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Negotiating Identities in a Heteronormative Context

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ABSTRACT

Society prescribes a set model of heterosexual development toward a gender and sexual identity. Individuals with gender and sexual identities that do not conform to the prescribed heterosexual identities must essentially develop their own way, that is, they must privately negotiate their path through identity development and identity adoption. However, while negotiating their private reality, they must rely on existing concepts of other. Using a social constructionist framework, we explore the private negotiation of an individual who does not conform to the socially prescribed gender and sexual identities—a transgender lesbian. Based on this interview, we suggest that the model of traditional heteronormative gender socialization to sexual identity would need to be revised.

The following is an exploratory case study of how a transgender¹ individual negotiated her feminine and homosexual identities out of a masculine and heterosexual context. Although the majority of society adequately negotiates private and public identities from a set model of heterosexual development, individuals with gender and sexual identities that do not conform to the prescribed identities must essentially develop their own way. That is, they must privately negotiate their path through identity development and identity adoption, often while also portraying the socially prescribed heteronormative identities. Using a social constructionist framework, we explore the private negotiation of an individual who does not conform to the socially prescribed identities—a transgender lesbian.

Writings on transgender identity development tend to center around personal accounts (e.g., Boylan, 2003; Howey, 2002) and stage identity development (i.e., coming to terms with being transgender; Devor, 2004; Nuttbrock, Rosenblum, & Blumstein, 2002). The problem with these stage models of development is that they fail to consider the fluid nature of gender and sexual identity development (Eliason & Schope, 2007). Socialization is a never-ending process. In addition, the contexts within which we define, explore, enact, perform, and interpret our own (as well as others') gender and sexuality change over time, with different experiences, and across space and time. The fact that these are ever changing and evolving constructs necessitates a more fluid and reflexive model of identity development. This is especially true for individuals who are negotiating identity paths that are somehow different from the heteronormative ones. As such, in this article, we explore the case of a transgender lesbian's experience with renegotiating her gender and sexual identities within the existing heteronormative framework.

DEFINING HETERONORMATIVITY

Heteronormativity is defined as a system of valuing heterosexuality as the natural and normative sexual orientation, thereby devaluing all other expressions of sexuality (Warner, 1991). It operates within a patriarchal framework where gender is viewed as a natural derivative of sex (Rubin, 1993; Warner, 1991) and males and females are depicted as appropriate and complementary sexual partners for the purpose of procreation. Heterosexuality is, thus, placed within a political context whereby other sexual expressions (particularly lesbian experiences) are devalued and sex and gender are defined in binary terms (Rich, 1980).

According to Ingraham (2005), viewing heterosexuality as compulsory and naturally occurring discounts that we learn how to effectively practice heterosexuality. The confusion of heterosexuality as naturally occurring rather than institutionalized ignores the great variance in its practice across cultures and downplays its role in the distribution of labor and wealth in patriarchal societies (Ingraham, 2005).

GENDER IDENTITY

Gender has been described as a social institution, one that organizes and stratifies many aspects of day-to-day life (Bem, 1981; Lorber, 2009). Gender norms and attributions influence allowable emotions, types of occupational status, and even personality characteristics. As gender typically (but not always) corresponds with one's biological sex, differences between men and women, and the ways in which they experience life, come to be seen as natural rather than socially constructed (Beall, 1993; Lorber, 2009). Men and women are evaluated and rated in terms of their respective, expected levels of masculinity and femininity (Bussey, 2011) rather than recognizing that each sex embodies aspects of both masculinity and femininity.

One's gender identity stems from the labeling of oneself and others as male or female. Children initially view their surroundings in concrete terms and, therefore, emulate the respective masculine and feminine behaviors as a way of confirming their gender identity (Kohlberg, 1966). Although Kohlberg (1966) initially viewed gender identity in static terms, Bem (1974) later characterized the adoption of a gender identity as a more individuated process (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Through our internalization of gendered norms and our external reaction to the internalization (in our interpretations of others' presentations of gender and their interpretation of ours), gender socialization becomes embedded in our social interactions (Bussey, 2011).

