Moving Beyond the Binary: Exploring the Dimensions of Gender Presentation and Orientation[*]

Emily LENNING[**]

ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to provide a forum or discussion of the problematic nature of gendered language as it is currently employed by social scientists in particular, and the larger culture in general. Drawing from my previous research – a 2008 study in which a large-scale qualitative survey that included 249 individuals who identified as transgender, and 55 individuals who were in committed relationships with transgender people – we are able to see that the issue of language, it's construction, and it's use in informal conversation and especially scientific discourse is a topic in need of further exploration and theorizing. Informed by the participants in my study, I question the utility of the current language to describe not only the transgender experience, but the experiences of those who embrace traditional gender roles as well.

Keywords: Transgender, gender, language, gender presentation, gender orientation

[**]   *Fayetteville State University*

Social & Theoretical Framework

While transgender individuals experience acceptance and are even celebrated in other parts of the world (Greenberg, 2006), the U.S. has consistently been an alienating and downright dangerous place in which to challenge traditional (i.e., dichotomous) gender norms. Unfortunately, even the scientific community and members of society at large, still commonly define gender as being in relation to one's presumed biological sex (Namaste, 2005), which severely limits the recognition and acceptance of a variety of gender expressions. This sort of classification (gender as a function of sex), as other cultures have recognized, is extremely problematic, inasmuch as there have been many more than two biological sexes identified (Greenberg, 2006). In fact, estimates suggest that as many as 1 in 2,000 individuals are born intersex, which is a blanket term to describe over 70 variations of biological sex (Haynes, 2001), including Turner's Syndrome[1] and Klinefelter's Syndrome. Consequently, relying on only two classifications of sex (male and female) is not sufficient to make the assertion that one's gender is a function of one's biology.

Despite the problems related to rigid (binary) conceptualizations of sex, the U.S. continues to rely on male and female genetic codes to characterize gender which, as feminist theory has illuminated, is a social construction (as opposed to a biological fact). In fact, it can be said that, while sex is a noun that describes a genetic body, gender (though also technically a noun) should be considered a verb, in that it is defined by actions. Specifically, gender describes the ways in which we perform our perceived (or even preferred) sex. For example, feminine gender can be performed by acting out those behaviors that are socially acceptable for females, such as crossing ones legs at the knee when sitting or applying makeup skillfully. It is in these actions (and how they are reacted to) that gender is socially constructed. In other words, gender is attributed to an individual (by an audience) based on how well she or he acts out appropriate gendered cues. Accordingly, "Individuals engage in artful impression management in order to warrant the attributions of gender" (Weigert, Teitge & Teitge, 1986, 71). Sex, on the other hand, cannot be performed in this manner; simply, it is what it is.

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[1] Turner's Syndrome and Klinefelter's Syndrome are both genetic variations of biological sex that deviate from our traditional genetic classifications of male and female. For a complete description of these and all other known intersex conditions, visit "Intersex Conditions" at www.isna.org.

Though I tend to believe that gender is socially constructed and, therefore, not essential, it must be recognized that this is a rather privileged position to take, particularly as a non-trans person myself. Post-modern social scientists have argued quite successfully that gender is to some extent dramaturgical, however this notion implicitly requires an audience and, further, it suggests that "without this interaction there would be no need for gender" (Green, 2001, 63). For someone who is conflicted about her or his own gender, this assertion might seem absurd; to that individual, it may seem ridiculous (appropriately so) that one's gender is determined by "someone else's interpretation" (Green, 2004, 63). Thus, as Green (2001, 63) argues, "Non-transsexual interpretations of transsexual and transgender expression, both in physical space and in language, often reflect an easy dismissal of transpersons' agency, if not their very existence." In other words, a trans individual may not feel that gender reassignment surgery, for example, is a means of changing their gender at all. Conversely, they are changing their bodies to make them match the gender that is already inherent within them.

