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2011

Intimate Allies: Identity, Community, and Everyday Activism Among Cisgender People with Trans-Identified Partners

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation blends traditional ethnographic data from interviews and observations with digital ethnographic data from blogs and YouTube videos to present stories of identity, community, and activist-oriented experiences from white cisgender women who are partnered with trans-identified people on the FTM spectrum. The project addresses the following broad questions: How does being the cisgender partner of a trans person inform complexities around the ability to articulate sexual identity? How are cisgender partners finding community and organizing themselves into new forms of community when they often lack language with which to describe their relationships? In what ways are cisgender people allies to the trans people with whom they partner, and how is being an ally connected to forms of everyday resistance and educational advocacy? How does technology play a role in articulations of identity, experiences of community, and the ways that partners participate in activism?

This work queers sociology by illustrating and considering the potential consequences of normative categories of gender and sexuality in relation to everyday lived experience. This project brings out the tension for many cis partners between a desire to belong by using normative categories of identity, coupled with a complex need to also resist those categories. Relatedly, I examine how the problems of identity for cis partners impact their access to various identity-based communities, and I instead argue for a queer politics of affinity. Further, this work calls for a broadening of what constitutes "activism" in order to consider the everyday actions and advocacy work that partners engage in as contributing to and encouraging social change around trans issues.

Accordingly, my work contributes not only to the fields of queer and trans studies, but also to a sociology of gender and sexuality that takes queer and trans studies seriously in terms of theoretical contexts and analyses.

Intimate Allies: Identity, Community, and Everyday Activism Among Cisgender People with Trans-Identified Partners

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology in the Graduate
School of Syracuse University

May 2011

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To all who appreciate fancy genders.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My students from Introduction to Sociology (Fall 2009) and Social Problems: Bodies and Identities in US Culture (Spring 2010) at Syracuse University showed me how much teaching can contribute to change. I can only hope that the future classrooms I walk into are such amazing spaces of engagement and critical thought. You all made it a pleasure to teach each and every class. I also want to thank Jackie Orr, Reese Kelly, and Gail McGuire for inviting me to teach pieces of this dissertation in their classrooms.

Susan Fitzgerald is a wonderful friend and has offered shelter and to care for my pets at any time - thank you for this. Without you, there is much I would have missed out on - professionally and personally. Peter Mack has been my summer reset button. Thank you for hiking hundreds of miles and filtering thousands of liters of water with me. There is no one else I'd rather share a freezer bag of rehydrated food with. Many thanks to Dr. Melissa A. Johnson, Samuel Lurie, Stephanie Crist, KJ Rawson, and Erin Rand for helping me embody more of myself.

Robert Tompkins, Lorraine Tompkins, and Sarah Tompkins have provided remarkable support, acceptance, and encouragement - I cannot thank any of you enough. Thank you to Susannah Brooks for the Dissertation Support Kit during the final months of writing and revisions.

BCL, you really know how to make a boy sparkle… thank you for reveling in my fanciness. You will always be the first in so many ways and I am incredibly grateful to have you in my life.

PREFACE

"Everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things."
- Kathleen Stewart from *Ordinary Affects*, 2007:9 -

My first semester in college I took an Introduction to Sociology course where I had to write a 10-page research paper on any topic I wanted to write on, as long as I discussed it from the theoretical perspectives that we had talked about in class. I was 18 years old and the paper that I wrote about the social construction of gay and lesbian communities wasn't very good (it was 1999 and I used the word "homosexual" over 60 times in the essay), but my professor, Jeff Erger, noticed that I had found my own way to Seidman's (1996) groundbreaking book published three years prior, *Queer Theory/ Sociology*. That book was the first academic book I purchased, followed by Nardi and Schneider's (1998) edited volume, *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*. I began my inquiry into queer sociology through those texts and in an Introduction to Sociology course that was taught by a professor (now friend and colleague) who knew nothing about me except that I had used peer-reviewed sources in my essay instead of websites and magazine articles like the other students. Jeff told me to wait a year and then take his upper-level course, a course in symbolic interactionism and the social construction of reality. I spent that year in a smoky coffee shop across the river, teaching myself LGBT studies and queer theory. When I finally got into Jeff's upper-level course, he asked me to write a longer, better version of my paper from my freshman year, using what I had learned in the new course. I narrowed the focus for the

new essay and discussed the intersections of lesbian identity with community while doubling the length of the paper (it was the year 2000 and I used the word "homosexual" just twice, only when discussing Plummer's (1975) theory of "homosexual" identity development). I was 19 years old and my academic career in queer sociology began when Jeff asked me to do research with him and another professor, Melinda Miceli, based on that essay.

Ten years later, I sit at my desk on the verge of finishing my PhD in Sociology. I have spent ten years immersed in LGBT studies, queer theory, and trans studies from various disciplinary perspectives - having only been able to take *one* course in LGBT studies in 2005, during my final year of coursework for my graduate program. My history of getting to today with this project was nurtured by friends, advisors, and colleagues who saw the importance of queer sociology with me from the beginning. My mentors and advisors have read literatures in and around LGBT studies, queer theory, and trans studies to stay current with *my* work, which was often unrelated to their own. Ten years is a long time in queer academic years and the fields that inform a queer sociology have experienced drastic theoretical shifts throughout that time. My specific interests in relation to those ever-shifting and politicized historical and theoretical contexts, however, have remained remarkably unchanged: identity, language, community, activisms, bodies, and the role of technology in everyday life. It is with nostalgia, gratitude, and great pleasure that I begin where I began.

Chapter One
Introduction: Historical and Theoretical Contexts and Conversations

The Project: A Summary

This dissertation presents stories of identity, community, and activist-oriented

experiences from white cisgender[1] women who are partnered with trans-identified people

on the FTM spectrum.[2] As a group, the participants in this project are generally fairly

well-connected to other LGB, trans, and queer people and communities. Most have a

high level of education and access to resources that allow them to find community and

engage in social change on a variety of levels. Very few participants reported knowing

other cis people with trans partners and they were eager to discuss their experiences with

me. This has, perhaps, painted a somewhat homogenous picture of my participants, but

while they are similar in some ways (e.g., white, cis women, fairly young, educated),[3]

many do not share the same politics and think about identity and community in

conflicting ways. For example, Sarah, who identifies as queer, believes that people

shouldn't call themselves "lesbian" if they are partnered with someone who doesn't

identify as a woman. Sarah's politics around identity and language clash with Renee,

who adamantly claims "lesbian" as her own sexual identity, even though her former

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[1] "Cisgender" refers to people who identity with the sex/gender they were assigned at birth. It is often abbreviated as "cis."

[2] "FTM spectrum" refers to people who were assigned female at birth and no longer identify as being female, "girl," and/or "woman." People on the FTM spectrum may claim a variety of gender identities, which may or may not include "trans." However, for this particular project, I only talked to cis people who had trans-identified partners.

[3] See Appendix C for a table of participant demographics around class identification, geographic location, age, level of education, sexual identity, and if their trans partner was trans-identified when the relationship began.

partner identifies as male.[4] Other participants, such as Rachel and Dakota, feel a strong

need for queer and trans community in their lives, while Clara does not feel the same

need to have this community, even though she is fairly involved in her local communities

in various ways. Some partners, like Drew, Rachel, and Dakota, are actively engaged in

trans politics in their local communities and on college campuses and would proudly call

themselves activists, whereas Sonja and Scarlett both shy away from using "activist" to

describe their own connections to social change. Overall, in other words, while the

participants tend to be similar in terms of demographics, many have conflicting views,

stories, and experiences around the main themes of the project: identity, community, and

activism.

The project addresses the following broad questions: How does being the

cisgender partner of a trans person inform complexities around the ability to articulate

sexual identity? How are cisgender partners finding community and organizing

themselves into new forms of community when they often lack language with which to

describe their relationships? In what ways are cisgender people allies to the trans people

with whom they partner, and how is being an ally connected to forms of everyday

resistance and educational advocacy? How does technology play a role in articulations of

identity, experiences of community, and the ways that partners participate in activism.

Methodologically, this project considers how to blend traditional ethnographic data with a

variety of digital ethnographic data in order to engage with how social life is moving

increasingly online for many individuals. Using forms of digital ethnography and

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[4] Renee is no longer in this relationship, but was partnered with someone on the FTM spectrum at the time of the interview.

postmodern qualitative methodologies, I conducted interviews via email and instant

messaging with 18 white cisgender women who have partners on the FTM spectrum. I

also collected several types of additional data from blogs, zines, and participant

observation at several trans conferences. I also transcribed 92 publicly-accessible

YouTube videos uploaded between 2009 and 2010 from two YouTube channels that

feature video blogs (i.e., "vlogs") from partners and focus on partner experience. Videos

were transcribed from a total of 26 cis women partners on YouTube. I transcribed 58

videos from 16 partners on one channel, and 34 videos from 11 partners on another.[5] The

cis partners on the YouTube channels seem to share similar demographics with my

participants and their experiences are just as varied as the partners I interviewed.[6] Taken

together, these methods and data create a digital (Murthy 2008) and multimodal (Dicks,

Soyinka, and Coffey 2006) ethnographic project.

This work queers sociology (see Seidman 1995, 1996; Hines 2006, 2007;

Roseneil 2000, Stein and Plummer 1994, Valocchi 2005) by illustrating and considering

the potential consequences of normative categories of gender and sexuality in relation to

everyday lived experience. This project brings out the tension for many cis partners

between a desire to belong by using normative categories of identity, coupled with a

complex need to also resist those categories. Relatedly, I examine how the problems of

identity for cis partners impact their access to various identity-based communities, and I

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[5] One person had videos on both channels so there were 26 people total, but she had videos posted to both, making the numbers 16 and 11 for the number of people on each channel.

[6] Because I didn't interview the partners on YouTube, I can only guess that their social locations are similar to the interview participants. Generally, the cis women partners on YouTube all appear to be white and most seem to be within a similar age range (18-29) as the partners I interviewed. I do not have data for their geographic locations, though some partners mention this in their videos at different times.

instead argue for a queer politics of affinity. Further, this work calls for a broad understanding of what constitutes "activism" in order to consider the everyday actions and advocacy work that partners engage in as contributing to and encouraging social change around trans issues. Accordingly, my work contributes not only to the fields of queer and trans studies, but also to a sociology of gender and sexuality that takes queer and trans studies seriously in terms of theoretical contexts and analyses. In addition, while this project contributes to the existing literature about postmodern qualitative methodologies and methods, I also show how sociologists can respond to the ever-changing ways that our social lives have become mediated by various internet technologies by considering multimodal and digital ethnography for future work.

This project emerged from the time I spent in trans communities and with cis people who partner with trans folks,[7] as well as in resistance to the previous literature I had read about cis women who were partnered with trans people. When I was first imagining this project, many cis partners with whom I talked at trans conferences did not discuss their experiences of having a trans partner in terms of loss, grief, or burden as the previous literature suggested they might (Gurvich 1991, Brown 2005, Nyamora 2004, Mason 2006). Instead, cis partners seemed more focused on problems of identity policing, a lack of community with other partners, and being a trans ally. It was with this in mind that this project emerged as a way to highlight some of the complexities of everyday life for cis people who are partnered with those on the FTM spectrum, while

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[7] I use "folks" in many places throughout this dissertation in solidarity with the politics of language in many trans communities. Use of this language seeks to draw attention to a shared commonality through "trans." Many people in trans communities will say "trans folks" instead of "trans people" or "trans individuals" when referring to more than one trans person.

also academically engaging with those complexities in ways that stay grounded in the trans-positivity of the conferences and in trans communities and activism more broadly.

Mapping the Introduction

This introductory chapter considers the historical and theoretical contexts that are relevant to the project at hand. First, I trace the historical emergence and proliferation of "trans" as an area of scholarly inquiry in relation to the emergence of sociological work on gender and sexualities. In addition, I provide an overview of the previous literature on cisgender partners of trans people, much of which comes from psychological perspectives on identity formation and relationships, as well as family studies. I then shift to consider the recent theoretical contexts in which this project is situated, beginning with work in the sociology of gender and the silences around cisgender and transgender in those literatures. I follow this with an overview of work in LGBT studies and the problem of identity as it relates to community and politics, particularly in relation to homo- and heteronormativity, and discussions around the binary structurings of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Much of the work in queer studies and queer theory seeks to address issues around identity and binaries by taking a political and anti-normative approach to identity when considering sex, gender, and sexuality. That is, queer studies and queer theory seek to create a tension around the insistence on identity in other fields and disciplines, and I take this up by providing a short overview of the work that addresses this. However, queer studies and queer theory have also been heavily critiqued for failing to account for

the lived experiences of groups of people they claim to address. That is, this critique of

queer theory lies within a basic sociological call for inquiry into everyday life,

institutional and policy considerations, and socially structured power relations.

Transgender studies attempts to use queer theory in a grounded manner, connecting the

politics of queer theory to the everyday life experiences of trans people. It is in solidarity

with transgender studies that I move from my theoretical contexualization to illustrating

how I engage with queer sociology; a sociology that is grounded in provocative and

important political theories of "queer," but that pushes a queer critical discourse to be in

conversation with lived experience through trans studies. I end with a note on language

and terminology used in the dissertation, along with overviews of the research chapters.

Historical Contexts

The historical contexts in which this project are situated are those that directly

inform my inquiries about the experiences of cisgender people who partner with trans

folks. For this reason, I do not provide a history of the medicalization of transgender

bodies and persons, an overview of various rereadings of individuals throughout history

who are now interpreted as "trans," or a comprehensive discussion of trans scholarship to

date. Simply, this project moves between the cracks in previous literatures, and this

section on historical contexts puts these literatures in conversation with each other. I

begin in the 1950s, when Virginia Prince first coined the term "transgenderist" in the

United States and began organizing around her newfound word that referred to cisgender

men who were crossdressing as women (Denny 2006, Valentine 2007, Califia 2003,

Meyerowitz 2002). Unfortunately, the support groups and events she created did not

accept members who were planning to transition, had transitioned, or members who did

not identify as heterosexual - these groups were for heterosexual

"crossdressers" (cisgender men) who generally lived full-time without medical

interventions as women (Valentine 2007). Virginia Prince founded the first large

organization for trans people and their partners in 1976.[8] Tri-Ess is "an international

social and support group for heterosexual crossdressers, their partners, the spouses of

married crossdressers and their families" (Society for the Second Self, Inc. 2004). Tri-

Ess actively works to focus *only* on crossdressing within a heterosexual partnership. Gay,

lesbian, and bisexual crossdressers are not welcome in Tri-Ess, nor are trans-identified

individuals and the cisgender partners of trans people who have transitioned or are

currently doing so.[9] Patrick Califia (2003) criticizes Prince's book, *The Transvestite and*

His Wife (1967), the ideas of which are the foundation of many of the principles and

ideologies of Tri-Ess, although he understands the reasons for Prince writing what she did

at the time. By not tolerating homosexuality, or transexuality for that matter, Prince and

Tri-Ess work to somewhat normalize crossdressing to the heterosexual wives and

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[8] For more information about Tri-Ess, see the introduction on the website here: http://www.alphatriess.org/3sbroc.htm

[9] While I was exploring the Tri-Ess website, I came across the listserv and message board for the wives of crossdressers. It was here that I realized the extent of the separateness that Tri-Ess had from other parts of the trans community. Tri-Ess does not use "trans" or "transgender" in any of the language on their website. It makes *very* clear that the forums are for "genetic women" who are partnered with "heterosexual crossdressers." Discussions of transexuality are NOT welcome in the forums as the rules claim that crossdressers "have been subjected to recruitment techniques aimed at convincing crossdressers they are transexuals" (Society for the Second Self, Inc. 2004). In my opinion, this sounds oddly like some of the things that homophobic conservatives have claimed about the gay and lesbian community – that they are recruiting members. Virginia Prince says in her book, "Practically no femmiphile would advise, induce, or influence another to become a transvestite – he knows the cost too well and has suffered too much to wish it on another. Most homosexuals, however, have no hesitation about indoctrinating and initiating others into the practice" (1967:16-17). See http://www.tri-ess.org/spice/CDSO/CDSO.htm for the list of rules on the Tri-Ess forums.

significant others (Califia 2003). While not generally recognized in previous literatures

(Califia 2003 is a notable exception), it should be noted that Prince included partners

(wives) of "transgenderists" in her organizing from the very start. That is, while previous

work often recognizes Prince for contributing to and initiating the language around trans

categories that we now use, the literature ignores the other people Prince included in her

organizing - the cis women who were spouses.

A proliferation of trans scholarship and activism began in the 1990s, when "trans"

emerged as a category that described "a *collective* (often spoken of as a *spectrum* or

umbrella)" (Valentine 2007:33, also see Califia 2003). For this reason, the 1990s to the

present is the most critical era in which to contextualize my work. In 1992, Leslie

Feinberg's 22-page publication was released, situating "transgender" as a collective in

terms of personhood and politics. As Valentine says:

> The earliest use of transgender (in its institutionalized, collective sense) in
> US activism dates back no further than 1991 or 1992, and therefore marks
> a significant shift in discourses, practices, and personal identities around
> gender variance in an astonishingly short period of time (2007:34).

This is not to say that organizing did not exist prior to the early 1990s, as I mentioned

previously with Virginia Prince's work. In fact, "many of the features associated with

contemporary *transgender* activism - the rejection of pathologization, social and political

networking, the celebration of the possibilities of shifting genders - were evident in

specifically *transexual* activism of earlier decades of the twentieth century" (Valentine

2007:35). However, the new language of *transgender* brought with it a new collective

culture and language of identity, something that did not occur prior to the 1990s. This

was particularly true for those on the FTM spectrum and their partners, who had

generally been left out of prior "transexual" activisms, but who had often been organizing with feminist and lesbian political movements (see Califia 2003).[10] Prior to the 1970s, those who might be seen as identifying with the FTM spectrum, as it is currently defined, often carved out social space and organizing around a "butch" identity[11] (Califia 2003, Halberstam 1998). However, feminist movements, from the 1970s to the present, have often shunned people on the FTM spectrum (and their partners as well) due to them often not identifying as women and/or female. For this reason, the collective of *transgender*, which includes a variety of gender identities and sexualities, has allowed many trans people and their partners a largely-accepting umbrella under which to organize.

A newer cohort of cis people who are partnered with individuals on the FTM spectrum represent a much different group than the wives that Virginia Prince's organization catered to in the 1950s. Cisgender partners now often embrace the idea of a transgender collective and see this umbrella as something they are included under, since issues around identity, community, and politics affect their lives too. In other words, cis partners are shaped by the activist language of a trans collective through their relationships. As Patrick Califia explains, "By affiliating with, loving, and validating transgendered people, partners have become allies and members of their own sexual-minority community" (2003:212). I would argue, however, that partners have also become allies and members in *trans* communities as well. This was made evident while conducting fieldwork at several trans and LGBT conferences across the United States

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[10] Some of the tensions between FTM organizing and feminist and lesbian politics are elaborated on throughout the dissertation, particularly in Chapters Three and Four

[11] "Butch" usually refers to masculinity and/or masculine traits in someone of any sex or gender, but the meaning varies depending on class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, community, and/or geographic location.

between 2007 and 2010. The conferences generally revolve around the politics of identity and community, as well as activism around legal, medical, and social issues related to the everyday lives of trans people. While explained in more detail in Chapters Four and Five, these conferences often include cis partners as significant contributors to trans communities. Conferences encourage partner attendance and many have special partner workshop "tracks" that deal specifically with partner issues, such as identity, transition, and relationship well-being. The conferences not only encourage cis partners to develop a sense of partner community, as Califia (2003) motions to above, but they also encourage engagement with a larger trans community that includes a variety of allies, including family, friends, and partners.

While there is currently very little inquiry around cis people who are in trans communities, this research project is situated in relation to the *small* bodies of current literature on cisgender partners of trans people. There are three main bodies of literature to discuss here: 1) psychological literature, 2) literature from the academy in fields other than psychology, and 3) non-academic literature. The divisions between these groups of work are often tricky to manage; however, I make some loose delineation here in the interest of organization. The non-academic literature, which consists of published first-person accounts of being a cis person who is partnered with a trans individual, will not be covered in this introduction as the relevant pieces are used as data, directly in relation to the other data I collected, in Chapters Three, Four, and Five. Although the academic literature has a variety of political and disciplinary investments in the analyses, one thing is clear and agreed upon: cis people who are partnered with trans folks have personal and

political experiences around identity and community that are unique to this particular

relationship configuration.

The psychological literature on cisgender partners spans from the 1980s (with a

focus on wives of crossdressers who were assigned male at birth) to the present (where

the focus tends to be on cis women who partner with people on the FTM spectrum).[12]

The 1980s and 1990s brought us the first wave of psychological literature that focused on

relationship dynamics, identity development, and sexual satisfaction for cis women who

were spouses of people on the MTF spectrum (Cole 1998, Gurvich 1991, Peo 1984,

Weinberg and Bullough 1988, Brown 1998, Dixon and Dixon 1991, Ekins and King

1996). There was a complete lack of literature during this initial period that examined

relationships for those on the FTM spectrum. This period also produced literature that

often used language that was problematic or just plain wrong.[13] For example, George R.

Brown's (1998) piece, "Women in the Closet: Relationships with Transgendered Men,"

would seem to be about cis women who are partnered with trans men (i.e., people on the

FTM spectrum) based on the title. However, Brown, a psychiatrist, actually writes about

"cross-dressing men and their spouses" (1998:353) and uses "transgendered men" to refer

to cis men who crossdress throughout his piece. He claims that this piece "present[s] data

from the largest and most representative descriptive study completed to date on women in

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[12] It is not clear exactly why there was a shift in the literatures over time to now be more focused on
partners of people on the FTM spectrum, except that there was an obvious gap in the older literature
because it never (as far as I know) addressed the FTM spectrum at all. Perhaps the influx of FTM-related
literature more recently is both a response to the previous silence, and due to the fact that people who live
in relation to trans individuals (as partners, friends, family, etc.) are now producing research that is
connected to their everyday lives and are "out" about their personal investments in trans-related
scholarship.

[13] This language is not the result of the year that the pieces were published in. This language would have
been incorrect at that time as well.

relationships with transgendered men" (Brown 1998:356). In reality, his work is not on the partners of trans men at all - it is about the partners of cisgender men who crossdress (i.e., someone who might be interpreted as being on the MTF spectrum). In the same volume, Sandra S. Cole (1998) also uses "transgendered males" to refer to the same group of people - those who were assigned male at birth and crossdress. This issue with language makes both pieces almost completely inaccessible due to the authors' confusion of MTF and FTM spectrums (e.g., trans women and trans men, respectively), even though they are now only just over a decade old.

Weinberg and Bullough (1988) were actually quite progressive for their time in their approach to research on the "wives of transvestites." They recognized that previous literatures had focused on people who might be described as falling on the trans spectrum from a deviance perspective and followed Peo's (1984) call for more research about cis women who were in intimate relationships with individuals who were assigned male at birth and crossdressed. Weinberg and Bullough (1988) did not use a pathologizing or deviance-based perspective in their work; instead, they focused on how the wives felt about themselves (i.e., self-esteem) and the importance of support groups in the lives of the cis women they surveyed. Susan Gurvich (1991) took a similar path of inquiry with her dissertation that examined how wives of those on the MTF spectrum used various coping mechanisms and support systems after finding out about their spouses' shift in gender. However, Gurvich's lack of reflexivity about her own divorce from a spouse who transitioned sets a negative tone in her work about how a spouse's transition may lead to major emotional pain and grief, while sympathizing with the ten wives she interviewed.

More recent work in psychology from the 2000s brings us close to contemporary uses of terms when discussing trans people and experiences. For example, three dissertations in psychology focus on how the identities of many cis women shift when a partner on the FTM spectrum transitions (Brown 2005, Nyamora 2004, Mason 2006). Often, the women interviewed for these projects shifted their identities from "lesbian" to "queer" or "bisexual." While these researchers interviewed partners who often said interesting and detailed things about their experiences of identity, the interviews were then analyzed within psychological stage model frameworks of grief, loss, mourning, and caregiver burden (Brown 2005, Nyamora 2004, Mason 2006). That said, Brown (2005) actually straddles a disciplinary line with a move from the individual to the social when she provides an analysis of how the queer cis women she interviewed negotiate and rely on queer community during a partner's transition. As a psychologist, Brown's (2009, 2010) most recent publications to date provide both clinical *and* social analyses around issues of sexual identity renegotiation and sexual intimacy, which is often lacking from the rest of the psychological literature.

Non-psychological academic accounts of cis partners of trans people began in the late 1990s with brief mentions of partners in the early trans studies literature (see Devor 1997, Feinberg 1998, Green 2004, Wilchins 2004). Patrick Califia (1997, 2003) is the only author to outline a history of partners in trans activisms, recognizing the important role that cis partners have played in trans lives and realities, but not elaborating on that role. In 2007, the first sociological, research-based account of cis/trans relationships was published in the UK with Sally Hines's (2007) book *TransForming Gender: Transgender*

Practices of Identity, Intimacy, and Care. Hines interviews trans people in her work who talk about their experiences of intimacy and longevity in relationships, but she does not interview the cis partners or spouses in this work. Tam Sanger, another UK sociologist, recently published *Trans People's Partnerships: Towards an Ethics of Intimacy* (2010) that is in conversation with Hines' work, though Sanger interviews both cis and trans people about their relationships. Sanger (2010) encourages readers to rethink intimacy, gender, and sexuality through the stories that her interviewees share and in relation to Foucauldian notions of power relations and governance. She asks, "Are people becoming freer to live the lives they desire or are they manipulated subtly into these very desires?" (Sanger 2010:1). That is, she considers the ways that intimacy is socially regulated through the bureaucracies around trans gender and sexuality. However, while groundbreaking in terms of their focus on trans intimacies, Hines (2007) and Sanger (2010) focus on the *relationship* itself, not on cis partners as a group.

This is similar to Carla Pfeffer's (2008, 2009, 2010) work that is largely situated in a family studies perspective and focuses on cis women in relation to the partnership in particular. However, while Hines (2007) and Sanger (2010) focus on the cis/trans relationship itself, Pfeffer (2008, 2009, 2010) focuses on how cis women experience their lives through and against their relationship and their trans partner. In her dissertation, Pfeffer (2009) broadly examines identities, bodies, work, and family/household life for cis women with partners on the FTM spectrum by considering how the cis women explain their relationships and the work that goes into maintaining them. While she only interviews the cis women for the project (not their trans partners), her focus is on the

experience of the *relationship* for these women and how it impacts their daily lives. For

example, her work on body image examines shifting body image for cis women in

relation to a trans partner's body dysphoria as she discusses "relational body

image" (Pfeffer 2008, 2009). She has done additional writing on emotion work and

household labor in cis/trans relationships, again, from a family studies and more

traditional sociology of gender perspective (Pfeffer 2009, 2010). Jane Ward (2010)

presents us with similar stories of emotion work and "gender labor" in femme/FTM

relationships. Ward argues that femme[14] cis women engage in labor that validates their

trans partner's masculinity and says that "in many cases, FTM identities remain reliant

upon the labors of femininity that nurture and witness them, both within, and outside of,

intimate sexual relations" (2010:251). Unfortunately, while Ward presents interesting

data around femmes being trans allies, she uses overgeneralizing statements such as,

"within trans subculture, femmes have been positioned in the outsider categories of 'ally'

or 'SOFFA'" (2010:249) which are not supported by my own data in this project based on

interviews and participant observation.[15] Further, while she introduces "gender labor" as

an affective form of labor that we *all* do to affirm each other (Ward 2010), she discusses

it in ways that position femmes as victims of Western femininity, expected to provide

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[14] Femme identity is usually considered to be about consciously embracing a (queer) political and non-normative femininity (see Hollibaugh 1997). However, not all femmes are cis female/woman identified people (since femininity can be embraced and challenged by someone of any gender), as Ward (2010) would have readers believe, and she does not discuss how she is using "femme" in her piece.

[15] SOFFA stands for Significant Others, Friends, Family, and Allies. It is commonly used in trans communities to refer to cis people who are related to trans people in some way.

gender legitimating assistance to their FTM partners.[16] In sum, while previous academic

literatures on cis people with trans partners from various fields have made important

contributions to knowledge around trans intimacies, relationships, bodies, sexuality, and

the gendered division of labor, this work fails to seriously consider how cis partners also

exist in the social world outside of their relationship with a trans person.

Theoretical Conversations and Interventions

　　　　Engaging in interdisciplinary and humanistic sociological work on a topic with a

troubled history in the academy presents a particularly complicated challenge to

providing a concise theoretical context in which to situate this project. While this project

is broadly situated within a sociology of gender, there is an overwhelming silence from

that scholarly subfield around cis and trans specificities and the potentially complex

histories of gender for trans people. The terms "women" and "men" are frequently used

to discuss gender inequality in courses in the Sociology of Gender, with only rare

interrogations of what those terms mean and who counts as a "man" or a "woman." The

assumption is that "man" and "woman" refer to *cisgender* men and women, and

discussion of whether trans people are included in "man" and "woman" is absent. In

relation to this, "transgender" often operates as a category that serves to illustrate the

socially constructed nature of gender, often leading to classic nature versus nurture

debates in classrooms instead of critical discussions about the realities of everyday life

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[16] I wonder if what I see as problematic analysis (due to my personal and political stakes in trans communities as a trans person myself, in addition to my data for this project) is based on Ward's self-disclosed status as "a queer femme who was, during the study, in a long-term relationship with an FTM" and her experiences in specific communities during that time (2010:252). Unfortunately, Ward does not elaborate in this piece about her own political investments in specific communities or about her former relationship and how it may have informed her analyses.

for trans people. The exceptions to this often come from scholars who place their work at

the intersections of sociology *and* LGBT, queer, and/or trans studies. That is, from

sociologists who use interdisciplinary (queer) theories to inform their work on gender. I

begin my theoretical contextualization with a *brief* overview of the binaries of sex,

gender, and sexuality as discussed through literature in the sociology of gender, and

quickly move to discuss theoretical conversations and interventions from LGBT studies,

queer theory, and trans studies before returning to a sociology of gender in the subsequent

section by arguing for the importance of doing queer sociological work. It is not my

intention to provide a complete history of LGBT studies or a comprehensive overview of

queer theory here (see Jagose 1996, Sullivan 2003), but to instead provide introductions

to the theoretical landscapes that inform this research.

　　　Without queer interventions, a sociology of gender relies on binaries of sex,

gender, and sexuality to illustrate issues of gender inequality, discrimination, and

oppression within contemporary societies. Generally, sex, gender, and sexuality are

usually delineated in the following ways: 1) *sex* refers to a male/female binary as based

on biological factors, such as hormones, chromosomes, and genitals; 2) *gender* refers to a

binary of man/woman based on socially constructed ideas around masculinity and

femininity, appearance, clothing, and behaviors that are seen as in line with a specific

sex; 3) *sexuality* is often used to refer to a binary of heterosexual/homosexual (or straight/

gay) based on attractions and desires for people of the opposite or same sex or gender

(see Lorber and Moore 2007). The boundaries between sex, gender, and sexuality, and

the binaries that have been socially constructed within each as are often highly contested,

as is illustrated by my project; however, a non-queer sociology of gender often relies on these binaries in order to make arguments around sex, gender, and sexuality. For example, Lorber and Moore (2007) do precisely that in their book *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* where they discuss how feminism has addressed "women's" issues such as menstruation and breast cancer, as well as sexuality and prostate cancer in relation to men (4). In doing so, they uphold the hegemonic notions that certain bodily functions and issues are unique to one of two specific genders: "women" or "men." Even more problematic, Lorber and Moore rely on a sex and gender binary for their anti-essentialist arguments around gender and then dedicate a chapter to trans and intersex bodies and genders called "Ambiguous Bodies" where they use language of "us" and "we" (i.e., the authors and readers) versus "they" (i.e., trans and intersex people), in order to illustrate just how socially constructed gendered bodies can be.

West and Zimmerman (1987), on the other hand, were fairly cutting-edge in late-1980s sociology of gender. While still using a binary of "man" and "woman" for some examples, their work largely focuses on interrogating gender as a structure that requires us all to "do gender" all the time (West and Zimmerman 1987). Their piece is about gendered interactions, not about male/female or men/women specifically. Their work continues to be cited over 20 years later because their arguments don't rely on binaries of sex, gender, or sexuality - or any specific categories - to make sense. As they say in conclusion:

> Social change, then, must be pursued both at the institutional and cultural
> level of sex category and at the interactional level of gender…
> Reconceptualizing gender not as a simple property of individuals but as an

> integral dynamic of social orders implies a new perspective on the entire network of gender relations (West and Zimmerman 1987:147).

Unfortunately, the vast majority of scholars doing work around gender in sociology have not taken on West and Zimmerman's (1987) call for a new perspective. Instead, scholars rely on the traditional gender binary for their arguments, which does not interrogate "the entire network of gender relations" (West and Zimmerman 1987:147) since gender relations, such as those related to sexuality and relationships, can also involve gender beyond, or outside of, the binary of man/woman. The sociology of gender contributes to an awareness of the important ways that social phenomena around gender inequalities, discrimination, and oppression are related, for example, to the gendered division of labor (see DeVault 1991, Hochschild 1989) or workplace discrimination and the "glass ceiling" (see Purcell, MacArthur, and Samblanet 2010). However, these explanations remain incomplete because they rely on a binary of sex and gender that is rarely questioned. In other words, the binaries around sex and gender continue to be upheld and lived experience that queers or works outside the binaries is often erased by referring only to "men" and "women," presenting an incomplete picture of the realities of gender since there are many people who would not identify with either of those two terms. Relatedly, Susan Stryker notes: "Most disturbingly, 'transgender' increasingly functions as the site in which to contain all gender trouble, thereby helping secure both homosexuality and heterosexuality as stable and normative categories of personhood" (2004:214). That is, trans experiences and bodies are addressed in ways that suggest only *trans* genders deserve interrogation. Without interrogating the categories of cisgender "man" and "woman," they are repeatedly upheld as the "ideal" gender

constructs that shape and define what it means to be "homosexual" and "heterosexual."

This is true not only in sociological studies of gender, but also in the field of gay and

lesbian studies, which is situated across disciplinary boundaries.

Gay and lesbian studies in the academy has an interdisciplinary history in literary

theory, historical research, and social science perspectives, among others. While often

called "LGBT" studies, this field of inquiry is generally focused on "same-sex" sexuality,

not (trans)gender, per se. Further, when focusing on sexuality, "bisexual" experiences are

often completely ignored, leading to a gay and lesbian studies that largely depends on the

gender binary of man/woman to make sense of "gay" and "lesbian" in terms of "same-

sex" arguments. LGBT studies, as it's currently understood, emerged out of the identity

politics movements of the 1960s and 70s and often relies on a fixed and stable adherence

to a particular sexual identity (e.g., "heterosexual" or "gay"), and, by extension, a

particular gender identity that informs that sexuality. LGBT studies in the social sciences

has focused broadly on topics such as models of homosexual identity development (see

Plummer 1975, Ponse 1978, Troiden 1979, Cass 1979), gay and lesbian parenting (see

Stacey and Biblarz 2001), social movements (see Bernstein 1997, 2002; Taylor and

Whittier 1992; Engel 2001), and community (see Krieger 1983, Stein 1997). This work

has been instrumental to understandings of gay and lesbian identities and concerns, but in

doing so has aided in creating a homonormative[17] and sometimes hetero-assimilationist

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[17] Briefly, "homonormative" refers to constructed norms around being lesbian or gay in terms of lifestyle, marriage, politics, and various other beliefs and ways of living. Some people also use "homonormative" to refer to a lesbian or gay adoption of heteronormative ways of being. Most often, scholars claims there are certain types of white, middle-class, gay and lesbian people who uphold homonormativity, which sets up a hierarchy where bisexual, queer, questioning, trans, and gender nonconforming people are seen as "less than" because they aren't the "normal gays." For more on homonormativity see Warner (1999), Puar (2007), and Duggan (2003).

rhetoric that has sought to "normalize" gay and lesbian subjects by arguing against deviance and pathology. Gay and lesbian individuals and couples have been portrayed in much of this literature as the kinds of (white) people who you would never know are gay. The work is often invested in explaining the ("normal") everyday experiences of gay and lesbian people in order to illustrate that discrimination and oppression is due to a lack of equal protections under the law and to advocate for policy change. However, as Michael Warner cautions, "Increasingly, the answer is that to have dignity gay people must be seen as normal… Not assimilationist, exactly, but normalizing" (1999:52). In other words, the argument from many gay and lesbian studies is that normalizing "gay" and "lesbian" is the path to gaining legal protections, and in doing so, as many queer theorists would argue, those who are not seen as "normal" are somehow preventing those legal protections from being established.

Queer theory emerged in the 1990s alongside a burgeoning queer activism and was seen to be a kind of academic activism that worked against the normalizing rhetoric of gay and lesbian studies. That is, queer theorists often saw (and continue to see) their work as contributing to larger queer activist movements through their writing and teaching that focused on critiques of the normative and binary categories of sex, gender, and sexuality (see Warner 1999, Puar 2007, Duggan 2004, Gamson 1996, Seidman 1996, Butler 1990, Rubin 2006). Queer theory challenged the identity politics that often plagued gay and lesbian scholarship by advocating for an *almost* anti-identity politics through a queer umbrella. As Steven Seidman writes:

> Both queer theory and politics intend to expose and disturb the normalizing politics of identity as practiced in the straight and lesbian and

gay mainstream; whereas queer politics mobilizes against all normalized hierarchies, queer theory put into permanent crisis the identity-based theory and discourses that have served as the unquestioned foundation of lesbian and gay life (1995:118).

This is not to say that queer theorists are uniformly invested in one kind of queer politics, but they often share a general commitment to troubling identity politics, particularly around the heterosexual/homosexual binary and the binary gender structure that informs those constructs of sexuality (Seidman 1995). This dissertation project shares a commitment with queer theory to troubling the static and normative notions of sexual and gender identity categories and politics upon which gay and lesbian studies has relied. As my research will illustrate, the cis women partners of people on the FTM spectrum use unique strategies for managing their sexual identities, which often end up queering the categories they claim. That is, many partners redefine, deconstruct, and/or dismantle the boundaries of sexual identity categories in order to claim a particular sexual identity (e.g., "lesbian") while having a trans partner. In other words, many cis women partners *queer* these categories from the inside by breaking down the normative meanings around "same-sex."

Relatedly, many people use "queer" as a politicized and non-normative sexuality and/or gender identity (including some of the cis women who are included in this project). However, this move has also been critiqued for simply creating a new normative identity based on resisting the gay and lesbian politics that "queer" sought to escape (see Duggan 2004, Gamson 1996). As Gamson argues, "Queer as an identity category often restates tensions between sameness and difference in a different language" (1996:403). This is most evident when individuals use "queer" to stand in for

"lesbian" or "gay," for example, ignoring the anti-normative political potentials of the term. "Queer," whether in its connection to community activism or to a theoretical deconstructionist task, has always encouraged an intentional *identification with* challenging normative and supposedly stable categories. These may be categories of analysis, of coalitional politics, or of identity (see Gamson 1996, Seidman 1994, Warner 1999). Unfortunately, many queer theorists, in their deconstructionist endeavors, have ignored the concrete ways that "queer" is deployed as an identity that is deeply connected to political and collective movements in favor of a "politic [that] becomes overwhelmingly cultural, textual, and subjectless" (Gamson 1996:409). Queer sociology pushes queer theory in a more social direction grounded in interactions, as will be illustrated shortly, but trans studies also utilizes queer theory in ways that provide more connection to lived experience and politics, instead of relying on textual and cultural analyses alone.

Alongside queer theory, trans studies is an overwhelmingly activist field of scholarly inquiry. While previous work *about* trans people was largely pathologizing and medicalizing, the field of trans studies began to emerge from trans community activism in the mid-1990s (Whittle 2006). This was trans scholarship by trans people, for trans people. Trans studies is a field where the social locations of researchers and writers vis-à-vis "trans" matter in crucial ways due to problematic histories of cisgender researchers studying the trans "Other." Trans studies is a field where, quite literally, scholars risk their careers (or potential careers) and their personal connections outside the academy by

explicitly positioning themselves in their writing as trans people.[18] We do this because it

matters in relation to the communities and politics that we situate ourselves within;

because many of us are trans activist teacher-scholars. We do this in order to take back

the literature from those who wish to tokenize us with negative language and analysis

(see Whittle 2006, Stryker 2006). This is not to say that cis people can't, and don't, do

trans studies - they can and do. However, trans studies is a field with a particular political

history that is justifiably skeptical of non-trans people *who are not situated in relation to*

"trans" in significant ways[19] producing work about trans lives, communities, and bodies.