SEXUAL IDENTITY

Although intimately intertwined, the concepts of gender and sexuality² are separate constructs. Sexuality has been broadly defined as the expression of behaviors and thoughts that have erotic meaning (Anselmi & Law, 1998), and, distinguished from gender, defined by these authors as the expression of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that are thought to coincide with one's physical sex, but are not erotic in nature. The socialization of gender and sexuality create generalized understandings about how people will behave in erotic situations (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1998).

The expression of sexuality is one key example of how gender imparts very different expectations and norms for behavior. This difference rests in the power imbalance experienced by men and women living in a patriarchal society (Crawford, Kippax, and Waldby, 1999; Johnson, 1997). The development of sexuality is a highly reflexive process with gender identity playing a major role in the adoption of a sexual identity. One's expression of sexuality, in turn, influences one's gender identity (Devor, 1989). Sexual identity is evaluated by others and by the individual according to cultural standards (Travis, Meginnis, & Bardari, 2000). Whereas men are evaluated more often in terms of their performance abilities, women are evaluated in terms of their appearance and adherence to standards of beauty (Devor, 1989; Travis et al., 2000). The sexual socialization and sexual expression of men and women are strongly influenced by one's gender identity. For example, men in contemporary American society are raised to be almost overly active in the expression of their sexuality. Further, men are expected to know what to do in sexual

situations and to take the initiative, guiding inexperienced women in their path to sexuality (Crawford et al., 1999; Kilmartin, 1999).

In the heteronormative context, women are raised with little expectation of having significant input into their own sexual behavior (Crawford et al., 1999; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). Unlike men, women are socialized to view sex as “enjoyable” only when part of a meaningful relationship with a man. Purely recreational sex is not acceptable (Kimmel, 2009; Laws & Schwartz, 1981; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). In this case, women’s sexuality is in line with the passivity and dependence associated with femininity.

ALTERNATIVES TO GENDER CONFORMITY

Bem (1974) proposed the concept of androgyny as an alternative for individuals who did not conform to normative expressions of masculinity and femininity. She suggested that androgynous individuals possessed both masculine and feminine characteristics and believed this concept would alleviate some of the problematic issues associated with essentialist approaches. Although the introduction of this concept represented a significant stride in examining gender roles, the concept is used little today (Anselmi & Law, 1998). Gender “blenders” and those who are gender variant represent more muted categories of gender, although not officially recognized ones. Gender variant individuals have normal sex status and identify with the corresponding gender identity. However, the expression of their gender incorporates aspects of both masculine and feminine characteristics (Bornstein, 1994; Devor, 1989; Diamond, Pardo, & Butterworth, 2011; Lucal, 1999).

Lucal (1999) notes that many people have extreme difficulty interacting with individuals who do not “do” gender properly—that is, individuals who do not follow the prescribed gender performance. Without being able to make explicit assumptions about one’s gender, people are left without a broad framework to interpret and organize another’s behavior. Gender blenders blur the distinction between male and female and often receive a masculine attribution. In the absence of feminine clues, the only option available in a heteronormative dichotomous system is masculine (Lucal, 1999).

Transgender individuals also portray a noteworthy exception to the masculine–feminine dichotomy, in the sense that they may eventually occupy and be privy to both sides of the binary (Diamond et al., 2011). Transgender individuals are individuals of one sex who strongly identify with the gender of another. Transgender individuals are somewhat distinct from cross dressers who are concordant in their sex and gender identity, although they sometimes engage in opposite gender role performance. Some transgender individuals go to extensive surgical means to correct the disparity between sex and gender. Others find solace in the performance of gender roles, including dress (Devor, 1989).

