding
of gender. Gender was described at times as constructed (e.g., West &
Fenstermaker, 1995), at times as essential (e.g., Lippa, 2010) and often
appeared enforced by social agents (Risman, 2004). Levitt (2006) offered
a four-part definition of gender (one structural and three functional compo-
nents), based on her program of research on LGBT genders and identities
(e.g., Levitt, 2006) that fits well for this population. This study contributes
important clarifications to that theory, however, which will be described
here:

(1) *Gender as essential and constructed.* Ontological naturalism is the assumption that gender develops naturally and predictably on the basis of one's sex (see Butler, 1999). This belief also leads to the assumption that those who are comfortable expressing their gender in a manner typical of another sex would also be more comfortable in the body of that sex. For many of the LGBT identities that Levitt explored (e.g., butch and femme lesbians; Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004) gender was experienced as having an essential aspect (e.g., a biological or deep-seated and early predilection toward a gender that either was confirming to expectations based on their assigned birth sex or was not) as well as a socially constructed aspect that determined and shaped the expression of that gender.

Findings in this study resonated with this dual-pronged approach, as participants described feeling "different" early on, but then engaged in accul-turative processes that led to new gender representations. Being comfortable with their assigned birth sex was independent of the transgender partici-pants' comfort with their assigned birth gender. Even those participants who identified as male or female embraced idiosyncratic combinations of gender and sex characteristics—retaining male and female traits and qualities—as they saw fit.

(2) *Gender as instrumental.* Different types of social power—meaning individuals' ability to influence the behavior of others—are conferred to those seen as masculine or feminine (e.g., Brescoll, 2011) and denied to those who did not fall into these categories. The participants of this study grew up unable to comfortably claim either identity and so often were denied both the formal or direct power given to men and the informal or indi-rect power that women claim (e.g., Rogers, 1975). Moving into an identity (as male, female, or transgender) that was validated within a LGBT cul-ture offered a greater understanding of self, as well as the claim to a form of power. When participants adopted new gender identities (e.g., transman, MtF, queer), they sought community that enabled authentic relationships and a sense of self as desirable and powerful (see Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). This work supports Cashore and Tuason's (2009) emphasis on the centrality of agency within transgender people's process of identity formation.

(3) *Gender as a way to meet needs or express values.* In Levitt and Hiestand's (2004) work, the proliferation of transgender identities (e.g., butch, boi, FtM) were seen as resulting from the reaction to cultural pressures to maintain restrictive definition of male and female genders that compro-mised their participants' needs. Similarly, our participants described harsh experiences from an early age due to the restrictiveness of gender cate-gories and described how these experiences led them to seek similar others and claim identities based on language that was more representative of their experiences. And for those whose gender identity fit into traditional

categories (e.g., man or woman), the adoption of those gender identities occurred in relation to a society where nontraditional sex and gender combinations remained unrecognized.

A main contribution of this study is the documentation of how the very different meanings of sex and gender across LGBT cultures—and the extent to which they were viewed as intertwined—interacted with both participants' sense of gender authenticity and the very real material constraints and social pressures in their environments. This work is supported by Devor's (1997) research that found that female-to-male transsexuals who held lesbian identities rejected them if their lesbian communities restricted expressions of masculinity. As well, Levitt and Hiestand's (2004) research that found that butch lesbians were more comfortable when in a context that embraced their gender identity and when mentored by older butch lesbians to have pride in their butch gender. Also, Sanchez and Vilain (2009) found that the fear that adopting a transsexual identity would negatively affect one's life was the best predictor of severe of psychological distress. In the present study, it seemed that participants' selection of a transgender identity was influenced strongly by this fear and their desire to select an identification that would feel authentic but minimize future minority stress—that is, stress unique to the experience of having a minority identity (e.g., Meyer, 2003).

It is not just having a sense of an essential difference that led to a transgender identity, but having a context that provided affirming labels and resources that made an identity fit. Financial constraints and medical capabilities were part of this equation as well in this study. Participants who did not have the resources to transition (which could be financial, legal, or medical), or who could not transition safely or "well" (in terms of ability to pass or their sense of aesthetics) made decisions about their identities that took these limitations into consideration. Although past research has emphasized the processes by which one transgender identity was developed (e.g., Devor, 1997; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005), there is little research that has identified these common processes of making choices across the formation of transgender identities.