> According to Susan Stryker:

> The field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts,
> denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we
> generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually
> differentiated human body, the social roles and statues that a particular
> form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced
> relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of
> gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain
> or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood… It concerns
> itself with what we – we who have a passionate stake in such things – are
> going to do, politically, about the injustices and violence that often attend
> the perception of gender nonnormativity and atypically, whether in
> ourselves or in others (2006:3).

Stryker positions trans studies within a kind of queer theoretical framework, noting the

importance of breaking down the "normative linkages" associated with gender. She also

positions trans studies as a field that is generated and inhabited by the very people it

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[18] For a first-hand account of this in relation to Sociology, see Raine Dozier's piece in the "Report on the Status of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons in Sociology" presented to the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 2009. Also see Dean Spade's (2010) account of how he, as a trans person, was advised to navigate the academic job market.

[19] By this I mean non-trans people who are not partners, family members, close allies, and/or friends to those who call themselves "trans" and/or who are gender nonconforming. However, even research done by these people can be (and has been) problematic, as illustrated during my discussion of the previous literature on cis partners.

seeks to attend to in scholarly ways - a field about "we" not "them." Currently in its

relatively recent emergence, trans studies is overwhelmingly white at the present time and

is focused mainly on Western subjectivities of gender (Stryker 2004). Stryker says that

the abundance of white trans scholars and scholarship "is due, no doubt, to the many

forms of discrimination that keep many people of color from working in the relatively

privileged environment of academe, but also to the uneven distribution and reception of

the term 'transgender' across different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic

communities" (2006:15). That is, this whiteness is not only about the social locations of

the scholars themselves, but also the whiteness of the trans subjects and subjectivities that

the scholarship focuses on, and the whiteness of the academy as a larger institution.

David Valentine (2007) carefully argues that "transgender" operates as a category of

knowing, one that might also operate as a category of identity or politics or community,

but one that enables the production of knowledge around gender, sexuality, and bodies.

"Transgender" may not move across other social locations in a uniform way; it is a

category of identity, politics, and community that is used largely by white people in

Western, English-speaking contexts, who may also have certain class privileges. As

Valentine (2007) found in his ethnographic research, "transgender" was not a term that

the young people of color he talked to in New York City used for themselves - some out

of resistance and some because they didn't know it. While "transgender" operates as an

umbrella category of identity, community, and politics for many trans and/or gender

nonconforming white people, it is a category that can erase the specificities of a raced and

classed gender and sexuality. All of this is to say that the whiteness of trans studies is

perhaps at least partially constituted by the very language used to describe the field.

In 1991, Sandy Stone published a "posttranssexual manifesto" - a response, at

least in part, to Janice Raymond's (1979) offensive and transphobic critique of trans

identities and bodies "infiltrating" "women's" spaces. Stone (1991) called for a new kind

of politics around trans in her piece - a transness that wasn't about "passing" and denying

our histories, but was about troubling the discourses that encourage us to want to pass in

the first place and to consider a kind of political trans "borderlands" (see Anzaldúa 1987)

as "posttranssexual." This was in line with how trans studies was emerging from trans

activisms outside the academy and a reconsideration of *transgender* as a collective

(Valentine 2007). Stone's (1991) piece is often considered to be the critical turning point

in a trans studies that is grounded in community politics. Valentine (2007) contextualizes

trans studies through Stone's call for a politically-connected trans studies when he writes:

> The concept of transgender has enabled a new set of counterclaims: first,
> an understanding of gender variance as socially valid, publicly claimable,
> and free of the stigma of pathologization. Second, as transgender gains
> hold in academic and popular discourses, it has enabled the coalescence of
> an emerging field of transgender studies which, like other fields of critical
> inquiry, challenges the claims of scientific, objective knowledge. Finally,
> transgender has reframed the moral and ethical questions in terms of the
> negative impact of medical, religious, scientific, and legal practices and
> theories on transgender lives (140-141).

Trans studies has taken Stone's critical call seriously and has developed around

attending to the political, legal, social, and embodied challenges of gender, sexuality, and

identity in the everyday lives of trans people (see Stryker 2006, Bornstein 1994, Califia

2003, Feinberg 1997). There is a call with trans studies to recognize that the lack of legal

protections for trans people is a civil rights issue (see Currah 2006). Opposed to the

homonormative and essentialist claim that "we" are "born this way"[20] and that

bioessentialist arguments around gender and sexuality should be made in order to obtain

equality, many trans studies scholars and activists argue that trans rights and politics

shouldn't be about biology versus choice, but about the freedom for anyone to embrace

and embody gender as they desire (see Currah 2006, Feinberg 1998, Hollibaugh 1997,

Wilchins 1997).

Currently, trans studies tends to focus on trans people, experiences, and bodies,

but not other groups of individuals with experiences that are in relation to "trans." That

is, trans studies has not begun a serious engagement with issues such as trans families,

partners, children of trans parents, teachers with trans students, parents of trans children,

or medical professionals who work with trans clients. While two UK scholars, Hines

(2006, 2007) and Sanger (2010), have pushed for a truly trans and queer studies

perspective in examining cis/trans partnerships, scholars in the US (see Pfeffer 2008,

2009, 2010; Ward 2010) have not yet seriously engaged with trans studies in their work,

instead relying on more traditional theoretical perspectives situated in a sociology of

gender that is based on a binary gender system.

A queer trans studies is a far cry from some gay and lesbian studies that attempt to

show just how "normal" gays are in order to gain acceptance in society. Queer theory is

intricately connected to trans studies in ways that encourage an analysis of bodies and

genders that moves beyond identity politics to a more queer politics of resistance through

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[20] My phrasing here is taken from Lady Gaga's song "Born This Way." To hear the song via Lady Gaga's
VEVO channel on YouTube, visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4a8QtvOkBQ.

the complexities of lived experience. As Paisley Currah writes, "The transgender rights movement might be described as an identity politics movement that seeks the dissolution of the very category under which it is organized" (2006:24). This does not mean that we cease to call ourselves "trans," but that trans remains open to possibility. That is, "the aim is not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and contestable as to its meaning and political role. In other words, decisions about identity categories become pragmatic, related to concerns of situational advantage, political gain, and conceptual utility" (Seidman 1996:12). As such, this dissertation aims to attend to those pragmatic decisions and articulations of identity that are often unable to stand in for the very real experience of living in relation to trans.

Queer(ing) Sociology and Socializing Queer

"Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as as power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations - in a word, the constitution of the self and society."
- Steven Seidman from *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics,* 1995:128 -

If we take Seidman's argument seriously, queer theory has an enormous potential to inform sociological work. While Adam Isaiah Green (2002) advocates for a "post-queer study of sexuality" (521) in sociology, I posit that our work does not have to be *post*-queer, it just has to actually engage with queer theory at the level of the social, a call that others have made previously (see Seidman 1995, 1996; Hines 2006, 2007; Roseneil 2000, Stein and Plummer 1994, Valocchi 2005). If queer theory is a perspective meant "to challenge and break apart conventional categories" (Doty 1993:xv) and "challenge the normative" (Goldman 1996:170), then a queer theoretical intervention in sociology

would contribute to challenging the ways that society is ordered by normative categories that have the potential to constrain our interactions.

Following a symbolic interactionist thread around social practices and interactions, Stephen Valocchi argues that sociological work on gender and sexuality is simply "not yet queer enough" (2005:750). That is, many scholars have not yet actually queered their work on gender and/or sexuality, and they discuss gender and sexuality in terms of binaries and static identities. He writes:

> [the] queering of gender and sexuality requires a sensitivity to the complicated and multilayered lived experiences and subjectivities of individuals, to the social settings within which these experiences and subjectivities take shape, and to the larger cultural, discursive, and institutional contexts of these lives (Valocchi 2005:767).

The categories of gender and sexuality do not exist in a vacuum; these categories are impacted by the sociocultural landscapes and historical periods in which they are used. Queer sociology recognizes this impact and seeks to deconstruct these categories in ways that reveal their reliance on hetero/homo and male/female binaries. Queer sociology recognizes how "individuals claim certain identities even as they undercut these claims through their practices and their (sometimes unstable) desires and subjectivities" (Valocchi 2005:767).

As I have discussed, previous sociological work on cis people with partners on the FTM spectrum has often adopted traditional perspectives in family studies and the sociology of gender for theory and analysis (Pfeffer 2008, 2009, 2010; Ward 2010). My research aims, instead, to take the social location and experience of a "cis person who is partnered with someone on the FTM spectrum" as the starting point for the queer

sociological project at hand. My focus here is not on the dynamics of a cis/trans relationship, but instead on the ways that cis partners grapple with, and are often encouraged by, their unique social location and experience in relation to identity, community, and engagements in trans activisms. My work seeks to bring a queer theoretical and analytical perspective to sociology, and to push US trans studies to engage with the experiences of people who live everyday life in relation to *trans*. In other words, not only does my work make a call for including non-trans people, experiences, and bodies in trans studies, but I also use trans and queer studies to encourage the scholarship in the sociology of gender to attend to the real complexities and contestations of gender that occur not only for trans people themselves.

Let me be clear: this is not a project about queer or trans subjects. This project is about the relational complexities of gender and sexuality, language, community, and activism. My examination of the experiences of cisgender partners in this project makes it possible to break down and interrogate the seemingly normative links between identity and experience, identity and community, and identity and activism, as well as the ways that language is considered able to make these links more or less seamless. These seemingly normative links are based on assumptions and expectations of sameness around identity and experience that impact cis partners finding community and engaging in activism. For instance, the cis partners in this project talk about identity being problematic because their experience of gender in a relationship with a trans person pushes the boundaries of specific sexual identities (e.g., "lesbian"), and those identity categories are often policed by others who also claim that identity. This policing occurs

because there is an assumption of similarity in experience that is required for someone to

claim a particular sexual identity. Further, as the majority of partners in this project

desire community that is organized around sexuality, my work breaks down the

normative links around identity-based communities; that is, my project challenges the

notion that communities are made up of people who claim the same identity *and* share a

sameness in experience. While the partners in this project do share the experience of

being partnered with a trans person, there is relatively little community based on this

experience aside from community that is found online. In the case of activism and

everyday resistance, my research questions the notion that only trans people would be

involved in trans activism; that is, the assumed link between personal identity and

activism is severed by considering how a relational connection to *trans* can encourage

action toward social change.

Notes on Language and Terminology

As Chapters Three and Four illustrate, the politics of language and meaning are

both contested and important for LGB, trans, and queer people, as well as within

communities that are organized around those social locations and politics. It is here that I

provide a discussion of my use of various terms within the dissertation in order to guide

readers, knowing that there will always be disagreements and confusions in relation to

language. It is, perhaps, interesting to consider the fact that I need to include this section

in the introductory chapter at all. How would the rest of the document be read without

these pages? What does my inclusion of these pages say about how new and shifting the

language is around gender and sexuality? It is not my intent to operationalize language in

any kind of positivist sense here; simply, I wish to provide background for how I came to

use the language that I do. I fully expect that at some point, either my use of the terms or

the terms themselves will be considered archaic - perhaps even offensive. It is with the

ever-changing politics of language in mind that I provide explanation for my use at the

current time.

First, I am completely intentional with my differential use of "LGB," "LGBT,"

and "LGBTQ" acronyms. "LGB" is used in relation to questions of *sexuality*, often also

in relation to a binary system of gender. As much as I argue that gender and sexuality are

linked through a social system that bases sexuality on (binary) gendered desires, "LGB"

identities are primarily sexual identities while "T" refers to gender identity and/or a

specific gender history. "LGBT" is used in relation to political movements and other

politics that refer to themselves as "LGBT," often focusing only on "same-sex" politics

without regard to trans gender identity. I rarely use "LGBT" alone to describe or analyze

anything because, as will be illustrated throughout, there are often significant divides

between "LGB" and "T" identities, communities, and politics.[21] "LGBTQ" is used to

reference communities and/or politics that are inclusive of the variety of sexual *and*

gender identities within that acronym.

In most academic literature, "transgender" is an umbrella term used to refer to

individuals who identify themselves as crossing or complicating traditional binary sex

and gender norms. This project recognizes the political and personal usages of terms,

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[21] I also recognize that bisexual people are often not included in lesbian and gay communities or politics, but this wasn't a topic of analysis for this particular project based on the participants' identities and the data.

names, and identities related to LGBTQ relationships, communities, and spaces. It also

recognizes the resistive power of naming (or the choice not to name) and the political

implications of these decisions. I will tend to use "trans," as opposed to "transgender,"

throughout the dissertation as an overarching term that encompasses a variety of possible

identities. "Trans" is seen by many individuals within trans-identified communities as

being the most inclusive of a variety of identities, experiences, embodiments, and self-

presentations that are not gender normative in contemporary US society. "Trans" is also

used as a way to make unclear the use of various medical technologies for transition[22]

and also used for people who have made a decision to *not* transition but who identify

outside of the traditional sex/gender binary. I also follow David Valentine's lead about

the spelling of "transexual;" as he says, "I spell 'transexual' with one 's,' a usage of

activist informants who employed this spelling to resist the pathologizing implications of

the medicalized two 's' 'transsexual'" (Valentine 2007:25). Further, I will often use the

phrase "FTM spectrum" in my writing here. This refers to people who were assigned

female at birth but who no longer identify as female or "woman" - however, this does not

indicate that people necessarily identify as men. Based on my experiences at trans

conferences, the use of "FTM spectrum" versus "transmasculine" is contested. Some

people feel that "FTM spectrum" sets up two ends of a continuum - female and male -

and people fall somewhere in between. Others feel that "transmasculine" is arguably

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[22] "Transition" is a complicated and often contested term that I have purposely left open to interpretation. That is, some trans people define transition as when they first identify as "trans" – yet others do not feel they are in a state of transition until they utilize various medical technologies (such as taking hormones). Some people feel that transition is something that is forever ongoing, and others feel there is an end point and may say that they have "transitioned." Saying that someone utilizing forms of medical technologies to change their bodies in relation to some form of trans identity is currently "transitioning" is generally accepted.

better because it does not set up that same continuum. However, I use "FTM spectrum" over "transmasculine" here to mean a shift away from a birth sex designation of female, recognizing that not all people who were assigned female at birth and no longer identify as female would see themselves as masculine, as "transmasculine" seems to indicate. Further, there are many folks on the MTF spectrum who do see themselves as masculine, but this project doesn't focus on masculinity for all trans people.

There is a much longer discussion of "cisgender" as a term in Chapter Three, but I will often use "cis," like I use "trans," throughout the dissertation to talk about participants as "cis women." Generally, I use the language that participants and cis partners on YouTube use for themselves when providing an analysis of the data. That is, if they use "queer," I use "queer" when talking about them, even if it is not how I would normally use that term. Those nuances are explained throughout the chapters as necessary. Lastly, I will often use "they/them/their" in reference to a singular person when I discuss "an individual," but do not know their preferred pronouns. This is not a grammatical error and is used in place of "he or she" since that usage invokes the gender binary once again by only referring to people who identify as "he" or "she." This use of "they" is becoming more common in many English-speaking trans communities as one of many gender neutral pronoun options.

Chapter Overviews

Following this introduction, I begin with a chapter on methods and methodology that considers the challenges of ethnography in a postmodern era of technomediated

social life. As this research utilizes both "traditional" ethnographic methods in the form of interviews and participant observation, as well as digital ethnographic methods by using YouTube videos, blog posts, and conducting the interviews via email and instant messaging (IM), the chapter tells a story of how these pieces of data came together as a digital (Murthy 2008) and multimodal (Dicks, Soyinka, and Coffey 2006) ethnographic project.

Chapter Three, "Languages of Identity: The (Queer) Politics of Naming," presents some of the problems with identity categories (and defining those categories) for cisgender people with trans partners, while also recognizing how important these categories can still be for many - both personally and politically. I argue that words such as "lesbian," "bisexual," and "straight" - even "queer" and "pansexual" - fail to provide adequate descriptions of identity for many cisgender people with trans partners. In other words, these terms do not provide any real information about the fact that some people are partnered with individuals that have a trans gender identity and/or a trans gender history since they depend on a binary notion of gender in order to make sense. These terms might help to define *individual* sexual identity, but they fail to account for the ways that gender and sexuality are also *relational* identities that indicate our connections with intimate others. I also consider how sexual identity is linked to politics and activism for some partners by claiming "queer," and consider the possibilities of "queer" for cis/trans relationships. This chapter challenges the normative assumptions around identity and experience being linked through sameness by illustrating the ways in which many cis

partners are intentionally resisting these assumptions through their own language around identity and their relationships.

Chapter Four, "(Re)Imagining Community," illustrates how identity does not guarantee membership within a community for the partners of trans people - even when the identity of the individual and the identity upon which a community is based are the same (e.g., "lesbian"). This is due to a policing of community boundaries through policing the meaning of specific identity terms, as discussed in Chapter Three. This also speaks to a larger issue of transphobia in many LGB and queer community spaces (see Weiss 2004) where partners may be seeking to find community. While YouTube channels can operate as sites of community that replicate many of the complex and problematic identity politics that are present in many physical LGBT and queer communities - especially around race - I argue that they provide an important space for the development of a sustainable partner community that is rarely found elsewhere. Relatedly, this chapter seeks to reconsider what counts as "community" by examining the importance and roles of various social networks in the lives of cis partners. Based on my research, I suggest that one solution for the lack of community that many partners experience is not to claim a different identity, but for the relevant and potential communities to form and operate under queer politics that are inclusive with regards to fluid and complex sexual and gender identities. In other words, this chapter challenges the normative link between identity and community by focusing on affinity and experience as modes of belonging and organizing. Further, I challenge the assumption that the most desirable forms of community are local, physical communities and illustrate the benefits that many cis

partners find from online spaces as well, by considering the YouTube channels to be operating as communities.

Chapter Five, "Activisms in Everyday Life: Advocacy as Partner Allies," examines how cisgender people engage in forms of trans and cis partner activism, often using forms of everyday resistance. While many partners refuse to call themselves "activists," my research illustrates that they are engaging in actions that contribute to social change around trans issues. Everyday activism is often about individuals working to carve out a more habitable everyday life, and this type of micro-activism, or everyday resistance, is often routinely part of the lives of cisgender people with trans partners. While education is often not considered to be activism, I illustrate how it contributes to social change in ways that other forms of everyday activism and resistance do and argue that "educational advocacy" is one type of trans ally activism in which cis partners engage. By framing forms of education as everyday activism, this chapter seeks to redefine and reframe "activism" in ways that might encourage various allies to recognize the importance of their everyday actions as contributing to a broader project of social change. In addition, this chapter challenges the idea that trans activism: 1) only matters to trans people themselves and, 2) is something that only trans people would be interested in engaging in. In other words, this chapter is invested in illustrating how trans activism is not only about trans identities and bodies, but is about a larger commitment to social change around gender and sexuality that has the potential to positively impact a great variety of people.

Based on my data, the themes of identity, community, and activism stood out as the most contested and complex topics in the data that also had direct theoretical and analytical links to one another. My choice to focus on these themes in particular stems from a desire to challenge the seemingly normative links between identity and experience, identity and community, and identity and activism as outlined above. This project treats identity as a relational, intentional, and queer political project wrapped up in social interactions that inform and complicate community and activism. Queer sociological work around the themes of identity, community, and activism challenges the individualistic nature of much of the previous literature on cis people who partner with trans folks. That is, by recognizing cis people with trans partners as a group in and of themselves (i.e., not just as one half of a couple in a relationship), this project highlights an affinity among cis partners that previous research has not considered. In addition, my research illustrates the importance of a sociology of gender (and sexuality) also being a sociology of *cis*gender and *trans*gender. This can be accomplished by engaging a sociology of gender with queer sociology and trans studies.

Chapter Two
Doing Ethnography in a Postmodern Era: Technology, Reflexivity, and
the Politics of Sociological Methods

"Perhaps the key methodological question is not *what method have you adopted for this research?* But what paths have been disavowed, left behind, covered over and remain unseen? In what fields does fieldwork occur?"
- Avery Gordon from *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* 1997:41 -

In early February 2010 I attend a large national conference focused on LGBTQ rights and policy issues in Dallas, Texas. I'm in a 3-hour workshop about the disability justice movement and its connection to the politics of class, race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status. We have a break about 90 minutes into the workshop and I make my way to the hotel coffee shop for a mid-afternoon jolt of caffeine where I find myself at the end of a long line of people who had a similar need. I end up standing behind someone that I recognize from the workshop and we introduce ourselves. After finding out I'm a graduate student she asked what my research was on. "Cisgender people with trans-identified partners and their relationships to forms of activism, organizing, and community," I said. "That's me!! That's ME! I'm a partner! That's awesome! I'd love to talk with you more about your work," she said before high five-ing me in the coffee line.

I open this chapter with a recounting of this exchange as a way to open a conversation about methodological challenges. There was no way for me to know that this person was a potential participant in the project before this conversation, since there is no easy way for her to disclose her relationship specifics or identity given a lack of language to do so. I didn't meet this person after being in a conference workshop about partners, or even about gender identity or sexuality. Instead, this meeting was a chance encounter based entirely on the fact that we ended up next to each other in a line and she spoke up to introduce herself and subsequently ask what my research was on. How do we find participants for a research project when there is a lack of common identity for

participants to organize around? How do we word a call for participants? What methods

do we use to collect data from people who share a common social location, but do not

have the words to define that location simply or easily? And, perhaps most importantly,

what do we do methodologically when our participants occupy social locations that are

often highly contested and/or politicized by various communities to which they find

themselves connected?

This was not an easy project to conceptualize or for which to collect data. My

original intention was to collect data using what are viewed as "traditional" qualitative

methods: face-to-face interviews and participant observation. I assumed I would have to

follow up with some participants and would do so using the phone, email, or instant

messaging. However, my methods changed dramatically over the course of my data

collection period for a variety of reasons. This chapter presents a story of methods, of

how I envisioned this project, how it changed, and the shifts in my thinking around

methodology. It contains the stories of ethical concerns, epistemological considerations,

and reflexivity that are present in most methods chapters in qualitative dissertations. But,

this chapter is also a story of how I came to find a methodology through collecting data,

how the methods allowed me to engage my scholar-activist self, and why I did things the

way I did.

Qualitative Considerations

"The phrase *qualitative methodology* refers in the broadest sense to research that

produces descriptive data – people's own written or spoken words and observable

behavior" (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:7). Qualitative methodologies, although sometimes

critiqued by quantitative and/or positivist sociologists, often inform the methods[23] that

researchers use for sociological endeavors that aim to get at everyday experience,

including interactions between individuals and their communities, identities, and

relationships. The methods used in qualitative projects are often interactive in ways that

create stories between the researcher and the participants. Interactionist sociologists have

paid particular attention to *how* these stories get created by the interviewer, who was at

one time thought to be an objective questioner, instead of an active subjective agent in the

interview process (Fontana 2003). However, in the 1980s and 1990s, the traditional

notion that the researcher should be an uninvolved person in the process inspired some

qualitative sociologists to start pushing the methods of interactionist sociologists even

further, calling for the researcher and participants to create a "partnership" in the data

collection process (Denzin 1997, Holstein and Gubrium 1995, Ellis and Berger 2003,

Fontana and Frey 2000). These scholars took key tenets around language, meaning, and

representation from postmodern theorists, such as Lyotard, Derrida, and Baudrillard, and

applied them to their thoughts about fieldwork and the social scientific research process.

What has developed is a methodology that blurs the boundaries between researcher/

researched, as well as considers issues of language and representation in the work

(Fontana 2003, Holstein and Gubrium 1995, Marcus and Fischer 1986, Denzin 2003,

Richardson 1988). Postmodern methodologies also seek to break down "traditional

patriarchal relations in interviewing… and ways to make formerly unarticulated voices

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[23] Generally, "methods" refers to the specific approach and actions used to collect data. "Methodology" refers to the study of methods and/or the theories that inform the methods.

audible are now center stage" (Fontana 2003:52). Both feminist and postmodern methodologies focus on the participatory nature of data collection and the attention to reflexivity, representation, and larger social structures of power that impact the dynamics of data collection (see Frisby, Maguire, and Reid 2009; Haraway 1988). Postmodern methodologists have also pushed us to consider the use of technology in our fieldwork, as an avenue for data collection and connection with participants through communication technologies, such as email, instant messaging, message boards, and webcams (Mann and Stewart 2003), which can allow for new forms of participatory and interactive methods.

The methods used in this project were largely informed by postmodern theories and intersecting queer theoretical viewpoints that have the ability to move postmodern methodologies in more politically-grounded directions. As Joshua Gamson has argued, queer theory has allowed scholars to consider new areas of inquiry and new ways of inquiring. It pushed "the postmodern moment in qualitative inquiry" into the study of sexualities (Gamson 2000:354). While both postmodern and queer theories have been critiqued for being focused on the text and disregarding larger social structures, discursive power, and the real experience of identity, a sociological use of these theories allows them to be applied to the very things some scholars have claimed are absent (Seidman 1996, 1997; Jagose 1996; Collins 1998; Green 2002). Stephen Valocchi (2005) directs us to ethnography as the method of choice for projects informed by queer theory. This is based on two points of epistemological sameness: 1) neither ethnography nor queer theory seek to find some kind of "truth," and 2) both deny that the hegemonic taxonomies present in US culture can speak to everyone's experience. As Valocchi

writes, "queer theory focuses on the gap between the categories used and people's lived experiences" (2005:767). This dissertation uses ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis to present a multi-modal ethnography comprised of data from multiple sources: participant observations at several national transgender and LGBTQ conferences; interviews with participants conducted via e-mail and instant messaging; digitally-mediated data including Internet blogs and YouTube videos; and hard copies of zines (handmade booklets of writing, art, and information). The methods that I employ with this project speak not only to the changing nature of everyday social life for many individuals and their communities, but also to how sociologists can be at the forefront of carefully examining these trends by considering new avenues for qualitative inquiry.

Murthy says that "ethnography is about telling social stories" (2008:838) and that "'everyday life' for much of the world is becoming increasingly technologically mediated… as social interactions increasingly move online, it is imperative that we respond critically" (2008:849). A critical response to this alignment of technology with everyday life in the form of methods is digital ethnography. Digital ethnography collects social stories like more traditional forms of ethnography do, except the stories are collected *via* some form of technology - usually internet technologies. A few scholars have written on how qualitative researchers have used internet technologies for *gathering* data (see Hine 2000, Paccagnella 1997), but little has been written about how online spaces can be the fields we find ourselves immersed in, especially when we aren't specifically studying online behavior or communities (Hookway 2008, Dicks et al. 2006). If our social lives are currently being impacted by the postmodern social mediascape that

we find ourselves navigating, then it makes sense that sociologists should respond accordingly when conducting research. Lines between real/unreal, fact/fiction, public/private, true/false, online/offline are being blurred as internet technologies infiltrate our daily lives through email, instant messaging, webcams, and social networking sites such as Facebook (see Best and Kellner 2001, Poster 2001). That is, internet technologies allow us to exist in a kind of temporal space of online/offline, a life that is lived at the intersections of public/private and real/unreal. But in very real ways, these technologies allow us to be in spaces we were unable to be in before, collapsing geographic distance to be "with" other people like us when we previously weren't able to do so. This chapter presents a methodological argument for considering multiple modes of data collection while conducting sociological research as a response to how social lives and interactions are becoming increasingly mediated through internet technologies.

The internet has become more than a vessel that holds information to be gathered. It has become a web of social interaction, community, and activism (Carty 2011; Atton 2004; Davis, Elin, and Reeher 2002; Shapiro 2004; Schwartz 1996; Strangelove 2010; Lange 2009; Correll 1995). It has allowed groups of people to come together, providing access where there was not access before due to geographic distance, lack of accommodation related to disability, or stigma. Eve Shapiro (2004) argues that organizing around transgender issues and community has especially benefitted from the use of internet technologies. They have allowed trans people and their allies to find community without risking safety and by overcoming the often significant distance between other community members. According to Shapiro, the internet has functioned

both as a *tool* and a *space* for trans people and allies since the mid-1990s, facilitating

community, education, and activism (2004:171). At the same time, the internet has also

become a tool for others to learn about transgender-related issues and policies. This

organizing and community is also happening offline, and the online/offline divide is

becoming blurred when people are able to interact in both spaces. For this reason,

reconsidering this arbitrary dichotomy is of great importance for this project. The

methods I use illustrate and add to much of what Shapiro argues regarding organizing

strategies for trans people and their allies by using both digital and non-digital data in this

project.

However, engaging with digital ethnographic methods is not without critique.

While some critics argue that digital methods are not as "rigorous" as more "traditional"

ethnographic methods of face-to-face interviewing and participant observation, the vast

majority of critiques regarding conducting sociological research online often have to do

with ethical issues related to public/private boundaries, and the researcher/respondent

divide (Hookway 2008, Murthy 2008). But, these boundaries are already blurred within a

postmodern world where government surveillance threatens our privacy every day and

we *willingly* broadcast our lives through outlets like Facebook and YouTube. Of course,

these technologies have also allowed many of us to connect with each other when we

wouldn't have been able to before. Especially in relation to projects like this one where

the focus is on very specific communities of people that are historically oppressed, we are

often hard-pressed to find participants that we aren't already acquainted with on some

level.

Collecting Data

In order to find people to participate in this project I posted a call for participants in several arenas.[24] I advertised for the project at two national transgender conferences in the conference program books, in two LiveJournal communities for partners of trans people, in three groups on Facebook, in two Yahoo groups, and through the TransAcademics website. From here, the call was posted on various listservs by people who saw it in the places I originally advertised. The call was also one of the first things that came up in a Google search if someone Googled my name.[25] After posting the call I waited for people to contact me. While I continued to go to conferences and meet people who fit into the participant parameters of the project, I never asked individuals to participate. This was deliberate as I didn't want to directly solicit individuals as participants. As previous research on trans subjects has often tokenized, pathologized, and/or exploited participants, this project was set up to recognize the troubled research pasts for potential participants from the beginning. One of my initial arguments for conducting this work was that people wanted to tell their stories about having a trans partner, but that there weren't outlets for them to do so in positive ways - especially in academic work. For these reasons, I let participants contact me, ensuring that people came to this project without my specifically asking them to do so.

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[24] See Appendix A for a copy of the call for participants.

[25] I actually didn't realize this until my Aunt mentioned my project in an email to me and I was confused about how she knew about it. She said she had simply Googled my name and found pages where I had posted my call for participants. Since I outed myself as trans in the call for participants, I had also outed myself to anyone who Googled my name without realizing it - including my Aunt.

While I originally intended to utilize fairly "traditional" ways of collecting data through participant observation at conferences and face-to-face interviews, I found out that these were not the best ways of collecting data from participants in this project. I did not begin this project with an intent to use "digital ethnography" as a method. In fact, I only started using internet technologies to collect data because I realized that I would be unable to collect data from people in person due to the fact that the closest participant lived almost three hours from Syracuse. While I met many potential participants at various conferences across the country who were really excited about the project, it was hard for them to commit to a face-to-face interview during the conference weekend, which was often packed with social activities already; and since everyone was scattered across the country, face-to-face interviews after conferences ended were not very accessible to me or participants. I exchanged information with many people while I was in these spaces, but no interview data were collected while there. So, I decided to switch tactics: instead of face-to-face interviews, I would focus on building rapport with people at conferences and then interview via email and instant messaging since many potential participants had emailed me after conferences asking how they could take part in the project. Even with the geographic distance, it was clear that people wanted to participate, but did not want to give up their conference time in order to do so. Being an insider to trans community spaces allowed me to recognize this fact and respect their need for time with other partners at the conferences. Conferences set up temporary and intense communities that usually last a few days at most. For many people, these few days are the only days they may get with other people who share their social locations. As a

scholar-activist, I was particularly sensitive to this and did not encourage people to give up their conference time to participate in the project.

Although many people initially contacted me, several of them did not fit the project parameters for a variety of reasons. Some people were trans-identified themselves, one person was under the age of 18, and one person's partner was MTF spectrum instead of on the FTM spectrum. A few people dropped out of the project due to time constraints and life changes. One person began to identify as trans during hir participation in the project. I chose to keep the data from this person prior to hir telling me about a shift in hir gender identity, but to cease collecting further data from hir after the fact.[26] In the end, I collected data from 18 participants, all of whom are cisgender women (assigned female at birth and still female/woman identified). All participants self-identified as white or caucasian in a pre-interview questionnaire and information sheet[27] that asked about race in an open-ended manner. Ages ranged from 18 to 29 years, with the mean age being 24.1 years. Participants live all over the US and Canada with relatively high levels of education (15 of the 18 participants have completed or are currently working on a Bachelor's degree or higher). Participants were either given pseudonyms, allowed to choose their own pseudonym, or were given the option to use their legal and/or known name by waiving confidentiality through their consent form. Several people did choose this latter option as a political strategy and a way to be public about their experience. The 18 participants described here all participated in the project

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[26] I recognize that trans and cis identities are not static categories and that people may move between them throughout the course of their life. For this project, I collected data from people who were *currently* not trans-identified. This doesn't mean that they never were and/or never will be, but that during the time that I conducted interviews with them they did not identify as trans.

[27] See Appendix B for a copy of this information sheet.

through interviews conducted via email and/or instant messaging due to geographic

distance, financial concerns around travel, and time constraints.[28]

While my use of internet technologies for interviewing emerged from an inability

to interview face-to-face, there were distinct advantages to using email and instant

messaging for interviews. First, with email there is a lag between when you send a

participant questions and when they respond. This means that while one interview

actually occurs over a longer period of time, that time is broken up significantly.

Someone may take a few days to respond and you may take a few days to respond to

them. I found that I got longer and more detailed responses if I limited the number of

questions per email to five or less. Due to this, I was usually going back and forth with

participants via email over a number of weeks or months. Andrea Fontana (2003)

actually argues that this is one reason why it can be difficult to conduct in-depth

interviews via email - there may be too much of a lag between responses. However, the

responses I got from participants via email were interesting, thoughtful, and often

carefully crafted.

Instant messaging interviews allowed me to have a real-time conversation with

follow-up questions. The format of interviews using instant messaging is similar to the

format of face-to-face interviews except that one uses text and the other generally uses

spoken or signed language. There is no limit to what people can say with an instant

message using a program like AIM, GChat, or MSN Messenger, and the interviews are

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[28] Participants were given the option to do a phone interview instead of an email or instant messaging interview, as outlined in my call for participants, but no one opted for a phone interview.

already transcribed as typing occurs.[29] Instant messaging interviews often *feel* more like

a conversation since they happen in real-time and emoticons can be used immediately to

denote facial expressions that the other party is unable to see. Emails and instant

messages also allow people to share additional things - links to webpages, photos, videos,

and blogs can all be looked at during an interview and discussions can be had about them

then. Partners would often link me to things, such as information about the community/

campus groups they were in, books, articles, blogs, or YouTube videos (both related and

unrelated to this project), and we would chat about those things during the interview.

This differs significantly from a face-to-face interview where people may share

resources, but you are unable to converse about them right then. I generally conversed

with each participant who chose to use instant messaging several times and individual

conversations lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to a few hours.

While Murthy (2008) maintains that research done exclusively online can yield

excellent data, he says that, if possible, a "multimodal ethnography" (Dicks et al. 2006),

where both digital and more "traditional" data are collected, is preferred in order to

provide a more comprehensive account of what it is we are researching. In other words,

utilizing multiple modes of data collection (for example, more traditional methods mixed

with some digital methods) may actually give us a better picture about what is going on.

For this project I not only collected interview data via email and instant messaging, but I

also have data from participant and non-participant observation at several conferences I

attended, facilitating workshops and presentations for cisgender partners and trans

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[29] Many programs will automatically save chat transcripts if a user tells the program to do so in the software preferences.

people, taking notes during workshops, and attending open events and workshops for

partners. These conferences are sponsored by a variety of national and local

organizations (as well as transnational corporations[30]) and focus on issues of identity,

community, health care, policy, and activism for trans, queer, and LGB people. They are

attended by activists, community organizers, academics, medical professionals, social

service providers, straight and cisgender allies, and LGBTQ people. While there are a

number of workshops at these conferences specifically for cisgender partners to attend, I

did not attend partner-only workshops while there. This is due to the fact that even if not

specifically designated as "closed" for partners only, it was easily inferred from the

workshop description that it was a partner-only space. I could have asked workshop

goers and organizers if I could be in the room and take notes, but that would have

contradicted the community politics around how spaces have been set up for certain

groups of people to engage with each other.[31] Furthermore, most partner workshops

focus on emotional and transition-related issues, which are not the focus of this project.

Participant observation was thus conducted in more general workshops and public spaces,

as well as in spaces into which I was specifically invited, with people knowing that I was

doing research about partners of trans people.

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[30] For example, Raytheon, one of the largest defense contractors for the US military, was the main sponsor for the first Southern Comfort Conference in Atlanta in 2006 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joanne-herman/amanda-simpson-a-transgen_b_410400.html). Other companies, such as Best Buy, American Airlines, Ameriprise, General Mills, Hilton, and Southwest Airlines have sponsored other LGBTQ conferences.

[31] There was one time when I actually did ask a workshop facilitator if I could come to the workshop because it wasn't listed as closed, but it also didn't say "open to all." The workshop was about zine-making for partners and I could not infer from the description whether it really was partners-only or not. It wasn't closed at all, and the facilitator and attendees were happy to have me there. This specific workshop is discussed further in Chapter Five.

In addition to the interviews and participant observation, I also collected a significant number of other materials that partners had contributed to or created. I transcribed 92 YouTube videos from two YouTube channels created by cisgender partners discussing identity, community, pronoun usage, bathroom spaces, safety concerns, and language issues. A "channel" on YouTube is a web address that has a collection of videos made by a specific person or people. On both channels that I used for this project, individual partners made weekly videos on specific days that were set aside for them to post the videos.[32] For instance, every Tuesday Alice might post on that week's topic, then on Wednesday Barb would do the same. Weekly topics for the channels were decided on by viewers and video makers together and then discussed by channel owners before finalizing the questions that the videos should address. These online and publicly-accessible videos were made by partners for other partners, trans people, and various allies. YouTube videos present an interesting source because they exist as a kind of "auto-interview" where people were both the interviewer and the interviewee in these online narrations. I collected the majority of the interview data prior to finding the YouTube videos and found that many of the questions that the people in the videos were asking themselves were questions that I had asked participants. Often, people in the videos would read questions out loud that the group in charge of the channel had come up with for the week's topic and then answer those questions themselves. In addition, I collected zines[33] at various conferences, had zines sent to me via the postal service,

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[32] The details of these channels are discussed further in Chapter Four.

[33] Zines are handmade booklets of writing, art, and other information that are distributed in limited quantities. Some people have digitized their zines for easier access.

printed and saved articles that participants had written about trans issues for local

magazines and newspapers, and printed and saved online discussions happening through

blogs. The digitally collected portions of my data not only provide significant

information that adds to the data collected through interviews and participant observation,

but they also provide narratives I would have not been able to add to this project using

only one type of data collection or a more traditional qualitative methodology. This

project has a variety of both physical and digital data, recognizing and responding to how

social interactions and trans activisms, in particular, have moved into virtual spaces

(Shapiro 2004).

Analytical Considerations

I initially analyzed the data for this project while it was collected and topics

mentioned by a specific participant were then subsequently often brought up with other

participants during interviews. The data from YouTube videos helped to frame the

analyses as these data were completely user-created and not prompted by me. I focused

largely on a queer analytical strategy with this project. According to Valocchi, a queer

analysis pays particular attention to dismantling the homosexual/heterosexual binary

while also addressing other areas of social difference, such as gender, class, and race –

and working to notice the instabilities of all of these potential identities (2005:762).

Furthermore, "a sociologically informed queer analysis can explore the discursive and

material nature of power embedded in the homosexual/heterosexual binary, the

possibilities that exist for dismantling that binary, and the relationship of that binary to

other axes of inequality" (Valocchi 2005:765). Valocchi (2005) gives us a conceptual and

analytical framework for sociologists who engage in gender and sexuality research. The

ideas of this framework are as follows:

> 1) queering the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality; 2) taking
> seriously the nonnormative alignments across these variables; 3) resisting
> the tendency to essentialize identity or to conflate it with the broad range
> of gender and sexual practices; 4) broadening an understanding of power
> to include identity formations as well as other discursive formations; and
> 5) treating the construction of intersectional subjectivities as both
> performed and performative (2005:766).