Intersex individuals also defy the binary classification of male–female. Given that sexual chromosomal abnormalities alone have been shown to be twice as common as Down syndrome (Devor, 1989), it would seem that a

binary classification system is not sufficient. However, Fausto-Sterling (1998) notes that there appears to be a “cultural need to maintain clear distinctions between the sexes” (p. 27), including surgical intervention to sustain the binary.

The presence of these different classifications challenges heteronormative ideas of male and female, masculine and feminine, in terms of seeing them as binary in existence. Rather than incorporate alternate classifications into the existing dichotomous system, individuals who do not adequately portray their respective gender are ignored and forced to choose between the existing bipolar classifications. The existence of more than two gender categories would blur the distinction between male and female and lessen the amount of perceived and portrayed difference between the sexes, thus, shattering the heteronormative hierarchy of gender.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism views sexuality as fluid rather than fixed (Ingraham, 2005). Sexuality is contextual in nature and derives from the gender stratification and socialization that is present in the existing society (Bussey, 2011), with the privileged groups constructing the relevant definitions (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1998; Ingraham, 2005; Jackson, 2005; Tiefer, 2000; White, Bondurant, & Travis, 2000). The constructs of gender and sexuality are difficult to tease apart, as one intimately influences the other. The adoption of a particular gender identity affects how one will behave and consequently how one will be perceived in performing his or her relevant gender role. The expression of one’s sexuality and the acceptance of the relevant sexual identity greatly depends on the gender role that one has espoused (Anselmi & Law, 1998).

Rather than taking the view that there is one reality (or one for males and one for females) that can be studied and observed, social constructionism proposes that there are many realities and these realities are constructed via social interchanges or interaction (Beall, 1993). Gergen (1985) offers four assumptions of the social constructionist perspective: 1) reality can be understood in multiple ways and there is no one true reality in existence; 2) the way one understands reality is the result of social interactions that vary according to time and space; 3) stereotypical conceptualizations of reality may persist because of practicality rather than empirical validity; and 4) how one constructs his or her reality may affect how someone else constructs his or her reality (e.g. the socialization of children).

Social constructionists view gender as a social institution, one that organizes and stratifies many aspects of day-to-day life (Bem, 1981; Lorber, 2009). Gender norms and attributions influence allowable emotions, types of occupational status, and personality characteristics. Since gender often corresponds with one’s sex, differences between men and women and the ways they experience life are seen as natural rather than socially constructed (Beall, 1993; Lorber, 2009).

Social constructionists think of the body as a frame or scaffolding, where culture hangs the fabric of meaning and interaction (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). The individual, through interaction with himself or herself and others, molds the structure into the shape of an identity. The prevailing sexual norms available to men and women in American society are heterosexual in nature, but others exist (Laws & Schwartz, 1981). Kauth and Kalichman (1998) hypothesize a view of human sexuality in terms of a circle that represents the fluidity of expression. Variation in the expression of sexuality, however, still adheres to many prescribed gender differences in socialization.

A CASE STUDY

Our goal was to explore how an individual experiencing an alternative to gender conformity negotiates the process of gender identity and sexual identity, using a case study. The authors understand that this approach is problematic and limited in scope. However, the purpose was exploratory and to be used as one of many potential examples of how an individual raised within a heteronormative framework must negotiate and develop a gender identity and sexual identity that are labeled “other.”

The interview used in this study was part of a larger study focused on the intersection between alcoholism and homosexuality. It was one of a nonrandom sample of 20 respondents with a mean age of 52 years. After Institutional Review Board approval, a snowball sample was gathered through advertisement in the classified section of a state-wide gay newspaper and through contact with a gay-and-lesbian specific Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) group. The author drew up introductory letters and consent forms and created pseudonyms prior to any face-to-face contact with respondents. The interview schedule consisted of up to 23 demographic questions as determined by answers to the questions, and up to 79 additional open ended questions.

Cory

As a case example, we explored an intensive interview with a transgender (male to female) whom we shall hereafter refer to as Cory. At the time of the interview, Cory was 40 years old, had acquired a high school education, and was unemployed. As a male, Cory had been married and divorced six times (remarrying and divorcing again one of his previous wives). Cory produced a total of four children from three different wives.