(4) *Gender as an eroticization of values.* Finally, she suggested that new gender identities linked values and needs with the eroticization of new gender identities and signifiers (e.g., leather). Participants who experienced self-loathing learned that they could be romantically desirable within LGBT cultures that respected their identities. The transgender people in this study differed from the groups in other studies (e.g., Levitt, 2006), however, in that the members of those communities were engaged in one culture from which a single aesthetic emerged. In contrast, the transgender interviewees participated in different communities depending on whether they wished to maintain a genderqueer or a traditional gender identity, and also on their birth sex. As a result, transgender communities of support had different erotic aesthetics and beliefs about gender from one another.

Beliefs or values about gender might be important in predicting decisions of whether to transition one's gender or sex. Gagne and Tewksbury's (1999) study relayed how transgender people who accepted the medical sexual binary model tended to identify as male or female, while those who rejected it identified as genderqueer. Activist and author Jason Cromwell (1999) similarly documented transmen's pleasure in not transitioning and challenging the idea that being a man requires a male body. In our study, community values converged with personal ones in making decisions on how to identify or whether to transition. The presence or lack of a LGBT community that supported transgender identities and eroticized genderqueer bodies appeared central in the participants' decisions, as it seemed to underpin the respondents' beliefs about what was necessary to have romantic partnerships and self-confidence in the world. Also, participants' beliefs about and valuing of the aesthetic success of surgeries related to transition, their feeling that surgery would or would not increase their sense of congruence, and their access to resources that could lead to a successful transition were important considerations. A contribution of this work is the emphasis on the development of gender identity within communities and the crucial role of resources in the decisions about gender or sex changes.

Examining Subgroups in Understandings of the Development of Gender

Another contribution of this study is its ability to study commonalities and differences within different transgender identities. As researchers, we were interested in noticing any marked differences within our participants in terms of their gender identity (e.g., MtF, FtM, crossdresser, butch), original sex (i.e., male, female or intersexed), or approach to physical transition (e.g., desire to transition or not). When we began gathering data, we were uncertain if we would analyze the data in one analysis or if the interviews should be sorted into separate studies. After analyzing the initial seven interviews, we decided that one analysis would be appropriate as most of the responses appeared to converge across subgroups. When the analysis was complete, we again reviewed the hierarchy carefully to see if we could identify any notable trends (i.e., at least a 3:1 ratio). Also, we wanted to check that our analysis indeed was based on experiences across identities—especially given our cisgender female perspectives.

Overall, the findings did seem to hold across participants' identities. Although some experiences were necessarily exclusive to a given group (e.g., only people who had sexual reassignment could talk about its effects), it was rare to find a potentially shared experience that was solely expressed within one group. Two trends, however, were found for participants who had adopted a traditional gender identity that was not their assigned birth gender (as opposed to a genderqueer identity). Some of these participants

(3 FtM and 1 MtF) reported great distress about going through puberty—especially transmen who had developed breasts at that time. Also, some (5 FtM and 1 MtF) described a sometimes agonizing process of considering whether they should have sex reassignment surgery in light of the costs, health risks, and cosmetic outcomes.

Participants interpreted the meanings of their gender identity in the context of their local minority as well as majority cultures. The African American participants conveyed having to consider how changes in their gender might be interpreted across multiple communities and the costs of authentic self-presentation might be much higher if it meant losing access to a racial minority community that was offering support. Their dual minority status created intersecting minority stressors (e.g., Singh & McKleroy, 2011) that could make supports and resources scarcer and choices more limited.

Another trend was that participants who had spent time in lesbian communities described more of an influence by feminist language and beliefs. Four transmen talked about their efforts to avoid adopting negative or oppressive male qualities in their transition and their interest in maintaining female qualities. None of the transwomen described the importance of retaining male qualities in this manner. Also, two FtM individuals and one butch lesbian described that the lesbian (butch-femme) community helped them to embrace a feminist belief that being a masculine (butch) woman could be positive, which, in turn, encouraged them to explore their own masculinity. There was not a similar description of gay men's communities helping MtF individuals become accepting of being feminine and male-identified. Aside from these particular differences, however, the commonalities in gender experiences across transgender identities and enactments were overwhelming, and the vast majority of experiences cut across these groups—speaking to the pervasive power of mainstream gender and sexual norms.