Methodological Issues Concerning Language

The debate over the differences between sex and gender as descriptive terms illuminates an even greater challenge to the present study. In specific, the way in which language is used and manipulated is particularly significant to this work because, as stated by Namaste (2005, 2), "questions of language are deeply political," including and especially relating to the language that surrounds gender expression. As such, the goal of this paper is exploratory in nature, aimed at providing a forum or discussion of the problematic nature of gendered language as it is currently employed by social scientists in particular, and the larger culture in general. Drawing from my previous (2008) research - a large-scale qualitative survey that included 249 individuals who identified as transgender, and 55 individuals who were in committed relationships with transgender people - I was able to see that the issue of language, it's construction, and it's use in informal conversation and especially scientific discourse was a topic in need of further exploration and theorizing. Informed by the participants in my study, I came to question the utility of the current language to describe not only the transgender experience, but the experiences of those who embrace traditional gender roles as well.

At the onset of this study, I had no idea just how intricate the issue of language would become. It was not long before it became apparent that language was just as important to address as the messages it produces or, rather, that one (language) must be critically analyzed before the other (the

resulting discourse) could be understood. Thus, the obvious place to begin is with a description of how I conceptualized the language that is the foundation for this study.

> "For the purpose of this research, the term transgender refers to: individuals who have undergone hormone treatment or surgery to reconstruct their bodies, or to those who transgress gender categories in ways that are less permanent. The term thus includes people who are at different stages of gender transformation: physically, emotionally and temporally" (Hines, 2006, 353).

It is important to note that this research includes those individuals who cannot afford surgical transition or that may not want to surgically alter their bodies; transgender, then, refers to a range of individuals, from those that simply reject normative gender roles to individuals that undergo a complete gender transition. This broad conceptualization of the term transgender is quite intentional. It is a rejection of the classist definition of trans-individuals as only those who can afford the expensive process of physical transformation. Beyond the fact that surgical transition is a luxury that few can afford, it must be recognized that sexual reassignment surgeries (especially those for female-to-male transsexuals) are less than perfected and often have debilitating and sometimes fatal consequences (Rubin, 2003). Consequently, "FTMs pursue surgery less vigorously than they do testosterone" (Rubin, 2003, 58). Given these facts, a study that defines transgender by one's decision to undergo surgery would yield an unrepresentative sample (Rubin, 2003).

It is also inappropriate, as Serano (2007) points out, to define an individual based upon how well one does or does not perform gender. In discussing the term "trans woman" and one who fits that particular description, she argues that,

> "No qualifications should be placed on the term 'trans woman' based on a persons ability to 'pass' as female, her hormone levels, or the state of her genitals – after all, it is downright sexist to reduce any woman (trans or otherwise) down to her mere body parts or require her to live up to certain societally dictated ideals regarding appearance" (Serano, 2007, 11).

Agreeing with Serano's sentiment, I maintain that transgender is a term where surrounding boundaries have not yet been fully appreciated. As the term 'transgender' is still being appropriately developed and understood, I

have chosen what, at present, is the best definition available for the purpose of exploratory research.

Though my choice in language attempts to capture a broad range of research participants, it is necessary to mention that the term transgender is not always embraced by individuals who I might otherwise consider an important part of my population. As Namaste (2005, 2, emphasis in original) argues, "It needs to be pointed out at this stage in history that increasingly, transsexuals[2] object to being included under a catch-all phrase of *transgender*." The term transgender emerged from the gay and lesbian communities and, thus, transsexuals who do not define themselves in relation to that community may resent the use of the term to describe them. Moreover, it should be noted that not all of the individuals who might describe themselves as transgender have the same social and health service needs of someone who is transsexual (Namaste, 2005). It should be expected, then, that using a broad term such as transgender to yield a research population will amass a broad range of identities and experiences. Indeed, it did; my final sample ranges from self described "cross dressers" to fully post-operative transsexuals. I think that, given the relative paucity of transgender research, that using this term "transgender" is easily justified, and was an appropriate term to use for an exploratory study such as this.