Cory spent a good amount of time during the interview describing herself as she had been before her transformation—her previous male self. Basically, before her transformation, Cory presented as a rather stereotypical male. She showed pictures of herself as a male that revealed a barrel-chested, red-haired man with a full beard and moustache. Cory appeared in many of these photographs wearing flannel shirts, heavy denim jeans, black leather or camouflage jackets, baseball caps, and heavy leather boots—all clothing associated with the masculine gender. Furthermore, in three of the photographs

there appeared a very large, red pick-up truck, complete with a gun rack holding two guns.

At the time of the interview, Cory had been living as a woman for about two years. She had received significant psychological testing and counseling (as is required for sexual reassignment) and was on a regular regimen of hormone treatment. She had gone through an orchidectomy (to remove the testicles), but still had not had full reconstructive surgery at the time of the interview. Furthermore, she had gone through some electrolysis treatments primarily to eliminate facial hair (as the hormone treatments were fairly effective in eliminating other male body hair on the chest and extremities). As a woman, Cory presented stereotypical feminine appearance and mannerisms. Along with well-manicured and painted fingernails, Cory was wearing a peasant blouse that was soft, somewhat sheer, and flowing, Capri pants, and medium height heels. She used a fairly soft, whispery voice, and often gestured with feminine mannerisms (such as gently touching her sternum with her fingertips when referring to herself or patting her blonde coiffeur into place at regular intervals). Her physical appearance, although overall presenting as typically feminine, still had subtle male physical characteristics. Her height, even without heels, was unusually tall for a woman, and her hands, although clear of hair on the fingers, still appeared somewhat masculine (e.g., large and with prominent veins).

Excerpts from the Interview

Negotiating an identity in terms of gender and sexuality occurs within a context of heterosexual privilege. Therefore, expressions of gender and sexuality that adhere to and support a heteronormative model are valued over expressions that deviate from this ideal. The pressure to conform is great and can result in feelings of inadequacy for those who do not meet the expectations of heteronormativity.

EARLY GENDER SOCIALIZATION

Cory was raised in a small Midwestern working-class town. When she was a month old, her mother left her father and she moved in with her paternal grandparents. This was a difficult arrangement for Cory, as the household was quite strict and controlling. At about age 11, Cory's father remarried and she moved with her father and new stepmother into middle-class suburbia. Some aspects of Cory's home life improved with her move to the suburbs, but there were also difficulties in terms of her new family structure. Cory went through several years of resentment toward her stepmother before their relationship improved.

It was clear in the interview that Cory struggled throughout her childhood with the gender socialization associated with her male sex. That is, the social environment prescribed a distinct direction for gender development, but Cory did not feel that it corresponded to his (at the time) sense of self. She stated about her male childhood experiences:

I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what. I used to want to play with all the neighborhood girls and I was comfortable with that. We played dress up, and as I went through adolescence I was into Mom's underwear, and I thought it might have been some kinky thing I was going through . . . It wasn't a sexual thing for me or anything. It's just that that's the way I was comfortable. But yet, I grew more aware of it, and of course one can't put a label on one's self until you look and find one to put on.

These feelings of strong socialization were further clarified when Cory shared that:

I felt like I should have been a little girl. Which I always was, but I had this unfortunate anatomy and I was molded and herded right along through childhood and into the workday world of [small town], Indiana and sent off in the same clothes that Daddy wears to work and married and had a kid a year after I graduated from high school.

MALE GENDER SOCIALIZATION INTO ADULTHOOD

As Cory grew into adulthood, she recognized that there was something about herself that did not match her internal sense of self. As is common among individuals questioning their gender identity, Cory too searched for a label—a category to which to belong. As she entered early adulthood she recalled that:

At that point, I would have to say that I was bisexual because I got the feeling about some guys the same way as I get the feeling about some girls. At that point, I guess it was the social [or] peer pressure that kept me from really pursuing the other part.