This project is in line with Valocchi's framework through the very nature of the topic

itself, but also through the analysis. That is, the social location of being a cisgender

person with a trans-identified partner already inherently queers "the relationship between

sex, gender, and sexuality" (Valocchi 2005:766) due to the the uneasy delineation of

categories within these social structures. Further, cis/trans relationships expose the

arbitrary artificiality of hegemonic norms and assumptions within structures of sex,

gender, and sexuality since the intersections of these structures are intricately complex

and individuals are often not invested in defining these categories clearly in ways that

make sense to mainstream populations. However, it is my job as a scholar-activist to

think seriously and critically about how to engage with the data in ways that illustrate the

messy connections between these things *and* to do justice to the voices and stories

presented here. Often, the taxonomies we have for explaining identity and experience

don't work well when we consider sexuality and gender identity in the context of

relationships, which, we are told, should be easily categorized as "gay" or "straight."

Further, I have to consider that even with identities or experiences that I may consider

"queer," participants may define themselves or their relationships as "straight" (Valocchi 2005, Halperin 2002). A queer analysis takes these complexities seriously, while recognizing the discursive forms of power that shape and define lives and experiences in specific ways.

In order to begin the task of analyzing the wide variety of data that this project considers, I printed copies of all interviews with participants, transcribed and printed the data from the YouTube videos, and printed any supplemental information from websites and blogs. These data were then read and coded using a system of colored tabs and margin notes indicating the topics and issues around which specific pieces of the data were focused. While the transcripts from the YouTube videos have the potential to be analyzed in a different way using content or discourse analysis in the future, for this project, I treated the YouTube videos as "auto-interview" ethnographic data; that is, I considered that the partners on YouTube were asking and answering their own questions in the videos and coded the transcripts in the same way that I coded the email and IM interviews I conducted myself. I did not use any quantitative measures of the data - that is, I did not count how many times specific things were mentioned. I kept the general codes fairly broad and took notes on any details related to these codes in the margins and in short memos on the topics as I read through the data multiple times. A different colored tab was used to indicate instances of each of the following codes, recognizing that these codes are not necessarily mutually exclusive and passages of the data often had significant overlap with two or three codes. I also provide examples of what types of things were included under each code.

- Community - connections with others, membership in groups or at resource centers, conferences, friendships

- Language - naming identity, pronouns, labeling the relationship, offensive words

- Identity - how one sees oneself, identity labels/naming, if their sense of self or label has been contested by others, identity politics

- Activism (broad) - social movement activism, working for policy change

- Everyday Resistance - correcting pronouns, finding gender neutral bathrooms, challenging boundaries of identity and/or community

- Advice/Support - giving advice to others, finding support in various groups or spaces

- Technology - online communities, blogs

I purposely did not formally break down these codes any further because of the overlap between them and the risk involved with dissecting data by topic in such a detailed manner. That is, when we continuously break up the stories we collect into smaller pieces in order to fit our codes, we can risk losing how these pieces are connected to a larger narrative of experience and larger social structures (see Maines 1993). In addition, due to the variety of data I collected, I feared that having overly-specific coding would prevent me from seeing the connections in the data across data types and the coding categories.

It is important to consider here that others might read my data differently than I did. For example, I have critiqued work done by other researchers who look at cispartner experience from certain perspectives (Gurvich 1991; Brown 2005; Mason 2006; Nyamora 2004; Pfeffer 2008, 2009, 2010; Ward 2010). Upon reading some of the data

included in those dissertations, I would have picked out different topics and issues on which to focus. As researchers, we all make decisions about what stories from our data we want to focus on, and I have been particularly aware of that with this project in relation to community politics and advocacy. I know that how I choose to analyze the data and what stories the project focuses on mean something to the communities of people that this work is drawn from and impacts. My community connections to my participants and the additional data I collected definitely played a role in my decisions around which stories to highlight with this project. While my decisions around analysis may not be the decisions that every researcher might make, these decisions were not arbitrarily made, but were impacted by the data itself and the communities of people who have voice in this project.

There is no one relation to the field that is unquestionably optimal in order to conduct social scientific research. In fact, debates about inside/outsider status have played out in social science literature for decades (see Merton 1972, Smith 1990, Zinn 1979, Krieger 1983, Griffith 1998). Some scholars argue that it is best to be an insider because you have some kind of rapport and shared understanding; others argue that you see the data better if you are an outsider because you won't take anything for granted. However, the better/worse debate ignores the fact that our locations and statuses in relation to our projects and participants simply yield *different* data and analyses. The difference in the data we collect and how we analyze it is related to the power behind the social differences between our selves and our participants. That is, there are socially structured power dynamics and differences in play throughout the research process, from

data collection to analysis to publication. My relationships with participants and the

community spaces that we share have certainly affected why I chose this topic to begin

with, why I chose the methods of data collection that I did, how I interpreted the data, and

how I chose to write up the stories that I collected.

Ethics

As a trans person, I am well aware of how research has been used to justify and

inflict various forms of violence against trans people and their allies, including friends

and family. The DSM diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) alone has been used

by various people in positions of power to deny employment, housing, and medical care

to trans people for decades by claiming that trans people are "sick".[34] Individuals who

partner with trans people are often seen as guilty by association, what Goffman (1963)

referred to as "courtesy stigma." In other words, the discrimination and violence extends

to the cisgender partner. So, when I decided to focus on partners of trans people for my

dissertation, I had a feeling that people would be wary about talking to me - even though

I share community space with many of my participants.

One of the issues around circulating in similar professional and social circles with

participants is that I was incredibly conscious of the fact that participants might be at

conferences I was attending, and continue to attend. Prior to any conference, I sent out

an email to all the participants letting them know that I would be there and asked anyone

else who would be there to let me know how they wanted to handle it. As I have

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[34] The DSM diagnosis has also been used strategically by some trans people to receive specific medical care. See O'Hartigan (1997), Levi and Klein (2006), and Ophelian (2010) for more on this.

promised confidentiality to my participants, not only for what they have shared, but also

that they are sharing with me at all, it would be breaking the confidentiality agreement to

approach them in a public space. People with them may ask how we know each other,

which could lead to awkward situations for the participant. Also, not everyone's partner

knows that they participated - or they may now have a different partner. Generally,

participants seemed unconcerned about all of this and were willing to essentially give up

their confidentiality in the conference setting and actually asked me to say hello if I saw

them. These encounters with participants were not limited to conference spaces,

however. I once found out via Facebook that one of my participants, Melissa, and her

partner would be attending the same small concert that I was planning to attend. I asked

her how she would like to handle the situation and she stated that she would love for me

to say hi - her partner and his parents would be there too and they all know that she had

been talking with me about the project. My worry about confidentiality and "outing"

interestingly contrasts with a general feeling from participants that confidentiality isn't all

that important when it comes to in-person meetings in public.[35] Of course, my worry has

a lot to do with my location as a social science researcher who has been specifically

trained to take confidentiality seriously in ways that assume that participants *want* and

expect confidentiality and pseudonyms. These assumptions often ignore the very real

political and out lives that people lead, which might make confidentiality around their

identities and community affiliations seem secretive in ways that don't make sense to

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[35] In addition, some participants chose to forgo confidentiality with the interview data when they decided to use their legal or known names in all work produced from this project. I created a separate consent form after a couple of participants specifically asked that they use their legal names instead of pseudonyms in the project. Five of 18 participants chose to use their legal names in this work. The politics of this is discussed further in Chapter Five.

them. It is important that researchers are able to take this into account and discuss issues

of confidentiality and the use of names with participants in order to stay true to the

communities of people who share stories for our work, but also to create documents that

allow this in ways that institutional review boards find ethically acceptable.

When I present on methods at professional academic conferences, I am often

asked about ethical issues around conducting research online, especially in relation to the

YouTube videos. Simply put, I was required to tell the IRB that I would be using the

videos as data, but I was not required to get consent from the people who made the videos

because they are public material.[36] YouTube videos that are made by a single person or

channel focused on a particular topic or person's life are referred to as "vlogs" - short for

"video blogs." As Hookway explains, "blogs that are interpreted by bloggers as 'private'

are made 'friends only.' Thus, accessible blogs may be personal but they are not

private" (2008:105). I agree with Hookway that the fact that the user has made them

publicly accessible indicates that while blogs and vlogs may contain personal

information, it is information that the user is comfortable being made public since they

made this information public on their own. However, by using YouTube videos as data, it

could be argued that I am making the videos *more* public. With a proliferation of internet

communication technologies (ICTs) that allow once-private thoughts and/or actions to be

public, we need to consider what these technologies are doing, and have the potential to

do, in relation to social life. Grant Kien argues that we need to consider "the intimacy of

technology, the relationships and feelings it is bound up in, and the understanding that

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[36] A more in-depth discussion of public/private as related to YouTube can be found in Chapter Four.

technology contributes dynamically and dramatically to the performance of everyday life

rather than one-dimensionally serving as its backdrop and container" (2008:1103). In

other words, ICTs like YouTube are not a drop-site for personal information that is

private - they exist as specific places for individuals to *live* parts of their everyday lives

and experience forms of community in *public* forums that allow others to take part,

especially those people who do not have physical communities of people with similar

social locations to be in. As the founder of one of the YouTube channels for cis partners

of trans men said, "Our goal of the channel is to offer advice and support to significant

others, friends, family members, and allies of trans men… We're aiming for our channel

to be educational and fact-based but we're also going to share personal stories and

experiences with you as they apply… I'm excited to share educational information with

our viewers." So while the people making the videos for the channels on YouTube may

be sharing personal stories, the stated goal of the channel is to support others and provide

educational information (through sharing experiences) about being a cisgender partner of

someone on the FTM spectrum. This cannot be done if the channel was private and there

seem to be no assumptions that it would ever be anything but public given the stated

goals there. Further, this project helps contribute to the overall goal of making partner

experiences known and providing information about those experiences.

Imagining the Field

I ended up with a largely digital ethnography. This presents a new imagining of

"the field," since there was no physical place called the field like most ethnography is

expected to be situated in or around. There was no specific site connected to this work

and interviews did not revolve around participating in a particular field. My participant

observations were mostly separate from the interviews - there were only two people at

conferences who also happened to be people I interviewed, as far as I know. I don't

recognize anyone from the YouTube videos as anyone that was in attendance at any

conference workshops I attended or facilitated, though it's possible we were at the same

conferences at the same time and our paths did not cross.

The field of interviewing was in front of my computer; I had no "face time" with

participants. I sit here writing this chapter with a small piece of paper tacked to the

bulletin board on the wall above my desk that reads: "Is this a disembodied project?"

That piece of paper has been there for months while I've considered what it means to

collect data from participants in entirely textual forms. Erving Goffman makes a

distinction between embodied and disembodied information when he argues that

embodied information is that which is conveyed by "*current* bodily activity, the

transmission occurring only during the time that this body is present to sustain this

activity" (2005:82). In his view, disembodied messages are those that have no present

body engaged in a current activity. Letters, books, and photos are all disembodied

messages according to Goffman because the "sender" of the message has stopped

informing us in present time. So, what do we make of the use of ICTs in relation to

questions of embodiment in social scientific research? *Is* this a disembodied project?

I did not see body language, facial expression, or hear a variation in speech patterns or

tone during the interviews, but this does not mean there wasn't a body typing to me, and

that my body wasn't engaged with the typing of the interview as well. The body is forced

to be conveyed and read textually, often with emoticons, such as smiley faces for facial

expressions. I consider all of this in relation to the idea that interviews and ethnography

are methods that have traditionally *required* that at least two bodies interact in some

physical space.

Jenny Sundén's work on virtual embodiments of gender and sexuality in text-

based online worlds argues through feminist interpretations of cyberspace and technology

that "the virtual does not automatically equal disembodiment" (2003:5). There *are*

bodies and minds that create the text we read on the screen, and as such, interactions via

ICTs facilitate inherently embodied interactions. Annette Markham's partially

autoethnographic work on being in online communities and studying how people use

ICTs presents us with her experience of suddenly, frequently using her computer to

communicate: "I'm exhausted. My back hurts. My hands hurt. I'm very thirsty. I don't

know how people can sit in front of their computers for so many hours at a

stretch" (Markham 1998:40).

According to both Sundén and Markham, "the field" consists of virtual spaces that

are set up via various forms of technology. For both of them, these fields were in the

form of large chat rooms that could have a hundred people or more engaged in

simultaneous conversations. Markham noted at one point that she had nine chat rooms

open at one time, conversations scrolling by on her screen that she wasn't even engaged

in (1998:41). The work of these two scholars uses different technology than I use in my

project here. They are engaged in conversation in virtual "rooms" where people mostly

"hang out" and talk to other people they've been talking to for awhile - years, perhaps.

There isn't much of a stretch to consider how these spaces are like large cafeterias or

nightclubs, for example. The field operates a bit differently for me since with email and

instant messaging interviews there aren't groups of other people engaged in a virtual

hang out space - it's just myself and the participant having a conversation.[37] However,

the YouTube channels do present a kind of online community and a "field" that one could

search through. The videos are often in conversation with one another. That is, people

generally answer the same questions in their individual videos for the week and refer to

other members of the channel in their videos. They often talk about emails that were sent

between themselves and other partners who are members of the channel, letting viewers

into another realm of communication and connection between people that are not in real-

time conversation with one another through the videos.

The methods of interviewing that I used with email and instant messaging posed

some interesting challenges for me in terms of time management and my own personal

life. Because I was available via instant messenger programs all day, I could potentially

have an impromptu interview at any moment. Messages popped up on my screen from

participants at all times of day, while I was in the middle of doing other things, just

before I had to teach, or right before bed. Unless I had a scheduled meeting at which I

had to be, I entertained all of these messages and responded, setting aside anything I was

in the middle of doing. I could have solved this by simply using a different instant

messenger account solely for research purposes, but that would have made it awkward in

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[37] Of course, I have no idea whether participants have input from others (such as their partner) in their responses to me. I always conducted interviews alone without anyone looking over my shoulder, but I don't know that their experience of space was the same.

terms of "leaving" the "field" when data collection was over. If I did this, participants

would suddenly no longer see me online when I was done with interviews.

Due to this, I'm not sure whether I have actually left the field. Some participants

still instant message me to chat about various things and I converse with several via

Facebook on a regular basis. In addition, I am still sought out as a resource for

participants and their partners. This speaks to the complexities around insider/outsider

and researched/researcher statuses for me in relation to this project.

A Reflexive Discussion of Self, Space, and Location

"Challengers to traditional ways of doing social science argue that all knowledge is created within human interaction. Who we are shapes the kinds of theories we create and the kinds of explanations we offer. Instead of assuming that objectivity is possible, then, we need to be reflexive: We need to develop an understanding of how our positions shape the research topics we choose and the methods we use to study the social world. Literally, what we see is shaped by who we are."
- Kristen Esterberg from *Qualitative Methods in Social Research,* 2002:12 -

Reflexivity within qualitative methods has recently had much more attention, but

even by the 1960s "ethnographers had begun to problematize, and sometimes reject

outright, key realist tenets that had undergirded earlier fieldwork and practice" (Emerson

2001:20). As discussed earlier, qualitative researchers began to realize that "reality" was

not something easily described or obtained, but instead was constructed by participants

and researchers throughout the research process (Fontana 2003). As Stephen Pfohl says:

"[positivism] is compulsively unreflexive about the powerful social structuring of its own

perceptual apparatus" (1992:77). Pfohl calls for the use of "*power-reflexive methods of*

sociological (dis)closure" (1992:77) that trouble the positivist claims of truth, objectivity,

reality, and authorial voice. Utilizing power-reflexive methods recognizes that the social-

scientific aura that our (re)search claims to have is always constructed through the social,

is always impacted by HIStory, and is always subject to the effects of socially structured

(dis)connections (Pfohl 1992). We need to (re)search and theorize in relation to power as

a *productive* force – a power that produces desires, identities, bodies, realities, and *truths*

that our (re)search may ultimately claim to have. But, we also need to examine how

power produces *us as researchers and theorists*. We need to "construct forms of social

scientific knowledge less complicit with the hegemonic narcissism that dominates our

HIStorical present" (Pfohl 1992:74). In Alvin Gouldner's call for a reflexive sociology,

he says, "the historical mission of a Reflexive Sociology is to transcend sociology as it

now exists" (1970:489). For Gouldner, this reflexive sociology requires us to examine

our own beliefs and to break down the boundary between "object" and "subject" in the

research process. It is, simply, "a moral sociology" (Gouldner 1970:491) that encourages

us to recognize that we are not simply "researchers," but that we are citizens within a

larger social world. As Pfohl asks, "[o]nce having examined a particular conjuncture of

biographical and structural relations of power, what have I learned that may further

struggles for social justice in the society in which I live?" (1992:80). To push ourselves

beyond the (re)search, to consider the power behind (our) social locations, and to (re)

think our methods in light of this is to practice a reflexive sociology.

　　As Esterberg (2002) points out, our own social locations affect what we see as

"data" and how we choose to go about collecting data. My location as an educated,

middle class, white, trans person[38] has affected this project, beginning with the choice of

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[38] Of course, some of these locations are temporary and none of them exist without specific privilege, oppression, and complexities related to each other.

the topic. I originally came to this topic because a friend of mine, Renee,[39] identified as a

lesbian while partnered with a trans man. I couldn't figure out, at the time, how she

could reconcile her identity of "lesbian" with the fact that she was dating someone who

identified as male and who was consistently seen as male in public spaces. But during

my time in the various arenas that have contributed data to this project, I have come to

understand Renee's complex, strategic, and political reasons for strongly holding on to

her lesbian identity while in that relationship.

The relationship between the researcher and the researched is a much-discussed

issue within work focused on the "doing" of qualitative methodologies. Emerson and

Pollner claim, "[o]n one hand, the participant-observer seeks to get close to those studied,

to become immersed in their every day life…. On the other hand, the participant-observer

must at some point disengage and distance himself *[sic]* from local scenes and

relations" (2001:240). However, Fontana and McGinnis (2003) say that ethnography has

moved from a narrative isolated by the researcher to a project between researcher and

researched that might allow some differences in power to be smoothed over. According

to them, the ethnographic story is now a negotiated text and that postmodern

methodologies blur the boundaries between the roles of the interviewer and the

participant through the negotiation of the text and the narrative (Fontana 2003, Fontana

and Frey 2000, Fontana and McGinnis 2003). This does not mean that there are no

power differences between the researcher and the participants, but that those power

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[39] Unless noted otherwise, all names are pseudonyms either chosen by the participant or given by me.
Some participants chose to use their legal and/or commonly known names in the dissertation and all
subsequent publications. This was also mentioned earlier in a different section of this chapter.

differences can be made more transparent by using reflexive practices in our research processes.

Due to the fact that my social location as a trans person is directly related to this project, my relationship to my participants is complicated. Not all of my participants were currently partnered,[40] or their relationships dissolved,[41] during their participation in the project, but they were still interested in dating trans people again. One participant in particular saw me as someone they could potentially date after we met up at a conference. In this case, my role as "researcher" was completely ignored as soon as I met the individual in person. This led to several awkward exchanges and my attempt to avoid the person for the remainder of my time there.[42] Other participants used me as a resource about trans issues - a trans person they could talk to about things that may or may not happen with their partner when their partner starts some kind of legal, social, and/or biomedical transition. I was asked for information about therapists, surgeons, pharmacies, medical care, online resources, conference information, policies around non-discrimination, legal, and bureaucratic advice. At some point, the communities are simply too small to deny our connections with each other. That is, at times, my transness trumped my role as researcher in my relationships with participants. While some people in my field may see this as problematic, it is important to seriously consider how the

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[40] n = 1

[41] n = 4

[42] This was a participant that I had been speaking with via IM for a few months, but had not met in person prior to the conference. I never had a conversation with this individual following up on the situation at the conference since it did not escalate past verbal sexual innuendos and flirtation, which I have often experienced in queer social settings anyway.

researcher and resource roles inform one another in this particular project when shared community mediates the relationship.

As academics, we are often seen as people with access to information. Even if we don't necessarily know the answers to the questions, we have access to information that can provide some answers. While most of my participants have also obtained some form of higher education, they may not have social networks and community on their side in the same ways that I do. For example, Melissa and her partner are not tapped into the same large, national-level trans/queer social networks that I am. Because she and her partner are lower-middle class with limited insurance coverage when it comes to trans health care, Melissa contacted me asking about where her partner could obtain his testosterone prescription at a more affordable price. I was able to direct her to a commonly-used mail-order compounding pharmacy on the West Coast that her partner now uses to fill his prescriptions. Due to the fact that I attend multiple trans-related conferences every year, my access to a wide variety of information often surpasses that of my participants.

"Qualitative researchers pay attention to the subjective nature of human life – not only the subjective experiences of those they are studying but also the subjectivity of the researchers themselves" (Esterberg 2002:2). As Emerson explains quite well, "Reflective approaches thus view social reality as constructed or accomplished exactly by efforts to capture and represent it rather than as something that is simply 'there'" (2001:20). Where we, as researchers, are socially located plays a role in what we study, how we choose to study it, how we choose to analyze our data, the style we use to write up our project, and

how we present our data to the social scientific community. "The writer decides not only

which particular events are significant, which are merely worth of inclusion and which

are absolutely essential, and how to order these events, but also what is counted as an

'event' in the first place" (Emerson 2001:48). What one researcher finds to be an

extremely important focus for a project may be a mere mention in another researcher's

work. For example, Carla Pfeffer's work (2008, 2009, 2010) on the women partners of

trans men focuses on power differences around gender in a relationship through issues of

identity, the body, labor, and the family. Pfeffer has data in her dissertation that illustrates

how the women engage in forms of everyday activism, but she made a decision to focus

on other issues in her work. Nicola Brown's dissertation does the same thing by not

analyzing the data in relation to activism and ally work (either on purpose or because she

simply didn't recognize the data as being related to those things) while focusing on the

relational identity development of cis partners of trans men (2005). In sum, we all have

some relationship and allegiance with our project, our research fields, and/or our

participants that will determine *how* we carry out our work, but qualitative researchers are

not the "contaminant" to the data that some positivist researchers may view them as being

(Fine et al. 2000).

Connections

        As this chapter has illustrated, the project utilized both virtual (through email and

IM interviews, YouTube videos, and blog posts) and "traditional" ethnographic methods

(through participant observations at conferences) that were informed by postmodern and

queer theories. Postmodernism and queer theory's attention to issues around language, meaning, and the deconstruction of identity and community categories is particularly important when considering the populations of people that have contributed to this project. In connection with postmodernist leanings, "the critique of identity runs throughout queer theoretical writings: Identities are multiple, contradictory, fragmented, incoherent, disciplinary, disunified, unstable, fluid" (Gamson 2000:356). For many scholars, this presents a problem: How can we possibly conduct social science research if we are unable to really define the population that we wish to study? But, for scholars drawing on postmodern and queer theories, we recognize that "identity...cannot be taken as a starting point for social research, can never be assumed by a researcher to be standing still" (Gamson 2000:356). Instead, as Arlene Stein has done, we might focus on how participants engage in "identity work" (1997). That is, we pay attention to how participants construct their sense of self through stories of experience. What this project does, following Stein, is to recognize "the permanently unsettled nature of identities and group boundaries" (Stein 1997:201).

Chapter Three
Languages of Identity: The (Queer) Politics of Naming

"What is named is real, and what is not has no existence… The privileging of language as the arbiter of reality has been especially hard on gender. As we've seen, most nonnormative experiences of gender are excluded from language, and what little language we have for gender transcendence is defamatory. Moreover, all aspects of gender that are not named as also assumed not to exist - to be make-believe."
- Riki Wilchins from *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*, 2004:38-39 -

Riki Wilchins (2004) argues that the value placed on language in some cultures to

stand in for the "real" has very particular effects on sexual and gender identities. In other

words, identity labels are seen as being able to define us adequately and stand in for the

complexities of lived experience. As sexual and gender identities often play intricate

roles in our intimate relationships with others, as well as our potential memberships in

various (political) communities, the power of a binary system of language around sexual

and gender identities to erase *lived* experience and identity is highly problematic. This

chapter illustrates some of the ways that cisgender people with trans-identified partners

find their experiences and sometimes complex histories with sexualities and gender

identities erased, due to the fact that language often does not provide adequate tools with

which to describe cis/trans relationships. This is not to say that partners are

disempowered and unable to create new language around sexuality, but even when

partners do find terms that describe their sexual identities in relation to (trans)gender

histories and experiences, these terms often do not make sense to those who are outside

of trans, queer, and/or allied communities.[43] I argue in this chapter that there is a deep

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[43] Some individuals have started using the terms "transamorous" and/or "transsensual" to refer to a desire to partner with trans people, but these are not widely used even within trans communities. These terms are discussed further later in this chapter.

policing, from both larger heteronormative society and members of various LGBT communities, around both sexual and gender identity categories that affect the ways that partners name their sexualities and describe their relationships to others. Further, I argue that binaries in language around gender (man/woman, male/female) and sexuality (gay/ straight, and also with "bisexual" directly referring to the gender binary) produce limits around identity for those in cis/trans relationships and, ultimately as we'll see in Chapter Four, affect how cisgender partners find and sustain community.

Jason Cromwell argues that trans people "queer the binaries" of identity: "[B]y 'queering the binaries' I mean that they are peculiar, seem bizarre, and spoil the effectiveness of categories" (Cromwell 2006:510). That is, when trans people (and their partners) use binary identity categories such as "lesbian" or "straight," these categories *become queer* in that social norms around who can claim these categories, and who these categories are presumed to describe, are challenged. This chapter illustrates some of the ways that the effectiveness of these categories do, in fact, become spoiled when we try to speak of cis/trans relationships. Further, hegemonic categories of sex, gender, and sexuality often force queer, gender nonconforming, and/or trans people to challenge the boundaries of *any* potential sexual identity, as some partners in this project decided to just stop naming their sexuality at all. Similarly, Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2002) argues that we cannot separate sexuality from gender because sexual orientation *requires* identification of gender identity in order to make sense. For example, "straight" and "gay" require gender to be defined in binary terms (e.g, man/woman or male/female) in order to make sense. In other words, "gender is sexual and sexuality is gendered" (Vidal-Ortiz

2002:182). As there is no widely used language for sexual orientation that takes trans

identities into account, trans identities are made invisible by having to assume a partner's

gender as male or female in order to make sense of available identity categories.

The dominant cultural rhetoric around gender and sexual identities seems to take a

number of positions connected to language (see Wilchins 1997, 2004; Plummer 2003;

Sedgwick 2003; Butler 2005): 1) we should have a gender identity and a sexual identity,

2) we should clearly know what those identities are and how to articulate them to others,

3) we should not be deceptive about our gender and sexual identities, and 4) "I don't

know" or "I'm not sure" are unacceptable answers to the question "Who are you?" Being

able to clearly subscribe to these positions relies on binaries and dichotomies in language

that set one category against another in ways that don't make sense for many queer and

transgender people: neither gay/straight nor man/woman seem to fit. The problem around

binaries in language is compounded for the partners of trans people who are often trying

to affirm not only their own identities but also the identities of their trans partner when

talking about their relationship. As my research suggests and this chapter will argue,

words such as "lesbian," "bisexual," and "straight" - even "queer" and "pansexual" -

simply don't provide adequate descriptions of identity for many cisgender people with

trans partners. In other words, these terms do not provide any real information about the

fact that some people are partnered with individuals with a trans gender identity and/or

trans gender history since they depend on a binary notion of gender in order to make

sense. These terms might help to define *individual* sexual identity, but they fail to

account for the ways that gender and sexuality are also *relational* identities that indicate

our connections with intimate others. Further, as Wilchins indicates, some societies "also ensure that any bodies that might *queer the act*, by contaminating and combining meaning, are excluded" (2004:37). This speaks to the overwhelming power of language to oppress through erasure, forced silence, and the creation of derogatory terms such as "tranny chaser" that are now presumed to be descriptive of the experiences of cisgender people who partner with trans folks. As transgender people have been tokenized, fetishized, and exploited by a variety of institutions and individuals (see Meyerowitz 2002; Valentine 2004; Currah, Juang, and Minter 2006; Butler 2004; Feinberg 1998), the cisgender partners of trans people seem to pay close attention to the politics of language around describing their relationships so as to not replicate these distributions of power. However, this often leaves partners with an inability to describe their own identities and/ or the relationship, which can add to their feelings of invisibility.

The consideration of language in relation to people's everyday lives is particularly salient when we consider a vast history of discrimination and oppression in the US for specific groups of people, and how language has been used by those with power to control various populations (see Butler 1997, Foucault 1984, Bourdieu 1991). Language has also been very consciously used by those with less power in attempts to reclaim notions of self and community, and to "take back" words that were once used (and perhaps are still used) as derogatory slurs. For example, Judith Butler discusses the potential performative power of taking back or "rallying under" terms of degradation such as "queer" (1997:158). But, what happens when language fails us? That is, what if

no available words in our language feel right when it comes time for us to describe our

selves, our communities, our experiences, and our relationships?

While challenging binary language constructs around gender and sexuality is

important and necessary to a queer politics, as Gayle Rubin argues:

> Our categories are important. We cannot organize a social life, a political movement, or our individual identities and desires without them. The fact that categories invariably leak and can never contain all the relevant 'existing things' does not render them useless, only limited…We use them to construct meaningful lives, and they mold us into historically specific forms of personhood (2006:479).

Further, although some queers have denounced identity-based politics in favor of affinity-

based groups and social justice organizations (see Green 2006, Phelan 2004, Valentine

2007, Wilchins 1997), the fact remains that identity-based communities are still safe-

havens for many queer and allied people and that identity continues to be the basis for a

significant portion of large-scale LGBTQ organizing.[44] But how can one find a

community of similar people when there is very little language with which to accurately

describe one's identity or experience? As identity and community are often linked

through identity-based politics within LGBTQ populations, this chapter considers how

language plays a role in fashioning sexual identity for cisgender people with trans-

identified partners. What terms *are* partners using to describe their sexual identities and

how are these words operating in the context of their relationships? How do cis people

talk about their trans partners in ways that affirm both individuals in the relationship?

How does one negotiate their own sexual identity while identifying within their

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[44] This is evidenced in part by the number of US organizations that are based on LGBT identity and involved in national politics, such as the Human Rights Campaign, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, National Center for Transgender Equality, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, and the Gay Liberation Front, to name a few.

relationship as well? I consider these questions by examining how gender binaries in language are related to issues of (in)visibility around sexuality, and I argue that these binaries impose limits around sexual identity that erase the trans specificities in a relationship. This chapter also illustrates how partners (re)define currently contested identity terms while arguing that none of the available options for sexual identity are able to take trans gender identities into account. Finally, I consider how sexual identity is linked to politics and activism for some partners by claiming "queer," and consider the possibilities of "queer" for cis/trans relationships.

Using "Cis-"

I struggled early on in this project with a language that would indicate being not-trans and with how to make a distinction between "trans" and "not-trans," since these categories aren't static and individuals may move between them. To focus on the cisgender partners *only*, instead of also including trans people who are partnered with other trans people, is in line with an effort to reconsider how trans struggles with oppression and discrimination affect a variety of people - one group of whom happen to be partnered with trans folks. My reason for this is related to a (political) desire to recognize that "the trans community" is not just made up of trans people. That is, while I am well aware of the variety of people who are allied with trans struggles for social justice, I don't often hear of these non-trans allies being included in conversations around "trans." In order to signal to potential participants that I was only interested in talking

with *cisgender* partners, my call for participants used "cisgender" as the main term while

including "non-trans" in parentheses after the first use. This part of the call read:

> I am looking for participants for a qualitative dissertation research project
> that is focusing on cisgender (non-trans) people who have/had partners
> who were assigned female at birth but who do not identify as female/
> woman. This project broadly focuses on the experiences of being a
> cisgender partner of a trans-identified person.

At some point it occurred to me that maybe "cisgender" was an odd term to be using

since I hadn't heard it used as an identity label before, and I wasn't hearing people calling

themselves "non-trans" either. But, then I realized that this was about description, not

identity. That is, I wasn't looking for people who used specific words to describe their

identities - I was open to cis men and cis women with a variety of sexual identities.

Instead, I was focused on people who shared the similar social location or experience of

being a cisgender person who is partnered with someone who is trans-identified.

However, I still wasn't sure if how I worded the call for participants was contested and if

I should use the same language in the dissertation. Several months into the research

process, I sent an email to interview participants and ask for their input about

"cisgender," "non-trans," and any other terms they might prefer. One of my participants,

Morgan, illustrates how the language of "cisgender" is not really an identity term when

she said:

> I have never heard a single person "come out" as straight/
> heterosexual or "come out" as cisgender. They rarely use these words to
> describe themselves because their gender identity is so accepted that it has
> for so long gone without a name. I don't use the term to describe myself in
> general because no one (besides another trans person who has used the
> term or a former gender studies professor) will understand what I mean.
> They assume they know it without giving it a name.

Morgan is right: we assume people are cisgender just as we assume they are straight -

unless we find out otherwise. Cisgender just goes without saying - that is, it is unmarked

- due to gender normative privilege in US culture. This is similar to the privileged

positions of other social locations such as "white" and "male." As Calvin Thomas says in

his essay about queer heterosexuality, "straights have had the political luxury of not

having to think about their sexuality, in much the same way as men *[sic]* have not had to

think of themselves as being gendered and whites have not had to think of themselves as

raced" (2000:17).[45] Those with privilege often fail to see themselves as having a social

location that is linked to the privileged category and therefore, most often, do not claim

identity based on that category (Lemert 1997, Wilchins 2004, Johnson 1997). For

example, a white woman may see herself as a woman and have thought about her gender

due to her location in a patriarchal gender system, but it's less likely that she has

considered her whiteness in relation to power and privilege in the same ways. Based on

what we might know about other privileged locations and self-identification, the vast

majority of non-trans people probably don't think much about the fact that they're

cisgender. That is, unless an individual is close to someone who is trans, such as a

partner, they likely do not consider their gender normative privilege at all. However,

cisgender people who are partnered with trans individuals (as well as cisgender friends

and family members) may experience what Goffman (1963) refers to as a "courtesy

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[45] While Thomas's essay is an excellent critique of the transformative power of discourse and a critical intervention around naming and privilege in relation to sexuality, he fails to recognize any complexities around gendered bodies and identities beyond the binary of male/female, man/woman. Further, while he critiques terms traditionally associated with sexuality, such as "queer," "straight," and "lesbian," he uses "men" and "women" without noting that who he is really talking about are *cisgender* men and women. This is, largely, an effect of the time period when he wrote this piece (2000), as it is only now *becoming* more customary for *some* queer scholars to name cisgender subjects as such in their work.

stigma," where someone who would generally have privilege becomes stigmatized due to the stigmatized social location (whether perceived or actual) of someone they are with. So, Morgan makes a good point when she says that she doesn't use it to describe herself because not many people would understand what she was saying and would simply assume she wasn't trans anyway. Of the seven participants who responded to my email asking about these terms, two people preferred "cisgender," three people preferred "non-trans," and two people suggested other terms such as "partners of transmen."[46] Clara pointed out:

> Cisgender or non-trans are both acceptable descriptors, though I'd say I prefer cisgender. I assume a good majority of people prefer labels describing them in terms of what they are rather than what they're not.

Clara's argument is that we should refer to people based on who they are, instead of what they are not. If we don't refer to transgender people as "non-cis" why refer to cisgender people as "non-trans"? While there was no consensus on what term I should use in this project, it does seem best to use a term that refers to people in the positive instead of based on what they aren't. Jessica Cadwallader says that using "cisgender" or "cissexual" is "a way of drawing attention to the unmarked norm, against which trans* is identified" (2009:17). My own experience of "cisgender" is within trans community spaces that use it regularly to recognize and affirm the variety of trans allies and to mark that which is usually unmarked, as Cadwallader argues.

Two well-known authors and trans activists, Kate Bornstein and Helen Boyd, were also considering the term "cisgender" on their blogs while I was collecting data.

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[46] "Partners of transmen" really didn't work for this project because a partner of a trans man could be someone of any gender identity - including other trans men. Further, not everyone's trans partner identified as a "transman" so this suggestion was too specific to be used for this particular project.

Kate Bornstein wrote, "Cisgender/Transgender is a valid gender binary. I don't like the prefix cis, but that's my problem. A global binary exists that is worthy of examination for its impact on the quality of our lives."[47] I don't interpret Kate's statement to mean that she *wants* this binary to exist, she's simply noting that it currently *does*. While Kate actively works to break down binaries in her own work and refers to herself as a "gender outlaw," she recognizes that the sex/gender binary is deeply embedded within social institutions and likely isn't going away anytime soon. However, she also points out that within this binary, we should be cautious about constructing a "monolithic cisgender identity" due to the fact that cisgender people who are "gender embracing are more than allies, they're family." One month earlier, Helen Boyd had posted on her blog an entry entitled "Jeez Louise This Whole Cisgender Thing."[48] Boyd claims that there is a difference between cisgender and cissexual - anyone who is the slightest bit gender variant (including "femme-y gay [men]" and butch women) is not cisgender, according to Boyd; however, they *are* cissexual.[49] Boyd claims that if someone is gender variant or

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[47] The full blog post from Bornstein used in this discussion can be read here (accessed January 20, 2011): http://katebornstein.typepad.com/kate_bornsteins_blog/2009/10/a-theory-of-othering-sex-and-gender-outlaws.html

[48] The full blog post from Boyd used in this discussion can be read here (accessed January 20, 2011): http://www.myhusbandandbetty.com/2009/09/17/jeez-louise-this-whole-cisgender-thing/

[49] The blog post makes it unclear what the difference is between "cisgender" and "cissexual" except that she says that people who have variable genders but are not trans are also *not* cisgender - they are cissexual. The example she uses is a "femme-y gay man who maybe performs a more gender normative masculinity for his job." This person is not cisgender, according to Boyd. However, the vast majority of people perform gender differently in a variety of contexts, but this does not make the vast majority of people gender variant. I would argue that dressing more masculinely for work does not mean that someone is not cisgender. Boyd says herself that cisgender "implies, or means, or could mean (depending on who you talk to), that someone's sex and gender are concordant." That femme-y gay man she describes likely still identifies as a man and was assigned male at birth. This does not mean that he's gender variant - unless he identifies as such, which he certainly may.

gender fluid but doesn't identify as trans, they are being called cisgender (though it's not

clear who she claims is making the word work like she says it is). She goes on to say:

> Telling me, & other partners whose lives are profoundly impacted by the
> legal rights / cultural perceptions of trans people, that we are "not trans"
> implies that we are also not part of the trans community… We are not just
> "allies." We are vested, dammit, & a part of the trans community, so when
> "cisgender" comes to mean, or is used to mean, "not part of the trans
> community," we are once again left out in the dark.

It seems as though Boyd has experienced someone using "cisgender" in ways that

suggested she was not part of a trans community, though I have never read or heard the

term used in this way. Based on reports from participants, my data from participant

observation at conferences, and the comments from readers about Boyd's blog post, this

is not how "cisgender" or "cis" are used by the vast majority of people. "Cisgender" and

"cis" are commonly used in FTM-spectrum communities as simple descriptors (not as

gender identities) without any negative connotations connected to the terms. I have yet to

hear anyone at a conference, workshop, meeting, or in a personal conversation of any sort

claim that "cis" is used to automatically suggest that someone is not part of a trans

community. None of my participants cited the term as being offensive, and some people

only rejected them because they sounded "clinical" or were not easily understood by

most people in society. Further, as Morgan stated earlier, the people using the term are

often in trans communities and/or doing gender studies in the academy - none of whom, I

assume, would want to shrink the notions of "trans community" or "ally" to only include

certain people. I can only theorize that Bornstein and Boyd seem to circulate in very

different communities with different politics around language, based on their work.

Bornstein's politics and writing fall more in line with the politics I've experienced in

FTM-spectrum communities both personally and in my fieldwork than Boyd's politics

and writing do. This is all to say that "cisgender" does not operate *completely*

uncontested in trans communities, but that there might be specific political and/or social

locations from which the term is more, or less, contested.

Simply, "cisgender" and derivatives, such as "cis" or "cissexual," currently

operate as descriptors - not as identity categories. Not a single participant personally

identified as "cis," but did recognize that "cis" described them; which is in line with

Bornstein's argument that cis/trans is a valid binary. This binary is a descriptive binary

within trans community spaces; one that, at least for most people in this project, does not

give power or privilege to one group of people over another. It is a binary that helps to

describe the diversity of genders, embodiments, and identities within trans communities

(i.e., there aren't only trans people in these communities). However, for Helen Boyd, a

non-trans woman partner of a trans woman, this binary brings up experiences of "cis"

meaning not being part of "the trans community." While the cis/trans binary operates

differently in larger society, with obvious power and privilege going to those who are

cisgender/cissexual and presenting in gender normative ways, the binary does not seem to

work the same in trans community spaces I'm familiar with and with the communities

that my participants are a part of. When Boyd says that calling partners "not trans"

suggests that they are also not part of "the trans community," she seemingly fails to

recognize that some people are simply *not transgender*, even though they certainly may

be family, allies, partners, and activists within trans communities and movements. Taken

together, my own experiences in trans community spaces, the data for this project, and

Bornstein and Boyd's arguments suggest that "cisgender" is operating differently in FTM-spectrum contexts than it might be in contexts that are primarily MTF. While neither Bornstein nor Boyd identify on the FTM spectrum, Bornstein's politics of language are more in line with the politics one tends to experience in FTM and genderqueer communities and contexts, which can be - though are not always - very different politics than those in MTF-spectrum communities.