In addition to the word transgender, I use the terms male-to-female (MTF) or trans-women to refer to those individuals who were biologically born male but that embrace a female gender identity. Similarly, female-to-male (FTM) or trans-men will be used in reference to individuals who were born biologically female but that embrace a male gender identity. You will also note that I, at times, will use the terms transgender and transsexual synonymously, which some may criticize as a false comparison (Green, 2004), though it must be recognized that many the participants in this study also used these terms interchangeably and don't always choose to describe themselves with the same language as, for example, researchers would. It is true that transgender can sometimes be used to refer to those who reject normative gender but that do not necessarily desire a full gender transition, whereas the term transsexual is almost exclusively used as a label for those individuals that pursue a complete gender transition. However, as the findings revealed, many individuals who would be clinically labeled a transsexual because of certain decisions they have made (e.g., to undergo hormone therapy) do not intend to have full sexual reassignment surgery.

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[2] Namaste (2005) is referring to individuals who undergo (or intend to undergo) complete sexual reassignment surgery.

Moreover, given the overwhelming emphasis that our society places on the presentation of "proper" gender roles, the titles of transgender or transsexual are much less significant than the experiences that both identities share. Gender attribution, or the way outsiders place labels on individuals as a result of their perceived gender, "is important because the way we perceive another's gender affects the way we relate to the person" (Bornstein, 1994, 26). Given the social stigma attached to the transsexual label, we are not equipped to argue that there is in fact a considerable difference between the two classifications. Moreover, as Matt Kailey (2005), a transman, points out so succinctly, the label is more an artifact of what the individual has chosen to identify with, as opposed to some rigidly defined biological explanation of one's current gender status. He notes:

> "We're a society of labels, and I was having a hard time finding one that fit. Was I a man? A transman? A female-to-male transsexual? All or none of the above?…It took me a while to decide, but now, several years later, I still use the label I selected in the beginning-transman" (Kailey, 2005, 26).

Other terms also emerged in the data I collected, such as genderqueer, transboi, butch, female man, queer FTM, transmasculine, trannyboi, transdyke, multigendered, and cisgender (i.e., non-trans individual). These terms are not as easily described as those mentioned above, primarily because (unlike transsexual or transgender) they did not come from the medical or the gay/lesbian communities. Rather, these labels were created by the individuals who embrace them and, therefore, are preferable. While the terms transsexual and transgender are institutionalized descriptions of individuals who reject normative gender, the others are rejections of the clinical and/or limiting nature of the two terms.

Given the myriad of language used to describe the various identities that the participants used to describe themselves, it appropriately took quite awhile at the proverbial "drawing board" to decide what language (e.g., transgender v. transsexual) to use in my recruitment instruments. Though it was difficult, I was somewhat confident in my own understanding of the terms (and their significance) and felt that my choices of language were of more importance to my data than this would ultimately be to my participants. The fourth survey question asked of transgender individuals and the third survey question for significant others, "What is your gender identity?" produced a more diverse collection of responses than I could ever have anticipated.

Findings

As I left the response possibilities open-ended, some respondents spent an entire paragraph naming, defining and describing their gender identity to me. Indeed, very few people answered the question in one word (e.g. male, female, transgender). There were, however, three trends in gender identity for transgender participants, and two trends for significant others. Generally, transgender participants either identified themselves as having a very particular identity (e.g., male, female, FTM), considered themselves multi-gendered or "queer," or rejected gendered labels altogether. Significant others, on the other hand, tended to identify themselves with a specific gender (e.g., male, female, cisgender) or answered the question by stating their sexual orientation, ignoring gender altogether.

In light of the large number of transgender respondents, the number of individuals who described their gender identity in one or two words was relatively small, and the variety of words used was unexpected. Identities ran the gamut of male, man, transman, transsexual (TS), MTF, genderqueer, androgynous, FTM, female-bodied man, transguy, trannyboi, transdyke, transmasculine, queer, intergender, transwoman, ambigender, transvestite, transgenderist, Tgirl, crossdresser, bigendered, and woman. The more common terms (e.g. MTF, TS, etc.) were often offered with no additional explanation, but many respondents who used less common words took the liberty of providing me with their own definitions. For example, someone who identified as Ambigender, defined it as "(mixed gendered, both are good and expressed, neither repressed) Androgyne - ambigendered being a subcategory of androgyne, other words for androgyne: intergender, gender queer, other gender." Some respondents' answers were downright clinical, such as a biological male who stated,

> "I am a Dual Role Transvestite, as diagnosed by a Gender Identity Clinic. F.641 I assume the role of the Opposite sex and behaviour (sic) as well as dress in the clothes of the opposite sex on a full time or temporary basis. No desire for SRS or Body modification. I take female Hormones, and also have a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria."

