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External Impact on the Internal Structures of Lesbian/FTM Relationships

FREDDY TOGLIA



Layout by Ilhly Gomez Del Campo Rojas.
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The modern era’s understanding of queerness and queer culture holds a distinct lack of recognition of the partnerships between self-identified lesbians (to whom I will be referring simply as “lesbians” in this piece) and trans men. In ignoring this subsection of the queer community, much knowledge is lost, leaving those living that reality in isolation and those outside of it ignorant of its nuances. My purpose is not to argue whether partners of trans men can be lesbians or whether lesbians should con-

sider dating trans men at all; it is instead to discuss the main ways in which society affects these dynamics and changes these relationships, clarifying the scope of such effects. I seek to unpack how the external structures of society and culture influence, convolute, strengthen, and inform lesbian/FTM partnerships. Please see the content notes for definitions of the simplified terminology I am using (the terms used here do not fully cover the complexity of the gender and sexuality spectrums being discussed, but for the sake

of this piece they are sufficient.)¹

In observing the significance of external cultures in relation to lesbian/FTM pairings, some of the most powerful influences come from the pairings' own queer communities. What often hits closer to home for lesbian/FTM pairings than the reaction of larger society is the reaction of the lesbian community. Many queer groups place heavy emphasis on the value of "found family" and the unity that comes through shared struggle. Persistent lesbophobia and sexualization of lesbian love make it difficult to take up space without eliciting reactions of disgust and mistreatment from straight society. For this reason, the word "lesbian" holds weight as a politically charged label. Lesbians have historically been unified through the fight to

men find that as they accept their partners' gender, they lose the support of their own community. This feeling is prevalent both in partnerships that begin as lesbian pairings and in partnerships in which the trans partner was already in transition when the couple began dating (Theron and Collier). The lesbian community derives a lot of its pride as a group from its love of women rather than men. When a person within the community finds that they experience love for a trans man, even if their internal alignment with the label of "lesbian" has not changed, they are frequently thrown out of the status of "true lesbian" (Platt and Bolland). This lands many lesbian partners of trans men in a place of detachment, and the nature of their relationship then falls into a gray

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be accepted as a part of larger society, not shunned as "ineffective others" or "duds" within their communities. Traditional womanhood defines women in relation to their attraction to men. In the absence of this attraction and the dynamics it creates, lesbians often get labeled as defective, leading to discrimination, disgust, anger, pity, and fetishization being foisted upon them. This has fueled their fight to be treated with decency and respect, not despite their love for women but with the acceptance of that as part of their identities as humans. Arising from this fight is a lesbian culture that is deeply rooted in its separation from men, and many lesbians value that concept.

Many lesbian-identified partners of trans

area isolated from a clear sense of community (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler). From this isolation often arises an internal emotional struggle within the partnership brought on by external opinions, with the loss of visible queerness further removing the pairing from the lesbian community.

This loss of visibility is not to be ignored. Many lesbians, femme and masc alike, feel pride in their visible gay relationships. A bond is formed through the mistreatment of lesbian sexuality that fuels a fight for recognition. Forfeiting the assumption of queerness when viewed as a couple can be a significant shift for both partners. Often in my research I found that the impact of this change tended to weigh more heavily on the cisgendered

partner, who feels a sense of loss in her identity now that she visually passes as a straight woman in a straight partnership. Many lesbian women feel the need to offset this with a more direct projection of their queerness. An interview with one such cis lesbian partner, collected by Liesl Theron and Kate L. Collier illustrates this:

The other thing is, politically I feel kind of like I have to claim more space. And then, being invisible is kind of hard. You're invisible as a heterosexual person. Nobody looks at you. Nobody pays any attention to you. You're completely invisible. I can kiss my partner in public spaces, hold his hand, lots of displays of public affection and people are sweet about it. We're newlyweds.

Such erasure of identity can serve to amplify already present shifts in the personal identification of lesbian partners. There is a tangible loss of struggle to be seen as a valid couple. Suddenly, there is an "out" from fighting for the equal treatment of queer and straight pairings, as those rights are suddenly "gifted."