Partners versus "Tranny Chasers"

While there are certainly politics about how one identifies or describes their own non-transgender self, there are also politics around the language one uses when claiming an attraction to trans people - whether this is only in relation to one partner or a preference for dating trans people in general. This is a particularly contentious subject for many cis people who date trans folks because there is a risk of tokenizing or seeming as if one is fetishizing transness, both of which are generally considered negative in trans communities. For example, while attending a workshop about partnering with trans people at a large, national-level conference, there were several arguments about whether it was actually okay to discuss a desire to partner with trans people. Other discussions centered around how "tranny chaser" circulated in mainstream society and in trans communities (decidedly negative in both contexts), and the fact that "tranny chasers" are not only cisgender people. One of the partner YouTube communities had a week's topic[50]

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[50] The YouTube channels organize the videos into weekly topics, which each contributing member posting a video that addresses that topic. This is explained further in Chapter Four when discussing how the YouTube channels function as communities. All vlogs used for this project were uploaded to YouTube on one of the two channels by 27 different white cisgender women partners between March 2009 and January 2010.

focus on the term "tranny chaser," with partners on the channel having either been called

this or feeling that they are at risk for being called this. Feelings about the term are

mixed as to whether it is offensive or not, but generally it seems to be viewed as a term

referring to people who fetishize trans people. As Tina explains in her vlog for the week:

> I think that that word is very damaging. First of all because when you're
> talking about someone chasing trannies you're talking about them
> fetishizing trannies, transgendered people, and that in itself, by saying that
> there is this group of people who fetishizes trans people, that *word*
> fetishizes trans people… I also hate the word because people apply it to
> me. And I know that. And I'm not a tranny chaser. I do tend to be
> attracted to genderqueer women, really dykey women, or trans men. But
> it has nothing to do with sex, it has to do with who I'm attracted to…
> There's no chasing involved, it's just, you know, who you prefer to date,
> who you're attracted to. So I think the word tranny chaser is very
> offensive.[51]

Tina explains tranny chasers to be those who fetishize trans people and one reason that

she dislikes the term is because people have used it in reference to her. She claims that it

doesn't describe her because "there's no chasing involved" - a literal interpretation of the

term. In addition, she distances herself from sexual desire here - "it has nothing to do

with sex" - in order to draw attention to the sexual fetishization of trans people/bodies by

others. Several other members of the YouTube channel also talked about the term in

relation to a fetish, and then distanced themselves from that explanation. Beth says in her

vlog:

> [A tranny chaser] is someone who fetishizes trans people and is basically
> only interested in them because of their trans status. And for those of you

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[51] People within certain trans community spaces will sometimes use the words "tranny" or "trannies" with friends when talking about people on the trans spectrum. This use is considered playful and generally not problematic when used by those who are inside the community, but is considered highly derogatory if used by outsiders. Some people within trans communities also find "tranny" derogatory so it's often used with explanation, apology, and a willingness by the speaker to not use it if it offends anyone. For this reason, the terms are often only used with close friends who use the same language.

who don't know what a fetish is, the actual definition of a fetish is any object or non-genital part of the body that causes a habitual erotic response or fixation. So if someone is habitually fixated on people who are trans, or people with trans identities, then yeah, they have a fetish and yeah they're a tranny chaser. But I do think there are people who are just uniquely attracted to trans people, whether that's MTFs or FTMs, and I think those people who are uniquely attracted to trans people are attracted to them for reasons that go beyond intimacy… So I think it can be a preference without being a fetish. I'm not offended by the term because I've never been called a tranny chaser… But I am offended by tranny chasers. Like, with the people who are actually tranny chasers because I don't think that anybody should be desired only for their gender identity or for their genitals, or I dunno, I don't think that's right.

For Beth, it's possible to be attracted to trans people without fetishizing them, but she doesn't offer up any alternative language here. What makes someone a tranny chaser, according to Beth, is how they fetishize trans people through a trans gender identity or specific genitals. Beth has never been called a tranny chaser and doesn't take offense to the word itself, but is offended by the fetishizing behavior of others.

There seems to be a fine line between "attraction" and "fetish" in the ways that the members of the channel discuss these two things, but all members claim they do not have a fetish for trans people. One of the main ways that members of the YouTube channels illustrate their genuine "attraction" is by *not* mentioning desire or sex in their videos for the week on "tranny chasers." In fact, the way that these cis women differentiate between their "legitimate" partnering with trans people and the "tranny chasers," is to mention that tranny chasers *do* desire sex with trans people specifically. The partners on YouTube, in particular, seem to be engaging in a careful and explicit denial of the erotics of transness in order to resist classification as a "tranny chaser." I sat in a room filled with similar explanations at a workshop I attended at a very large,

national LGBT conference. While sitting in a circle of about 70 cis and trans people, I

listened as sexual desire for trans people was denounced in an effort to vilify and call out

the "real" "tranny chasers." If, historically, trans people were granted entrance to gender

identity clinics and allowed to transition only when they claimed a lack of sexual desire

(i.e., asexuality) (see Valentine 2004, Meyerowitz 2002), might it be counterproductive to

continue an asexual rhetoric within our own trans and allied communities?[52] Has "tranny

chaser" gotten away from us? That is, is a term that trans people have used against

exploitative outsiders (and to keep the outsiders *outside*), now coming back to potentially

refer to people within our own communities - cisgender people, and even other trans

people, who partner with us?

It's generally seen as wrong or disrespectful to be attracted *only* to trans people

(because this would suggest one has a fetish), and some partners believe that tranny

chasers are people who have dated more than one trans person. Shawna brings this up in

a vlog while trying to be careful about not offending other people on the channel or

others who are watching, since some contributors to the channel have stated that they've

dated multiple trans people:

> [Tranny chaser] simply means… someone who has sought out multiple
> relationships with transgender individuals… It has been attached more to
> someone who, I guess, more like a fetish… it's like someone seeking out a
> transgender individual for an ulterior motive other than "I am attracted to
> you as a person and, you know, I'm in love with you and you happen to be
> trans and you happen to be the multiple person that I happen to be
> attracted to that was trans."

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[52] This is not to say that asexuality is not a valid subject position or identity. My arguments here are not about identity or even behavior, and are instead related to historical discourses of oppression around desire.

Shawna says that it's not okay for someone to *seek out* relationships with trans people, certainly not more than one trans person, and we can infer that the "ulterior motive" she mentions here refers to sexual activity, which is off-limits. She goes on to say, "If someone wanted to call me it… they would be ignorant because my boyfriend is the first trans person I've been with" - in other words, she *can't* be a tranny chaser because she's only dated one trans person. Beth suggested that it's maybe okay for someone to have a *preference* for dating trans people, but Shawna claims otherwise. For Shawna, it seems that you cannot like the fact that someone is trans or find gender nonconformity attractive in a person without risking being a tranny chaser. If you like a person and find out later they are trans, that's okay - "you happen to be trans" - but you cannot like someone *for being trans*. Another member, Connie, agrees with this and states in her vlog for the week that she is with her partner because she likes *him*, "not because I like his trans status." Interestingly, most people in the US, and in many Western cultures, choose a partner based *first* on that person's gender. That is, a heterosexual man would likely say that their potential partner would be a woman; a gay man would likely say that his potential partner would be a man. Both of these scenarios are considered completely acceptable in terms of defining a sexual identity and attraction, and part of the reason they are acceptable is through the assumption that the subject of attraction/desire is cisgender. However, Shawna argues that you cannot choose a partner, and presumably have a sexuality, based on someone's gender identity if that person is trans - or you risk being called a tranny chaser.

So how can people who are attracted to trans folks talk about this attraction without seeming to fetishize trans bodies and identities? Is there even a place for trans attractions or will cisgender people who are attracted to trans folks forever be "tranny chasers"? One partner I met at a conference told me that organizers of a different trans conference in her local area, where she had proposed a workshop session for partners of trans people, required her to meet with the conference board to argue her case for having the workshop and how it was going to be facilitated in ways that would ensure that trans bodies and identities were not fetish objects. According to her reports, the workshop was eventually approved and went very well, but she had to go through a lot more to be given a space for discussion at the conference than most other workshop organizers did based on the politics of attraction and dating trans people that the conference organizers were concerned about. Although only two participants even mentioned the terms, "transamorous" and "transsensual" are sometimes being used to describe the people Beth talked about - those who have a preference for trans people without fetishizing them. Scarlett, one of my interview participants, responded to my email that asked about language use in this project and wrote:

> I totally understand where you are coming from. I struggle with this myself because when I joined the Transamorous/Transpartners group I really was not into the name. For one, I don't identify as transamorous. Like, I have been attracted to trans men before but certainly not most of them and often am attracted to cis men (gay and straight), butch women, genderqueer folks, etc - mostly on the masculine spectrum.

For Scarlett, although there is an available word to describe being attracted to trans people, it's not a good fit for her because she's attracted to lots of different gender identities. Further, while "transamorous" and "transsensual" are terms that exist, they are

not in wide usage at all. Scarlett and Renee were the only people who even mentioned

them (and Renee only mentioned it by telling me I should look it up), and not a single

person used the terms in any videos from the YouTube channels. Based on my research,

it seems that there are not currently acceptable ways to discuss a desire for or an

attraction to "trans." While the vast majority of trans people I have met at conferences

and know personally tend to date cis people, there is a silence from these cis partners

around sexual desire and attraction, likely due to the idea that desiring "trans" is still

considered taboo and potentially fetishizing in many trans and queer communities. This

is not to say that the desire and attraction don't exist, but that they seem intentionally

silenced and bubble under the surface of seemingly more benign conversations at

conferences and on the partner YouTube channels.

Read as Straight: Language and (In)visibility

One of the ways that subjects and objects become "real" or visible is through the

use of language. As Wilchins argues, "What is named is real, and what is not has no

existence" (2004:38). While language has the power to make something known, it also

has the power to erase or make invisible that which is unable to be said. Partners

regularly mentioned how language had the power to "out" them, to make their queerness

known, and to suggest that their relationship was something other than normatively

heterosexual.

In many languages, pronouns are a regular part of speech, writing, and/or manual

signs that signify the gender of a person being discussed. In English, the pronouns "he"

and "she" are used to refer to other people, most often. While there are a variety of

gender neutral pronouns in existence, these have yet to catch on as parts of everyday

spoken or written English.[53] As some trans people transition, one of the most common

things that often occurs is a shift in pronoun usage when referring to that person - in the

case of people on the FTM spectrum, this shift usually moves from "she" to another

pronoun such as "he," "ze," or "they." Of course, this is also a shift in the use of these

pronouns for other people who are a part of trans people's lives - friends, family

members, co-workers, service providers, and partners.

One of the issues that Kate brought up in an email interview was that when she

talks about her partner, her queer identity gets erased as soon as she uses "he" to mention

him. While this may not seem like a big deal for some, Kate talks about how a shift in

language has affected her own queer visibility. She says in a blog post that she shared

with me:

> I'm starting to feel uncomfortable that none of these people really know
> who I am. Not that I'm afraid of telling them I'm gay, or that I'm seeing
> someone trans. It's just difficult to explain, and even more difficult to
> work into a conversation. When I was seeing a girl, all I had to say to new
> acquaintances was "my girlfriend works at such and such" or "me and my
> girlfriend went to the cinema." Immediately they would know and it
> wasn't a big announcement. Now, bringing [my partner] into the
> conversation immediately marks me as straight, even though I call him
> "my partner," the dreaded pronoun comes along soon enough. I've always
> been one to say I don't care what people think of me. On the other hand I
> feel like I'm in the closet.

When Kate's partner was using "she" as a pronoun, Kate felt that outing herself was

much simpler - people Kate was talking with would automatically assume Kate was gay

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[53] Gender neutral pronouns are often used in trans communities, though. "Ze" and "hir" are most common;
"they" is also being used fairly often now.

because they both used "she." However, switching pronouns for her partner has meant

that Kate is now viewed as straight by others. Interestingly, while many LGB people

have used "partner" to avoid choosing a gendered pronoun and having them potentially

assumed to be LGB, Kate mentions how she is using "partner" to avoid being read as

straight. Being in the closet is undesirable and something that Kate is not doing for

safety reasons, but is an effect of referring to her partner with different pronouns. Renee

also discusses pronouns and coming out in relation to a specific situation she had at work

when her partner, Taylor, came up in conversation:

> There is always that issue with me identifying as a lesbian and meeting
> someone for the first time or, you know, like, how do I disclose or get the
> point across that I'm a lesbian, I'm a person who's attracted to women but
> I'm going to be referring to my partner as "he," just so you know, but that
> doesn't mean I'm straight? Like, how do you get the average, everyday,
> not-queer-conscious person to process that situation through their head?
> And it's also a question of, how much do you *care*, like how much do you
> want to disclose because it's really exhausting all the time to have to
> explain that situation and educate every new person over and over again
> about what's going on with these issues. And, like, I don't wanna have to
> do that all the time. You know? So, for example, when I was working at a
> copy center when I first just started working, the manager asked me one
> day, "Oh, do you have a significant other?" And I was like, "Umm,
> yeah…" I can't remember exactly what I said, but it was something along
> the lines of "I have a partner" and then she said something… like it's kind
> of that dance around pronouns you know? And I think that I said to her
> that I had a girlfriend. And I didn't disclose the trans part of it and I didn't
> say anything like that. And I felt a little badly about it because, like, I feel
> like in doing that I'm kind of denying his identity, but the way that I
> justified it to myself was that this is a person that *I'm* going to be dealing
> with on a daily basis, and Taylor doesn't have to deal with this person, like
> Taylor probably won't even meet this person necessarily, so it's more
> important she knows who *I* am, accurately, than she knows who Taylor is.

Renee brings up several issues in this segment of our interview. Like Kate, Renee found

it difficult to explain her relationship to others and often didn't feel comfortable doing so.

Using "he" to refer to her partner also invited the possibility of confusion from others

about whether she is straight, which led to her feeling like she needed to explain herself

in order to stay true to her own identifications. For Renee, her own identity is more

important than that of Taylor's in her everyday interactions with people, especially if

Taylor would never meet them. In the story she relays above, she finds it more important

for the co-worker to understand *her* than for them to know the complexities of gender and

sexuality in her relationship with Taylor. Disclosing Taylor's trans identity could open

the potential for Renee's strongly-held lesbian identity to be denied or questioned, and

she clearly resists being potentially seen as straight by using "lesbian" to define her

sexuality and by being "out" with that identity. Being read as straight is also an issue for

Tina, who says in her vlog about queer visibility:

> It makes me really uncomfortable when I'm perceived as straight because
> I absolutely do not think of my relationship with [my partner] as a straight
> relationship, I think of it as a queer relationship. Even if I was with a bio
> man, I could never have, like, a straight relationship with him. That kind
> of normative expression of gender doesn't really fly with me I guess.

For Tina, being perceived as straight just isn't in line with how she views herself or her

relationship - it's too normative. Similarly, Sienna says in her vlog:

> Dating a trans guy and losing some of my queer visibility - because we
> look like and ARE a straight couple - is very challenging in some ways
> because my whole entire life I've kind of gone back and forth between: "I
> think I'm gay… I think I'm straight. I'm dating a guy… I'm dating a
> girl."

Sienna identifies her relationship as a straight one, but recognizes her own challenges

with visibility and identity when it comes to having a trans partner. As Sienna has

struggled with identity in the past, losing the queer visibility that she used to have is a

challenge.

Loss of queer visibility for cisgender partners is something that comes up

regularly in conference workshops as well. I facilitated a conference workshop in 2008

that focused on how trans people can support their partners through a transition. Most of

the people attending the workshop were cis/trans couples and we brainstormed some

discussion topics as a large group before splitting up into smaller groups for easier

discussion as there were about 70 attendees. As I walked around the room, joined each

small group for a short time, and listened to the conversations, I realized that every group

had at least one short discussion about how to maintain a comfortable level of queer

visibility that felt right for both people in the relationship. Several cisgender partners

were afraid that there would be a loss of visibility in the future (especially after their

partner had been on testosterone for awhile and was being fairly consistently read as

male), and other people were talking about how to gain back visibility that they felt was

already lost. One of the complexities around visibility for many cisgender partners is

balancing their own desire for visibility with their trans partner's potential desire to be

stealth or to not be seen as queer.[54]

While not discussed often by participants, being read as straight means that there

is potential for being treated differently. As Natalie describes, perceived social

differences are not without differential treatment:

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[54] I'm not suggesting here that all cisgender partners wish for queer visibility and all trans people do not, but it is these cases where issues of visibility are most contested within the relationship and seem most pressing for cis partners.

> I identify as a lesbian and I have for quite a long time… And it was an odd thought for me thinking that now people perceive us as a straight couple and me as a straight woman, and along with that you get a different kind of treatment and I'm really surprised with that. (Natalie)

Natalie does not seem bothered by a loss of queer visibility, but is thoughtful about what it really means to be read as a straight couple (and perhaps about the ways that privilege is working differently in her life since her partner's transition, though she doesn't specifically mention privilege here). However, interestingly, Natalie is the only person (interview participant or partner from the YouTube channels) that mentioned anything alluding to heteronormative privilege in relation to a partner's transition. The focus in the vlogs seems to be more on whether the women feel that someone's reading of them is "right" or "wrong" instead of the potential social benefits that might come with being perceived to be straight.

However, not *all* cisgender partners desire to be read as lesbian or queer, or even care about it. In her vlog, Faith says:

> If I had queer visibility I pretty much lost it because I know that people perceive [my partner] and I as a straight couple. Which again, is perfectly fine with me, I don't care - I know he likes it, sometimes.

Faith claims that she doesn't care about being read as straight and, in fact, her partner at least sometimes *does* like being seen as straight when they are together. She also indicates that her trans partner is not entirely invested in being read as straight, so it does not seem like she's not caring about how they're read as a couple for his sake.[55] Another participant, Clara, said in an email to me that as a "femmey, mostly straight girl" she isn't

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[55] See Ward (2010) for a discussion of "gender labor" (the work done to legitimate someone's gender identity) by femme cis women who are partnered with trans men.

concerned with queer visibility, even though she is active in queer communities in the large city where she lives.

While visibility around sexual identity is discussed in different ways by participants, it's important to consider just how much LGBT and queer narratives are often centered around issues of visibility. The trope of "the closet" is a prime example of this - we are expected to "come out" of hiding and make our sexualities known (see Sedgwick 1990). It is generally considered to be a time of celebration when we do this, and we are congratulated for it - even if we are subject to negative consequences for doing so, such as losing friends, family, and/or being kicked out of our homes. The goal is always to, eventually, come out. When considering the closet, it's not surprising that issues of queer visibility are fairly important to the majority of cisgender partners here - many of whom were already involved in LGBTQ communities before meeting their partner. The performativity of language and the speech acts required to come out as queer produce difficulties for many partners who are attempting to negotiate being read as straight while identifying within, or in relation to, the LGBTQ spectrum. As Michael Brown points out, "coming out or staying in the closet is usually materialized in the form of a speech act" (2000:29). Pronouns were used as indicators of coming out for some participants in the past, but with a partner's transition and a shift in pronoun use they simply aren't enough to make oneself visible as queer anymore. Brown further argues that, "by remaining silent, by not telling one's sexual story, that which is known to the self remains unknown to others: heteronormative power is exercised once again" (2000:44).

But some cisgender partners are not *exactly* interested in remaining silent and issues of visibility are difficult when more than one person is involved in making queerness visible. As the next section of the chapter addresses, some partners are reclaiming and redefining identity terms in ways that make sense for them in order to gain some degree of visibility. Other partners are simply refusing labels for sexual identity altogether, a silence that is, perhaps, as queer as actually claiming "queer" in a culture that seems to require us to name ourselves *something*. If we consider, for a moment, that to refuse any sexual identity label at all might be a queer endeavor by resisting the (homo)normative push to name ourselves, what might we make of Brown's (2000) argument that silence reifies heteronormative power? Can our silence through a refusal to name also resist a normative classification of our desires based on a binary system of gender? Further, might a reworking of the current terms (e.g., "lesbian" or "straight") be an act of resistance *through* naming?

A Contested Language of Identity: (Re)Defining "Lesbian" and Refusing Labels

As Scarlett suggested previously, even new terms for sexual identity, such as "transamorous," might be too limiting for many people (who may also be interested in dating people with a variety of gender identities, not just trans-identified individuals), and they are not terms that are widely used. Partners express a fair amount of confusion over the language they want to use to describe their own sexualities (both to themselves and to others in a variety of contexts), which is especially true for the cis women who have lesbian-identified histories. While some are struggling with using "lesbian" to describe

themselves and have switched to different sexual identity labels, others are resisting what

"lesbian" has meant and are redefining the word in order to justify holding onto it when

in a relationship with someone who does not identify as female or "woman." As Kate, a

participant, explained in a blog post:

> I suppose one of the main issues we have is that I identify as lesbian,
> which sort of clashes with his identity as male. Not that it bothers him, it
> is more how other people see us as a couple which is sometimes
> frustrating for me. I am proud of who I am, and I won't change it to suit
> anyone else's narrow definitions of sexuality.

As she illustrates, how she defines her own identity might be discordant with the ways

that other people view her and her partner as a couple. That is, being read as straight

doesn't mesh with her own identification as a lesbian. However, Kate is determined to

claim "lesbian" even though she knows that it's contested; a move that could, perhaps, be

considered a move to queer the label and resist who is "allowed" to claim it. She went on

to write:

> I've been told numerous times I "must" be bisexual.   I don't have a
> problem with bisexuals, their point of view makes a lot of sense to me, but
> I just don't feel that I am one. The bottom line is, I would never have a
> relationship with a non-trans man and I'm still strongly attracted to
> women. There isn't really a word for that, so lesbian fits best out of the
> terms people recognize.

While some other participants took issue with "bisexual" as a limiting term suggesting

only two genders were available, Kate doesn't like it for herself because she sees herself

as dating women and trans men only. For her, "bisexual" doesn't fit because it includes

cis men. A lack of language for Kate to adequately describe her attractions has forced her

to expand and redefine (to queer?) the currently available categories to fit. Although I've

suggested that resisting all categories might be a queer endeavor, it seems equally

plausible that reworking the categories themselves - that is, resisting having them *not* include you - could also be queer work around identity, even if that identity is not called "queer." Renee, who generally claims a queer politics in relation to her lesbian identity, explains further about why there is no need to change her identity just because she's dating someone who identifies as male:

> At no point in time did I ever say to myself or think anything other than "I identify as a lesbian. I'm a lesbian." And I have my personal reasons for that, I have somewhat political reasons for that, there are many reasons why regardless of who I'm with I'm gonna identify as a lesbian. And I kind of just equated that with like, if you're bisexual and you happen to be dating a man you're not going to change your identity to straight just 'cause you happen to be dating a man.

For Renee, her political connections to "lesbian" - both in terms of a sexual identity and a larger community of women who she feels most comfortable with - allow her to justify continuing to claim the label for herself. While she recognizes that her relationship itself isn't a lesbian relationship, she resists the notion that she should shift her own sexual and political identity to be more (hetero)normatively in line with her partner. Similarly, Leah, in a vlog, articulates a difference between her own sexual identity and labeling the relationship itself in order to validate both herself and her trans partner:

> So if you're male and you're dating an FTM then you would be considered in a gay relationship. Or the other way around - if you identify yourself as a lesbian and you're dating an FTM people would consider that a straight relationship. I'm in a relationship with [my partner] and I consider that a straight relationship, but I still identify as a lesbian, in ways that I'm still attracted to women.

For Leah, identifying the relationship itself as straight does not mean that she needs to see herself as straight. She recognizes and validates her partner's identity through calling the relationship a straight one, but keeps "lesbian" to describe her own attractions. However,

claiming the identity of "lesbian" while being partnered with someone on the FTM

spectrum is not without critique from other people - including other partners. For

example, Sarah said to me in an email:

> I'm sorry, but if you're dating and in love with and attracted to a guy
> (whose package, body, hair growth, smell, face, voice) has changed how
> can you call yourself a lesbian? Isn't that undermining your partner a
> little? It's like a girl who calls herself straight while dating a woman, it
> just doesn't make sense to me. Sexuality is more fluid than all that.

Sarah critiques how some cisgender women who are dating trans men use "lesbian"

because it would be disrespectful to their partner and she draws seemingly clear lines

around "lesbian" and "straight;" however, Sarah also claims that "sexuality is more fluid

than that." In other words, while she suggests that sexuality is fluid, the identity labels

themselves are not - although we've seen how some partners have justified their use of

both "lesbian" and "straight." Sarah's argument to pick a new category that affirms a

trans partner's identity would not resonate with Kate, Renee, or Leah, who all argue that

their sexuality does not change in response to a partner's gender identity and who would

all likely resist policing around their chosen sexual identities. In other words, for Kate,

Renee, and Leah, sexual identity is *not* relational, even though other aspects of their lives,

such as community involvement or activism/advocacy, might be. In her vlog, Aster

claims that sexuality can be fluid *and* she can still identify as a lesbian:

> I think even a lot of gay people don't really understand about sexuality
> being fluid. I mean, I identify as a lesbian and 99% prefer women, but I
> am open to dating trans men and trans women and even if by some freak
> accident I was attracted by a genetic male, hell, I'd go for it, but that
> doesn't mean that my sexual preference is anything involving men. So, I
> identify myself by my sexual preference and I'm just open-minded...

Aster sees herself as an open-minded lesbian - an explanation that is in contradiction with Sarah's comment that someone should not call themselves a lesbian if they are dating anyone who identifies as a man - cis or trans. Aster argues against policing the labels of sexual identity based on *preference* - that is, she *prefers* to date women and, therefore, calls herself a lesbian. She does not feel that she should have to give up that label if she might, by chance, be attracted to someone of a different gender identity than "woman" - such as her trans partner.

However, while some partners were adamant that their identities did not shift in relation to having a trans partner (they just redefined what those identities meant), others did experience a shift in identity and/or language around identity once they began dating a trans person or after their partner told them they were trans. This is not to say that a "new" identity has necessarily been solidified, but that a partner's transition sparked a shift or a questioning in some way; for some, this meant questioning the use of any identity label at all. Leah says in her vlog:

> I still label myself as lesbian but I'm not much for labels anyway because I don't feel that people, based on who they love or their sexual orientation, should have to put a label on anything because, you know, you should be able to love who you want and it shouldn't be a big deal.

For Leah, who one is partnered with and one's sexual orientation should not have to be labeled. She still calls herself a lesbian, but she also suggests that a move away from all labels might be desirable. Leah seems hesitant to forgo labels altogether, but believes that she should be able to do that if she wants. Her statement that "it shouldn't be a big deal" points to the social importance placed on naming and making our attractions and

desires known to others. In a vlog, Sienna explains her relationship with labels and

visibility through naming her sexual identity:

> I think that labels are very dangerous things in the first place and I don't
> like to label my sexuality anymore, but as far as losing queer visibility I
> have lost some of it because I am dating a trans man and he is a man and I
> don't identify as a lesbian anymore.

Sienna's visibility as a queer person was directly tied to her identification as a lesbian,

which she has since given up due to her partner being a trans man. While Renee and

Kate challenge who can claim the label of "lesbian" by opening up the word to more

possibility around gender, Sienna feels that if she is dating a man, then she cannot claim

"lesbian" for herself (similar to Sarah's argument) and therefore wishes to not use labels.

Interestingly, although Sienna makes it clear that her partner "is a man," she does not

indicate here that she seeks to claim a straight identity. Beth presents some of the

complexities of feeling that she can't use "bisexual" to describe herself because she's not

attracted to either cisgender men or women:

> When I came out originally I first came out as being bisexual years ago.
> And then I started identifying as lesbian and then I was identifying as
> queer or pansexual and now I just don't identify at all… What I mean by
> "don't identify at all" is I don't subscribe to labels right now because I
> don't think I'm straight and I don't think I'm gay and I don't think I'm bi
> 'cause I'm not really attracted to women - I know I'm not attracted to
> women. And I'm not attracted to cisgendered men, at least not most of
> them. I'm mostly attracted to trans guys, but when you tell people that
> you're mostly attracted to trans guys then they call you a tranny chaser.

In her vlog, Beth notes that a failure of available terms to describe her attractions

positively means that if she tells someone she is primarily attracted to trans guys, she is

labeled a "tranny chaser" - a label with negative connotations with which does not

identify. We see with Beth the issue that was raised earlier in relation to "tranny chaser" -

Beth doesn't feel comfortable saying she is "mostly attracted to trans guys" because that

attraction is an unacceptable desire. Lacking language to adequately describe her

attractions and sexuality, and a danger around speaking these attractions at all, has led

Beth to simply not identify with any sexual identity label. Using labels has become

unimportant for Reagan as well, based on who she's dating and the complications around

language in describing her sexual identity:

> I'm still totally attracted to women, I'm dating a boy - I dunno! What do
> you call that?! I dunno. Maybe this sounds dumb and contradictory when
> I did work so hard to find this sense of self from coming out and being gay
> to being able to say now that that's not that important to me anymore.
> Maybe dating a trans guy is just putting those things into perspective for
> me and realizing that, you know, maybe it's not that important what people
> think.

What is particularly interesting about what Reagan says here in a vlog is that "dating a

trans guy is just putting those things into perspective" for her. That is, Reagan has

rethought identity labels and their usefulness overall, not just in the context of her current

relationship with a trans person. Further, she questions the importance of coming out

since the available identity labels to come out as do not and cannot capture who she is or

who she is dating. Jules also resists labels for her sexuality, but identifies as straight

solely in relation to her partner:

> I don't like to put a title on my sexuality - I do identify as straight 'cause
> I'm with a straight male and I love him and I'm completely attracted to
> him - but as far as in-depth my sexuality I still haven't figured it out. I
> don't feel like I really need to. [My partner] says I'm pansexual, he also
> says that I'm bisexual - but I just really don't know so I'm not gonna put a
> title on it for now. I'll let you guys know when I figure it out.

As illustrated by Kate earlier, some partners find themselves getting advice from others

about what their sexual identity or orientation might be. They are being told by other

people that they "must be" bisexual or pansexual once they begin dating trans men. Jules

resists the suggestion from her own partner to pick a new identity and decides to forgo

labels for the time being, but that she will announce it on the YouTube channel if and

when she decides on something. Jules realizes that the norm in both LGBT contexts and

in broader US culture itself is to have some sort of identity label, even if it changes over

time, and that this norm of naming is being at least somewhat replicated within the

YouTube community she is a part of.

Other partners are questioning their sexuality, but haven't decided to just give up

on identity labels like Leah, Beth, Sienna, Reagan, and Jules have. Autumn articulates

the complexities of her own identifications in concert with her relationship in one weekly

vlog:

> Of course I identify, or identified, I don't even know at this point, as a
> lesbian. With that being said, it made me question who I was because [my
> partner] has always been a man… So, that's what led me to question my
> sexual orientation and how I identify. It made me think, "Well, if I have
> the capacity to love a man for seven years am I really gay? What does that
> make me? Does it make me bisexual? Does that make me pansexual?
> Does it make me a lesbian who just so happened to fall in love with a trans
> guy?" I don't know what me being in love with [my partner] makes me.
> And I'm not sure if I have to know that, but I don't know that.

While Autumn is questioning how her relationship might change her sexual identity, she's

also grappling with the fact that she thinks that she might be supposed to know what her

sexual identity is. That is, Autumn recognizes the larger social discourse around the need

to know oneself and to be able to articulate that for others (see Foucault 1978, Calhoun

1994, Wilchins 2004, Butler 2005). Interestingly, Autumn, Jules, and Sienna all

reemphasize their partners' male gender identities when discussing how they grapple with

or redefine their own sexual identities. I interpret this as being at least partially related to much of the ally work done in trans communities (which is discussed further in Chapter Five) around the acknowledgement of trans people's chosen gender identities. Based on my experience in trans communities, both personally and for fieldwork, it is common for both cis and trans people to deliberately name someone's gender identity or to indicate it with pronoun usage in order to model how the person prefers to be addressed.

While straight-identified partners have continued to either identify as straight or shift their identity to "queer" or "pansexual" since being in a relationship with someone on the FTM spectrum, none of the partners who identified as "lesbian," "bisexual," "pansexual," or "queer" before being with a trans person shifted their identity to straight. This latter group of partners either shifted their identity to another category that seemed more open, refused sexual identity categories altogether, or redefined the categories in ways that include their experience and relationship. While some of the partners were willing to change how they referred to their relationship by saying it was a straight relationship, they were not willing to adopt a sexual identity of "straight." This suggests that the personal and political connections that cis partners have to "lesbian," "bisexual," "pansexual," or "queer" might weigh more heavily than a trans partner's gender identity when contemplating a shift in sexual identity. If none of those options seem viable, partners may choose to forgo sexual identity labels altogether.

Identity Through Theory, Politics, and Activism: Queer(ing) the Self

The people whose voices are included in this project are fairly politically engaged

individuals, even though the vast majority of them do not consider themselves activists

(which will be discussed in Chapter Five). That is, some participants are drawing on

queer political and activist language to define their identities as being open, fluid, and

shifting, or to resist identity labels that seem to require a binary notion of gender for

intelligibility (see Gamson 1996, Warner 1999, Butler 2004). Up until this point, I have

focused on the ways that questioning identity has been a large part of the experience of

self for cisgender people with trans partners, and the fact that many people have not come

to clear conclusions about how to name their sexual identity. That is, we have been left

with a sense of continuous questioning and partners being unsure about their sexual

identities through the data thus far. However, some participants have actively embraced

the complexities of identity when it comes to their relationship with a trans person by

adopting explanations of queer selfhood. As Dakota explained at length in an email to

me:

> To me, identifying as queer is a way to say that my desires and attractions
> (emotional, sexual, physical, etc.) are non-normative, that I am interested
> in a wide variety of people with a diverse range of gender identities and
> expressions. I don't fit into a straight or lesbian label, and I find "bisexual"
> problematic as it upholds a gender binary, and because the term has so
> many negative connotations (ex. that I am equally attracted to "men" and
> to "women") or just connotations that don't necessarily apply to me (ex.
> that I am not or could not be monogamous, that I am sexually
> promiscuous, etc. - I want to be clear that I am not valuing these traits
> negatively, but rather that they don't necessarily apply to me). I also find
> that identifying as queer gives me common ground with gay men, trans
> women, stone butches, high femmes, and others with whom I might not
> seem to have a lot in common. To me, "queer" is also a reclaimed identity
> (although it originally did come out of the queer community itself, it was

often used in a pejorative way) and an intentionally politicized one - an identity that speaks as much to my anti-assimilationist politics and my affiliation with queer theory and queer movements as it does to my sexual orientation.

Dakota's explanation of her identity utilizes some of the similar frameworks as previous explanations I've presented, but is also quite different in content. She mentions the identity labels that she's not comfortable with, similar to other participants, and why she's not comfortable with them; but, instead of settling on something that simply seems like it fits or continuing to be confused about where she fits, she claims a queer location that is as much about her relationship and desires as it is about her own politics and involvements in queer social movements. That is, for Dakota, a separation of identity from the political importance of finding common ground with others that share similar politics and non-normative senses of self just isn't possible. This is in line with Michael Warner's (1999) discussion about "queer" being more than about sexuality and identity - it operates as a specific cultural politics of resistance. Warner argues that being in queer culture "is a way of transforming oneself, and at the same time helping to elaborate a commonly accessible world" (1999:71). In other words, Dakota's queer politics are not a politics of identity; they are a politics of encouraging a shift from the normative that allows and celebrates coalitions around difference. In a vlog, Chloe also explained her identity in relation to her own queer (and lesbian) politics, and includes an explanation of why she does not claim "lesbian," but will use that word in specific situations:

> I've really shied away from using the word lesbian. I only use it in particular situations for particular connotation. I think that for me, lesbian feminism has a very specific history that I like, so when I'm talking about myself as a feminist I think about myself as a radical queer feminist or a progressive feminist, but there's a lot of lesbian feminist history that I

really align with and feel that I'm a product of. So, I'll use the word lesbian in feminist spaces to denote a certain genealogy that I think I'm coming from with my activism and my education stuff… But almost all the time - 95% of the time probably now - I identify as queer. I say I'm queer-identified because I like the fact that it confuses people. I don't like it and I like it. I like the fact that it confuses people because people are like, "What does that mean?" and then that opens up conversation about how desire, orientation, identity, all those things are far more complicated than binaries allow them to be, and I can get into that… So, it depends on the person and it depends on the context how I vocalize my identity, but I feel like queer fits me best because it's more complex, it's complicated. It also resonates on a level of questioning and trouble making that I really appreciate. Like, queerness to me is challenging assumptions, challenging norms, challenging, just questioning everything and saying does this work? Is this right? What are the problems here? Who does this not work for? What are other ways of doing this or living this or being this?

Chloe does use the "fits me best" language of identity that we've heard before; however, she provides reasons for her historical connections to "lesbian" as related to a lesbian feminism that she feels she is a "product of." For Chloe, challenging and questioning are key parts to her explanations of a queer self, which seem to be connected to Butler (1990, 1991, 1993) and others (see Warner 1999, Gamson 1996) given her use of "trouble making" in relation to identity politics. What is notable here is that both Dakota and Chloe are academically-oriented people - at the time of data collection both were undergraduate students and focused much of their coursework and reading within queer and feminist studies. However, earlier I introduced Renee, who is also in a similar academic situation, but firmly identifies as lesbian even though she was also using queer theory (Butler, in particular) to explain her identity:

I definitely think there's just a queer consciousness, especially in the past two years I guess, like, gotten more into the postmodern theory and poststructuralism and all that stuff. Umm… and I've always very much believed in the whole "gender as performance," identity being fluid, things like that, even when I first heard of it it, it just clicked for me, somewhere,

and that is on an academic level but it also means something, you know, *personally*, other than on an academic level. So when Taylor started coming out and disclosing these things to me and I started evaluating my own identity, I had these theories to fall back on, and I think that if I had been a different person I would have felt more stuck. Like, I would have felt more like, "Well I have to figure out what's going on here. I have to make a decision. Like, I have to, like, put it clear in my head." But I was okay with the fogginess and existing between these identities or just not really being sure what it meant. 'Cause I was just okay with the uncomfortability because I knew from these theories that there isn't really anyway around it and it's okay. You know? Like, it's fine. These things will change, it'll happen again, like, a new change and all that stuff. And I also had the consciousness to separate a gender from a sex and a body, and a gender expression from a sexual orientation, and just, you know, simple things like that. That, I guess, I learned from the theories, but I had also experienced before on my own because even before I met Taylor I was very interested in gender and I would read things about gender theory and think to myself: "By doing this I'm constructing my own gender right now and just because my own gender is feminine and it happens to match the sex I was born with it doesn't mean that I'm not transgressing typical gender norms by just questioning it and playing with it and things like that." So I think it's just a general comfortability… a comfortability with being uncomfortable or not knowing.

Dakota, Leah, and Renee all talk about their identities as being read through academic theories of sexuality and gender. That is, their explanations are lengthy and all have fashioned a queer identity that places importance on notions of questioning, challenging or transgressing, and comfort with fluidity and complexity. This is in contrast to previous discussions of identity that I presented where partners talked about being uncomfortable with being perceived in ways that they did not identify, held strongly onto concrete identity labels, challenged ways that others were using those labels, and/or had just decided to give up on identity labels completely. That is, here we see partners very intentionally claiming anti-normative and political identities that follow Warner's questioning: "When was being queer ever *only* about sexuality?" (1999:62).

One of my other participants, Abby, also uses "queer" as an identity that is tied to an activist explanation of self. Abby explained in an email to me that her identification shifted to "queer" after she began participating in various forms of activism with her partner:

> At the time that we met I didn't really know how to identify my sexual orientation. Everyone kept asking me and I usually just said bisexual, but I still didn't really feel like that was really it. [My partner] is very into queer activism and more specifically trans-activism so I finally discovered and claimed the label of queer and more specifically pansexual from him. I identify as pansexual because I believe I am able to be interested in someone romantically and/or sexually regardless of their sex or gender identity/expression. When I finally came to the conclusion that this was how I really identified, I was kind of just like, oh, duh, this makes sense. I had always been open to dating regardless of race or economic status, etc, so why should I be exclusive when it comes to sex or gender?