Still others identified themselves with terms that even they struggled with, such as a respondent ("Male, but somewhat femme") who said "I identify as intergender, as having a gender between male and female. I freely admit that I'm not sure just what this means." Though I left gender identity up to my respondents to decide, one participant was angry at my choice to use the term transgender in my questions, i.e., "By the way, Transsexual Men and

Women Don't like to be classed in as Transgender, I'm NOT a cross Dresser (Transgender) I'm Transsexual there is a difference."

Those who weren't able to describe their gender identity succinctly often reported feeling multi-gendered, while still others rejected gendered labels altogether by insisting that they don't have a gender, per se. It seems, however, that both options serve the purpose of subverting binary gender norms *as we know them*, while simultaneously reinforcing them. For example, one respondent answered, "Multigendered: I figure if I am home in multiple ethnicities, why can't I be in multiple genders? My gender is very fluid, and may change from minute to minute. I have been called 'ma'am' walking into a store, and 'sir' on the way out." True, this description is restricted to a female/male dichotomy, but it rejects the either/or qualification that we have come to accept. Others, such as a respondent who claims, "Identity is multi-faceted," also describes themselves within a binary gender system. This person continues by saying that the "[e]asiest way to describe it would be 'male.' I also identify with the following: man, guy, androgynous, progressive male, balanced male, man with a transsexual history, transgender, transsexual, 'variation on a theme'." While this person considers their gender to be multi-faceted, their many "facets" still remain generally within the boundaries of traditional masculinity.

Several respondents claimed to reject gender identification (or, at least, the male/female binary system) altogether. One respondent said that,

> "I have no gender identity. Gender is a construct I have never been able to consistently follow. My sexual identity seems to strongly feel 'male' and this is a very critical distinction for me because I truly do not feel my gender has anything to be with my being transsexual. I'm not particularly masculine, so I don't know what makes me feel male other than feeling very sad I don't have a male body. I'm not very feminine, either…and I don't feel female except in the very realist sense of my body having female parts."

Another respondent answered the question, but felt the need to put her identity into context by saying that,

> "Given that the definition of gender is the social expression of one of our culture's two accepted sexes, Female or Male, then I would have to say that I generally fit under the Female category. However, being raised as a boy in a matriarchal family, free of the expectations of feminine passivity and 'typical' gender roles, I feel comfortable

> pursuing interests and activities our society frowns upon women participating in."

What these responses suggest is that even those respondents who are distinctly aware of and apprehensive about our current dichotomous system of gender struggle to define themselves outside of it.

Significant others had less trouble stating their gender identity, though they did provide a wide range of answers, including woman, female, genderqueer, queer female, genetic female, female-identified, genetic woman, femme female, cisgendered dyke/faggy boi bottom, shemale, male, and androgyne. Though some of the answers made the respondent's sex/gender unclear (e.g., genderqueer), the majority of the sample identified themselves as having a feminine or female identity[3] in some form or another. Some of the respondents were particularly sensitive to the excluding nature of some language, such as a female who answered that she was "female bodied, female identified, not a 'woman' (ie avoiding femininity/gender roles/performantivity (sic) of gender)." Several others used the term "cisgendered female" to describe their gender identity, presumably so as not to suggest that their partner's gender identity was any less "real" than theirs.