Some lesbians see this "forfeiture" as the act of traitors whose lives are suddenly made easier through the assumption of heterosexuality (Halberstam). In a series of interviews taken by Jess T. Dugan and Vanessa Fabbre, trans man Jay reflects on the difference in treatment in the medical world of visually straight couples versus lesbian couples, pulling from his experience with his wife's end-of-life treatment:

One good thing I can at least say is that when Eleanor received end-of-life care, the doctors provided the most dignified, compassionate care that we had ever re-

ceived. But part of it is that I was finally passable by then and they were treating us like we were a heterosexual couple for the first time ever. It was like night and day, the respect, almost reverence, that staff would give. They treated us like we were gold. That experience really highlighted how incredibly different it is to just be treated like a normal human being, and, you know, we had gotten so used to being treated like we were garbage. It was really shocking just to receive standard care. (Dugan and Fabbre)

This is one example of the privilege allotted to straight couples, which can serve to erase the part of a lesbian partnership's identity related to their struggle. The impact of this potential privilege is widespread, and it can feel almost as though the endeavors of a person's past as a lesbian have suddenly been erased. Looking at the FTM partners' experience does not yield much difference in negative reaction, especially from trans men who used to consider themselves to be butch. If a trans man previously identified as butch, there is often the interpretation that transition has provided an escape from the reality of a masc lifestyle. Some see it as "a free ticket to escape...they feel like you're sort of giving up the fight" (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler). I personally find fault with this opinion. Masc lesbians are not necessarily on the receiving end of good treatment, but this perspective entirely ignores the discrimination trans men face. If an FTM man lived in the past as a butch, his transition is not a way to avoid facing discrimination but rather a shift in the nature of said discrimination, and the same can be said about the way society views these relationships (Halberstam).

While I conceptually understand the foundation of this opinion, the assumption of straightness greatly influences the way in which society will treat a couple. This “forfeiture” is not traitorous in any way. Transgender people are not privy to any amount of privilege over cis people; a trans identity in a relationship can and often does introduce a new layer of discrimination against the couple. The fact that a partner is undergoing transition does not nullify the pair’s other struggles. I agree that assumed straightness opens up a new world of treatment, as exemplified above, but I do not believe this is the fault of the couple or that it in any way vilifies them as members of the queer community. These couples cannot control the assumptions made about their appearance, and they absolutely cannot

places many formerly identified lesbians into the realm of heterosexuality; cultural pressures begin to become confining when a trans man finds that he can no longer seek the same crowd as before. Many trans men still see the lesbian community as their own despite their gender expression (Dugan and Fabbre). An interview quoted in Jack Halberstam provides a reflection on this forceful loss of community as a trans man: “Sky suggests that while certain individuals in the lesbian community are hostile to him, ‘I’m forty years old and I’ve been involved with [lesbians] for nearly half my life. I’m not going to give that up.’” This introspection into oneself and the space one identifies with is not reserved solely for the transgender partner in a relationship.

Often the cisgendered lesbian partner in

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control the actions of society in reaction to that appearance.

Taking a step back to examine the ways in which these opinions may manifest in the lives of trans men and their partners reveals a somewhat forceful motivation for FTM partners to reexamine themselves as they relate to their past labels. Many trans men who were previously members of the lesbian community, especially as masc lesbians (though masc is not an indicator of transgenderism per se), find that post-transition, they identify as straight men. In these individuals, there is no meaningfully identified shift of sexual orientation but rather a confirmation of gender. This confirmation

such pairings must reexamine her sexuality and community as well. She may find that the lesbian label no longer fits and may face a shift in her community away from that which she has known. Being a lesbian is much more than a simple identification of attraction, as discussed above. People who fall under the lesbian identity find within it “a sense of community, a shorthand for signifying sexual/romantic availability or nonavailability to others, a way to be understood by others (whether this was an accurate understanding or not), a political grounding and orientation, and a way to understand themselves” (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler). In the same way that solidarity with the lesbian community

may shift or stay the same for trans men, their partners come to similar conclusions across the spectrum of identification (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler).

To balance these factors, along with many others not discussed in this piece, it is important for partners to recognize themselves as a couple in transition. No transition is stagnant. One partner's confirmation of gender may spark a shift in orientation for the other and a major shift in community for them both. While not all the previously discussed influence happens in every lesbian/FTM pairing, it is important to acknowledge and understand the reasoning behind such external reactions to allow for the couple's growth as a unit. I recognize the positive impacts of societal reaction—the improvement in health care and general societal treatment, the stability that comes with a partner's feeling comfortable in his presentation, and the self-confidence that emerges from internal conflict. I have presented here what I believe, based on my research and own experience with the topic, to be the main impacts on couples in transition. Many of these opinions strengthen the bonds of lesbian/FTM couples and the understanding that each partner has of themselves and their lover. It is important to be aware of them and to discuss them with consideration of their nuances (as I have attempted to do) to fully understand their lives and these dynamics.

¹The word “queer” acts as umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community, including both gender and sexuality. “Cisgendered” or “cis” refers to a person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth. “Transgender” or “trans” refers to a person who

does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Both “trans man” and “FTM” (female-to-male transgender) refer to those born female who transition to become men. This includes both trans men without surgeries or hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and those who medically transition. The term “lesbian” refers to women without attraction to men; the more modern understanding of the term can be summarized as “not-men who love not-men” to include more of the gender spectrum (Halberstam).

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