For Abby, "queer" and "pansexual"[56] operate through a similar thread of identity - one being a more specific version of the other. Further, Abby explains her queerness through the idea that queer is open to various possibilities around sex and gender in relation to a partner, connecting this openness to dating people of other races or socioeconomic status.

Not all partners talk about "queer" through a theoretical, or even political, model, however. Some partners discussed their queerness simply as an alternative to other categories (see Baker 2008). As Sarah noted in an email:

> I've never felt comfortable with the lesbian label, I like/am attracted to gender ambiguity, and I don't look like someone from the L Word (which is what I picture when I think "lesbian") but I'm definitely not straight, as I like women, so queer seems more fluid and relaxed and open, and I like that freedom.

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[56] "Pansexual" refers to someone who is involved in intimate relationships with others regardless of someone's anatomy or gender identity. For a more lengthy discussion, see: http://www.suite101.com/content/what-is-pansexuality-the-rise-of-a-new-sexual-orientation-a327541

For Sarah, "lesbian" represents something she's not and "queer" is a space of freedom in identity. Meghan, a participant, also considers "queer" a more open identity than others she has come across:

> I now choose to use "queer" to describe my sexual orientation because "bisexual" isn't a good fit anymore. I like to think of queer as being a broad term, encompassing more than just two genders. I like to think of queer as somewhat of a label for people who don't like labels.

Meghan presents a critique of binaries with her explanation of identity. That is, the fact that her partner is trans indicates that there are more than the two genders of male and female so "bisexual" doesn't work anymore since "bi" refers to two.

For this group of partners, "queer" operates as an identity that is open, fluid, politically-engaged, and/or connected to their partners' transness through needing an identity that also includes trans people. That is, for these partners, "lesbian" and "bisexual" don't work because they are too limiting to describe their attractions and their relationship with their trans partner - and they aren't seeking to redefine those words to fit their relationships, attractions, or desires. While redefining "lesbian" and "bisexual" may work for others, as illustrated previously, Dakota, Chloe, and Abby recognize that these words already have previous (and limited) meaning to others - and that the words often don't include trans people. Further, "straight" is not an option for these partners because it is not connected to the politics, theory, and/or activism through which this group of people has fashioned identity. As Rachel explained when I asked her to elaborate on her identity of "queer":

> Queer is my rainbow umbrella when I'm not boy enough to be gay and not binary enough to be bisexual or inclusive enough to be pansexual or exclusive enough to be lesbian, though I have used all those terms to

> describe myself in different contexts and may again someday. Queer is a big I-give-up-and-am-too-tired-to-try-and-sort-out-my-sexual-identity-again-today. Queer is a strong proud reclaimed fuck-you to limited ways of thinking about gender. Queer is the old fashioned definition too - a little odd - a scrappy, quirky outsiderishness that for me grew largely from being a part of a band of liberal artistic pagan students attending a mainly conservative college.

"Queer" is oppositional for these partners in relation to media depictions (as Sarah mentioned with *The L Word*) and a politics that would erase or make invisible their complex relationship configurations, as Rachel notes above. That is, "queer" is explained as a reclaimed and anti-normative identity space where the identities of their partners are also included and validated through the language used to describe themselves. Further, for this group of partners, "queer" is often used to resist normative politics around gender and sexual identities in larger society and in "lesbian and gay" contexts (Warner 1999).

Conclusions

The problematics of identity in cis/trans relationships can be connected to Judith Butler's positions around the speaking of identity and coming out. As she posits, "If I claim to be a lesbian, I 'come out' only to produce a new and different 'closet.' The 'you' to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity. Indeed the locus of opacity has simply shifted: before, you did not know whether I 'am,' but now you do not know what that means" (Butler 1991:15-16). For the white, middle-class, cis women partners whose stories are included here, this means that their coming out as being "straight," "lesbian," "queer," or "pansexual" doesn't tell the whole story. That is, these labels fail to refer to transness. To claim any of the identity labels participants mention

here is to claim identities that are always incomplete in terms of incorporating a trans

partner into the *being out*. In other words, none of the available sexual identity categories

we have in contemporary US culture are able to describe the complexities of gender and

desire in cis/trans relationships. Even identities that might seem to be open or fluid, such

as "queer," fail to capture the gender identities of both partners in the relationship and

produce an opacity (or maybe an assumption) around what those labels even mean.[57]

That is, almost any sexual identity that is claimed automatically erases the trans

specificities of the relationship. For some, this is desirable because they identify as

straight and their trans partner prefers not to be read as trans. But, for others, outness and

visibility is a key part of their sexual identity. This chapter has presented some of the

problems with identity categories (and defining those categories) for cisgender people

with trans partners, while also recognizing how important these categories can still be for

many - both personally and politically.

Gayle Rubin's (2006) point at the beginning of this chapter about the importance

of categories as points of organizing, directs us towards the next chapter that focuses on

forging community, community dynamics, and the politics of identity as related to

community. Language still meets us in the following chapter as it plays an important role

in how partners find community and with which communities they find affinity. We'll

see how technology plays a large role in constructing community for some cisgender

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[57] I use "both" here because all participants indicated that they only had one partner, though I footnote this to say that I recognize that not all people are in monogamous relationships with only one other person and it is not my intention to make that assumption or to privilege monogamy over polyamory or other relationship configurations.

people with trans partners and the ways that virtual spaces afford new kinds of

community that are often unavailable in the physical spaces of local community.

Chapter Four
(Re)Imagining Community

"If we are serious about becoming more flexible about the nature of identities and identifications,
then we need to reconceive the notion of community as well."
- Kristin Esterberg from *Lesbian and Bisexual Identities*, 1997:174 -

"Indeed, it may be only by risking the *incoherence* of identity that connection is possible."
- Judith Butler from *Bodies that Matter*, 1993:113 -

This chapter builds on the arguments in Chapter Three about the politics of

language around identity for cisgender people with trans partners. Community can

generally be understood as a sense of togetherness and belonging that bring individuals

together under a shared understanding about a particular experience, identity, politics,

interest, or feeling of affinity (see Krieger 1982, 1983; Weston 1991; Correll 1995;

Morrish and Sauntson 2007; Anderson 2006). Kath Weston (1991) says that for "gay and

lesbian" individuals, community is often viewed as the opposite of isolation - finding

other people like you (122). As David Valentine argues, "Whether geographically

bounded or not, community is not a natural fact but an achievement" (2007:73). In other

words, a sense of community is constructed by people who are invested in having it, but

not everyone involved has the same understanding of what defines a particular

community. For this reason, finding community is often difficult for partners given a

lack of easily identifiable sexual and/or gendered identity terms around which to form

community. The vast majority of literature that considers sexual and/or gender identity as

the basis for scholarly inquiry discusses community in relation to identity, suggesting that

for those with non-normative sexualities and/or gender identities, identity-based

communities often play important roles in everyday life (see Esterberg 1997, Jenness

1992, Johnson 2007, Krieger 1982). This importance holds true for the majority of partners included in this project, and many partners also express concern over potentially losing community and/or an inability to find a community in which they are comfortable, including being unable to find communities of other people with trans partners. While some may argue that individuals who do not fit into these identity-based categories could simply join a community around a particular interest that is separate from sexual or gender identity, this can be difficult when we consider the general heteronormative and transphobic culture of the US,[58] combined with some partners not wanting to be silent about their sexuality and/or gender identity. In a society where certain lesbian and gay people are accepted as "normal" and individuals who are bisexual, transgender, and/or queer are interpreted as non-normative and deviant (see Gamson 1998, Puar 2007), I argue that having a trans partner seems to automatically put the couple outside the realm of acceptability in the vast majority of LG and straight community spaces. One exception to this might be if the couple lives a stealth life where a partner's trans identity is not known to others.

My research indicates that LGBT and queer communities have been spaces that many white LGB, queer, and pansexual cisgender women with trans identified partners have called home for a significant part of their lives. While a new gender identity in a relationship may or may not coincide with a shift in sexual identity for someone with a

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[58] This is largely evidenced by the failure of cultural and governmental institutions to grant LGBTQ people rights. A continued stress on the binary gender system itself within the social culture of the US, the fact that there are no federal laws protecting LGBTQ people from hate crimes, the fact that LGBTQ people can only get married in certain states (not at the federal level) unless within a heterosexual union, and that trans people still be considered to have a "disorder" under DSM standards all promotes a generally homophobic and transphobic social atmosphere in the US. For more on current laws with regular updates, see the website for The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, http://thetaskforce.org/

trans partner, many partners talk about their connection to various forms of LGB and/or queer community and fear losing it due to how community members might interpret their sexual identity in relation to having a trans partner - even if the partners identify their *relationship* as straight. Does a history of queer life experience ensure that someone will still be welcome in their LGBT or queer community if they claim a straight relationship? In other words, how do sexual identity, community affinity, and relationship labeling interact to affirm or question someone's membership? Partners who identified as heterosexual/straight prior to partnering with a trans person do not discuss experiencing a loss of community (though they certainly may have individual people fall out of their lives) - perhaps because communities based on heterosexuality don't exactly exist.[59] Straight-identified partners discuss fear of individuals not accepting their relationship, but they do not talk about losing acceptance from a community they find themselves connected to in the ways that LGB/pansexual/queer partners do.

This chapter illustrates that being part of a local (offline) LGB or queer community is often related to whether or not a person's trans partner is accepted in that community. If trans people are not accepted in a specific local community, the partner will also not find community there. If trans people *are* accepted by community members, the partner will continue to be accepted there. In other words, in communities based on sexual identity, I argue that who an individual is partnered with, or desires to be partnered with, means just as much (and perhaps more) than the identity of the person actually seeking community. The data presented here speaks to the larger issue of transphobia in

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[59] Straight partners might experience loss of community from other identity-based networks, such as those connected to race, ethnicity, or disability. However, no straight partners included in this project mentioned a loss of community at all.

many lesbian and gay community spaces (see Weiss 2004) where partners may be seeking to find community. Due to the struggle around identity-based community for many cis partners in this project, there is a great need for local community based on affinity, instead of identity. Patricia G. Lange defines affinity to be a feeling of "membership in a social network, or feelings of attraction to people, things, or ideas" (2009:71). Bonnie A. Nardi says that affinity consists of "feelings of connection between people. A feeling of connection… is an openness to interacting with another person. Affinity is achieved through activities of social bonding in which people come to feel connected with one another, readying them for further communication" (2005:99). While shared identity has the potential to produce feelings of affinity, affinity itself is not dependent upon identity, as this chapter will illustrate.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the politics of community and how participants experienced a change in community when their trans partner began to transition and/or came out - for some this meant fearing a loss of community, some found new community, and others simply experienced a shift in their connection to various communities. Following this, I move into a discussion of the ways that identity politics worked to define the boundaries of LGBT and/or queer community in the lives of many partners and the ways that hierarchies of sexual identity played roles in potential loss of community. This is then connected to how many partners talked about the importance of LGBT and queer community in their lives. This includes temporary communities that are formed at LGBT and queer conferences, and I consider how a sense of community is

created at conferences, even when people know that the community will disperse at the

end of the conference weekend.

The chapter then shifts to a discussion of YouTube *as a community space* by

discussing how the partner YouTube channels operate as communities. Online

communities are often viewed as "less than" their face-to-face counterparts, but I argue in

this chapter that the partner channels on YouTube are important sites of community for

partners and sometimes actually *preferred* over face-to-face communities. The YouTube

channels discussed in this chapter are *not* identity-based communities, but are instead

based on the shared perception of a similar experience and affiliation - the experience of

having a trans partner. The communities on YouTube, often described by partners as

communities of support, are for anyone who has a trans partner, is a trans person, or who

just wants to learn more about being in a relationship with a trans person. Some people

with trans partners have suggested that community based on the *experience* of being a

partner is easier to find in online spaces than in spaces where people are face-to-face, due

to the fact that YouTube allows one to describe experience instead of simply naming

identity. That is, instead of having an identity label stand in for experience, vlogging on

the channels allows the partners to *describe* the specifics of their identities and histories

of their experiences - both individually and in relation to the fact that everyone making

vlogs for the channels has a trans partner (e.g., saying "I'm a lesbian" doesn't mean the

same thing for people with trans-identified partners as it might for "same-sex" couples).

However, my research suggests that the channels might only provide community for a

certain group of partners - white, largely middle-class, cisgender women in their 20s -

since this is the demographic of partners who are uploading videos to the channels and

sharing their stories as "authorities" on cis/trans relationships.

This chapter argues that partners have a particularly complex connection to LGB

and queer communities due to identity-based politics, which can often exclude the

partners of trans people due to their varying sexual identities. As indicated by the

previous chapter, identity is constantly contested and questioned (by partners and others),

which makes communities based on identity complex spaces for partners, even though

partners often mention a desire to be a part of them. My analyses suggest that partners

might find more accepting forms of community through coalitional and nonidentity

politics of affinity - that is, community based on shared experience (Johnson 2007, Green

2006, Phelan 2004). Unfortunately, the majority of partners do not discuss having this

type of community aside from the channels on YouTube. While YouTube channels can

operate as sites of community that replicate many of the complex and problematic

identity politics that are present in many physical LGBT and queer communities -

especially around race - I argue that they provide an important space for the development

of a sustainable partner community that is rarely found elsewhere.

Why (Queer) Community - or not?

Community is often seen as desirable and is described as a potential space of

safety and belonging for many cisgender partners. However, not all partners feel they are

a part of any kind of queer or LGBT community - and not all partners *want* to be a part of

one.[60] This section of the chapter looks at how partners talked about the importance of

community, *why* community is important, and why some partners don't find LGBT or

queer community important at all. For some, not finding queer or LGBT community

important is related to feeling like they're not part of one. As Claudia explains in a vlog:

> I personally don't feel a part of the GLBTQ community. I feel that my community is the people that I love and the people that accept me and accept my relationship… We don't really identify with the GLBTQ community and I mean, I don't really feel like we identify with the straight community… We're sort of in the middle, off doing our own thing.

Part of Claudia's ambivalence around an identity-based community is the fact that she

feels that she and her partner don't fit into either the GLBTQ or the straight community.

She doesn't identify with either and so her community is made up of supportive people in

her life - of various sexual and gender identities. Claudia's explanation of community is

related to Kath Weston's (1991) work on families (and communities) of choice. Weston

explains through her ethnographic work that many "gay and lesbian" people have forged

family and community by choosing to have these close relationships only with those who

are most supportive and affirming. These families and communities may or may not be

aligned by sexual identity.

While some may interpret having a transgender partner as a "queer" relationship,

many cisgender partners included in this project do not see themselves as being in a queer

relationship or having a queer sexual identity. Both YouTube channels featured vlogs

where partners talked about queer community (in relation to sexual identity), but not all

the partners on the channels saw themselves as being a part of these larger LGBTQ

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[60] See Joseph (2002) for a discussion of how capitalism and political practices are connected to utopic notions of community that are, in fact, exclusionary and dividing.

communities - even if they did see themselves as being a part of a community of partners via the YouTube channels. Caitlyn simply says in her vlog about queer community:

> I've never really been in that kind of community, if that's what I should say, I've never considered myself to be gay or whatever.

Breanna explained that she is part of an LGBT or queer community, but that it's strange to her because she identifies as straight. Some cis women partners identified as straight because they are partnered with someone who identifies as a man - and they met their partner after his identification as male, instead of before their partner transitioned. As she says in a vlog:

> It's really kind of strange being a [part of a] community you don't really feel a part of. And it's very strange being looked at funny for being kind of straight and so I don't really know what my feelings are on it... I see myself as straight then I'm with the straight crowd... So I'm not really IN this community per se, but I'm definitely a supporter of it. I definitely believe in gay rights and all of those kinds of things. I would happily stand on the front line with the pickets and everything for gay rights and everything like that. But not being a member can be kinda difficult and you kinda get funny looks.

Breanna describes herself as an ally to the community here - not feeling part of the community, but in support of it and "gay rights." While straight allies are very much part of some LGBT and queer communities, and Breanna suggests that others see her as a part of the community, she explains being in an awkward place based on her straight identity but read-as-somewhat-queer relationship. Beth speaks about her connection to LGBT and queer community similarly:

> I feel more comfortable being read as a heterosexual couple so I guess I don't totally feel comfortable in the community. The only reason I would say I do feel comfortable in the community is because most of my friends are queer and it's because of them that I feel more accepted in the community, but if it weren't for them I'm not so sure that I would.

Beth, too, is in a local queer community but doesn't feel entirely comfortable being a part of it because she identifies as straight and wants to be read as being in a heterosexual relationship with her trans partner.

However, other partners talk about the importance of queer community in their lives and how they came to find queer communities. While Beth, Breanna, Caitlyn, and Claudia don't seem to find queer community particularly important in their lives, several partners discuss how imperative it is for them and can't imagine *not* being a part of queer community spaces. Cassidy, who is from Europe, explains in a video:

> Community is really important to me. Because, I mean, we're still fighting for gay marriage and for gender recognition act, we're still fighting for so much that we need a community. We barely have the basic services for LGBT youth and I know that's the same across most of the world, but I have an idealistic mind. And I fight for this kind of stuff so my community is very important to me.

Cassidy connects her desire for community to her involvement in activist work (explored further in Chapter Five). Cassidy says that community is important because people need to feel like they are a part of something, especially when people are still fighting for legal rights. Others talked about how community and identity may intersect, but that community is what's really important. As Madison says in her vlog:

> Regardless of what label I identify with or if I don't like labels I still feel connected to the community, and that's the most important thing in my mind.

For Madison, connection with others is most important to her - regardless of her decisions about naming her sexual identity - and this is similar to what Cassidy said about needing to feel a part of something. Autumn talks about her community similarly:

> I don't ever want to not be part of the queer community because that's where I fit and that's where I feel comfortable and I think that I, myself, am sort of a queer woman because I don't fall into the normal sexuality realm of things in society.

Autumn indicates that not being a part of a queer community would be a problem for her. She refers to herself as "sort of a queer woman," without giving an exact label to her sexual identity, and queer community is where she feels most comfortable due to her relationship configuration. This is related to Jason Cromwell's (2006) arguments about "trans" working to queer the binaries of gender in ways that queer categories of sexuality that depend on those gender binaries. Autumn sees herself as not falling into the "normal sexuality realm of things" because she cannot rely on a gender binary to define her sexuality as either "gay" or "straight."

Rachel and Scarlett both talk about how they found queer community and the importance of being involved for both of them on several levels. Rachel said in an email to me:

> I stumbled upon my first experiences with queer community when I was working for the summer at a resort that put on shows every night, and there were just tons of gay boys involved with the theater. They were out and happy, they dated and had a good time. I think seeing so many people being okay with their queer identities helped me be more okay with my own. If I were not involved with a queer community I think self-acceptance would have been far more difficult. Now, it's hard to imagine not being part of a queer community. I think I would feel more isolated and more disconnected from relevant political issues, not to mention more bored on the weekends!

Rachel describes her experience with queer community as social *and* political - she doesn't want to be distanced from knowing about current issues, nor does she want to feel alone. Scarlett described similar experiences in an email interview:

> I have been involved in queer communities since I "came out" in [my city] when I was around 22/23. Started off just being in lesbian/gay bars or for queer parties at bars and houses. Since then I would say through my performance work (mostly burlesque), my academic and volunteer work and my social circle I now have a life that is heavily queer. I have happily built myself a queer bubble - my roommates are both queer (trans and femme) and so are a lot of my friends.

Scarlett has purposely built herself a "queer bubble" in order to feel a sense of community with people that she feels most comfortable with. She says later, "I don't think I would like being around a community that was not predominantly queer. I have always felt queer and this is where I feel most comfortable." Due to this, Scarlett has organized her social, work, and academic life around a sense of queer community as much as possible.

While many partners talked generally about queer and/or LGBT communities, only three of seventeen people I interviewed had connections with other cisgender people who have trans partners. The partners on YouTube have a community through the channels that is based on being the partner of a trans person, but few people I interviewed had this type of community and none of the partners on YouTube mentioned having a community of other partners outside of YouTube. Scarlett, however, was one of the people in the project who did have a local community of partners. She wrote to me:

> I am a part of a transpartners group at [a center in my city]. I have been to three group meetings and one potluck we organized with some partners at a woman's house from the group. I've shared articles and experiences/ fears with them and most of them are intelligent/interesting/caring and awesome! - with some crazies thrown in for flavor. I am grateful and proud to say that Rex connected me with that group and am very interested in partner research/etc.

As is clear by Scarlett's emails to me, she's very involved in queer communities in her area and also in communities of other partners. Scarlett was also on a workshop panel about being a service provider for LGBTQ people at one of the conferences I attended, so she is involved in queer community through her job in addition to personal/social community. Meghan also knows of a community of partners in her area:

> I do know other people who have trans partners. I'm not yet close friends, or close with any of them. I am part of a community in a sense. I have been involved in the Tg[61] community to show support for Jess. Though, lately I've been noticing how it would benefit me if I was more active in the significant other group. Even though Jess has already been on hormones and had top surgery, I could still use support. I am also lucky in the sense that there is an s.o. group[62] in my area, so I should be taking advantage of that. My schedule is changing due to work, so I'll actually be available to go to the meetings. I think I'll find out when the next one is and go…

Meghan reflects here on her connection to a potential community of partners, suggesting that she might want to get more involved than she has been. She is aware that a local group exists and thinks that she could really use some support from other partners, even though she and her partner, Jess, aren't experiencing a lot of physical changes from Jess's transition any more. Alexis wrote in an email about how she would also like to know more partners:

> I would have been interested in a group of people who have trans partners, it could have really been helpful. I looked for something, but it was mostly for trans themselves. This is part of the reason your research excited me so much!

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[61] "Tg" is short for "transgender."

[62] "s.o. group" refers to a group for significant others - cis people who date/partner with trans folks.

Alexis notes that she was unable to find a group for cisgender people with trans partners, but that she would be interested in one if it were available. She mentions my research here in a way that suggests she's hoping the project encourages some kind of partner community to emerge. Interestingly, we see that Meghan also mentioned at the end of her answer to a question I had about community that she was going to try to go to the next partner meeting in her local area, as if my question reminded her that there was a place she could be going to find community with other partners. Scarlett noted earlier that she was interested in partner research in general as well. For Alexis, Meghan, and Scarlett, involving themselves in partner research, even when not actually meeting other partners, was a way to support or contribute to a larger sense of community knowing that they would be able to talk about their experiences and that their stories would circulate through talks and published work. For these partners, participating in research about partner experiences was about an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006) of partners - one that they aren't exactly *in* since only very small pockets of local partner communities exist, but still feel they are a part of on a larger scale. They recognize that other partners are out there, even if they will never meet them.

One participant talked at length about her relationship with other partners. Rachel knows other people with trans partners, but she isn't involved in a community of partners:

> I do know other people with trans partners. My best friend is married to a trans lady. We didn't meet because of queer community stuff, in fact [my best friend] was identifying as straight when we met and I was just in the beginning stages of coming out. It just so happened that we both fell in love with trans people. We have a lot of different experiences, since her wife is mtf and Steph is ftm (or as he says, mtmm: Myself to more-myself)

and her wife is pretty stealth while Steph is very outspoken about his trans status. Both of our families commiserate about insurance companies though! She lives far away though so she's not an every-day part of my life anymore.

She goes on to say:

> I met a lot of partners at the Southern Comfort convention and had some great and necessary conversations there, and I know a lot of partners through Steph's friends group which consists almost entirely of queer people. None of them are super-close friends of mine, but there are a few I can count on if I really need to talk about something. There's also a gender chat group Steph helped start at our local GLBTQ center, and there's a lot of trans people and their partners there, but I hate going. Chat-group formats have never served me well. I get nervous talking about personal stuff in front of people, and for gender topics I have a hard time knowing if I should be talking about trans issues only, or if it's more inclusive. I don't know that I need any more community exactly. What I would really love is one good close friend I could confide in who was in a similar relationship and lived near enough that we could hang out a lot and help each other.

Rachel knows other people with trans partners, but feels that her community is really a larger queer community consisting of a variety of people - not just partners. Rachel attended one of the largest trans conferences in the US, Southern Comfort, which provides some space for cis people who have trans partners to meet and converse.[63]

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[63] Southern Comfort is *very* much organized for trans women and their partners, *not* for people on the FTM spectrum and their partners. While this conference has been trying to include more FTM-related workshops, the workshop listings on the website for 2010 have a total of 95 workshops, with only seven that are FTM-specific (one "FTM meet and greet", one about FTM sexuality, one about FTM workout routines, one workshop about taking testosterone, and three workshops related to surgery for FTMs). The majority of workshops are about MTF physical transition (voice, hormones, surgery, and presenting an "authentic" self). There are no partner workshops for anyone, but the SOFFA space that is described on the website is described as MTF specific. Most of the workshops at Southern Comfort are generally not centered around community-building or activism, but about biomedical and legal transition-related issues for trans women. This is in stark contrast to the workshops at Gender Odyssey, TransOhio, Translating Identity, and the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference that all feature many workshops dedicated to community-building and activism. Interestingly, Gender Odyssey, TransOhio, and Translating Identity are all heavier on FTM-specific workshops than MTF ones, and attendance is visibly more by those on the FTM spectrum. The conference in Philadelphia is very mixed in terms of FTM and MTF attendance, and the workshops reflect that and actively encourage dialogue and coalition-building between groups.

Rachel says that she isn't sure that she needs more community - because she already has a queer community to which her partner belongs. However, she does note that having a friend who is in a similar relationship would be desirable - not someone she just met at a conference, but someone who lives near her who she could talk to and spend time with on a regular basis. Rachel describes what I've experienced myself at conferences - a largely temporary nature of community - and while Southern Comfort was valuable for her, she didn't come away from it with a lasting sense of community or long-term friendships. My experiences and observations at conferences like Southern Comfort suggest that partners are excited about the almost-instant community they find while there, but that it is, in fact, fleeting. The conferences generally bring people from several geographic areas to one place, usually a convention center or hotel, where attendees spend two to four days in workshops, keynote talks, meals, and other events together. The conversations in workshops are often emotional and intimate, and it is not unusual to be in a workshop where multiple people are crying before it's over. In workshops, conference attendees often share things about their relationships and personal lives that they haven't shared with other people before, and others in the room listen and respond. All of the trans, queer, and LGBT conferences I've attended have a similar format, even though they vary in size, location, and around the diversity of people in attendance. By using this format of fairly constant, intimate interaction between conference-goers, the conferences foster the creation of an intense, though temporary, community of people. The results of conference evaluation forms indicate that attendees state that one of the main reasons they go to the conferences is to meet new people and/or to reconnect with

people they met in previous years.[64]   This suggests that people go to conferences looking

for community, and often return to rekindle the feelings of community from previous

years. My own experience with returning to conferences over several years is that it is

almost like a year hasn't passed - you see people in the same settings (i.e., workshops,

meals, and events) and you pick up where you left off with them. This is especially

interesting at trans conferences because many people look *much* different than they did

the year before due to the use of medical technologies for transition; they may also have

new names, use different pronouns, and have new partners. Sitting near the registration/

check-in table you see people reuniting from years past, congratulating each other on

transition-related changes, introducing new partners to one another, and exchanging

phone numbers in order to stay in contact during the conference.

Conferences are, however, temporary collectives of people. The excitement of

seeing everyone, the intimacy of conversation in workshops, the room-sharing at the

conference hotel, and the ways that local conference-goers open their homes to people

from out of town who can't afford a hotel all end with the weekend. But, these are the

very things that *create* community *at* the conferences, and what people look forward to

year after year. The conferences also serve as a vehicle to broaden a larger sense of

community. That is, conferences allow for people to experience that sense of "imagined

community" (Anderson 2006) after they end. The social connections that people make

with one another often do last - and are what keep people coming back. Personally, I

now have a network (a *community*) of people all over the US that I know I could count on

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[64] The results of these surveys are usually shared during the opening plenaries at the conference the
following year and/or emailed to people on the conference listservs.

if I needed something - simply from going to conferences. Many of the people I've met

and have become close with also know each other. However, while there is often talk of

engaging in social action, this often doesn't lead to any kind of sustained action after

conferences are over. For example, at one conference, a group of partners got together

and strategized for next year's conference. Everyone agreed that a Google group would

be created so that people could stay in touch and continue working on the programming

for the following year, but the group was created and abandoned before the conference

weekend was even over.[65] This intensity of connection and feeling of instant community

is so specific to the conferences that it seems as if after people drive or fly home they

simply feel disconnected again. It's almost like it's *too much* community - one that

simply cannot be sustained or managed in people's every day lives since it's a lot of work

to keep in regular contact with so many people in different geographic locations. Further,

we often don't know what the every day lives of conference-goers are like outside of the

conferences. While we hear stories about transition, family, and relationships in

workshops and in our social interactions at the conferences, we don't get a broad picture

in the workshops of what people do on a day-to-day basis. The conferences are a luxury -

a vacation - and a time to focus for a very short time on gender and sexuality and share

that focus with others. But, for many people, this level of intensity isn't how they can

operate on a daily basis.

I would argue that the conferences are important for igniting a sense of

community, but that we need more resources for partners to have the tools to sustain a

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[65] This is explored further in Chapter Five in relation to advocacy, ally work, activism, and everyday resistance.

local community of partners in their areas when people go home. It's clear from being in the workshops with partners that people yearn to have community and be connected with others, which is echoed by many of the partners who are included in this project, but that there are not many resources to encourage building local communities for the vast majority of partners. Further, conference communities often encourage processing issues around identity politics (e.g., who belongs in what workshops, what language is appropriate to use when referring to someone, or who can claim certain identity terms, and why we should open the terms to everyone). This processing rarely happens outside of the conferences as partners express that they experience policing not only around identity labels, but also around which communities they feel they can be a part of.

The (Identity) Politics of Community

"Community is deployed to lower consciousness of difference, hierarchy, and oppression within the invoked group."
- Miranda Joseph from *Against the Romance of Community*, 2002:xxiv -

While the politics of language and meaning certainly impact the ways that partners name themselves and their identities, as illustrated in the previous chapter, the policing around who is "allowed" to claim specific sexual identities based on the gender of a partner also plays a role in finding, accessing, and belonging to LGBT and queer communities. When groups of individuals define the boundaries of a specific community around identity lines, who counts as being welcome in that community is often debated, *even if people use the same language to describe themselves* (e.g., lesbian trans women may not be welcome in some lesbian communities, even though they identify both as

women and as lesbian). Some participants I interviewed talked about choosing

community based on politics that were specifically related to gender, sexuality, and race.

This tended to come up when I asked interviewees about communities with which they

aligned themselves and about any communities they avoid for various reasons. The

reasons for avoiding certain communities were related to the ways that identity politics

were being played out by the individuals in those spaces.

Two of my interview participants suggested that this was due to an issue with a

lack of attention to the intersectional nature of social locations within certain

communities in their local areas. Alice writes in an email about her experience with two

different local queer communities that include people with trans partners:

> I do know a number of other people who have trans partners. There are 2 groups of partners that are very separate from each other. One group, who I avoid spending time with, try to be the "perfect" queers. They try to do everything in a way they seem to think is the right way to be queer and please everyone. For example, they won't let you hang out with them if you wear anything scented as someone who may be nearby might have an allergy. Or they also do not like to have anything race related mentioned as they see that as racist. There are just all these rules to hang out with them so I don't bother. The other group of partners is pretty fantastic. They're very relaxed people to be around. They get together once a month at least for drinks or dinner… Complain a little… but mostly just hang out like friends do.

While Alice's discussion here is partially about how the one group is really focused on

being what they likely see as politically "correct" through a liberal politics of race where

talking about race is seen as problematic and potentially racist (see Garner 2007), her

discussion also touches on the policing of "queer" through this notion of political

correctness. That is, the group she does not hang out with has an idea about the "right

way to be queer" and allows people to be a part of their community only if people "do

queer" properly. I followed up with Alice and asked her about the two communities of people she knows by specifically asking her about the issue of discussing race within the one community and she responded by saying:

> The group that I do not hang out with is ALL white. I hadn't really thought about that before you asked. I think their need to be "perfect queers" is strange. They end up alienating themselves from others. Also, they try to get others to understand that it is ok to be who you are no matter what, but when you do have different views, they push you out of the group. They tell people sometimes that they are bad allies to the trans community when they have different opinions or don't agree with something that someone from the group is doing. Which is a another reason I don't like to hang out with them. I don't sugar coat the world for anyone (except maybe small kids). It makes me sad because some of those partners and their significant others could really do some amazing things if they actually practiced what they preached. The group that I do spend time with is mostly white, with a little asian flare. The queer community [in my area] is a pretty white one these days from what I've seen.

Alice notes that the group of "perfect queers" views any discussion around race as being racist, which is in line with a "colorblind" politics of race (Gallagher 2003, Brown et al. 2003). Part of the lack of racial diversity in her community is related to the area of the country where Alice lives - a largely white urban area in the Midwest.[66] However, this could also be connected to the fact that Alice's whiteness simply does not give her access to queer communities of color - maybe to even knowing they exist in the area. It is also important to pay attention to the second thing she says above: "I hadn't really thought about that before you asked." While Alice is reluctant to hang out with the group that is all white and refuses to engage in discussions around race, Alice actually hadn't considered that this might be due to the group's whiteness, perhaps because of her own racial location as white (see Cuomo and Hall 1992). Sarah, who is also white and lives in

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[66] According to the US Census Bureau, this city's population is approximately 70% white.

San Francisco, a much more racially diverse area[67] where racial politics operate differently than in the Midwestern city Alice is from, talks about her connection to community in this way:

> I usually find myself in queer communities of mixed races. While I am a white, cis-sexual female I find that I feel more comfortable in generally mixed communities. I feel there's a sharing of knowledge that takes place in mixing pots that I really value. As for gender, I like people who question it or fight against it as well as those who feel perfectly comfortable in their birth bodies.   I find that rich white lesbian communities (and gay male communities) make me uncomfortable. There are usually gender roles and race comments made in those spaces that make me uncomfortable these days.

Sarah actually purposely avoids communities that are largely white and seeks out community with people of various racial backgrounds. Additionally, she implies that she is most comfortable in communities of people with a variety of genders. That said, she does note that the majority of her friends identify as queer:

> My group of friends is VERY queer, just the other day at Pride a friend and I were talking that we didn't really have any straight friends. All the people I surround myself with are blue-collar femmes, bi-queers, trans guys who date boys and girls, and genderqueers. Sometimes I think we all feel a little insecure with not being "lesbians" or "straight" or "gay" but I think we're really much more comfortable this way, and in San Francisco it's pretty easy.

Sarah mentions feeling a bit insecure about not fitting in as "normal" (whether that's about homonormativity or heteronormativity), but also feels that she has the option of being queer (as opposed to "gay" or "lesbian") because she lives in San Francisco where she is able to find queer community fairly easily and have all of her identities and desires be accepted.

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[67] According to the US Census Bureau, the population of San Francisco is less than 50% white.

"Acceptance" was a fairly large theme throughout the YouTube videos, in particular. This theme was mainly connected to issues around hierarchies within communities about the acceptability of various identities. Several partners on YouTube talked about how specific genders or sexualities seemed to be seen as "less than" within LGBTQ spaces. As Beth notes:

> Within the community there [are] levels of acceptance. So at the top there [are] gays and lesbians, they're the most widely accepted in the queer community. And then you have the bisexuals who are, you know, pretty accepted kinda sometimes. And then way, way, way down you have the trans people who are, in my opinion, the least accepted in the queer community.

Beth's comments here around acceptance are connected to Joshua Gamson's arguments in his book *Freaks Talk Back* (1998) where he claims that bisexuals and trans people are often positioned against gays and lesbians in the media in order to uphold binaries that define normality. According to Gamson (1998), bisexuals are positioned as non-monogamous and those who can't make their minds up about whether they are gay or straight, while trans people are viewed as gender "freaks" who fail to adhere to their "appropriate" gender that should coincide with the sex they were assigned at birth. Claudia questions the "GLBTQ" acronym as standing for a cohesive community and notes a similar hierarchy as Beth did when she says:

> I don't know if I feel whether or not the T should be included in the GLBTQ community. I kind of have some issues with that whole lump of letters anyways because I feel that it excludes so many other people out there in this world fighting for the same things that we're fighting for, like friends and family and pansexuals and genderqueer and gender variant and two-spirited people. I feel that it limits us to who we accept in our community and I feel that we have sort of placed this bar of where we have gay and lesbian people, and then everybody else is just below them

because people don't understand and people aren't open to the idea of accepting anyone that's different.

Claudia recognizes the community politics that get played out around identity and disagrees with the hierarchical arranging of people based on identity. Claudia also suggests that these politics of identity aren't helping a greater movement of equality because people are actually fighting for the same things in society, but they aren't collaborating due to perceived differences around gender and/or sexual identity. Maya also discusses this:

> I have mixed feelings about the GLBT community as a whole in general because although a necessary evil, I feel like we shouldn't be separated from the rest of the "straight" community or whatever in the first place, but obviously we know that that's easier to talk about than to enforce on society. But anyway, I think GLB and T should be in with all the Q and everything because we all have a relatable experience which is that we're not mainstreamed into society and that society does have issues with our choices of lifestyle. So I think that's what makes us a community, in that we're all kinda in this together. I do think there appears to be a hierarchy within the community where, yes, within our already sectioned off community the G and the L are much more acceptable. The Bs are harassed and I think the T is just as much as known in this community as it is in the [larger society].

While Maya recognizes the political desirability of having a community based on GLBTQ identities, she also is uncomfortable being separated to begin with. She explains that the community is based on the fact that "we're all kinda in this together," but notes what Beth mentioned before - that some "queer" identities are more acceptable than others, and she knows that her relationship with a trans person means that she falls outside the realm of acceptability. What Beth and Maya both fail to really recognize in their statements is that *some* gay and lesbian people actually *are* mainstreamed into contemporary US society, even though at the end of the quote above Maya says that the

"T" is often not understood within LGB(T) communities or in the larger society. There is

a hierarchy of LGBTQ identities within LGBT/queer communities like both of them

point out, but this hierarchy also extends to larger society where normative, monogamous

lesbian and gay individuals are becoming more accepted in many places across the US

(see Gamson 1998, Puar 2007, Warner 1999).

This hierarchy is also illustrated by the fact that several partners discussed how

their acceptance or role in the communities changed due to their partner's transition and/

or due to a shift in their own sexual identity. This was especially true for people who had

been in communities that were lesbian-identified, but also true for people who suddenly

gained access to a queer community that they didn't feel they were a full part of before.

That is, having a trans partner when identifying as straight allowed one partner to be read

as "more queer" and be a part of the community. Tina talks in a vlog about how her

community thought she gained queerness when she began dating her partner:

> When I started dating [my partner]… I was much more accepted in the
> queer community. Not that I hadn't been before but just that the
> expression of my sort of idea of gender and sexuality wasn't solidified in
> the eyes of other people because I hadn't done a lot of dating and the
> dating I did do was, like, lesbian and gay, it had nothing to do with, or you
> know, lesbian and straight, if you want to call it that. So it wasn't, like,
> really queer… I felt like I was suddenly embraced.

Tina recognizes the difference between previous dating experience being "lesbian" and

"straight," and her community's thinking that her having a trans partner shifted that

dating into a more queer experience. Due to this, she actually experienced greater

acceptance within her local community, which was specifically *queer* and not lesbian or

"LGBT." However, Tina is the only partner that spoke of this occurring. Most partners

interpreted a shift in their role or acceptance in the community in negative ways. In

Chapter Three, we saw that many partners said that they faced backlash about whether

they could call themselves "lesbian" after starting a relationship with someone on the

FTM spectrum; here, Chloe and Aster illustrate how this policing also operates at the

level of community. In a vlog, Chloe explains how dating someone who identifies as

male affected her role in the community:

> When I first started dating [my partner] I had a lot of backlash from the
> queer community, the gay community, that I hung out with at that time,
> and also some of my other friends that were like, "Wait a minute - you're
> dating a guy? You're such a bad lesbian. What kind of lesbian are you
> that you're dating a boy?" Comments like that… I was definitely made to
> feel like you're not really what you said you were this whole time, or you
> don't belong, you're not one of us anymore because you pass as straight
> and you get straight privilege now and so you're not really queer if you're
> gonna embrace straight privilege by "presenting" - quote, unquote - to be
> straight and dating [your partner].