Six of the 55 significant other respondents designated a term of sexual orientation in place of their gender identity, or as a qualifier of their gender (e.g., heterosexual female). Though I intended for subsequent questions to uncover the challenges that face significant others, it seems as though a simple question about gender identity uncovered a core challenge they experience. As transgender folks move through a gender transition, their partner potentially faces a transition of their own; the transition of their sexual orientation. For example, one woman answered the question by saying that, "I have always identified as a straight woman – until I met my current SO," and another simply states, "Heterosexual now. Had experimented with women in college." A "heterosexual female" clarifies that she is "straight with no bends," and another says, "I like both mean (sic) and women. A shemale is what I desire most though. The best of both worlds, so to speak." While it could be that the respondents didn't know the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation (which is unlikely given their partner's gender identity, the sophistication of responses, and that they received the survey through communities in which this distinction is common knowledge), it appears that significant others struggle with the

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[3]   While the transgender sample was evenly divided between individuals with masculine identities and individuals with feminine identities, the majority (though not all) of significant others were women in relationships with transmen.

relationship between their gender identity and their sexual orientation, and how that is affected by their partner's transgender identity.

Though these respondents eluded to their sexual orientation in answering my question about gender identity, there was a separate question for both trans individuals and their significant others on sexual orientation (i.e., what is your sexual orientation?). This question, and the answers it produced, proved to be as complicated (if not more so) than the question on gender identity. Transgender participants reported being hetero-queer, bisexual, heterosexual, pansexual[4], gay, queer, lesbian, bi-curious, omnisexual, lipstick lesbian, trans lesbian, hetero-male lesbian, asexual lesbian, asexual[5], and monosexual[6]. The overwhelming majority of respondents reported being bisexual, pansexual, or queer. The latter two identifications, however, were often used as an alternative to the limiting nature of bisexuality. For example, "I identify as queer, or, to make it simpler for people, bisexual. But there are obvious problems with the term 'bisexual' and I've been attracted to/involved with people who don't fit the two-gender norms." Or, similarly, another participant answered, "pansexual (I used to identify as bisexual, but that implies two, and my sexuality is not limited to the binary)." Thus, while the (aforementioned) list of sexualities offered by my respondents seem long, it appears as though the various terms actually serve the purpose of correcting flaws in the traditionally understood meanings of more commonplace identities, i.e., heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual.

Despite the confident answers of many, some transgender participants revealed the problematic nature of sexual orientation labels. The quagmire of sexual orientation was illuminated both in terms of one's changing preferences over the course of one's life, and in terms of finding a suitable label if one doesn't fit the traditional gender norms that have historically defined sexual orientation. One respondent went so far as to describe the fluidity of their sexuality over the course of 57 years; "Hetero curious since June of 1965 Married Hetero since June of 1972 BI curious since August of 1983 BI actual since March of 2001 Trans curious since August of 2001 Trans 3 ways sometime since October of 2002 Sort of asexual nudists at present at 66 & 56." Even cisgendered individuals can have a similar range of sexual orientations over the course of their lifetime, but the complicated nature of

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[4] Pansexuality (also know as omnisexuality) is a sexual attraction to all people, regardless of their gender identity of biological sex. Whereas bisexuality implies a dichotomy, pansexuality suggests the possibility of attraction to a spectrum of gender identities.

[5] Asexuals report having no feelings of sexual attraction.

[6] Monosexuals can be heterosexual or homosexual, but are strictly attracted to only one sex or gender.

defining this is amplified when one must move outside of traditional labels to create an identity.

Defining one's sexual orientation when one's gender identity doesn't fit traditional language is a problem unto itself. A female-identified person, for example, angrily stated that she, "wouldn't have any way of knowing for sure, since womyn-born-womyn consider me a worthless freak, much less something they'd want to be in bed with. I know that I like guys and often guys go quite far in flirting with me before they realize I'm a trap." Presumably, this respondent feels as though her sexual orientation is questionable because those she is attracted to may not consider her a "legitimate" or "real" woman. Though it was common for participants to struggle with producing a label that appropriately described their sexuality, only one person said that they "have no sexual orientation." This pre-operative MTF admitted that she is "very disgusted by my male anatomy that I refuse to allow anyone to see or touch it. I feel that sex is not something that I would be interested in with anyone of any gender or sexual orientation."