Cory rejected her inner sense of being a female and threw herself wholeheartedly into enacting masculinity as prescribed by society—conforming to her interpretations of the male role. She relied on the broad categorical or stereotypical performances to portray herself as a man. One example of this is her reporting that, “I got married six times and screwed everything that I could get a hold of (laugh).” This relates to her buying into social expectations, but as her gender socialization (as a male) was not truly internalized, her portrayal of self was false—a role she was playing on the social stage. She chose stereotypically male occupations and enacted her role of masculinity (in fact, a level of hypermasculinity) based on socially prescribed expectations. She reported:

I used to be a pipeline laborer, on gas pipelines, and my upper arms were, like this [indicates very large biceps and triceps]. I was quite a violent person in the male role. Pick-up trucks, rifles, beer drinkin', tobacco chewin', big beard; lived off the land for two years; punched my wife out once in a while. Oh my God. I shot up a federal game officer's vehicle one time. And beat a few people up and had a few stand offs on roof

tops with M16s, camouflaged clothing, and stuff like that. I got violent in the male role. I think a lot of it was camaraderie and being a good ol' boy.

EXPLORING THE FEMALE GENDER IDENTITY

Eventually, Cory realized that the incongruity between her internal sense of self (that of a woman) and her external portrayal of self (as a man) was not working. She started exploring her feminine self, while simultaneously enacting the male social expectations. Part of this struggle can be seen in her description of her marriages (some lasting only a couple months). When asked why she kept trying marriage, she replied:

Because I was stuck in that gender role. I was seriously stuck and it was all I knew and I was sort of scared to death to get out of it. Away from the security of the, quote, "married in a small town in Indiana," type thing.

Here, it is apparent that the larger social expectations were very present and her decision to transform from a male to a female was not an impetuous decision. The social expectations were very strong, and often Cory's desire to pursue life as a woman waxed and waned as she struggled with coming to terms with her sexual identity as a woman. Such a struggle can be seen in the following statement:

I started [gender] transition one time right after a divorce and I wasn't sure that I wanted to do it and I backed out of it. Just stopped the hormone therapy and I got married again. And I just couldn't get away from my feelings. I couldn't shut the door on them. I think I was trying to prove [that it was] going to go away, it [was] not going to bother me again.

Over time, Cory decided to pursue life as a woman. Basically, she grew weary of the struggle and eventually moved away from her small hometown, where her sexual identity (as a woman) could more openly be explored. She stated:

[I asked God], 'What's wrong with me?' And I didn't get a bolt of lightning and an answer, but that's where things started falling together. I started going out in public cross-dressed at that point. Where it was safe. But I had cross-dressed before this, privately at home for years. I truly found myself as a woman at that point. At that point, sexuality did not enter into it. It was just a gender experience.

Determining a Sexual Identity

During the interview, Cory described herself as a transgender lesbian. It is at this point in her life that she has settled on a sexual identity. Part of the decision to go through with sexual reassignment surgery was based on her desire to become a woman in order to more completely become a lesbian—her true sexual identity. She stated:

It's what I've evolved to after a lot of soul searching. It's what I've evolved to, it's not like I haven't tried male sex . . . it just isn't there for me, it doesn't feel right. I like to use the term "my unfortunate anatomy," when I had a male's body, I had feelings of being a lesbian when I was in bed with my wives in a heterosexual situation. These feelings have always been in me, but the sex had to be heterosexual sex, even though I didn't feel that inside myself. *[Interviewer: You felt like you were having lesbian sex?]* Exactly, exactly. And I wasn't interested in becoming a heterosexual woman because I just didn't like the feeling of a man touching me, all that hair, and that hard thing. (laughing—indicating repulsion) Get away! *[I fully realized I was a lesbian]* when I went full time and I started living as a woman. "Full time," that's a gender community term. Full time means, even when I was pre-op, I would . . . function and dress and live as a woman.