Here we can see how the politics of identity are tangled with the politics of community

by policing community boundaries based on identity and the idea that Chloe wasn't like

the other community members anymore. That is, the lesbian community claimed that she

no longer shared their experience as lesbians - "you're not one of us anymore" - so she

was no longer welcome. While the previous chapter showed the politics around identity

labels themselves, the comments made by several partners suggest that the policing

around who is allowed to claim a label is also connected to who can claim space within a

particular community that is organized around the assumed sameness in meaning for

those identity labels (see Esterberg 1997, Krieger 1982, Lockard 1986, Jenness 1992,

Ponse 1978, Stein 1997). Chloe's community suggested she had been lying about her

identity, an apparent threat to community dynamics and the assumption that she would

suddenly gain heteronormative privilege because her partner is read as male. In her

community, being perceived to have straight privilege seems to mean that Chloe is no

longer one of them and is not as welcome as she was before. Aster presents a similar

story in her own vlog:

> My part in the community and how it's changed since I've become involved with a trans man… I was a lesbian for about four or five years and one thing, I really did feel like I was part of that community and I was very involved in that community. I only had a small little circle of lesbians, I only knew maybe three or four and I was really disappointed when I started seeing [my partner] I seemed to kinda be kicked out of that community really. I mean, isn't it supposed to be an open-minded and embracing community? Because that's not what I was getting… my ex and their friends and that general population seemed to have decided that I was weird and that I was dating an "it" and that I wasn't one of them anymore and stopped talking to me…. And I wish I could be a part of that again, but I think even a lot of gay people don't really understand about sexuality being fluid.

Like Chloe, Aster faced backlash from a lesbian community after getting involved with

her trans partner. Again, with Aster dating someone who didn't identify as female, her

community decided that she no longer belonged since her experience wasn't like

everyone else's anymore. Aster critiques the rhetoric of openness and acceptance that she

believes lesbians claim, as that is not what she experienced in her own community. In

fact, Aster experienced blatant transphobia from her community with people referring to

her partner as "it" instead of by his name or preferred pronouns.

Some partners experienced a loss of local physical community, some simply don't

have an LGBTQ community in their geographic area, and other partners note the

differences between the YouTube channels and the local communities they are a part of

(perhaps due to different types of communities serving different functions). The

literature suggests that loss of community is a fairly common narrative from both the

partners of trans people and trans people themselves as a result of transition and/or a shift

in gender or sexual identities (Sojka 2011, Devor 1997). This is experienced most

commonly within lesbian communities where "lesbian" is defined in ways that do not

include men as sexual partners, and often do not include men as people with whom the

community regularly socializes. In these communities, "man/male" often refers to those

who were assigned male at birth and those who no longer identify as woman (i.e., cis

men, trans women, and trans men). While Jillian Weiss (2007) argues that the gendered

borders that have historically defined "woman" and "lesbian" are beginning to erode, the

politics connected to these borders are still being played out; for example, the Michigan

Womyn's Music Festival admission policies still exclude men and trans people of all

gender identities (Califia 2003). Academics have written numerous pieces about butch/

FTM and lesbian/FTM borderlands, highlighting the very real tensions between various

communities around identity (see Weiss 2007, 2004; Halberstam 1998; Hale 1998;

Jeffreys 2003; Johnson 2007). These tensions have also been part of what has pushed

forward the rise in queer and trans scholarly work produced by queer and trans people

themselves, particularly the newer work on transfeminisms, which calls for trans

inclusion within what are often cissexist feminist studies and feminist movements (e.g.,

Serano 2007, Green 2006). Although Weiss (2007) argues that younger populations are

shifting the definitions of these contentious and historically exclusionary identity and

community categories, one of the women on YouTube, Reagan, noted how she still

experienced a sense of loss when her partner began to transition:

> I totally felt a loss of community and stuff like that when I started dating [my partner] as [himself] and that's really why I joined the channel because I really missed that feeling of community and everything like that. And honestly, TMates has been so great, I love the girls on the channel, I feel so comfortable being able to relate to other people and it's just, it's been really awesome.

When Reagan lost her local community, she found TMates to be a positive alternative. While not a place to "go," per se, the channel provided Reagan with a similar feeling of community that she had before her partner came out as trans. Interestingly, while much of the previous literature suggests that loss of community is a key narrative from partners of trans people, and it often comes up in workshops at conferences, only one person on the YouTube channels mentioned it and no one I interviewed talked about *actually* losing it, even though many talked about fearing loss of community and issues of hierarchy around identity. Statements made about loss of community in the previous literature are rarely, if ever, backed by data to support them. For example, Carey Sojka, in her forthcoming (2011) piece, says, "Partners of transgender people who were a part of queer or LGBT communities before their relationship may feel a sense of loss when they relationship is read as heterosexual." Sojka's statement is not connected to data that support her claim. While several people in my project mentioned fearing a *potential* loss of community, only Reagan talked about actually losing community.

Other partners have not yet experienced communities shutting them out when people find out they have a trans partner, but anticipate this happening. This anticipation is likely due to narratives that circulate in trans community spaces (both on- and offline) about the loss of community[68] and the inability of some gay and lesbian communities, in

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[68] This idea also circulates in the academic literature, but is not backed by data (see Sojka 2011).

particular, to accept a trans person and their partner into the social network.[69] The fear of losing community is also experienced by partners who identify as being in a straight relationship (even if their sexual identity is not heterosexual), those who have a trans partner who identifies as straight, and/or those who have a trans partner who wishes to be stealth. Madison asks in her vlog:

> Is the queer community still gonna be open to us, do you know what I mean? I know there's a T in the LGBT but I've always felt that it's the letter that's kind of left out… Even though we do consider ourselves a straight couple we still love being around the LGBT community; we still love having our friends.

Madison's questioning around whether she and her partner will be able to still be a part of their LGBT community once her partner starts getting read as male more consistently stems from the question of who counts as "LGBT." That is, if Madison and her partner consider themselves a straight couple, is the LGBT community still open to them? Autumn asks similar questions in a vlog when wondering what might happen when her partner is read as male and decides to be stealth:

> I worry a lot about when [my partner] goes stealth, when he goes to school and when he gets a new job and when he makes friends that aren't part of the LGBTQ community - how that's going to impact our life because I've been a part of that community for so long and it's not something that I'm ready to or wanting to let go of. I love going to Pride, I love being involved in queer events, I love being a part of that community because there are some amazing people - some of my best friends are gay and

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[69] This mirrors a lesbian and gay separatist politics that often comes under critique from trans and queer activists for pushing political agendas that uphold a normative ideal of lesbian and gay at the expense of other "sexual minorities." The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) is most commonly cited for doing this, arguing that they can push for passing certain legislation if they don't mention transgender people or bring gender identity into the equation, refusing to recognize that some trans people are also gay and lesbian, but may not be included in politics and policies that refer to couples as "same-sex." The HRC and other organizations that do this often claim they will try to add transgender people on to the legislation once they can secure the rights for gay and lesbian people. Critical activists claim that these organizations should adopt a more inclusive politics or stop saying they are an "LGBT" organization if they aren't including the complexities of lived experience within the acronym.

> lesbian people and I'm really, really sad about the thought that that will go away for me. And because it's how I've identified for so long and it's a group of people I've felt so close to and so much a part of. So I do struggle with that a lot.

Autumn fears losing queer friendships and being a part of the LGBTQ community after her partner is stealth because she expects that he will become friends with people who are not part of that community. For Autumn, the politics around her partner's stealth identity and her own need to continue to be a part of LGBTQ communities is something that she isn't quite sure how to manage yet. Although she doesn't mention that she thinks her current community would no longer accept her once her partner is stealth, she either anticipates this or feels she might not be able to continue her community affiliations based on the fact that her partner won't want to be identified as trans after a certain point in his transition. This played out similarly for Renee when she was with her ex-partner, Taylor. As she said in our interview:

> I kinda feel every now and then that my queer awareness and my involvement in the queer community is something that bothers Taylor because he doesn't really identify in the queer community and that bothers me sometimes a little bit so it's just like, a little bit of tension there where I feel like he actually sees gender as more of a binary than I do, which is funny because he's the one that's crossing it, you know?

It was clear through my interactions with Renee that she felt that her lesbian identity and her identifications with queer community were both points of contention for Taylor. This was hard on Renee because she has strong political connections to her identity and to queer community. While Renee understood Taylor's refusal to get involved in queer communities with her due to his identification as a straight man, she also found that to be

a bit of a contradiction, as she believes that he's the one who is actually crossing gender lines.

However, not all partners cared about these politics or the potential loss of community. When I asked Alexis about her involvement in any communities that are connected to her self-described identity of "mostly heterosexual with a little bisexual mixed in" she had this to say:

> I am not involved in any communities. Part of being with JP involved a great deal of secrecy. This included not "outing" him or myself. He insisted in order to maintain his chosen identity and to prohibit questioning and discrimination.

While Alexis is involved enough online to have found my call for participants, she lives a fairly stealth life with her partner in her local area. As a mostly-straight cisgender woman, she didn't indicate being bothered by not having a community built around sexual identity, trans identity, and/or trans/queer politics - perhaps because she never had one to lose.

The politics of community that center around the politics of identity are most problematic for the cisgender partners who identify their sexual identities as lesbian, queer, bisexual, or pansexual, as well as those partners who identify as being in straight relationships, but who don't identify as straight in terms of their sexual identities. Not all communities are based on identity as an inner sense of self and/or naming of sexuality (whether connected to politics or not) - some are, instead, based on a shared experience, regardless of an inner sense of self or how one labels their sexuality. However, this becomes problematic (and confusing) when we consider that some communities also see these identities as being inextricably linked to experience, which can lead to an argument

for closing off community to those who no longer *currently* share a particular experience.

But I question whether current engagement in lesbian experience, for example, should be

a basis for community boundaries - what about the people who are not currently dating?

And how is "lesbian experience" defined? As Butler asks, "If a sexuality is to be

disclosed, what will be taken as the true determinant it its meaning: the phantasy

structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy?" (1991:17). What is taken as the

primary indicator of no longer sharing the experience?

That said, the partner YouTube channels actually operate as communities that are

based on the experience of having a trans partner. They do not rely on sexual identity

categories for group membership and do not replicate the identity politics that I've

illustrated often go hand-in-hand with claiming "lesbian," in particular. It is here that I

turn to (re)imagining community by considering how partners are forming and

experiencing community via internet technologies on YouTube.

Imagining YouTube Channels as Communities

Most of us interact with YouTube as an audience, as people who watch what other

individuals have posted. In fact, Michael Strangelove says that only 2 to 10 percent of

YouTube members actually make and upload videos to the site, and only 13 percent of

members comment on the videos that they watch (Strangelove 2010:14). So, how can

community exist through YouTube with the vast majority of us being passive audience

members? While Strangelove argues that there is "a YouTube community" that

encourages users to follow a set of norms around interaction with the videos (which may

actually include *not* interacting aside from watching), there are also smaller communities of people organized through collaborative channels on YouTube. While not discussed in Strangelove's book, collaborative channels on YouTube (described below) are organized online pockets of vloggers that are creating new spaces to investigate "imagined communities" (Anderson 2006). Though Anderson's work focuses on nationalism and the concept of community in relation to cultural history, he argues that the sense of patriotism that sovereign states often encourage is connected to imaginings of "community." That is, citizens believe there is community (and a national identity) even through the inequality, oppression, and discrimination *within* the community itself. As Anderson says, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (2006:6). In other words, there is a sense of community because we we have a shared imagining of connection with other people - even if we never meet them face-to-face. On YouTube, members agree that community does not require in-person interaction (and might not require any interaction beyond viewing a video), that "community" on YouTube requires some action (by making a video, commenting on a video, and/or just watching a video), and that specific interactions violate community norms. This section of the chapter explains the organization of the partner YouTube channels as communities, argues that the communities are created through "videos of affinity" (Lange 2009), and presents data from the videos where partners talk about the YouTube channels *as community* and the importance of this community in their lives.[70]

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[70] I am indebted to Stephanie Crist for informing me that these channels existed.

Typing "partner ftm" into the search box at the top of the YouTube homepage leads to all kinds of results from cisgender people who have FTM partners, and from FTM-identified people who talk about ways cisgender people can support their FTM partner.[71] I was able to find two collaborative channels for partners of FTMs on YouTube: TMatesFTM and TransScribersFTM.[72] Given that the videos in each reference the only other channel and not any others, it's fairly safe to assume there are only two, even though there are many individuals on YouTube who post about their experiences as the partner of a trans person on their individual channels,[73] completely separate from the two collaborative channels. Both channels work similarly: there are seven to fourteen people who upload videos each week on their designated day about the topic for that week. Video blogs (i.e., "vlogs") normally begin with music and/or a photo montage that depicts the couple together, sometimes with graphics like hearts or animated words that tell the viewer how long the couple has been together. These introductions to each video also usually contain the week's topic in the format of "Week #: Topic" (for example,

[71] Interestingly, typing in "partner mtf" yields only about one-quarter the number of results as typing in "partner ftm." While trans visibility used to be predominantly from those on the MTF spectrum, there has been a significant shift in the past several years to the visibility of "trans" (especially in academic and conference) being mostly FTM spectrum identities and communities. Through a personal conversation with Kate Bornstein about this, we hypothesized that this shift might be due to the politics of visibility in communities that FTMs and their partners *often* (though not always) find themselves connected to (especially prior to identifying as trans), whereas MTF folks often do not. While risking constructing an FTM/MTF binary here, I think that it's important to note this because resources and community are not equally distributed among everyone who shares affinity with "trans" on some level (see Valentine 2007 for a discussion of how race and class are also factors here).

[72] TMates is still very active as of this writing and has new videos uploaded every day. TransScribersFTM has not had any videos uploaded to the channel in a year, even though all of the old videos can still be viewed. Many people participated in both communities and some made videos for both channels. In order to keep some level of anonymity, I won't distinguish which channel each person is from when quoting them unless they use the name of the channel when talking. I include the real names of the channels here as the mission of both is to educate about transgender issues and provide support to trans people and their partners. This meets a balance in terms of the ethics around the public vlogs and a *potential* wish for anonymity of the individual members.

[73] Individual channels are separate from collaborative channels like TMates and TransScribers. An individual channel is simply the online space where videos uploaded by only one YouTube user are located.

"Week 13: Queer Identity and Community") and last anywhere from 30 seconds to one minute. Some partners use the same photo montage or the same music from week to week, but rarely do people keep *both* the same. These personal introductions to the members' weekly vlogs are a managing of a positive presentation of self (Goffman 1959) on YouTube by showing pictures of them happy with their partner, often on vacation or at a party. Shelley Correll's (1995) ethnography of an online lesbian community also discusses Goffman's theory of performance of self in online spaces, though her work was limited to text-based online interactions. According to Correll, managing the presentation of self in online spaces is more easily accomplished than in our everyday "real" world interactions due to the fact that our self is only conveyed by what can be shared through the limitations of the technology we use. In Correll's (1995) work, this presentation of self was completely managed through textual interactions. My observations suggest that with YouTube, users are able to manage this in similar ways by making their videos in certain spaces and only including specific surrounding items in the video frame that they wish for others to see (e.g., they may sit with bookshelves behind them, or have posters on their bedroom wall). A partner on one of the channels recorded all of her videos in her car (which was parked in various locations), presumably for a quiet space and/or so others living in her house wouldn't hear what she was talking about. Several others had their trans partner with them in their videos. One person's trans partner would regularly be cooking dinner while she made her videos - he would walk back and forth behind her while she was talking and she would occasionally yell to him about something she was talking about.

This kind of management around presentation of self (and presentation of the relationship) is related to what Patricia G. Lange (2009) calls "videos of affinity" or "videos of affiliation," which are videos that foster feelings of connection between people, "often members of a social network" (71). These actions around presentation of self are ways of constructing a video blog that attempts to make connections with those who are watching, who might be in similar situations, or who are unsure about what it means to have a trans partner. Showing yourself smiling with your trans partner on vacation presents a happy couple that is "just like everyone else" - you become relatable and "real" for viewers. Videos of affinity "interest specific individuals or social networks of individuals" (Lange 2009:74), in this case, partners of people on the FTM spectrum. I use Lange's language of affinity here due to the difference in sexual identities between the partners on the channels (i.e., the partners identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, and straight). These are not *really* identity-based channels and communities - they are channels and communities based on the shared perception of similar experience and affiliation.

Community is created on the channels through a variety of interactions between the cis women posting vlogs and the viewers who post comments on the vlogs. The vlogs often reference each other, and the people making the vlogs will talk about interactions they had with other members of the channel via email in their responses to the questions for a particular week. For example, Paige took time to thank Beth for her support and friendship in one of her vlogs:

> [Beth] has really helped me through a lot of the rough times I've had in
> the last few months as far as [my boyfriend's] transitioning and we'll, like,

compare boyfriends and how they're dealing with this and we talk about what they say. So, Beth, I truly and absolutely appreciate you and our friendship and I'm very glad that we got to meet each other over YouTube.

A sense of community also gets created through the language that the partners on the channels use. For example, the women often refer to themselves as "TMates" or "TransScribers." These words, although names for the channels themselves, are often used by the women who post vlogs as identity labels. People will often say things like, "We TMates are here for you if you need anything," or "Feel free to email any of the TransScribers with questions." In other words, the TMates and TransScribers have developed a *community-based identity* through the channel, even though "TMate" and "TransScriber" have no meaning to people who don't know about the channels. This is different than an identity-based community in that the channels are not organized around sexual, gender, racial, ethnic, class identities - they are organized around having a trans partner.

However, it is important to recognize that the TMates and TransScribers channels mainly create a community affinity for *certain* sectors of partners - that is, not *all* partners watching (or not watching) find *equal* affinity with the members' videos. For example, Chloe explains how her experience is different from most others on the channel:

> I originally came to YouTube to kind of look for support and networking and I totally have gotten that to a lot of extent - definitely on the networking side of things… talking and being a part of the conversations on here with other people in similar kind of related situations to mine… But, as far as support goes, I don't really feel like I have so much support with whatever processes I might have because my experience is so different. Because [my partner] has been [himself] for so long and I came to him as, and I started dating him as, a lesbian and then my identities had to shift and he stayed the same so our relationship (I've been though this before) is a lot different. Because I'm the one changing and he's staying

> the same. Where in a lot of other relationships on the channel the partner is who's staying the same and the trans guy is who's changing, so I've kind of got a different situation.

While she says she enjoys the conversations with other partners, she feels that the

experience of *her* being the one changing and her trans partner being the same as he's

always been is what separates her from the support that others are getting via the channel.

Still, though, Chloe actually posts videos on both channels and is an active member of

YouTube on her personal channel as well, suggesting that she still finds some affinity

with the other partners even through this aspect of difference.

Members regularly comment in their videos about the role of TMates and/or

TransScribers in relation to their everyday lives and members present the channels as

open and welcoming spaces for all in their videos. For example, Maya says at the end of

one of her videos:

> Support and networking - we, as TransScribers, are here for you for that. So if you have any questions or need anything, don't hesitate to email our channel and all of us ladies will get back to you. I know that I even went to them this week for some support of my own and I'm appreciative to all of them, so have a great week and I hope that we're here for you.

Emma uses similar language at the end of one of her vlogs:

> If you don't understand anything you can always ask one of us, one of the girls on TransScribersFTM. You can go to the internet, there's several resources where you can go to get information to help you and your significant other.

Several things are suggested by Maya and Emma here. First, there is an invitation to

contact the TransScribers via email - an indication that the realm of community is not just

about posting and watching videos, but that there is more depth to the channel than we

might have assumed.[74] Second, Maya uses the word "ladies" and Emma uses "girls" to

refer to the TransScribers, which is related to the gender-specific nature of the channels,

even though they are not explicitly designed to be only for cis women partners.[75] Finally,

Maya tells us that she needed community support and found it from the other members -

a common theme in the videos.

Many of the members talk about the channels in terms of "support" - something

that very few of the people I interviewed even mentioned when I asked them about

community. As Mona says in her vlog:

> YouTube - huge, huge support for me… Definitely YouTube.
> TransScribers and TMates and a couple of individual channels have been a
> huge help. We're also part of an online forum that is not trans related, but
> we've gotten a lot of trans support there.

Similarly, Riley says:

> YouTube has actually been my biggest support thing. There's just such a
> big community that I didn't even know existed. There's so many people
> on here and they all come together and it's kind of like a little family, I
> guess you could say.

While Mona and Riley talk about how the channels have been communities of support for

them, as partners, Beth mentions how she sees the channels connecting to a broader level

of support:

> I feel like it's not just about supporting [my partner] but also just about
> supporting the community as a whole. So I like to do a lot of interacting
> with other significant others who are in the same situation that I am in and
> who are going through things that I've gone through and if I can help them
> to anticipate what's coming in the future I try to do that as well. So I think

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[74] Unfortunately, I did not have access to these email conversations, but they are sometimes mentioned briefly in vlogs.

[75] See a longer discussion about gender on the channels later in this chapter.

that being so supportive to the community is inadvertently supporting [my partner] because he can see how important it is to me.

Beth actually doesn't mention that that the communities have been a source of support for her; instead, she takes on the role of *supporter* by saying that her support of "the" trans community is also supporting her trans partner and other people "who are in the same situation." Beth's lack of discussion around how *she* has been supported is rare in the videos on the channel as a whole - while others offer support, they also tend to mention how supported they've felt by the communities on the channels. The rhetoric of support that is generally present within and in reference to the partner YouTube communities is not a common theme in the interview data when participants talk about community. One reason for this could be due to the fact that the YouTube channels were created, at least partially, around the idea of support, as stated by the members of the channel. "Support" for the partners on the channels seems to mean sharing their experiences of having a trans partner to show others that they are not alone and any struggles they are going through can be overcome. While some local communities also focus on support, the communities in which my interview participants found themselves were not support-based communities - they were social communities, often based on identity, activism, or similar interests. Social communities often also provide support for members, but my participants did not state this is why they were in their communities and they did not play roles in creating their communities around support.

Those who are contributing vlogs to the channels as members seem to be finding community through YouTube and are attempting to construct spaces of affinity, even if

this (unintentionally)[76] excludes some people. While relationship dynamics may be one

dividing line within the channel, issues around age, gender, race, language, and ability are

far more apparent. The vast majority of partners making videos on the channels seem to

be in their 20s,[77] they all speak English and record their videos only in English, all but

one is visibly white,[78] all are cisgender women,[79] and all present themselves as hearing

individuals. These demographics present problems on at least two levels: 1) at the level

of access to the information in the videos, and 2) being able to feel affinity with the

communities constructed through these channels. First, access is limited very simply by

access to the internet, but is also limited to those people who know English and who can

hear. Secondly, people of color, people who are over the age of about 30, cisgender men,

and trans people who are partnered with people on the FTM spectrum may feel outside

the social networks that are created by these channels. Largely operating as white spaces,

the white partners' vlogs rarely mention race or racism, and members do not discuss their

racial locations as intersecting with their sexual identities or their connections to forms of

community. That is, there is an overwhelming silence around race and "white" operates

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[76] There's nothing to suggest that any members are intentionally excluding people from the channel or the communities they create. I have to (and want to) believe that the exclusion is a result of unreflexive and uncritical rhetorics around the politics of identity and community playing out in the members' vlogs, which produce a silence around difference. However, regardless of the unintentionality, the results are the same: channels with English-speaking, white, largely middle-class, often college-educated, cisgender women who are mostly in their 20s.

[77] Some partners note their age, but most do not. Of the people who have mentioned age, there are a couple of partners in their 40s, one in her 30s, and the rest say they are in their 20s, or appear to be, *and* make reference to college or graduate school.

[78] The only person of color making videos for one of the channels only made two videos, while other partners tended to have between five and ten at the time of data collection.

[79] While I was collecting data, all members were cisgender women. At the time of this writing, there is one trans man who is partnered with a trans man contributing videos to the channel. There are no cisgender men.

as a unmarked social location on both channels where the cis women aren't required to examine their whiteness because *they are all white* (see Garner 2007, Frankenberg 1994). As both Valentine (2007) and Roen (2001) have noted, the category "transgender" has historically been connected to whiteness through medicalizing discourses and narratives that "allow" someone to claim "trans," paired with a silence around racial location in general. With white members of the channels using the largely white terms of "transgender," "trans," and/or "FTM" to talk about their partners, they may be unknowingly keeping the channels white.[80] In other words, do the attempts at affinity and community building for the white members of the channels also serve to unintentionally distance viewers of color due to a silence around racial location and/or discourage partners of color from saying they'd like to be contributing members and submitting weekly videos?[81]

There is also a clear divide around gender for the members of the channels. All members of both channels identified as cisgender women while I was collecting data. TMates and TransScribers[82] who made videos regularly used language that referred to other members as "ladies" or "girls," like Maya and Emma did earlier, even though neither channel seems to suggest that they're only for cisgender women based on the

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[80] This is similar to how this project ended up with all white participants, which I suspect is due to not only my own whiteness as a researcher, but also due to the language I used in the call for participants.

[81] There is a try-out process for aspiring members of the channel that involves sending current members an introductory video or posting an intro video on the "Auditions" channel talking about why you want to be a member, but the complete try-out process remains unclear to me.

[82] Those partners who are the weekly vloggers refer to themselves as "TMates" or "TransScribers". For example, "Thanks to all of the other TMates on here" is a common ending to many video posts. This seems to be a naming of self based on the community. That is, the community is named and partners take on the name of the experience as a kind of identity label that only operates within that community itself. When I asked my interview participants about whether they would like to call themselves "TMates" no one wanted to. Some people thought it was "weird," but others said that it wasn't an autonomous identity label - it would only describe their relationship, not who they are as individuals.

written descriptions on the channels' main pages. The description of the TMates channel

in writing was as follows:

> WELCOME TO TMATESFTM!
> This is a place for all in the LGBT community to learn and expand their minds through a group of S.O.F.F.A.'s personal and very different opinions on hard hitting topics, mostly concentrated on being a partner of someone who is FTM. This is a place for support and place to feel like you belong. Lastly, we welcome all opinions and conversations about the topics we address. Feel free to tell us if you disagree, or make a response video posting your views! However, any viewer that posts personal attacks or insults will be blocked from the channel :-(lets keep this an awesome online safe space for everyone!

The description here makes it clear that the channel is about support *and* about

community - "a place to feel like you belong." The channel is described as a safe space,

and one that owners of the channel will keep safe by blocking viewers who post offensive

comments in response to the videos. The description for TransScribers was much more

simple:

> TransScribersFTM is a group of SOFFs (Significant Others, Friends, and Family) dedicated to informing and educating people about transgendered individuals. We love our FTMs and are here to share our stories and experiences.

This was my first time seeing "SOFF" instead of "SOFFA," with the "ally" part of the

acronym being left out of the TransScribers' description.[83] While TMates states that they

are for education, support, and community, TransScribers only mentions educating people

(though it's clear that TransScribers also provides support and community, even if not

stated here). Although these channels do not put parameters around gender in their

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[83] "Ally" is generally used to refer to people who do not identify as LGBT, queer, a significant other, friend, or family member. However, I would argue that we are also allies *to each other* and that friends and family members who support us can certainly be allies.

descriptions, they replicate the gender divisions that we see offline as well. *All* of the

previous literature on partners focuses on women who are partnered with people on the

FTM spectrum.[84] At trans conferences, the vast majority of people attending workshops

for partners are cisgender women. In fact, there is often heated and emotional debate at

conferences surrounding whether trans people who are partnered with other trans people

are welcome in partner workshops because "partner" has come to mean "cis woman

partner" without actually saying so. Gender is an incredible and often surprising division

at conferences that are supposed to be *about gender*. Cis men who partner with people

on the FTM spectrum are often only found at the trannyfag[85] workshops, which are

spaces for cis men and trans folks on the FTM spectrum who are interested in dating cis

men. The variety of people who are partnered with trans folks are actually rarely

conversing with one another - they are often segregated along gender lines (by their own

choice, through the workshop descriptions, and/or based on how a specific space might

be perceived to include them or not). Further, in anthologies and other books about trans

experiences, we read only about cis women who are partners of trans men. So, it's not

surprising that members are operating under the same gender assumptions on the

YouTube channels that a partner of someone on the FTM spectrum must be female/

woman. Interestingly, conference spaces are not as divided around racial lines as the

YouTube channels are. Even if a conference space does largely fill with white people,

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[84] That includes this project, though not intentionally like the research in the previous literature. No cisgender men replied to my call for participants except to express interest that I was doing it - not to participate - and aside from one cis man who was actually partnered with someone who was assigned male at birth, not female. In future work related to this project, I would have to specifically recruit cisgender men who partner with trans men by circulating a call for participants in gay male spaces and communities - something I was unaware of at the time of data collection and participant recruitment.

[85] "Trannyfag" refers to a trans person on the FTM spectrum who also identifies as a fag and/or a gay man.

race is almost always discussed and whiteness does not go unmarked. This is likely due

to the activist and coalitional politics that many of the conferences operate within,

whereas the YouTube channels are not working under a similar rubric because they are

focused on education and support.

The YouTube channels exist as communities because the members have a shared

sense of community based on their experiences being cis people with trans partners and

the ways that they communicate through the vlogs. For many partners making vlogs for

the channels, community is imagined through the networks of affinity and support that

are encouraged and created through the channels. However, what is also imagined is a

homogeneous community, especially in terms of gender, race, and class. Regardless, for

many of the partners on the channels, YouTube is either the only place they *do* have

community or the place where they feel most comfortable sharing their experiences of

having a trans partner.

YouTube versus Local/Geographically-Situated Communities

While an online/offline dichotomy is now considered problematic since many of

us now live our everyday lives within this blurred intersection, partners did talk about the

differences between online and offline communities. Some partners on YouTube didn't

have an LGBT or queer community in their local area or didn't feel connected to the one

that was there. For this set of partners, YouTube was not just their own way of finding

support and community, but also a way to contribute to the support and community of

others. Lily shares in a video that YouTube allows her to feel that she's actually

contributing something to the potential well-being of others who might be watching:

> I feel like there is something that I can contribute, even if it's to let that
> one person out there, who feels like they're all alone and not having a
> clue, know that they're not alone…. I feel like I'm a part of the YouTube
> community as well as the YouTube GLBTQ community. I have not had
> any experience with the GLBTQ community within my own personal life
> yet, so I don't feel like I'm a part of that. I feel like [YouTube] is where I
> come when I need something from that community.

Since Lily does not have experience in a local queer community of any kind, she feels

that YouTube is a good place to go for a community experience. Jules also notes that she

does not have a local community when she says, "Basically we didn't have, like, a

community of queer friends, we still don't really - just YouTube and stuff." Other

partners mention a local community in their area, but they seem to prefer YouTube

instead. Riley encourages others to turn to YouTube *first* to find local community

through the videos if they choose to do so:

> I was actually pretty surprised to find that there was a pretty large trans
> community in [the city]. We don't live in [the city] but it's not that far
> from us… YouTube is a really good place 'cause there are so many
> different people, there's so many people from different places, it's a really
> good place to try and find people like you, near you. So search around
> YouTube.

Riley prefers YouTube for the diversity that she can't get in her local area - she can find

people like herself, but who are from different places and may have different

backgrounds.[86] Maya also has a local community, but prefers YouTube:

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[86] Again, there are only certain differences present within the channels themselves - geographic difference
and some class difference. Riley may be speaking about a larger YouTube community and including videos
from people who might diversify her YouTube experience along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and ability
that are not included on the channels.

> I guess I will say, in finding out that we associate with the T part, I do feel a part of the T community online. And that has been a really nice community, but as far as locally, who I'm interacting with, doing things with, I don't feel a part of that. But this community that we're a part of right here, I absolutely feel a part of.

She continues by saying:

> YouTube was a huge part in [my partner's] coming out for both he and myself. We both went to it for information, for networking, for support. We have found friendship, as well as a lot of information through different collab channels as well as different peoples' personal channels here on YouTube. I don't really have a support group - there's not one in the area that we go to or anything.

Maya interacts with other people in her local community, but not in ways that make her feel *a part of* the community. For her, YouTube is where she finds community through the collaborative channels and by interacting with other individuals through their personal channels.[87]

These partners seem to feel included and accepted within the communities created through the channels on YouTube in ways that they do not in their local communities, if such communities are available to them. This suggests that the channels create a different type of community space or experience of community than local communities might. It's not clear from the vlogs exactly *how* this difference occurs, but the stories from the partners on the YouTube channels suggest that partners may feel more accepted on YouTube due to the fact that while explanations of experience and identity are welcome on the channels, the partners don't need to engage in the labor required to explain their

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[87] Many people who participate in collaborative channels also have their own, separate, personal channels where they post videos that may or may not be related to the collaborative channel they are a member of. So they post videos within a specific community on a channel, but also interact with people (usually some of the same people) through other videos they made for their own channel. These videos are usually different in how they are set up because they don't need to conform to a channel's norms for what's included in the vlogs or how things are discussed.

situations as much as they might in local LGBT or queer communities. That is, there is a shared knowledge among the partners who contribute vlogs on the channels; while individual experience may vary, they seem to all have a similar language with which to talk about their experiences and there isn't a risk of anyone not accepting them based on their sexual identity or the gender identity of their partner. Simply, there is no need to hide the specifics of their relationships in order to gain acceptance within the communities on the YouTube partner channels. One of my research participants, Clara, also considered how conversations might be different online when people share a common experience. She shared something she wrote on a listserv a couple of years before this project began where she talks about why she joined the listserv to begin with:

> I'm not really involved or connected with any in-person trans or allies groups, so I'm really here mostly to see what's possible when you get a community of people with such a unique sort of shared experience together. What conversations you can have and what insights you can share and generate that just wouldn't be possible among the general public.

While Clara was actually fairly active on this listserv for at least a year and a half, she does not find herself connected to much trans or allied community in her local area, even though those communities exist where she lives. Instead, Clara finds community that is accepting of her and her partner in spaces that are not LGBTQ-specific, but where sexuality and gender identity are discussed in open and affirming ways. Clara prefers not to align herself with sexual identity-based communities because for her "that would feel like making a big deal out of something that's not," but she does get and provide support through listservs and online communities (though not from YouTube, as far as I know). For Clara, it seems that participating in these communities online does not carry the same

weight with regards to identity politics as participation in local communities might - and

the politics around sexuality and gender identity are things that Clara wants to avoid.

While other partners that I interviewed, as well as partners on the YouTube channels,

discussed their involvements with identity politics through community interactions, Clara

shies away from this altogether. This could be due to the fact that Clara and her partner

are in different places in their lives than many other partners included in this project.

Clara and her partner work full-time and have professional lives - they are not students.

While Clara definitely circulates in social spaces with other LGBT and queer people, her

partner identifies as male and she identifies as a bisexual cis woman.

This section of the chapter shows the importance of having online community

available, given that several partners do not have local LGB, trans, or queer communities,

let alone communities of other cis people with trans partners. A general lack of local

community focused on being in a relationship with a trans person has moved many of the

partners to join the YouTube channels in the first place, and inspired Clara to join a

listserv focused on partner experience even though she shies away from her local

communities that are LGBTQ-specific. This speaks to the possibilities of online

community spaces to provide important social interaction and support around complex

issues related to sexual and gender identities and experience.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed local community, temporary in-person community, and

online community. I've argued that the white cis women in this project have often felt

they are outsiders in LGB community spaces, as well as in many unmarked (i.e., "straight") spaces due to the fact that they have trans partners. From this, my research suggests that cis partners would likely be more accepted in communities that are based on coalitional and nonidentity politics of affinity, but only the partners on YouTube mention having this, and only through the channels themselves. While the partner YouTube channels provide a way to find community based on affinity (the shared experience of being the partner of a trans person), these communities mirror the problems of many physical LGBT and queer communities, particularly around race.

The cis partners' experiences suggest that identity does not guarantee membership within a community for the partners of trans people - even when the identity of the individual and the identity on which community is based are the same (e.g., "lesbian"). This is due to a policing of community boundaries through policing the meaning of specific identity terms, as we saw in Chapter Three. The solution for the lack of community that many partners experience is not simply to claim a different identity, but for communities to operate and form under different politics that are inclusive with regards to fluid sexual and gender identities. Interestingly, none of the partners mentioned trans-specific communities - spaces where we might assume that there would be complete acceptance of their relationship and partner. I can only speculate that this might be due to the relatively small population of trans people in any one area so "trans community" might be very small, insulated, and hard to find. Additionally, as David Valentine (2007) points out, there are very real race and class divides around who claims

a "transgender" identity and, therefore, there are divisions around who would seek out

and work to build community around that category.

Although many of us tend to privilege the local over a dispersed online network, I

want to consider how some partners are (re)imagining the necessity of local community

and, at the same time, I want to call for it. Based on my experiences and observations

from the conferences, I argue that local community is needed. I'm not interested in

privileging the local over YouTube, for example, in some kind of hierarchy of

community; simply, I've argued throughout this chapter that local communities and

YouTube communities provide *different* things for community members. YouTube *is* able

to provide some support for members, and certainly educates viewers about trans and cis

partner issues, which is important ally work. The channels also tend to not replicate the

same issues over sexual identity labels and politics that many partners expressed

experiencing with their local communities and also provide a sense of community for

those who don't have access to local communities.

My research points to a larger issue of general transphobia in many LGB and

queer community spaces (see Weiss 2004) where partners may be seeking to find

community. While LGBT and queer conferences may provide important temporary

communities for cis people with trans partners, I argue that most people desire more

sustained community interaction that is free from transphobia and the policing of

community membership. The following chapter will examine the kinds of activist and

ally work that partners take part in around transgender politics and rights in relation to the

transphobia and misunderstandings around transgender lives that partners experience due

to their relationship with a trans person.

Chapter Five
Activisms in Everyday Life: Advocacy as Partner Allies

This chapter is invested in building on the previous chapters on language, identity, and community by examining how cisgender people engage in forms of trans activism, often using forms of everyday resistance. What are some of the everyday, commonplace actions that cisgender partners use in order to advocate for trans people, especially their trans partner? How might a relationship with a trans-identified person make participating in forms of everyday resistance almost routine – even if the individual does not define their own actions as "activist"? How are these forms of activism connected to various community discourses[88] and how might participation in certain communities, such as YouTube channels or conferences, affect an individual's relationship with activism?

Scholarship in many fields, including sociology, anthropology, political science, women's studies, and LGBTQ studies has focused on forms of activism. Social movement activism is most often examined by researchers in these fields, but there are also forms of micro-activism that many people engage in on a day-to-day basis that can best be described as "everyday activism." Everyday activism is comprised of actions that seek to resist hegemonic control and assumptions in everyday life (Gold and Villari 2000, Kuumba and Ajanaku 1998, Stombler and Padavic 1997, Mansbridge 2005) and may go unrecognized by the intended target of the activism (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Everyday activism tends to be an individualized form of resistance where institutional and macro structures of power are not the main targets, like they are with social

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[88] By "community discourse" I mean the widely known (though sometimes contested) knowledges and narratives that circulate within a particular community and, at least partially, shape the experiences of those within that community.

movement activism; instead, everyday activism seeks to chip away at individual acts that often serve to uphold or reiterate the hegemonic structures in society. Everyday activism is often about individuals working to carve out a more habitable everyday life for themselves. It is precisely this kind of micro-activism, or everyday resistance, that is often at the forefront in the lives of cisgender partners.

While we often see and hear of "LGBT" activism and organizing as an umbrella movement,[89] there is also a significant, specific history to the organizing and activism around transgender issues in which cisgender partners have presumably played an important role, though this has only been studied by one scholar.[90] Although the Stonewall Riots of 1969 are often viewed as an indicator of the beginning of gay and lesbian liberation, trans people (specifically, drag queens and trans people of color) were enormously involved in the riots (Feinberg 1996, Califia 2003). While transgender involvement in LGB movements has continued in local, national, and international contexts and organizations, there is also an ever-growing trans movement that has deliberately splintered from LGB and gay liberationist movements in an effort to focus on gender identity, something that LGB and gay liberationist movements rarely, if ever, focus on. LGB and gay liberationist movements actually depend on the gender binary for

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[89] This "umbrella" movement is often critiqued, one reason being that trans people are often left out of various pieces of legislation even when posited as "LGBT" (see Minter 2006). For example, the recent repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" only includes sexual orientation. The US military still considers trans people to be "mentally ill" or "medically unfit" (depending on the source) and they are unable to serve. See http://www.sldn.org/pages/transgender-people-and-military-service for more. Marriage equality campaigns continue to advocate for "same sex" marriage and generally fail to consider or address the complexities for transgender people at various points in transition in relation to marriage. Simply put, the campaign relies on the hegemonic gender binary and the seeming normality that it upholds.