Significant others responded similarly when providing their sexual orientations, identifying as straight, bisexual, pansexual, transamorous[7], queer, lesbian, translesbian[8], bi switch, and transensual. Again, bisexual, queer, and pansexual were the overwhelming majority of reported sexual orientations though, again, the latter two were often used to "make up," as some participants explained it, for the limitations of the bisexual label. One participant described being both "pansexual and trans-amourous, more attracted to nontraditional gender representations." Similarly, another woman said that she identifies as "queer. I also sometime self-identify as lesbian, but I think that 'queer' does a better job at more fully encompassing my attractions to FTMs, butch dykes and femme lesbians."

Where significant others differed from transgender participants, however, is that they more often gave a response that reflected their partner's transgender identity. For example, a cisgender female responded that she is "basically heterosexual, though since my partner has female breasts and I enjoy all of her, I guess perhaps bi leanings…though predominantly hetero." Or another woman who said that "I am usually attracted to women and used to consider myself a lesbian, but since my (now) husband came out and

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[7] Transamorous, also known as transensual, is having a sexual attraction to transgender individuals.

[8] A translesbian is a male-to-female transsexual (pre or post-operative) who is sexually attracted to females.

we went through that whole process, my definitions have become much more fluid." The relationship between one's own sexual identity and the gender identity of her or his partner was best illustrated by a cisgender woman who said, "this could be pages long—simply put, I identify as queer. I often still refer to myself as 'gay' or lesbian,' but my partner (now legally my husband) identifies as a straight man, so it's too complicated for most." The struggle that significant others face with their own sexual orientation can often lead to complete confusion; "I identified as a lesbian for many years, until my partner's transition. I no longer identify by any label 'bi, lesbian' etc, because I'm just not sure!"

Summary of Findings

To say the least, I was overwhelmed by the myriad of unique responses received by what I thought were two simple questions (indeed, questions that sociologists generally think of as being simple demographic descriptors). What all of the answers have in common, however, is that they all illuminated the problematic nature of gendered language as it is currently constituted and sexual orientations as they are traditionally categorized. The multiplicity of responses also raises the question of whether more categories for naming gender identity and sexual orientation makes language more inclusive, or whether so many labels serves to complicate the issue and, consequently, makes language even more exclusive.

Reconsidering Language

Language and how it is used can greatly affect how we communicate about gender, hence having an effect on how we understand it from a sociological perspective. In the technical sense, gender is a noun; it describes a person as being masculine or feminine or, more commonly, as biologically male or female. This definition, however, falls short of conveying the actual meaning of gender. In particular, it ignores the actions one must engage in to be described as masculine or feminine, or as male or female. True, one is born with biological sex characteristics (such as genitalia), but those characteristics have little to do with what gender others attribute on a daily basis. We don't typically go about our daily lives without pants on, thus others use the gendered behavioral cues that we perform in order to attribute a label. Likewise, we choose particular ways in which to act in order for others to perceive us as being one gender or the other. Hence, the noun gender does not envelop the concept that we wish to consider when, for example, social scientists attempt to study it.

Pointing this quagmire out, however, is not to say that we should abandon the word gender and create a new one that captures the physical actions

required to maintain a gender identity. Simply adding words to our vocabulary can sometimes make things more complicated than clear. What this is to say, though, is that we need to reassess the true meaning of the language we are using. It is easy, if we understand that gender is a social construction, to dismiss its significance in our daily lives. The truth is that even someone who argues that gender is a restrictive, patriarchal construct (such as a radical feminist), goes to extreme measures to maintain their own gender identity. We are, whether we like it or not, extremely dedicated to the physical behaviors that characterize gender, even if we attempt to go about subverting them. For example, even a cisgendered female who has decided to reject the behaviors that characterize femininity (e.g., wearing make-up) is still adhering to gender roles, i.e., by adopting what has been defined as masculine behaviors. Since we have culturally attributed certain characteristics to femininity and masculinity, we are forced to work within those confines.