After Cory's transition—after committing to becoming a woman, going through psychotherapy, engaging in a regimen of hormone treatments, and experiencing the initial surgeries—she then focused on the heteronormative feminine expressions of emotion and caring in relationships. In effect, after becoming a woman, she was turning to her interpretations of the gender norms appropriate to her new sex. We see this in her following statements:

I prefer the closeness and warmth and the compassion of a lesbian relationship, much more than I could consider the domination of a male . . . it's really out of the question for a long term relationship *[with a man]*, it just absolutely wouldn't work for me. 'Cause there's a lot of things men do that repulse me. There is a tenderness there *[in a lesbian relationship]* that I can't find words for it. And it's just like you're not only lovers. It seems like a lot of males that are having relationships have problems on a personal basis. And they really can't be best friends . . . And I don't find that in a lesbian relationship. . . . The macho life I lived and all the things I did *[as a male]*, it just seems like a dream now. I can't imagine it any other way.

The fact remains that Cory is relying primarily on the somewhat stereotypical female gender norms, especially related to appearance (i.e., women are supposed to be pretty and timid), while even recognizing the stereotypes for what they are. That is, she focuses on appearance as the essence of what it means to be a woman, barring other attributes of being a female. She stated:

I would love to have my ribs cracked and maybe even a couple out because I've got real prominent ribs here. You got the money, they'll do it. I would get out of the shower and look at myself in the mirror and it was like, "it's not right, it's just not right." *[And then there's my] boobs.* Not much, but shit. They're still small. Isn't that a definite typical male thing to fall back on? . . . Making excuses for not having big tits. It's like, jeez, please. They're little but they're fine . . . It's surrealistic, you know? Essentially, it's like looking at a female body with a penis and testicles or whatever is there.

Cory is still relying on her outward appearance to convey her feminine gender.

DISCUSSION

In Cory's case, there is a clear reciprocal and reflexive relationship between gender identity and sexual identity development. This was apparent both before and after her identity as a woman. What Cory was struggling with was a way in which to differentiate between internalized gender socialization and external presentation of self. That is, both before and after her process of transformation, she tried to match her sexual identity to her gender identity. As a male, she presented overstated masculinity and as a female she presented overstated femininity, which is congruent with the purpose of gender norms—to serve as a cognitive aid to quickly process incoming information, often relying on stereotypical information. Here, she was relying on gender norms to glean information about her presentation of self, rather than exploring the nuances of gender. In this case, perhaps the purpose of the gender norms for Cory were to quickly direct others' attention toward the gender she was presenting—without a careful examination of the subtleties of her presentation of self—in order for the range of behaviors she was presenting to appropriately fit within the presented gender.

Cory's adoption of her sexual identity as a lesbian, which parlayed from her feminine gender identity, played strongly in her decision to transform. However, after deciding to transform, Cory had to renegotiate the gender and sexual identity process—this time as a woman. Her decision to transform, however, relied more on male gender norms; it was a decision based largely on her sexual performance—an element of typical male norms. She stated in her interview that, because she felt like she was having lesbian sex with her wives (when she was a male), she wanted to become a woman to match her sexual identity. Again, this is a more masculine approach in that her initial decision was based on her sexual experiences. It was only later that she brought into her lesbian/woman identity the female gender norms—relationships centered on emotion and caring. This occurred only after living life as a woman. Once more, the feminine norms were based on stereotypical notions of what personal relationships should be based on—emotion rather than sex, as socially prescribed for women. We believe that as Cory continues to negotiate the feminine gender, she will encounter and utilize more situational gender expectations and thereby find her comfort zone in terms of her presentation of self.

Oh, I'm so much freer. I feel free to express myself, I feel like the friends I have know me as who I really am. I don't feel bottled up at all. Um, I don't feel trapped, the old cliché, trapped in you know, a man's body. Given that gender and sexual identity development are more reflexive in nature, the more Cory actively negotiates these identities and acts them out, the more comfortable she will become.