[90] Patrick Califia has a chapter in his book, *Sex Changes: Transgender Politics* (2003), that focuses on the partners of trans people. This is the longest piece of writing on the topic of partners engaging in trans politics that I know of at the time of this writing, but focuses mostly on historical documents and pieces of literature that highlight the support from wives of trans women.

their arguments around "same sex" equality measures, but trans movements and

activisms cannot rely on that binary and often work explicitly against it (see Gamson

1995, 1997; Stone 2009; Devor and Matte 2004; Broad 2002; Valentine 2007). However,

very little literature currently exists that examines contemporary forms of trans activism

(see Feinberg 1996, Valentine 2007, Califia 2003, Stone 1991) or trans allied identities[91]

(see Stone 2009 for the only account of this), and no previous research examines how

cisgender people with trans identified partners define, engage in, or refute activism of any

kind. The literature on trans activism that currently exists generally focuses on a history

of trans movements and the ways that some trans activists have split from LGB

organizing. This chapter seeks to add to literatures not only in relation to the current

point in trans movement history, but to focus on an unexplored area of inquiry into the

everyday tactics of trans activism that partners are engaging in.

Transgender activism, in a formal sense, began in the 1950s when Virginia Prince

founded organizations for heterosexual cis male crossdressers and their cis female

partners (Denny 2006). Unfortunately, these organizations did not accept members that

were planning to transition, had transitioned, and/or members who did not identify as

heterosexual. However, they paved the way for different forms of trans organizing to

occur in the 1980s when more inclusive transgender organizations, such as the

International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE), began (Denny 2006). Patrick

Califia (2003) discusses how trans activism has shifted over the years, moving from a

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[91] "Trans allied identities" refers to the identities people who identify as being a trans ally as a significant
part of who they are. The identity of "trans ally" may overlap with other identities that are in relation to
"trans," such as partners or families of trans people.

focus on post-operative trans people[92] and their rights in the 1980s, to deconstructing a

unified trans identity situated around surgery by the late 1990s. K.L. Broad (2002) also

argues that this shift began in the 1990s, with transgender activism critiquing gendered

categories that often defined "LGBT" movements. During this time, mainstream LGB

organizations began to add trans issues to their mission statements, indicating a new

coalition of LGB people and trans people at the organizational level in some instances.

The 1990s marked the beginning of the "LGBT" acronym; however, as indicated in the

previous chapters, this "coalition" is a complex and often contentious one, leading to

many trans people splintering from the work of "LGBT" organizations beginning in the

late 1990s.

Eve Shapiro (2004) takes a slightly different approach and cites three waves of

transgender organizing in the U.S. over the last fifty years, though she follows a similar

historical trajectory of events as the other literature. The first, which emerged in the

1950s, focused on support for trans people. Organizations provided basic information

and held support groups for trans people, and sometimes their partners as well. Following

this wave, organizing shifted to having a more educational focus in the mid-1990s where

local trans activists would educate their LGB communities about trans issues. The second

wave was also defined by a shift in who was organizing. Those on the FTM spectrum

began to play a much larger role in trans activism and organizing during this time, which

continues to this day. The third wave of transgender organizing began in the late 1990s;

it included parts of the other two waves and also incorporated more direct action tactics

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[92] Those who have had genital reassignment surgery (GRS), sometimes called "sex reassignment
surgery" (SRS). During this time, the focus was primarily on trans women.

and a splitting of transgender and LGB organizing. Further, Shapiro (2004) points out

how the internet changed transgender organizing, activism, and community during this

third wave. Although Shapiro focuses on the organizations and/or trans people in her

work, I argue along with Califia (2003) and Wilchins (2004) that partners and other allies

are key elements to the trans movement as a whole. In light of Shapiro's arguments that

third wave transgender organizing, activism, and community has such a strong presence

online, it would seem limiting to focus only on what is occurring in "real" physical

spaces. This chapter examines how partners are engaging with the second (educational)

and third (trans-specific and the use of technology) waves that Shapiro outlines in her

work through an analysis of cis partner involvement in forms of educational advocacy

and everyday activisms around trans issues. This is illustrated by considering the

educational aspects of the partner YouTube channels and the ways that my interview

participants discuss engaging in actions that contribute to social change. I do not

examine the first wave (support) here, though it was mentioned in the previous chapter in

connection with community.

One of the few places that a partner *can* find community is through the

conferences that have at least some focus on trans issues. While the conferences were

introduced in Chapter Four in relation to their community aspects, the conferences also

serve as sites that encourage attendees to work for social change and engage in forms of

everyday resistance. There are two large annual conferences in the US that have a

significant focus on programming for people on the FTM spectrum - one is on the East

coast and the other is in the Northwest. These conferences tend to have several hundred

attendees each[93] and are organized by a variety of LGBTQ community organizations. The main difference in the conferences is that the one on the East coast is free to attend and the one in the Northwest has a registration fee of $135 or more.[94] While the conference organizers provide some scholarships for those who would be unable to attend due to the fee, this fee significantly limits who is able to attend. Only *some* people are given scholarships, so the vast majority of people who cannot afford the fee are automatically unable to attend so this leads to a largely white, middle-class group of attendees with little race or class diversity. The free conference on the East coast, on the other hand, has much more diversity in terms of the race and class backgrounds of attendees since it is financially accessible to more people. There are also several smaller conferences across the U.S., some that happen annually and some that do not.

The programming at conferences tends to be focused on trans people, with some programming for partners and family members of trans people. Many partners attend a variety of workshops that are not partner-specific, such as workshops on hormones and medical issues or name changes and gender marker changes on IDs, which promote involvements in forms of trans activism and advocacy around changing policies or being allies to those negotiating legalities. Partners also often attend workshops about surgery, including "Chest Surgery Show-and-Tell," a staple at almost every trans conference, even the smaller ones. This workshop is focused on chest surgery for folks on the FTM spectrum and is often a closed workshop, open only to people on the FTM spectrum and

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[93] While attendees at each tend to be living either on the East coast or West coast, some people do attend both.

[94] Rate is current as of 2011.

their partners (one of the few workshops that is open to *both* people in the relationship).

People who have had chest reconstruction take off their shirts and stand along the

perimeter of a large room, under signs with the name of their surgeon. Workshop

attendees walk around the room and look at people's chests, often pointing and

commenting at how particular work was done. People usually have a couple of surgeons

in mind and will stop and ask questions to the people standing under the signs for those

particular surgeons, normally about the experience they had with the nurses, the aftercare

involved, or the cost of the surgery. This workshop is, quite literally, about shopping for

a new chest, something with which many partners help. People who have been with their

trans partner through surgery will often talk to other cis partners and offer advice and tips

for what to do at the hospital and for aftercare. While this workshop is about the trans

person's body, it also provides a space for partners to talk with each other and share

strategies for advocacy in medical and legal situations. This strategizing is important

trans ally work among partners since, at the time of this writing, trans people are not

protected by any federal non-discrimination laws.

Generally, trans people and their partners are at risk for losing housing, education,

and jobs due to a lack of widespread legal protections around gender identity/expression

(Currah, Juang, and Minter 2006; Broadus 2006). There also are serious issues in

everyday life that must be addressed, such as access to non-gendered bathroom spaces

(Gershenson 2010), access to transgender healthcare (Wilkinson 2006, Levi and Klein

2006), a lack of language around identities and community, and general concerns around

safety and violence. The chapter first considers how partners define activism and the

ways that they see themselves being involved in activism - or not, since many partners

don't consider themselves activists or view their actions as "activism." I want to be clear

that I respect the refusal from many partners to claim an activist identity (i.e., I do not call

them activists here), but I will argue that their *actions* are in concert with endeavors for

social change. I then move into a discussion about everyday resistance, and argue that

partners are often engaging in "educational advocacy" around trans issues as an everyday

activist tactic. While education is generally not considered to be activism, I illustrate that

it contributes to social change in ways that other forms of everyday activism and

resistance do. By framing forms of education as everyday activism, this chapter seeks to

redefine "activism" in ways that might encourage various allies to recognize and value

the importance of their actions as contributing in a broader project of social change. The

partners on YouTube are especially engaged in forms of educational advocacy; however,

some of the partners resort to taking paths of least resistance when it comes to trans

issues. According to Allan G. Johnson (1997), a "path of least resistance" is related to the

choice we make in social situations that require us to act in some way. This path is

determined by our locations within social structures and we often choose to do whatever

is easiest to do - the path with the *least* resistance and risk. For example, it is often

easiest (socially, not necessarily personally) to *not* correct someone who uses pronouns

that we know a friend does not prefer. While we may feel troubled about this, if we say

nothing (i.e., take the path of least resistance) we don't have to worry about the person

being offended by our corrections and we won't have to engage in a conversation about

it. However, taking a path of least resistance doesn't encourage people to change. The

person who uses the wrong pronouns for our friend will never know they're doing so, and won't be encouraged to change their language, until we take a path of *more* resistance and engage in a potentially difficult conversation with them about the issue. Educational advocacy is often about taking a path of *more* resistance, but I also consider how some partners take a path of least resistance, especially around the threat of potential violence, and the reasons for doing so. Finally, I consider the ways that partners are doing *partner activism* - activism around being the partner of a trans person, not around trans issues, specifically. Examining partner activism is important because it focuses on bettering everyday life for *partners*, who are supported by trans activism through their relationship with a trans person, but are often not considered a distinct population in and of themselves.

Partners Defining Activism and Getting Involved

In my interviews with participants, I asked them if they considered themselves to be activists and if they were involved in any communities that they thought were activist.[95] Some participants clearly saw themselves as activists and others were adamant that they were not - the words "activism" and, especially, "activist" proved to be loaded terms for several participants and brought up lengthy discussions of what the words meant for them or why they wouldn't call themselves activists. Rachel was pragmatic when answering my question about whether she was an activist:

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[95] Not all participants responded to my questions about activism. *None* of the partners on the YouTube channels talked specifically about being activists and there was never a week on either channel devoted to activism. However, some partners on the channels did talk about actions they engaged in, and this is addressed later on in the chapter.

> If I were to define activist for a dictionary I would say: activist -n.- any person actively attempting to create sociopolitical change.
> I am a rainbow flag seven activist. Here's the poem where I got that term: http://www.campuspride.org/rainbowflagseven.asp …[96]
> I'm not a Capital A Activist though. I'm not the one who starts the petition, rallies the protesters, or plans the benefits. I admire those people with loud voices, but it's not my personality or my true desire to be among their numbers.

Rachel, who identifies as queer (and as we saw in Chapter Three, her queer identity is very much tied to her politics) and is very outspoken about trans politics in her everyday life, qualifies her use of the word "activist" even when talking to me for the project, but paints a broad definition of the word that is related to social change. As discussed in the previous chapter, Rachel is one of the only partners who identifies as being in a strong and supportive trans-friendly queer community. She went on to say:

> As far as the queer communities I am involved in, almost everyone participates in forms of activism. It so nearly overlaps the social scene for queer people here - people are always out for a drag benefit or to work a table at PRIDE with their friends or whathaveyou, and with Amendment 2[97] being such a big deal in my state recently everyone banded together in one big pissed-off glob of outrage for awhile. Individuals in the community are activists too in a zillion little ways...

For Rachel, her participation in queer community and activism are connected. This was also the case for Dakota, who explained her deep sense of an activist self as follows:

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[96] At the time of this writing, the link Rachel provided didn't work. The page that links the poem is available here: http://www.campuspride.org/inspiration/index.asp However, the same poem can be found with this citation: Schneck, Ken. 2002. "Rainbow Flag Seven." Pp. 124-125 in *Inspiration for LGBT Students and Their Allies*, edited by A.J. D'Angelo, S.D. Collingsworth Jr., M. Esposito, G. Hermelin, R. Sanlo, L.A. Sausa, and S.L. Windmeyer. Easton, PA: The Collegiate EmPowerment Company, Inc.

[97] Amendment 2 in Florida was passed in 2008. It defines "marriage" as "the legal union of only one man and one woman as husband and wife, no other legal union that is treated as marriage or the substantial equivalent thereof shall be valid or recognized" (http://election.dos.state.fl.us/initiatives/fulltext/pdf/41550-1.pdf). Civil unions and domestic partnerships are also not recognized in Florida due to Amendment 2 passing.

> I absolutely see myself as an activist - that identity is central to my sense of self. To me, activism is the set of practices that focus on changing relations of power (on an interpersonal, social, national, or global level). My activism (around trans, feminist, queer, and other issues) is what gives me a sense of satisfaction and purpose, and I see it as my personal mission. I consider myself deeply engaged both in practicing activism and in theorizing about activism (by which I mean, thinking about movement strategies, studying past activists and their work, and understanding how day-to-day actions impact structural inequalities). I like to surround myself with other people engaged in activism and see myself pursuing a career involving activist work.

She also explains her connections to various activist organizations and communities as

follows:

> I consider the organizations of which I am part to be engaged in activism, mostly identity-based activism - that is, organizing around central identities (e.g., transgender, feminist/women, queer). I do live in a cooperative house, however, that is not an activist body but rather an inwardly-focused community passionate about sustainability (in general) and cooperative living.

And goes on to say:

> The kinds of activism to which I am drawn are community-based (taking their support and direction from the communities on whose behalf they advocate), collectively organized (non-hierarchical, if operating in the form of an organization), radical (directly challenging the root causes of oppression), and inclusive (actively seeking to hear the most marginalized voices and to include and represent people of color, people with disabilities, and other oppressed people). I like coalition organizing, multi-issue organizing, and organizing that crosses boundaries of identity. All these attributes combine to create organizing that goes the farthest towards effecting real justice without perpetuating lateral oppressions or leaving anyone behind.

While I was collecting data for this project, Dakota was an undergraduate in college and

was also involved in several activist projects at her university, including one that secured

transition-related medical care to be covered by university insurance programs. She has

now graduated, but continues her activist and social justice work at the local and national

levels. For Dakota, coalitions are most important in her activist organizing and she

recognizes the connections and contentions between identity-based and community-based

activism. She also realizes that certain kinds of activism can reproduce oppression, and

as such, she engages in activism that is largely organized through feminist and queer

ideas around bringing subjugated knowledges[98] to the front when forming coalitions

around social justice issues.

While Rachel and Dakota were very sure of their activist identities and how they

saw themselves participating in activism, most participants did not feel the same way.

For example, Sarah was fairly ambivalent about her connections to activism:

> Yes, I tend to be involved in activism but I definitely don't devote my life
> to it. Sometimes I wish I could but in reality I choose my own "selfish"
> needs since I only have so much time and money. But trans and
> reproductive rights often make me get off my ass. I know a lot of people
> who are all for fighting against Prop 8, and as I HATE people telling me
> what I can and can't do, I am not a fan of Prop 8. However, I feel like gay
> marriage is a fight for the rich, white gays and doesn't concern queers as
> much. Also, I have a tendency to get depressed by activism because it
> never feels like it's enough.

Sarah indicates her involvement in activism, but only specific kinds of activism. For

instance, she refers to the campaign against Proposition 8 in California[99] as being not-

queer and therefore doesn't participate in activism related to that because she doesn't feel

that it concerns her. It's important to recognize here that Sarah saying that the marriage

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[98] Subjugated knowledges consist of various knowledges that have been seen as lesser-than or unqualified, but are often knowledges that are local and held by those who are also oppressed in a particular society (see Foucault 1994).

[99] Proposition 8 is the California Marriage Protection Act that seeks to nullify same-sex marriages performed in the State of California. Debates about this specific proposition have been continuing for approximately three years, as of this writing. More information can be found on the California Voter Information site: http://voterguide.sos.ca.gov/past/2008/general/title-sum/prop8-title-sum.htm

campaign doesn't concern her is related to her viewing the campaign as being something for those who she interprets as being generally privileged (i.e. "rich, white gays"), which she does not identify as being her own experience. In other words, she argues that marriage equality measures don't account for class, race, and "queer" differences around who can get married and who might desire to get married. Further, recent media coverage around marriage equality indicates that "same sex" is often a hard thing to define for trans people due to the number of factors that go into defining what might make a couple "same sex" (e.g., sex designation on legal documents, hormone levels, or anatomy - all of which vary between *all* people anyway). For example, in December 2010 in Michigan, Jordan Swan had his marriage license revoked 10 minutes after it was issued because he is trans and hasn't had a phalloplasty. His legal documentation indicates that he is male, but the Oakland County court revoked the license saying that the marriage was "same sex" and was, therefore, null.[100] While some might critique the heteronormativity of "marriage" (see Robson 2006, for example), the fact remains that Jordan Swan is currently unable to secure *any* kind of marriage or civil union due to these being based on definitions of "same" or "opposite" sex, which, for Swan, would require him to undergo further surgical procedures.

Three participants specifically distanced themselves from activism and/or calling themselves an activist. Clara simply said, "I'm not engaged in any activist communities, and it's not so much that I avoid it as that activism isn't on the radar among other things that fill my time." Sonja, who was a freshman in college on the East Coast at the time of

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[100] Information about this case can be found on numerous websites. For example, see http://www.bilerico.com/2010/12/trans_man_denied_marriage.php or http://blogout.justout.com/?p=25652.

data collection, was fairly apathetic about social issues in general and I had to really push

to get her to discuss her feeling about activism:[101]

> **Avery:** do you consider yourself [to be] an activist at all?   in whatever
> way that word makes sense to you
> **Sonja:** no
> **A:** are you against that word or you just don't think you are?
> **S:** I just don't think I am
> **A:** haha oh okay... i didn't know if you had anything against that term
> **A:** why don't you think you are? any reason?
> **S:** I'm lazy ;) and honestly, I don't think that it does a whole lot of good
> because people are going to believe whatever they want regardless of if I
> disagree. I have better things to do than try to push my beliefs on others.
> **A:** haha lazy...
> **A:** what does "activism" or "activist" mean to you?
> **S:** someone who puts themselves out in the community to push for reform
> and try to change society's beliefs to better match their own.
> **A:** makes sense. do you know of activism that doesn't operate like that?
> **S:** not in my experience.
> **A:** do you consider what you engage in with the campus group [to be]
> activism? even if you don't think of yourself as an "activist"
> **S:** not really because it's more of helping than trying to impart our beliefs
> if that makes sense.

Even though Sonja is involved in a campus organization that works for change through

educational tactics around domestic violence, she does not consider the organization to be

activist, nor does she consider her actions through the group to constitute activism.

Sonja's feelings about activism mirror feelings from many college students that Gold and

Villari (2000) interviewed for their study about peer education on college campuses.

Students didn't feel that they were "activists" - they were just volunteering or engaging in

community service (Gold and Villari 2000). However, these students, like Sonja, were

actually doing things that contribute to sociopolitical change. Sonja doesn't consider her

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[101] My interview with Sonja was conducted via instant messaging (IM), unlike some others that were conducted via email. The exchange is much more casual due to the nature of IM conversations.

membership in the campus organization activism because it's helping people and not

changing someone's beliefs. She feels that no matter what she might do, people will

"believe whatever they want" and she thinks that activism is about getting someone to

agree with her about an issue.

Scarlett also didn't see the term "activist" as being something she could identify

with at the time of the interview:

> I do not identify as an activist, yet. Mostly cause I wasn't knowledgable
> enough before school and haven't had enough time to engage in activism
> while in school. The term activism makes me think of protests which I
> generally avoid. Activists are like community organizers who are part of
> street rallies, etc. I want to make reasoned arguments in court and lobby [at
> the capitol]. I want to publish papers about what needs to happen for trans
> folks and their community. I want to serve trans folks as a practitioner and
> organize a center for their needs. I don't think of this as activism in the
> traditional sense. I want to be known more for my intellectual approach
> [more] than being on stage as an activist - I am on stage enough in other
> ways. I want to get into positions of power to effect change in a way that is
> going to make permanent results.

I asked her to explain more about what she said above in a follow-up email:

> **Avery:** It's interesting because you said that you don't really identify as an
> activist in the traditional sense but at the same time you said that you like
> "pushing the envelope" and you want rights to be recognized. Do you
> think there are other forms of activism than what is traditionally thought of
> as activism? Do you think that anything you do and want to do in the
> future might fall under some other kind of activism?
> **Scarlett:** Yes! I think I am just turned off by the term "activism" for some
> reason and I don't know why. I think there are many spaces to talk to folks
> about social justice and change. For me that mostly happens through my
> social work - for example like the gender workshops I just facilitated.
> That could be activism I guess, I just maybe wouldn't use that term… I
> may be very progressive but it's like I don't want to have a fashion mullet,
> ride a bike to the co-op and be vegan - a lot of the trappings of "activism"
> aesthetics turn me off. If that makes sense.

Scarlett works in the social service sector and ran a workshop at one of the conferences I attended based on her experiences providing services for members of her own community as the partner of a trans person. While Scarlett recognizes that she *does* work for social change, she refuses to call herself an activist due to an aversion to the term and the aesthetics that come to mind when she hears "activist." Scarlett wants to be engaged in activism that is intellectual and based on "reasoned arguments," which she sees as the way to incite permanent social change.

Although Scarlett and Sonja both refuse to name themselves as "activists," I would argue that they are engaging *in* activism through the ways that they seek to educate others and incite social change, even if in small ways. Gold and Villari found similar results in their work on college students engaging in peer education on university campuses: "The students we interviewed contribute significant time and energy to the campus movement, yet they still do not feel deserving of the term 'activist'" (2000:147). Further, they argued that many students they talked with have an aversion to the term "activist" and preferred to call themselves "educators" (Gold and Villari 2000:148). My interest in redefining "activism" to include forms of education and ally work is about recognizing the variety of ways that people's everyday activism contributes to and encourages larger movements for social change around trans issues. As the next section of the chapter will illustrate, many partners (including Scarlett) are engaging in forms of everyday resistance, everyday activism, and education or advocacy in ways that contribute to change, even when they aren't engaging in protests or other large social movement events.

Partners Engaging in Educational Advocacy as Everyday Trans Activism

Everyday acts of resistance often have specific goals that are about bettering *everyday life* for individuals and the actions used to accomplish this are often oppositional in more subtle ways. Often, everyday activism is referred to as "everyday resistance," referring to forms of oppositional action that work against hegemonic power structures (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). James Scott (1990) argues that everyday activism and resistance often work best for individuals who are generally powerless in larger society. This is because the acts often go unnoticed and there is not a large risk for additional repression by those in power with everyday, individualized resistive actions.

I should note that partners did not describe their own actions as everyday resistance or activism. For many cisgender people with trans partners, engaging in some of the actions described here are parts of their everyday lives; they do not see their actions as activist based on their own definitions of activism. However, I want to encourage us to see the partners' actions as part of a larger (trans) activist project for sociopolitical change based on the potential effects of these actions. Therefore, I argue that taking a path of *more* resistance by correcting pronouns instead of ignoring misuse, for example, is engaging in everyday resistance. Jules mentions this briefly in her vlog:

> Just maybe once or twice we'll get a "ladies" or he'll get a "ma'am" but in those instances we correct them, either one of us, whoever says it first, will correct them. With our families we try to educate them more instead of fighting 'cause you know fighting doesn't really get you anywhere.

Pronouns often present tricky situations for trans people and those who are family, friends, or the significant others of trans people. In Chapter Three, I considered the ways

that cisgender partners discussed how pronouns related to their own visibility as a queer

or straight person, but partners also often correct how outsiders use pronouns in reference

to their trans partner. This is often extremely subtle and friends of mine have numerous

tactics about how to train others to use the correct pronouns for someone, including just

continuously using the preferred pronoun for the person even if others are using a

different one. This sometimes causes outright confusion and the people using the wrong

pronoun will then either ask what is going on, refuse to use pronouns, and/or (hopefully)

eventually catch on and begin using the preferred pronouns that others have been

modeling during conversation.

Issues around pronouns are often discussed at conferences since there are many

other people around with whom to strategize. Many people shared in several conference

workshops that they have discussed tactics for pronoun correction with partners and

friends before a potential situation might arise. Partners often feel that it is important to

strategize ahead of time and to check in regularly with their trans partner about pronoun

usage so that they are on the same page if a situation should arise that elicits action of

some kind. Also discussed at conferences are strategies for dealing with more specific

situations, such as transphobic remarks made at school or work. Cisgender partners are

often viewed as allies to trans people in general (although, obviously, partners are more

than just coalitional allies),[102] and strategizing with allies is seen as pushing the trans

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[102] See Helen Boyd's comments about partners being called "allies" here: http://www.myhusbandbetty.com/
2009/09/17/jeez-louise-this-whole-cisgender-thing/ Boyd basically argues here that allies are not part of
the trans community so she's against being called an ally. However, I would argue that a) allies *are* part of
trans communities, and b) anyone can be an ally - including trans people themselves. The idea that allies
are somehow outside of the community seems problematic to me. While Boyd argues that allies are
outsiders so she is not one, I would push her to consider that she is both an ally *and* in the community.

movement further along. Kate shared a blog post with me that talks about how she

managed two transphobic remarks at work:

> There are two girls that I talk to on breaks, and twice one of them has made unpleasant remarks about crossdressing. The first time she was relating a story about being in the pub and seeing a drunk man unwittingly dance with a transvestite, who was trying to deflect his advances. She commented how brave it was for this crossdresser to go out to a pub dressed like that, which was fine. She then went on to say, "It would have been different if he'd taken him home or something. That's not right." I felt I should say something, but I couldn't think how to phrase it and the moment passed. Later on, I thought I could have just said that it's a misconception that crossdressers are out to trick people.
>
> The second incident was a couple of days ago. We were reading the personal ads in the Metro (free newspaper you can pick up on public transport). One ad said that someone was looking for a "slim, bisexual, christian crossdresser." This was kind of comical in itself, talk about narrowing your choices! But, the same girl as last time made some comment like, "Oh crossdressing, I don't like that. It's freaky." This time I managed to find my voice and say, "But we're wearing trousers, why shouldn't men wear skirts?" I know this hardly goes anywhere near explaining the complexities of the issue, but it was the best I could come up with without giving a lecture.

These incidents illustrate the struggle that Kate deals with, along with many other

cisgender partners, when trying to work up the courage to take a path of resistance in

relation to someone's remarks. With transphobic rhetoric (blatant or not) being the norm

in many places, it is often difficult to step in and correct someone's assumptions. While

Kate didn't say anything to the girl during the first incident, she managed to find her

voice after the second time the same person made a transphobic remark in her presence.

Kate engaged in everyday resistance as she questioned the hegemonic assumption that

men shouldn't wear skirts and interrupted the conversation with questioning. One of the

most important things about her stories, is that neither incident directly involved her

partner - Kate's resistance operated on a broader level of trying to lessen transphobic

remarks in general. This is similar to how Rachel describes her activism, which is broadly situated in an activism of everyday resistance. When I asked Rachel to talk about what kinds of activism she engaged in, she said this:

> My brand of activism is usually pretty understated, mostly it's just about being there and being out. It's not a primary identity for me, but I think I am an activist in my own way, usually for GLBTQcetera community stuff. I am usually open and willing to educate people about issues, I have political bumper stickers up for gay rights causes, and I show up for protests, hold signs, sign petitions. I hold hands in public. I talk about gay marriage issues with people who don't otherwise follow such topics. I make artwork for pride shows. I try to make sure the people in my massage therapy class know at least a bit about trans stuff in hopes that when they have a trans client they'll be respectful. Depending on whether or not I have the stamina for it at the time, I (usually gently) call people on their bullshit.

While other partners often didn't see their everyday actions as activist, Rachel very much does, even though she says that "activist" isn't a primary identity for her. She recognizes the political importance of bumper stickers, signing petitions, and even holding hands in public to disrupt heteronormative control over public space (see Seidman 2002, Morris and Sloop 2006). She also educates others about trans issues at school, similar to how Kate tries to speak up about trans issues at work.

Although education and activism are often thought to be two different things, I argue here that education can serve *as activism* when we consider tactics of everyday resistance. When living in a society where trans people (and their partners) are oppressed and often discriminated against, educating others is a way to bring trans issues to the mainstream. That is, I argue that routinely educating others about the politics of everyday life for trans people and their partners could be interpreted as engaging in activism towards social change due to the current oppressive social, legal, and political

climate in the US. Although partners often did not describe their own everyday behaviors

as being activist in any way, they often saw themselves as educators about trans issues,

either in general or on behalf of their trans partner, specifically, depending on the context.

For many cisgender partners, educating others about trans issues benefits not only their

trans partner, but them as well due to their own need for safe spaces to socialize, work,

and/or go to school. As Claudia simply says, "Even if I can't change the world, I might

be able to educate one person who might educate another person." Claudia sees that

educating one person about an important issue could have a snowball effect - the next

time that that person hears something transphobic, maybe *they* will speak up and educate

the person who said it, and so on. Autumn mentioned the connection between educating

others and activism in one of her vlogs on YouTube when she gives advice to people

watching about how to get involved:

> Do things in life that help you educate and be a part of the movement and
> be proactive in the organizations that are out there for the LGBT
> community. And be active in things like YouTube that are educational and
> informative and may reach an audience of people you may never meet, but
> may somehow reach out and touch someone and make things easier for
> them or help them understand something.

For Autumn, educating others and being "a part of the movement" go hand-in-hand and

she feels that YouTube can play an important role in this kind of activism due to the wide

audience the videos have the potential to reach. Sarah talks about her own connections to

educating others about trans topics, and the politics around using her ex-boyfriend's

experiences to educate people:

> Oh my god I feel like I've become a trans-educator which actually makes
> me somewhat uncomfortable because I'm not trans and I'm using my ex's
> experiences to educate others. But, on the other hand, I feel like it's better

to say something as opposed to nothing and I think that me being cis might make other cis people less on edge when I talk about trans issues (again, doesn't necessarily make me comfortable but...)

For Sarah, taking a path of resistance to educate others about trans issues when the occasion arises is not without some self-critique. She recognizes the potential problematics around using the experiences of others to illustrate a point, but feels that she can use her privileged position as a gender normative cisgender person to do good in these situations. She goes on to talk about her most recent dating experiences where she has found herself taking on the role of educator again:

> Since [my boyfriend] and I broke up in May, I've found myself dating people who are incredibly curious about trans topics. One person was questioning her own gender and I found myself talking a lot about mine and [my boyfriend's] experiences. Another, was mildly defensive about not being butch or trans but then admitted she dabbled in trying to pass as a guy a few years back. She also accused me of only dating/liking trans-men which really offended me. I also feel like my Examiner column is a lot of me educating people about trans rights and happenings and promoting trans artists and art.

Sarah writes a column for the San Francisco Examiner about trans issues, often about relationships with trans people, and considers her work to contribute to social change in the sense that she's educating others about trans rights and issues through her writing.

Other partners also discussed and/or illustrated how their educational style of activism is furthered by their work or attendance at school. Scarlett told me about her experiences of doing this:

> I have engaged at activism at school in the sense of trying to get administration to train faculty around trans sensitivity - we also got an all gender bathroom created two years ago. I don't do a ton of activism outside of school, mostly because I haven't had the time. I definitely will want to be a larger part of specifically trans activism in the future because

> I want Rex to have the rights he deserves and the trans community [too] - this is my boyfriend, these are my friends, and my clients.

Remember that Scarlett doesn't see herself as an activist, but mentioned earlier that most of her "action" is done through her job as a social worker. Here she explains that she used education in the form of training faculty to be sensitive to trans issues and she worked to get a gender-neutral bathroom at her school. Scarlett wants to be more engaged in activism on a broader level because she thinks there are rights that everyone in the trans community would benefit from having. Drew is one partner who is deeply involved with activism on hir university campus. During my research, ze often sent me instant messages just to chat and I would often ask what ze was doing that day or ask how hir day was. These conversations frequently included discussions of Drew's involvement in a "radical queer activist organization" on campus that was started by a friend of hirs. When I asked Drew what kinds of things the organization has done on campus ze said:

> We have done a lot in our few years of existence. We have worked on policy change at the University (including preferred name policy, housing policy, and rec center policy), we have done A LOT of educational pieces for classes, other student orgs and for our own members, and we are currently trying to get an full time staff person and permanent space for the LGBTQ community

Drew was also instrumental in getting gender identity and expression added to hir university's non-discrimination policy. Drew and the other members of the campus organization use educational tactics, direct policy change, and organize campus programming to incite change at the university. One of their educational tactics is Visibility Week, which happens every year. During this week there are panels, speakers brought on to campus, a campus march, "lunch and learns" (i.e., a brown bag lunch

discussion), a tent on the quad with pamphlets and information about LGBTQ issues and resources, and a drag show at the end of the week. When I asked Drew about the goals of Visibility Week, ze said that the main goal is to educate others with the hopes of making campus a more welcoming and safe place for LGBTQ people there.

Both Scarlett and Drew engage in activism under what Gold and Villari (2000) would consider peer education and what I am calling "educational advocacy." Their activist work is facilitated by the fact that they are connected to universities, spaces where activism and social change efforts have historically been widespread, even when not institutionally supported (see Loeb 1994). Partners who are not connected to college or university life may not have the same resources available that could help with their efforts for social change.

Both my participants and the cis partners on the YouTube channels tended to discuss engaging in many forms of educational advocacy, though they often didn't explicitly call this activism or resistance. However, their goal was to create social change and create a more just social climate for trans and other gender non-conforming people. The majority of the partners on the YouTube channels saw their vlogs as educational and felt that the channels would help make society better for trans people, would help to end transphobia, and/or would spark an interest in viewers to help incite change. The channels serve as community spaces through which partners educate, advocate, and collectively form opinions regarding strategies of resistance and resilience in the face of oppression. For example, as we'll see in the next section of the chapter, the partners on one channel all give similar advice about issues of safety in public. Resilience, according

to Reissman (2000), often goes hand-in-hand with resistance for stigmatized populations.

She explains that "resilience suggests managing, enduring, and transcending stigma" in

everyday life practices (2000:131). The partners on YouTube do this by presenting

themselves as a cohesive group and often agreeing on a response for various issues. For

example, the partners almost always reiterate in their videos how much they love their

trans partner and the introductions to the vlogs do this as well. The partners also refute

any stigmatizing textual comments to their videos - by either responding, letting other

sympathetic viewers respond, by deleting the comment, or by blocking the offending

viewer from seeing the vlogs on the channel. Although geographically dispersed and not

coming together in online spaces, the partners I interviewed are using tactics similar to

those that the partners on the YouTube channels use by educating others at their places of

employment and/or at school. While some of the educational advocacy that occurs from

both partners on YouTube and partners I interviewed focuses on encouraging actions that

contribute to social change, not *all* partners are advocating for any kind of resistance or

action. In fact, some of the partners on the YouTube channels may actually encourage

viewers to take a path of least resistance instead of taking action. The next section

examines these videos based on two specific topics and considers the paths of least

resistance that some vlogs have the potential to encourage.

Advocating for Paths of Least Resistance

Although the YouTube channels are framed by partners as spaces of educational

advocacy and activism, some of what the partners actually say in their vlogs works

directly against this goal. This section of the chapter focuses on two specific weeks from

the channels: "Defending Your Man" and "Trans Safety."[103] When I collected data from

the channels, I had originally thought that these weeks would highlight the general goal

of the channel to educate others and work for social change; however, some of the videos

from both of these weeks actually advocate that people take a path of *least* resistance

when it comes to general issues of safety. It may seem like this is a relatively small issue

to focus on; however, while the YouTube channels have the potential to incite social

change, and do so at some points, other vlogs encourage viewers to take a path of least

resistance in relation to some trans issues - especially around safety and violence.

I had thought that the week on "Defending Your Man" would be focused on topics

like health care advocacy, correcting pronouns, finding safe bathroom spaces, or

combating transphobia. My expectations on this week's vlogs were related to my own

experiences at conferences, the communities I situate myself within, and my own social

locations, which caused me to initially interpret "defending" as being more about

institutional constraints or hegemonic gender assumptions. However, three of nine

partners[104] who made videos for this week actually focused on *not* defending their partner

due to the fact that their partners were men. As Madison said:

> I've found that over the years I've had to restrain myself because my man
> doesn't really feel very comfortable with me defending him because he's
> the man and he can defend himself and he does that well, but I get too
> angry to see him being ridiculed or being looked at and not just have the

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[103] One topic was on TransScribers and the other topic was on TMates.

[104] The other six videos for this week did not engage with the questions that they had decided to address, or anything related to the week's topic. This often happened during weeks where people weren't sure what to say about a topic, but were scheduled to make vlogs.

freedom that I do to just walk around and [have] nobody questioning my identity, you know.

She emphasized this by later repeating herself:

I try not to step in 'cause it's [my partner's] gig. He's a man, he can take care of himself, but I just get so… I don't understand the stupidity of these people...

Madison was not the only partner on the channel to reiterate that her partner is a *man* and

that he can take care of himself. Jules mentions that she feels that she has a responsibility

to stand up for her partner, but she doesn't do so every time something happens:

I do feel like I have a responsibility to [my partner] to stand up for him. He is a big, strong man and he can do it himself, but if I'm there and I have the right means I will stand up for him. We're in a relationship and if someone insults him then they're insulting me too, so it makes me really upset if someone calls him the wrong pronoun… Here's my advice: try not to get in fights with people, try to approach the conversation as a way of educating them.

Jules says that she will step in if she's needed, but that her partner can basically take care

of himself as "a big, strong man." However, she notes that anything that might be

offensive to her partner is also insulting *her*, which indicates how any resistance or action

could benefit both of them. She does end with a piece of advice that is strongly related to

the goal of the channel - educate others instead of fighting with them. Sienna also

referred to her partner as a "big, strong man" when sharing her thoughts on the topic:

For the most part, I don't feel like I have to defend my boyfriend 'cause I do it every day on YouTube, advocating for this community and I feel like I've never had to really defend my boyfriend and who he is 'cause he can do that himself, I'm just not like that… So defending your man - I don't really feel like I have to do it 'cause they're a big, strong man - they can do it.

Sienna feels she's engaged in a kind of proactive defending; that is, by making her vlogs, she has educated others and hopefully helped stop anything before anyone else is affected. Interestingly, Madison, Jules, and Sienna all seem to feel that if they were to take a path of more resistance by sticking up for their partner, it would be emasculating. It seems that while these partners end up reifying hegemonic notions of masculinity, they only do so in an attempt to affirm their partners. That is, these partners are adamant about advocating for their partners' gender performance, even if they aren't challenging the larger structure of gender in society.

The week on "Safety" on the other channel had a total of 10 vlogs in which partners discussed specific situations where they feared for their partner's safety (and sometimes their own as well). Some people felt less safe in urban areas, others felt less safe in "small towns." "Safety" to this group of partners mainly revolved around relatively localized safety in specific settings - bars, restaurants, with family members, in relation to strangers on the street, or in bathrooms. They all addressed the same set of questions, stated in the vlogs, that they collectively constructed before the week began:

> 1. Have you or the trans men in your life ever felt unsafe due to his trans identity? When and what happened?
> 2. Have you or the trans man in your life ever been discriminated against due to his trans identity?
> 3. What precautions do you take to ensure your own safety and your trans man's safety out in public?
> 4. What worries or concerns do you have when your trans man is out alone somewhere?
> 5. What advice do you have to offer SOFFAs of trans men concerning trans safety?

Partners addressed these questions in different ways - some talked about all of them in a kind of narrative and others would read the question word for word and then answer it

before doing the same with the next one. While most of the partners reported feeling

unsafe at some point in time (usually at bars or in bathrooms), their advice to viewers was

almost uniformly the same - "be confident" - and didn't involve any real tactics around

safety. In fact, the advice often seems to put the burden of safety on the trans person, as

most partners were specifically addressing trans people only in their videos even though

the fifth question specified advice for SOFFAs. As Lily said:

> Don't put yourself in situations where you know ahead of time there could
> be problems… Just be smart and be confident. If you act like you are
> afraid, whoever is looking to make you a victim will pick [up] on that and
> you become an easier target.

She also said the following about the precautions she takes:

> I'm confident, that's it. Look people in the eye. I don't act like I'm a
> scared little whatever… As far as [my partner], what does he do? He tries
> to just blend in.

Another partner, Tina, says that her trans partner is stealth and they live a stealth public

life; in other words, they "blend in." Paige echos the advice of being confident, to not let

people see that you're uncomfortable, and she also says, "Just be assertive, be… walk

kind of like with an ego, but not too much. So, walk with pride and with your head held

up high." Mona gives similar advice:

> Go in with confidence, but don't get cocky. If you go in with your cock
> swinging you're liable to get your ass kicked… If you go in with the
> confidence of, "I'm a man, there's nothing to see here 'cause I'm supposed
> to be here…" that's all that people will see. So, you know, just go in
> confident and hopefully that'll be enough.