EXPANDING SEX AND GENDER POSSIBILITIES

Simply separating the two constructs of sex and gender would be inadequate in the attempt to represent these participants' experiences because the dichotomous understanding of each construct would still need to be questioned. Many transgender people call for the expansion of recognized gender possibilities (e.g., Feinberg, 1996), and, indeed, the proliferation of gender categories already is happening. Nontraditional genders and gender expressions are gaining scientific attention as evidenced by studies of forms of gender within LGBT communities, such as butch lesbians (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004), studs and aggressives (Moore, 2006), and drag kings and queens (Rupp, Taylor, & Shapiro, 2010). Also, popular media about nontraditional genders are making an awareness of gender diversity more accessible (e.g., the television series *Orange is the New Black*; Kohan, 2013). This attention

has been found to aid transgender people in their self-exploration as it provides language that can permit initial exploration, although it can provide poor models as well (e.g., Ringo, 2002).

Although important, nontraditional genders still come with expectations and restrictions within both LGBT groups and mainstream society, so the creation of new gender categories, might still not resolve the problem of gender stereotypes. For example, two of the FtM participants described pressures to be tough when they identified as butch lesbians but felt greater freedom to be sensitive after transitioning into male identities, and many described adopting LGB identities prior to adopting a transgender identity. Similarly, participants in Devor's (1989) studies on gender-blending and FtM participants and Levitt and Hiestand's research on butch lesbians (2004) described struggling with stereotypes of both mainstream and lesbian genders within and without LGB communities. Instead, it might be useful to consider how to loosen gendered expectations in tandem with creating new gender categories. As the meanings and associations of these identities change, the identities that seem congruent for people may shift, too. Kailey (2005) ended a chapter in his book with the succinct statement: "Me, I'm a transman—until a better label comes along" (p. 46).

Like developing color vision, as gender constructs became available, participants were better able to assess their own experiences to make sense of and represent their internal sense of gender. Language was not, however, the only restriction, and they had to balance individual authenticity with social and legal concerns in conceptualizing their gender (see Cluster 3). These findings add to those from a qualitative study of transgender identity development where researchers (Katz-Wise, Budge, & Schneider, 2009) found that both institutionally reinforced constructs of sex and gender (e.g., gender stereotypes and socialization, societal framing of transgender as abnormal, limited legal rights) were found to influence participants' identity formation experiences. Both studies emphasize how sex and gender identity decisions are made in light of the social and cultural norms available. Future researchers on gender variance in children may wish to shift from studying gender conformity as the outcome of interest and instead emphasize adjustment and wellbeing within different contexts and gender norms (Gray, Carter, & Levitt, 2012).

Facilitating the Journey Toward Identity Formation: Implications for Clinicians

Gender exploration was a specific goal of psychotherapy that was mentioned by participants in this study, as well as in a qualitative study of transgender people's experiences in therapy (Bess & Stabb, 2009). Finding a safe space to experiment with gender presentation was instrumental in participants' identity development processes. These studies indicated that, for those who

cannot find a social group to provide them with this sense of safety, a mental health care professional who specifically understands transgender issues may be an essential support (Russell & Horne, 2009). Israel and Tarver (1997) stated the importance of preserving transgender clients' sense of self-determination. The current analysis suggests that one way to do this is to support clients' self-examination efforts without pressuring them to fit any particular model of sex or gender. In addition, therapists can expose clients to broader definitions of sex and gender via gender narratives that can offer a helpful mirror into their own experiences. Another means of supporting transgender clients' self-exploration is by providing referrals to other useful resources such as local or online support groups.

Therapists should be wary of assumptions as to how clients define their sex, gender, and sexual orientation and what their wishes are in terms of how they express these elements of their identity. Clinicians might encourage their clients to take the time they need for gender exploration—a process that already might be underway. The Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling (2009) has developed comprehensive guidelines for the competent treatment of transgender clients that helps increase counselors' awareness of a range of relevant issues. Additionally, it is important to note that though some participants had supportive upbringings, many participants described relationships during their developmental years as rife with pain and scrutiny from others. These early experiences of gender might be important to explore in therapy (see Detloff, 2006 on the role of pain in transgender identities).

Therapists might examine with transgender clients their sense of gender as well as concerns about shifting gender presentation in different areas of their lives (e.g., relationships, career, sexuality) and how they can face these challenges (see Brown & Rounsley, 1996 or Korell & Lorah, 2007 for tips on addressing issues with transgender clients and their loved ones in a supportive and constructive manner). Developing an awareness of how transgender people experience their gender identity development can help professionals become more attuned to their experiences and advocate for flexible health care options that participants can select in relation to their own needs. This study highlights transgender identity and expression as based not only on locating language and narratives that feel authentic but also on making highly individualized choices in relation to available resources as well as the benefits and dangers that different resolutions represent within social contexts at hand.

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