CONCLUSION

Society prescribes a set model of heteronormative identity development informed by gender socialization. In promoting heteronormativity, all other gender and sexual identities are largely devalued. Cory, representing both a transgender and a lesbian, presents a case where the prescribed social arrangements for gender and sexual identity development do not fit within the heteronormative parameters. Preves (2003) and Dozier (2005) note that in an effort to normalize intersex children, their bodies are surgically and hormonally altered to fit into our binary social construction of sex, despite the relatively frequent occurrence of intersexuality. Rather than adjust the social model to fit reality, we force reality into our socially prescribed model of normalcy.

Individuals with gender identities and sexual identities that do not conform to the prescribed heterosexual identities must essentially develop their own way, that is, they must privately negotiate their path through identity development and adoption. However, while negotiating their private reality, they must rely on existing concepts of other (i.e., the opposite in a binary system). Having been socialized as male, Cory must parlay a female gender identity from depictions that are readily available. The same is true of developing a lesbian sexual identity. In a society that sees only heterosexuality as normative, Cory must navigate beyond the binary identities available. As a starting point, she must rely on interpretations of the broad, stereotypical gender presentations to glean information about how, in fact, to exist, function, and present with an alternate sexual identity.

Cory's case poses an interesting scenario about how transgender individuals, particularly those who also identify as homosexual, might negotiate their gender and sexual identities. Social constructionism provides a way to understand the issues raised in Cory's identity development. First, individuals with alternate gender identities and sexual identities lend credence to the tenet that there are multiple realities in existence. Although Cory relies on the existing, largely stereotyped, ideas of gender as well as sexuality, she must ultimately portray those characteristics with which she is most comfortable. The reality that she demonstrates may stray from traditional portrayals of gender and sexuality.

Second, gender and sexual identities are comprised of ideas from the larger society about how one should act, think, look, and feel. These constructs are not stagnant, but somewhat contingent on other conditions (i.e., economic, political, religious) within the larger society and therefore also vary by time and space. Few people fall under specific representations of gender and sexuality and we all must, to a certain extent, negotiate our own private identity and reality. However, at present, those who fall into traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality face a far less conscious task than those who do not. In fact, most of us fall along a continuum of gender expression between masculine and feminine, rather than residing at one end or the other. Yet, as individuals socialized in a heteronormative society, we choose to see those characteristics that reinforce traditional conceptions of

gender and sexuality. For individuals who have never completely fit into or fully adhered to the traditional gender portrayals, this process of negotiation of gender and sexuality becomes much more complicated and they are required to rely on more stereotypical depictions while navigating their new identity.

Regardless of the starting point, we all gain information about our corresponding gender from prevailing stereotypes, thus reinforcing the status quo and reifying gender. However, virtually no one fully adheres to the stereotypes, thus, undermining the traditional binary system. Some often assume that individuals like Cory represent more of an affront to the gender dichotomy and therefore threaten the system. The reality is that no one really fits the ideal nature of this traditional gender system. We all take the ideal and negotiate our more practical portrayal of gender. For individuals who already fall outside this traditional framework, they may cling more to these binary, seemingly static, portrayals of gender as a means of fitting in. We recognize that this is one case among a small population (transgender individuals) and that even within this population our case is an even smaller percentage (lesbian). However, the goal of this exploratory analysis is to open discussion about how smaller populations within the larger society negotiate their gender and sexual identities when the traditional framework does not apply. This case also suggests a more reflexive identity development process in place of the linear stage development models.

NOTES

1. We use the term transgender in this article since that is the term employed by Cory, the focus of the article. We understand that this terminology can be seen as dated by some, and other terms, such as, gender variant and gender queer are more favorable. However, since this is a case study and the individual self-identifies as a transgender lesbian, we will also employ that terminology.
2. For the purposes of this discussion, the term sexuality encompasses sexual orientation.

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