My experiences with discussions of safety at conferences contributed to my surprise that

the general advice from these partners was simply just to be confident, without any

discussion of the larger social issues that play a role in why safety is an important topic

for the channel to look at in the first place (for example, see Butler 2005; Currah, Juang, and Minter 2006). Perhaps, this week's vlogs were more about resilience (Riessman 2003) than social change. That is, maybe the goal was to educate viewers about how to manage stigma and potential violence, instead of how to work to change the system. The partners on YouTube talked about safety in terms of techniques to hopefully stay safe and perhaps they don't feel that they actually *can* change the fact that trans people experience violence, but they wanted to provide strategies that have worked for their trans partner and that might help someone else avoid a similar situation.

This is distinctly different from the strategizing that occurs during conferences, where the focus tends to be about safety in relation to institutional or bureaucratic restraints (e.g., airport security, school policies, bullying, healthcare, identity documents, etc). None of the partners on the channels mentioned these things as issues or how to navigate them safely. Identity documents are often mentioned at conferences by both cis and trans people as a measure of safety (i.e., the gender marker on your ID should match how you are most often read, and your name preferably seems fitting to the gender you are presenting as), but none of the partners on the YouTube channels talked about identity documents in relation to safety. The difference between the partners on YouTube and the partners at conferences is that the vlogs on YouTube were focused on very specific situations where an individual might be targeted in their local area. "Safety" to the partners on YouTube meant physical safety - a threat of being attacked. At conferences, "safety" is actually rarely discussed this way and is considered on a more institutional and legal level. While physical safety may be a concern for conference attendees, the

discussion around this would likely be about educating law enforcement about trans issues or talking to a potential emergency contact person about how to inform emergency personnel about preferred pronouns and any transition-related medical history. The differences we can see might be explained by a difference in resources - if partners on YouTube don't have access to organizing around protections at the institutional or legal levels, safety issues might seem individualized and something they need to manage at the individual level. The conferences allow partners (along with trans people and various allies) to learn ways to work for social change at a broader level, instead of just keeping oneself safe. But, without access to these conferences (due to not knowing about them, geographic distance, financial constraints, or other reasons), it would be hard for the partners on YouTube to know how to move beyond individualized tactics of violence prevention.

Partners Advocating for Themselves

While the previous sections of this chapter have focused on how cisgender partners engage in forms of *trans* activism, resistance, and advocacy, the final section of the chapter looks at how partners are advocating *for themselves*. How are partners organizing around partner issues? How are they educating others about their social location as the cisgender partner of a trans person, instead of about trans issues? This section of the chapter mainly uses data from participant observations at conferences, which tend to be situated within an activist framework of encouraging social change. The vast majority of workshops at these conferences have discussion around forms of

everyday resistance and/or broader forms of social change. Specific conferences have more partner programming than others, but all of the trans conferences (and most of the "LGBT" ones that have significant trans-specific programming) have at least one workshop that focuses on partners and/or relationships. The partners on the YouTube channels state that one of the goals is to educate others about what it's like to be the partner of a trans person so that other partners watching can learn and find community there, but often their focus is more on the trans person than about them being a cis person who is partnered with a trans individual. The cisgender partners I've met at conferences, and know personally, see their social location as the partner of a trans person as being a position to speak from and do activist work from that is specifically for other partners. This is not trans activism, this is partner activism. In fact, some of the partner activism is in direct response to (and against) organizing that trans people have done.

From the very first trans conference I went to in 2007, it was clear that cisgender partners were an integral part of the larger trans community and trans organizing. However, before I arrived at the conference, I wasn't completely aware of this even though I had been considering the potentials of this with my research. I was scheduled to give a talk (not a workshop) on the second day of the conference about partner identity and community - it was the first talk I would give about my research. I had already written my talk and spent the first day of the conference looking over the program and attending workshops about transitioning, legal issues, and trans identities. When I realized that the other person presenting in my session was a psychologist who did work about trans people and their partners, I decided to change the focus of my talk. I had read

some of the literature that talks about partner experiences as being experiences of loss,

grief, burden, and sadness (see Brown 2005, Nyamora 2004, Mason 2006, Pfeffer 2010

for accounts of people with partners on the FTM spectrum). But that wasn't what I was

seeing at the conference that weekend and that hadn't been the experience of partners I

knew personally, even though it's understandable that people may go through a

renegotiation of the relationship when a partner undergoes such a tremendous life change.

Instead of talking substantively about my work during my talk, I talked about methods

and the importance of having those within trans communities do research so that we had

a stake in the stories that we told with our work. I talked about my connections with my

participants and my involvement in trans communities and politics, and I questioned the

focus of partner research being solely about "feelings" instead of about everyday

experience and action.

At conferences, I didn't *often* see this experience of grief and loss (although I'm

not claiming that it doesn't exist), nor did I hear it from partners in the workshops I

attended. In fact, one workshop in 2009 at a large conference on gender in the Northwest

U.S. focused specifically on this issue. This was an open workshop[105] that focused on the

positives of having a trans partner. The room was full with close to 80 people there, and

the workshop facilitators started off with explaining why they had this workshop. The

facilitators were academics (and cisgender partners of trans people) who also noticed the

focus on grief and loss in the literature and said that those were not the places where

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[105] Workshops are generally either open or closed. Open workshops are open to all people of any identities or social locations. Closed workshops are only open to people with specific identities or social locations. Partner workshops are often closed to cisgender partners only, something that has recently come under scrutiny since there are also trans people with trans partners and conferences often don't devote any workshop space to this relationship configuration.

everyone was at, nor was that the narrative that everyone wanted to have about their

relationship. They also pointed out that the challenges in cis/trans relationships are not

unique - they are common in every relationship when one partner has a life-altering event

occur. The workshop attendees then worked with the organizers to brainstorm all the

strengths of being in a relationship with a trans person so that people could get away from

the grief and loss narrative that is so prevalent.[106] The list of strengths from the attendees

included: commitment, able to see personal growth in each other, going through identity

issues makes it a stronger partnership, comfortable with selves, better boundaries and

confidence, get to be members of many different communities, intellectually stimulating,

lack of secrets, fluidity of roles, becoming more feminist, awareness of differences in

privilege/oppression, reciprocity, having the gender variant community as a resource,

jointly educating others as a couple, and being a catalyst for change. Workshop attendees

also brainstormed a list of challenges to being in a relationship with a trans person,

including issues with disclosure, histories that might get erased due to transition, a lack of

acceptance from some people and communities, issues around language, and racism from

trans communities. People then got into small groups to discuss some of the topics that

were brainstormed as a large group. This was actually quite chaotic with so many people

in the room, but when the facilitators asked people why they came to the workshop,

towards the end of the allotted time, people seemed to indicate that the workshop had met

their expectations: to be in a room with others in cis/trans relationships, celebrate the joys

in their relationships, to see the positives, acknowledge the successes, because they were

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[106] It is important to note that this narrative is more often heard in MTF spectrum communities (specifically by wives who have MTF spouses) than in FTM communities. Future work might examine why this is.

fed up with the negativity about cis/trans relationships (that they read in academic pieces and that they heard from some wives of MTF individuals), how to be healthy while transitioning, and to find a community of partners. This workshop was only one of about a dozen workshops with a focus on partner experiences during this conference,[107] but it stands out as an excellent example of the ways that partners are organizing with each other to refute the negative narratives that circulate in the academic literature and even within some communities that serve trans people and/or their partners, suggesting that the relationship will never last through a transition and/or that trans people on the FTM spectrum will end up being misogynists with a newfound male privilege.

At the same conference I attended another workshop that was listed as "open to partners (past, present, or future)." This workshop was about zine making for partners. As the workshop wasn't listed as completely open to all (keeping in mind that "partner" generally means "*cis* partner" at conferences), I talked to the organizer ahead of time, disclosed that I was doing research about partner experience, and asked if it would be okay to attend. She agreed and I also disclosed my researcher status to the attendees in the workshop, explaining that if anyone didn't feel comfortable with me in the room that I would leave. To my surprise, every partner in the room was actually *excited* I was there and was doing this work - no one asked me to leave. I took a backseat in this workshop and just listened and took notes. There was some discussion about the strengths of partners to begin thinking about what to say in the zine that was being collectively made

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[107] There were over 100 workshops and events at the conference over three days. The 12 workshops in the partner-specific track mainly focused on transition, attraction, sex and intimacy. Only two workshops focused on partner experience in ways that weren't directly tied to a trans partner (that is, that didn't talk about sex, or a partners transition, or being stealth with a partner). One of these workshops focused on sexual identity and the other workshop was about zine making (discussed in this section of the dissertation).

as a group and would be copied and passed out to conference attendees during the rest of the weekend. People talked about how they felt that partners were the backbone of the trans allied community and took great pride in this role. Much of the discussion was around community and organizing. Some people commented: "Where are MY people?!", "We want to be able to go into Barnes & Noble and pick up a book of partner stories that's not just bad," "Coming to this conference is the first time I've had the chance to talk to other people with trans partners in a positive way," and "I would just feel better if I could find some other girl whose boyfriend is getting his boobs taken off." For this group of partners, not hearing or reading positive narratives made it seem like the relationship was doomed to fail. The collages people made to represent their page in the zine spoke to these issues and more. At the end of the workshop, it became clear that this group of partners wanted to keep talking. They said that they felt that space to discussing what partners need and then actually doing something about it was lacking. Unfortunately, the time for the workshop was up and we had to leave the room due to another session coming in. I thanked everyone for letting me be there and we headed out into the hall. I found a friend of mine and was talking with him for a few minutes before a woman from the workshop came up to me and told me that a group of partners (many from the workshop, but there were several others as well) had met up in the hall, asked the conference organizers about a free meeting space, and had been given a hotel suite in which to talk. They wanted to work on programming for next year's conference and asked if I would be the trans-identified ally, and would take their concerns and ideas to conference organizers afterwards.

I left my friend and the group of cisgender partners and I took the elevator upstairs and approximately 20 of us gathered in a suite with pieces of easel paper taped to the wall. I was the only trans person in the room and was asked to take notes in order to record what was said and to organize the group's thoughts when presenting the information to conference organizers. Throughout the 90 minute discussion, partners generally felt that their needs weren't being met by the conference - they wanted more space to talk with one another, more spaces for processing *with* their trans partner (i.e., workshops where they could be together as a couple instead of closed workshops for cis partners only), and more programming that focused on creating a community of partners. In this instance, partners decided that they weren't happy with how things were, thought that things could be better, and organized as a group of partners to change *their* future experience at the conference. Their organizing wasn't about their trans partner at all - they wanted more time with each other, as a group of partners, and felt that the only way this would happen is if they pushed for a change in the programming themselves.

While partners gather and organize with the hopes of effecting change on a small scale (such as at a specific conference) or on a broader level (such as educating others about the social location of being the cisgender partner of a trans person), some partners also speak directly against organizing that has been done by trans people. This came up at the meeting described above, as many people weren't happy with the partner programming that had been arranged at the 2009 conference. However, these critiques don't only occur *in* conference spaces. A friend of mine, Jessica McPherson,[108]

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[108] Jessica's legal name is used here with permission.

performed a spoken-word piece the day before a conference at a very small venue in the

conference city. Many people in attendance were also going to the conference that

weekend, and were mostly femme identified, trans identified, gender non-conforming,

queer, and/or cis partners of trans people. Jessica's piece calls out a specific workshop

that was about to be held at this conference for the second year in a row.[109]

<u>"Work in Progress" - by Jessica McPherson</u>[110]

At this conference about gender, there was a workshop titled "No Apology
Necessary: Coming to Terms with Our Masculinity." The description
read, and this is an except from the conference booklet, "many of us
who've been living as male have experienced unjustified targeting as the
embodiment of patriarchal culture. This shows up as accusations of
misogyny. How do we come to terms with our own maleness in light of
feminist messages that men are the enemy? Note: this closed session is
for trans men who have, for several years or more, been fully and easily
recognized as male."

Response:
"An Apology is Necessary: Coming to Terms with Misogyny"

As a femme I'm not always right, but I am an expert on sexism. You don't
always have to agree with me but I refused be simplified and dismissed as
a man-hater.
To begin, accusations of misogyny are often warranted and dismissing
these accusations is, in fact, patriarchy at its finest.
Feminism encompasses listening to women and their experiences,
therefore, I want an apology. I want an apology for the creation of a
transmasculine space where I, as a femme, feel targeted. I want an
apology that you have silenced my voice once again. This community
deserves an apology for holding a workshop closed to all those but quote
"easily recognized as male." The trans men I call friend and partner
deserve an apology for the assumption that transmasculine-empowered
people are inherently sexist. To be clear, when my back is turned and an

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[109] In solidarity with Jessica, her then-partner and I facilitated an open workshop about celebrating
femininity in FTM-spectrum communities. Jessica was in attendance.

[110] See her performance of the piece the day before the conference here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=MljRhPPWMEY

individual grabs my ass it feels misogynistic and unsafe regardless of the hormones that that hand is attached to.

I want an apology for the assumption there is no possible way to express one's masculinity without being an asshole.

I was abused by my father, assaulted in college, harassed on the street yesterday, the day before, and will be tomorrow. Excuse me if I'm a little weary of men who think the only way to express their manhood is to assault all things feminine.

An in-depth analysis of power and privilege does not view the transmasculine community as trading oppression for privilege.

Regardless of how manly my partner is received we will always run from the police and bathrooms will never feel safe - I do NOT call this privilege.

However, the ability to be perceived as man in a culture whose fundamentals have been based on the oppression of women does complicate things a little - I'm not going to hold your hand while you try to figure it out. Clearly, holding workshops to discuss "unwarranted accusations" of misogyny without inviting those who actually experience misogyny on a daily basis probably isn't going to get you very far.

Perhaps accusations of misogyny that the workshop leaders experience has more to do with the fact that they are using the hatred of femininity to express themselves rather than the fact that they are injecting themselves with testosterone - and can we blame them?

What models for masculinity do we have that don't include the hatred of all things femme? Perhaps even those who are transmasculine can have a little femme deep down inside that we are neglecting to love.

I can't blame you.

Some days I hate my femme self too, but perhaps the revolution is embracing the femme. The revolution is in masculine-dominated spaces where I, expressing femininity, am not shaking with fear.

The revolution is in redefining masculinity not as something from, separate from, but part of, the femme.

It is my hope we can be manly enough to blur the lines a little and open our hearts to the complexity of genders.

Jessica's critique of the conference workshop she mentions is about the facilitator's failure to recognize the larger social structures of power at work in relation to masculinity and misogyny. She says she refuses to be silenced as a femme person in a community she is a part of, when she lives in a society that seeks to silence all things feminine. She

also calls for a celebration of femininity and to reclaim power around the feminine - regardless of one's gender identity. Audience members snapped their fingers in agreement while nodding and saying "Yeah!" during her discussion of feminism. Jessica is also speaking out against the divisions of the trans community that this workshop promotes based on gender presentation. Further, while the facilitator of that workshop felt that his masculinity was being attacked and he shouldn't have to apologize for being masculine, Jessica calls for him to examine his thoughts about this in relation to issues of privilege and oppression on a larger scale where "attacking all things feminine" does not make one masculine.

While Jessica engages in trans activism in her performance piece, she also engages in partner activism, speaking as someone who is a femme partner on behalf of other femme and feminine people. She openly refutes the idea that masculinity cannot be challenged and calls on the workshop organizer to open the workshop to people who are affected by misogynistic performances of masculinity, many of whom are cis women that are partnered with trans people. The conferences facilitate this type of action, encouraging others to recognize how their own voices and experiences might be silenced and calling on other partners to engage in collective action around "the complexity of genders."

Conclusions

While many partners refused to call themselves "activists," this chapter illustrates that they are engaged in actions that contribute to social change around trans issues.

Trans activism currently spans both virtual and "real" spaces to include people engaging in a great variety of activist tactics. However, there is very little work on the use of internet technologies for everyday activism and resistance by way of sharing resources with others who are oppressed in an effort to collectively resist hegemonic norms and ideologies. Further, there is a lack of literature on tactics for trans activisms in general, and this chapter has illustrated some of the ways that partners are engaging in trans activism using tactics of everyday resistance and educational advocacy.

I've argued in this chapter that partners are engaging in activism through forms of education, advocacy, and resistance via YouTube and in physical space, and I have pushed for redefining "activism" in ways that include the educational advocacy tactics that partners often use to incite social change around trans issues in order to argue for an examination of the ways that trans activism is occurring through means other than social movement activism and protest. This chapter has considered both activist actions (education, writing, advocacy, and everyday resistance) and spaces with the potential for activism (conferences and YouTube). The partners on YouTube tended to engage with forms of educational advocacy via the channels and discussed using educational tactics in their everyday lives more so than any other type of activism. The work of the partners on YouTube was generally focused on trans people, even though one of their stated goals was educating about SOFFA experience. Partners I interviewed and met at conferences talked about engaging in a wider variety of activist tactics that worked for change to better everyday life for themselves as partners *and* trans people in general. This difference can be interpreted as being related to a difference in access to resources.

Taken together, this sampling of partners (who often did not see their actions as "activism") indicates the existence of strong trans-allied communities working for social change and trans liberation.

As previously stated, everyday activism is often about individuals working to carve out a more habitable everyday life. This type of micro-activism, or everyday resistance, is often routinely part of the lives of cisgender people with trans partners. Further, not only are cis partners engaging in trans activisms as allies, but they are also engaging in activism *for* other cis partners, as the last part of the chapter illustrated. Future work on partners engaging in everyday activism might focus on specific topics such as pronouns, medical advocacy, legal identity documents, and workplace or school discrimination.

<u>Chapter Six</u>
<u>In Closing: The Promise of Queer Sociology</u>

My goal in this concluding chapter is to revisit the previous three chapters as telling a queer sociological story of identity, community, and activism through the lives of cis people with trans partners. Further, this chapter outlines the contributions of my work to existing literatures in trans studies, the partners of trans people, and the sociology of gender and sexuality more broadly. I also seek to provide some closing thoughts that work to open up considerations for future research while recognizing the limitations of this project as it currently stands.

In Chapter Three, I examined the problems and complexities of currently available sexual identity categories for cis partners. The issues that cis partners discussed around these categories were largely related to available sexual identities being based on a binary gender construct of man/woman (in the case of "straight," "gay," "lesbian," and "bisexual") and/or being unable to signify trans relationality through the category name itself (particularly with "queer" and "pansexual"). One of the main problems for the cis partners in this project was that most of these categories presumed a link to sameness of experience that allows someone to personally claim the category. For example, this was most prevalent for the partners who called themselves "lesbian," which proved to be a highly contested identity due to the ways that other people (lesbian and otherwise) defined who counted as a lesbian. Because the lesbian cis partners in this project were dating people on the FTM spectrum - instead of dating women - they often faced resistance to their claim of "lesbian" as they were viewed as not sharing the "woman who dates women" experience. However, regardless of how partners might label their

sexuality, these categories of identity fail to tell the whole story of their relationship being one that includes trans experience. While this may actually be desirable for some, many partners expressed wanting to be out and visible as the partner of a trans person - something that is extremely difficult when there is a lack of language that allows someone to actually be out in specific ways that include trans. I argued throughout this chapter that the pervasiveness of a binary system of gender in defining sexual identity categories prevents cis partners from being able to explain their sexuality in ways that also take their trans partner and their relationship into account.

In Chapter Four, I focused on the ways that the politics of language and identity, as outlined in Chapter Three, affect how cis partners find community and maintain a sense of belonging in various communities. This chapter highlighted a need for affinity-based communities around gender and sexuality from a queer perspective, instead of communities based primarily on specific identities. I argued for a reconsideration of what constitutes community and the importance of various types of community for cis people with trans partners (e.g., local, temporary through conferences, and/or online through blogs or YouTube). This chapter also illustrated a continued need for education around trans experiences and issues within LGB and queer communities themselves in order to hopefully quell the transphobia that many cis partners experienced from communities they are (or had been) a part of.

Chapter Five focused on the ways that cis partners are engaging in actions that contribute to social change on a variety of levels. While many of my participants refused to call themselves activists, they were still engaging in action at the level of everyday

resistance and activism both locally and online, often through forms of education

advocacy around trans issues. These partners are attempting to use education as a method

for combating transphobia in their communities and in a larger society in general. I

argued in this chapter for a new definition of activism to include the educational tactics

that cis partners are often using to better the everyday lives of trans people and other cis

partners.

These chapters, as a group, contribute to queer sociology by illustrating how

identity, desire, belonging, and community are controlled by a social order around the

binary structure of gender that largely operates through language. Chapter Three

illustrated the very real ways that language was unable to stand in for the realities of

experience, as many cis partners queered the seemingly straightforward sexual identity

categories they claimed, calling into question the very meaning and importance that is

often placed on "knowing" our sexuality and being able to label it in the first place.

Chapter Four expanded notions of community to include multiple modes and varieties of

belonging in both physically-situated and online spaces. This chapter used queer

theoretical tenets to challenge the need for similarity around identity in order to form

strong community ties. Chapter Five was invested in showing how cis partners engaged

in trans activist endeavors as intimate allies who did not claim a trans identity for

themselves. My arguments in this chapter called for a broader definition of "activism"

and a recognition of trans social and legal struggles as impacting a greater portion of the

larger population than, perhaps, is normally assumed. Overall, at its most basic level, this

dissertation has refused to allow binary gender categories, and the sexual identities that rely on them, to operate in a hegemonic fashion that ignores cis/trans specificity.

Trans Studies, Cis Partners, and the Sociology of Gender

As a queer sociological project, this dissertation contributes to a variety of academic literatures and understandings of identity, community, and activism. My arguments throughout the three research chapters call for greater attention to be paid to those who live in relation to trans, as the experiences of cis partners in this project challenge normative assumptions around identity and experience, identity and community, and identity and activism. This section of the chapter builds on the contributions of the project to queering sociology as a theoretical task in order to discuss my contributions to scholarship in trans studies, the literature on cis partners, and the sociology of gender more broadly.

As previously discussed in Chapter One, trans studies has been a field that has focused almost solely on trans people, bodies, and experiences with little to no consideration of non-trans people who live their everyday lives in relation to trans. While trans studies is a field that has been created by the very people that it addresses - a field about "we," not "them" - my work illustrates how cis partners are a part of the "we" that trans studies seeks to attend to. Accordingly, this project has been situated within trans studies and contributes to expanding and pushing the field to engage in a broader range of experiences and identities. By focusing on identity, community, and activism, my work not only contributes to a new section of literature in trans studies about cis partners, but

also to how trans studies can consider the role of trans allies in trans communities and activism. There is currently very little literature on trans allies in general (see Stone 2009), let alone the ways that allies might be intimately connected to the communities and people they seek social change with.

Previous U.S. scholarship in sociology on the partners of trans people who identify on the FTM spectrum has not attempted to be situated in the field of trans studies (see Ward 2010; Pfeffer 2008, 2009, 2010), preferring to instead situate cis partner experience in feminist studies, family studies, and a more traditional sociology of gender perspective. Therefore, my work adds a new challenge to the current literature on cis people with trans partners, as I have theoretically situated this project in different arenas. While previous work on partners examines identity at the individual and relationship levels, my research sees identity as a relational project of interaction that cis partners queer on a larger scale by troubling the meanings of the identity categories themselves. Additionally, my work contributes to understanding the *social* experiences of community and activism for cis partners, both of which are largely unexplored in earlier scholarship. Further, although I contribute to the academic literature about cis partner experience, it's important to recognize that this project should operate and circulate as only a small window into the ways that some white cis women with trans partners experience their lives in relation to identity, community, and everyday resistance. I do not intend for this dissertation to provide information that can be generalized about *all* cis people with trans partners, but instead, to provide a fairly limited snapshot of some partners, based on my research.

While my work has definite contributions to newer and more specialized areas of scholarly inquiry, this project also contributes greatly to a well-established sociology of gender at one of the most fundamental levels: the language around gender categories themselves. In doing queer sociology and trans studies, I have challenged how the specificity of "cisgender" remains silently in the background of almost every use of "man" and "woman" in everyday English language, in the academy at large, and even within the sociology of gender. By allowing "cisgender" to operate as an unspoken given, "trans" gets created and used as an illustrative "Other" to study against the cisgender norm. By not interrogating and/or explaining our meanings and uses of "men" and "women" in our work, we fail to point out the complexities of these categories and do a great disservice to our readers and our students. For example, a seemingly simple and benign description of a college as a "women's college" fails to recognize the great variety of genders that are likely represented by the student population. What does "women" mean and who counts as a "woman" in this case? Does this school accept only incoming students who were assigned female at birth and currently identify as female and/or woman? Would this college also accept students who were assigned female at birth, but who no longer see themselves as female and/or woman? Would people on the MTF spectrum be admitted to the college? Why or why not? It is in our best interest as scholars, especially within the sociology of gender, to be clear about the meanings behind the gender categories we use in our research and in our classrooms. This does not mean that we need to draw distinctions between cisgender and trans people in our work, unless it is meaningful to do for a particular reason; however, simply discussing what the gender

categories mean when we use them (e.g., stating "anyone who currently identifies as a man") would allow for a more broad and open understanding of "men" and "women" that draws attention to how cisgender operates in a hegemonic way to inform the binary structure of gender.

In addition, my work contributes to the sociology of gender by *not* using trans people or bodies as "the" challenge to sex and gender categories. Instead, I illustrate a challenge to gender categories through the sexual identities of cis partners who live *in relation to* trans experience, refusing to let "trans" operate as a category of anomaly and trans people and bodies to be examples for understanding. It is my hope that other scholars will take note of my queer intervention in the sociology of gender, and will respond with a shift in language for their own work.

Limitations and Future Research

This project provides several different avenues for future research around cis partner experience, and also around identity, community, and activism more broadly. These avenues for future research emerge from the arguments I've made throughout the dissertation, smaller sections of data that deserve more attention in future work, and limitations of the current project.

First, as noted in Chapter Two on methods, I did not engage in a content or discourse analysis of the YouTube channels and videos used for this project. The focus for the dissertation was on the partners themselves and their experiences around identity, community, and forms of activism. However, future work could engage in a more

focused inquiry into the channels and the communications that occur through them in the form of videos and viewer comments in response to the videos. In other words, by analyzing the YouTube channels and videos in a more systematic way using content or discourse analysis, we might be able to garner a more complete and/or clear picture of how the YouTube channels operate as community that also includes those who view the videos. This type of analysis might also be able to examine how a video *and* text based online social network compares to other forms of online social networking, such as Facebook, blogs, and listservs, in terms of encouraging the formation of community.

In Chapter Three, I briefly discussed how some partners deny the erotics of "trans" in order to distance themselves from potentially being called tranny chasers. Future work might take this further, considering the role of sex-positivity in both trans and partner communities if there is a continued denial around desire. What might a sex-positive trans politics look like? Is this possible in relation to the "tranny chaser" label? What might the role of cis people be in a sex-positive trans politics?

There were several participants in this project who were either not partnered or had a relationship dissolve during the interview period. Interestingly, their responses to questions were similar to the other currently-partnered participants, suggesting a potential avenue for future comparative work that could examine what, if any, differences there are around personal politics and engagements with trans activism after someone is no longer dating a trans person, as opposed to those who are currently partnered. Without having done a detailed comparative analysis in this project, I can only tentatively suggest based on the limited data here that the non-partnered participants were no less involved in trans

community or activism than the participants who were currently partnered. In fact, all

five of the currently-non-partnered participants (Renee, Sarah, Drew, Dakota, and

Scarlett) are incredibly active trans allies in their local communities and/or on their

college campuses, and they still find trans community important in their lives. This

encourages future research on how a shift in personal politics, identity, and community

may not necessarily rely on the permanency of the relationship itself, but could be,

instead, a shift that happens through and in relation to *trans*.

While noted in several places throughout the previous chapters, this is an

overwhelmingly white project in a variety of ways. The participants in this project, as

well as the partners in the YouTube videos, form a group of partners that are typical of

most research in trans studies: they are largely white, middle-class, educated, and young -

and I fit that profile as well. Further, the majority of the theoretical and analytical

framework for this project is also provided by other white scholars in queer and trans

studies. That is, the notions of identity, community, and activism that are used

throughout this work are largely *white, middle-class* scholarly endeavors around these

concepts. This is certainly a limitation of the project and it is also the most difficult

limitation to consider in relation to future work. As a white scholar, studying the

experiences of cis partners of color and/or using theoretical and analytical literature from

scholars of color would not solve the larger issue of the overwhelming whiteness of the

academy. However, I have attempted to be clear about the whiteness of my project and

the theoretical literatures in which this project is situated - and how these are related to

my own social location as a white trans scholar. Trans studies would benefit greatly from

more intentionally intersectional analyses that also focus on cis partners and trans folks of

color, but it is not desirable to theorize or provide analysis on these experiences from the

often non-intersectional perspectives of white scholars that comprise the bulk of trans

studies as it currently stands.

Another major limitation of my project (as is true of all previous work on cis

partners) is the absence of cis men who partner with people on the FTM spectrum. Do

cis men have similar discussions around identity if they partner with people on the FTM

spectrum? Do they fear losing community? Are they engaged in forms of trans activism

and everyday resistance? As noted earlier, the lack of cis men responding to my call for

participants likely had a lot to do with how I advertised the project and where I

advertised. Future research that encourages cis men to participate in the project would

require being intentional about recruiting cis men by advertising in specific

establishments, groups, and communities that are largely organized around *gay* cis men.

It would also be beneficial to advertise for the project in spaces where discussions of

trannyfag identities are prevalent. Research that examines the experiences of cis men

who partner with people on the FTM spectrum has the potential to disrupt the

overwhelming focus on cis women in the partner literature thus far and to provide a new

perspective from cis partners with a different gender identity.

Community Contributions and Applications

As this project was derived from my own experiences in trans communities and

my observations at trans conferences where cis partners were intricately involved in the

complexities of trans gender and sexuality, I am committed to providing some research-based comments that have the potential for direct application within trans communities and communities of partners. Many of the partners in this project felt that there were a lack of local resources for partners where they lived. Although some participants lived in large, urban centers that had small communities of partners in the form of support groups, most partners did not have this in their local area. My research suggests that it would be beneficial for partners if more local LGBTQ resource centers and organizations had dedicated partner and/or SOFFA groups. Further, trans and LGBTQ conferences could better serve cis partners by providing space for partners to meet each other outside of workshops. This would foster the potential for more lasting community networks of partners after the conferences end.

In addition, while it's clear that there needs to be further education about trans issues and experiences within LGB and queer communities in the form of trans ally trainings, my research suggests that there is a need for partner experience to be a part of this education as well. This was most clearly illustrated by Chapters Three and Four, where partners talked about their sexual identities being policed by others who also claimed that identity, and the problems with finding and maintaining community through sexuality. Although my research suggests that communities based on affinity would be more accepting of a variety of genders, sexualities, and relationship configurations than those that are based on identity, there are still many identity-based communities in which cis partners see themselves. Accordingly, it is important for trans education, that includes material about partners, to occur within these communities. After all, most of the

partners in this project identified with LGB and/or queer communities before they met

their trans partner. In other words, education about trans and partner experience needs to

be provided to the very groups whose members sometimes have trans partners.

Final Thoughts

       In the final few months of writing this dissertation, *Original Plumbing (OP)*

Magazine: Trans Male Quarterly began hosting a series of blogs on their website.

Original Plumbing is a zine, mainly intended for people on the FTM spectrum: "Original

Plumbing is the premier magazine dedicated to the sexuality and culture of FTM trans

guys" (Mac 2010).[111] The zine features writing and photographs from various

contributors who respond to a call for submissions that is posted on the zine's website

every couple of months. The zine is high-quality, printed in color, and issues for

subscribers are mailed all over North America, Europe, and Australia. While this is

primarily a print magazine, during the first week of February 2011, the website began

featuring seven guest bloggers, one for each day of the week.[112] One of these bloggers,

Suzi, is a cis woman who is partnered with a trans guy. In her first blog, Suzi talks about

the weather, her partner, her dog, and what it's like living in Texas.[113] Then she writes a

question to herself, as if anticipating it appearing in the comments section of the blog by

a reader: "Wait, I thought you were a lesbian? What are you doing with a guy?" Her

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[111] For more, see *Original Plumbing*'s website at http://www.originalplumbing.com

[112] This set of guest bloggers has been blogging for two months - February and March 2011. A new set of guest bloggers is scheduled to begin blogging on the site in April 2011.

[113] The link to Suzi's first blog post and all the comments is: http://www.originalplumbing.com/2011/02/02/ suziblog-across-the-universe

answer: "I still am a lesbian." I smiled when I read this and thought about my

dissertation. I thought about all the partners whose voices and writings are included in

this project, many of whom identify as lesbian. I thought about the fact that it took *me*

quite awhile to understand how someone could identify as a lesbian and date someone

who didn't identify as a woman and/or female. I saw Suzi's words on my screen and I

thought, "Wow… a lot of people are going to read this blog. I wonder if things have

changed in the past two years since I began data collection for this project and I just

didn't realize it."

I scrolled through the rest of her blog and got to the comments section, hopeful

that Suzi would receive positive feedback for making a statement about her identity that

many of the partners in my project experienced as highly contested. Then I realized that

Suzi may not have been as hopeful: she anticipated resistance around her claim of

"lesbian" before she even finished writing the blog, but publicly claimed that word for

herself anyway. Suzi was right about readers potentially resisting her claim to "lesbian"

though - the very first comment that was posted read:

> Love that you are bringing in the partner discussion here. Myself, being
> the partner of a transman of 11 years, I cringe when another partner still
> identifies as a lesbian. Yes, you can call yourself and identify as anything
> your sweet self wants, but who are you sleeping with? A man. Right? I
> guess there is the dilemma. Can you still hold onto your queer self
> without that word? Of course. But, lesbian is women loving women. I
> don't know how far into transition your partner is, or how far he plans to
> go, but at some point that might get sticky. Thoughts?

Suzi responded, thanking the person for their post and being clear about her own

identification as a lesbian being personal and not something that questions or refutes her

partner's trans male identity. There were 35 comments to this blog post over the course

of four days. As of this writing, no one has commented on it since February 6, 2011.

About one-third of these comments were like the one above: negatively critical of how

Suzi identifies, even though it's obvious from her blog that "lesbian" is about her own

sexual identity and not how she sees her relationship with her partner. The rest of the

comments were supportive: other partners and trans folks who thanked her for posting

and for being open about her identity. Many of the cis partners that responded to her post

said they feel similarly about their own experiences, but haven't been able to discuss

them with others that they feel might be supportive of the complexities with their

identities.

Suzi's blog and the comments to her first post overlap with many of the stories

around identity and experience in this dissertation. One of my goals with this project was

to find out if and how cis partners were struggling to find acceptance and support from

some of the very communities they desired the most. It seems that this struggle is,

indeed, in full-swing and ongoing. My hope is that my work has the potential to inform

and ease the struggle in solidarity with cis partners who have already been working

tirelessly as intimate allies alongside me for years.

APPENDIX A

Call for Participants

My name is Avery Tompkins and I'm a trans-identified graduate student at Syracuse University in the Sociology department. I am looking for participants for a qualitative dissertation research project that is focusing on cisgender (non-trans) people who have/ had partners who were assigned female at birth, but who do not identify as female/ woman.

This project broadly focuses on the experiences of being a cisgender partner of a trans-identified person. I am particularly interested in your everyday life with your partner, community involvement, and issues of identity. There are no parameters or qualifiers around "transition." "Transition" is broadly defined for this project, meaning the process and act of not identifying as female/woman when assigned such at birth. There are also no parameters around "partner" – a certain length of time in the relationship is not a requirement for participation.

Participation in this project may take the form of interviews and informal conversations (face-to-face, over IM, via webcam, phone, and/or email) and/or sharing blogs/diaries/ writing. Participants are invited to engage in as many, or as few, forms of participation as they wish. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

Please contact me if you wish to participate or if you have any questions about the project. I can be initially be contacted via email, IM, or Facebook. Feel free to pass this along to other individuals who may be interested in participating as well. This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University.

Sincerely,
Avery Brooks Tompkins

abtompki@syr.edu
AIM: ---- (omitted in the published dissertation for privacy)

APPENDIX B

Demographic/Personal Information Sheet
Cispartner Research Project
Avery Brooks Tompkins
Syracuse University

You are being asked to fill out this form in order to know more about general details of your life and to be able to draw parameters around who the participants in the study are as a whole in terms of age, race, sexuality, class, geographic location, and various other factors. Filling out this form helps me know things about you and your partner that may or may not have come up through our interactions. If you do not wish to fill out any particular questions or do not know how to answer any of the questions, feel free to leave them blank – you will not be penalized in any way for not answering.

1. Name (legal/known and/OR chosen pseudonym):

2. Age:

3. Sex assigned at birth:

4. Current gender identity (if any):

5. Current sexual orientation/preference/identity (if any):

6. Race/Ethnicity (please be as specific as possible):

7. Religious/Spiritual Identity (if any):

8. City, State/Province, Country of birth:

9. Current city and state of residence:

10. Highest educational degree completed:

11. Current occupation:

12. Economic class status/location/identity:

13. Partner's age:

14. Partner's sex assigned at birth:

15. Partner's current gender identity (if any):

16. Partner's current sexual orientation/preference/identity (if any):

17. Partner's race/ethnicity (please be as specific as possible):

18. Partner's religious/spiritual identity (if any):

19. Partner's city, state/province, country of birth:

20. Partner's current city and state of residence:

21. Partner's highest educational degree completed:

22. Partner's current occupation:

23. Partner's economic class status/location/identity:

24. Are you currently partnered with a trans-identified individual?:

> If NO, how long ago were you partnered with a trans-identified person (most recent former partner)?
> Years: Months:

> If YES, how long have you and your current trans-identified partner been together?
> Years: Months:

25. Was your partner trans-identified when you first met them?

> If NO, how long into the relationship did your partner disclose a trans identity to you?
> Years: Months:

26. Has your partner ever taken testosterone?

> If YES, for how long? Years: Months:

> If YES, is your partner still taking testosterone?

> If YES, were you in a relationship with your partner at any time while they were taking testosterone?

If NO, has your partner expressed a desire to take testosterone?

27. Has your partner had any transgender-related surgery?

If YES, what kinds of surgery has your partner had?

If YES, which surgeries did your partner have BEFORE you met them?

If YES, which surgeries did your partner have AFTER you met them?

If NO, does your partner express a desire to have any trans-related surgery?

28. Do you and your partner share responsibility for any children/dependents?

If YES, what are the assigned birth sexes and ages of the children/dependents?

If YES, did you and/or your partner give birth to any of the children who are under your care?

If YES, which children?

If YES, which children, if any, currently live with you and/or your partner?

If there is anything that was not asked here that you would have liked to see asked or if you have any comments and/or suggestions regarding this form, feel free to let me know here below in writing, via email, phone, or in person.

APPENDIX C

Participant Demographics

NAME	AGE	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION	CLASS IDENTIFICATION*	SEXUAL IDENTITY*	PARTNER TRANS FROM START?*
Abby	24	Bachelor's	Midwest	Middle	Pansexual/Queer	Yes
Alexis	27	Bachelor's	Canada	Middle	Mostly Heterosexual	Yes
Alice	25	Bachelor's	Midwest	-	Queer	No
Clara	27	Bachelor's	Midwest	Lower Middle	Bisexual	No
Dakota	20	Bachelor's	Northeast	Upper Middle	Queer	No
Drew**	20	Bachelor's	Midwest	-	Pansexual	Yes
Kate	25	Master's	UK	-	Lesbian/Queer	Yes
Lara	21	Associate's	South	Lower Middle	Unsure	No
Meghan	24	High School	South	Lower Income	Queer	No
Melissa	29	Bachelor's	Northeast	Middle	Queer	Not Outwardly
Moe	18	Bachelor's	Northeast	Upper Middle	None	No
Morgan	24	Bachelor's	Northeast	Working	Bisexual	Yes
Rachel	24	Bachelor's	Southeast	Lower Middle	Queer	Yes
Renee	-	Bachelor's	Northeast	-	Lesbian	No

NAME	AGE	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION	CLASS IDENTIFICATION*	SEXUAL IDENTITY*	PARTNER TRANS FROM START?*
Rose	29	Bachelor's	Midwest	Middle	Queer	Yes
Sarah	24	Bachelor's	West	Low Income	Queer	No
Scarlett	27	Master's	Northeast	Upper Middle	Queer	No
Sonja	22	Bachelor's	Midwest	Lower Middle	Pansexual	No

Notes:

*All geographic areas are in the United States unless otherwise specified. Class, sexual identity, and whether or not the participant's trans partner was trans-identified when they first met is included as written by the participant - I did not edit these categories and identities. Some participants did not report their class location or age. All missing data is replaced with a dash (-). All participants self-identified as white/caucasian cisgender women when they filled out their demographic sheets.

**Drew began to identify as trans partway through data collection. This is discussed further in the chapters.

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