Thus, we need to envision gender as we do sexual orientation. It is commonly accepted that one has a sexual orientation, i.e., that a person is oriented towards being attracted to people of one gender or the other, or to both or, as these data have revealed, to a spectrum of individuals, including those who do not fit the standard definition of femininity or masculinity. It is also commonly accepted (at least from a social constructionist perspective) that one's sexual orientation is fluid and can vary from minute to minute, day to day, or year to year. As such, it makes sense that we recognize that gender is an orientation as well. To reconceptualize gender as an orientation, we are privileging the notion that gender does not simply describe one's body parts, but that it describes the masculine or feminine behaviors and characteristics that one prefers to present to others. Thus, *gender orientation*, like sexual orientation, can (and does) change from minute to minute, day to day, or year to year. Gender, from this perspective, is a preference (like sexual orientation), and not a biological fact. If gender were a biological fact, then transgender individuals would simply need to undergo hormone therapy and sexual reassignment surgery to be comfortable in their own skin. To the contrary, as these data have suggested, trans individuals spend a lot of time learning to behave in ways that are representative of their preferred gender and, significantly, they do not feel "right" or self-confident unless they do so in a way that they perceive to be "correct" (that allows them to "pass").

The idea of passing brings us to another dimension of gender, specifically *gender presentation.* As the participants of this study illustrated, one's gender orientation can differ from the gender that others attribute to that person. Take, for example, a male-to-female trans woman who, because of

her masculine characteristics (e.g., extreme height, pronounced Adam's Apple, facial hair), is perceived by others to be male. This does not change her gender orientation, as she can still feel that she is a woman in every sense of the word. Despite how she feels, however, she is *presenting* (even if unintentionally) to others as male, and is thus being perceived as male. Thus, gender orientation and gender presentation are two very different, yet related, dimensions of the broader term 'gender.' They are interrelated in the sense that individuals (generally) wish for their gender orientation and their gender presentation to be congruent with one another. Unfortunately, it is when these two dimensions are conflicting that transgender individuals face the most hardship, both in terms of inner turmoil and in their interactions with others. This, however, does not make them any less (or perhaps even more) 'gendered' than someone whose orientation and presentation match.

Thus, before we continue to study gender sociologically or to develop more transgender theory, we must have a universal understanding of the true meaning and dimensions of gender. This requires us to recognize that gender, in and of itself, is not a description of anything. Gender, simply, is a set of masculine and feminine behaviors and actions that we engage in to manage the impressions that others have of us. It is a broad term that attempts to capture what are the true dimensions of gender, namely one's **gender orientation** *and* **gender presentation;** neither of which can fully be described by the terms 'male' and 'female.' It is difficult to categorize some trans people as being (biologically) male or female for the simple fact that their gender presentation and their gender orientation do not match in the way that is socially acceptable. This does not make them any less 'man' when they choose to use the term, or any less 'woman.' What it does mean is that they do not fit into the traditional definitions of male and female, because these terms, quite simply, are not sufficient to describe gender. Because our gender is a combination of both our gender orientation and our gender presentation, which are sometimes at odds with one another, sociological research needs to begin considering these dimensions as separate, yet equally important, aspects of our research participant's identities. By ignoring these multiple aspects of gender, we have limited our understanding of the transgender person and experience.

It is because of these two dimensions of gender that the significant other becomes so vital to understanding the transgender experience. When we describe our own gender, for example, we are likely to only focus on one aspect of it (e.g., orientation), because we are not accustomed to seeing our gender as being multi-dimensional. This, of course, is expected in a society that views gender from a very narrow perspective. What the significant others in this study have shown, however, is that (even though they may not be able to name it) they are very aware of the multiple dimensions of their

partner's identity, as well as of their own. The transgender participants (whether or not their two dimensions were conflicting) were largely preoccupied with their gender orientation, or the way they would prefer to be seen by others. The fact that they were obsessed with orientation does not mean that their gender presentation was of any less significance. Indeed, the significant others frequently identified their partner's gender presentation (not orientation) as being the primary concern in their relationship, because how their partners were treated by others was largely dependent on how well they were able to pass. Wanting to be masculine or feminine, after all, are highly demanded and appreciated qualities or performances in our society. It is, in this context, only when your desire to be masculine or feminine doesn't match up with your perceived gender that you become an outcast. This is not to say that trans individuals don't recognize this, but that significant others are in many cases more aware of it (inasmuch as they raised the issue more frequently), perhaps because of the strong feelings they have for their partner and their "outsider looking in" perspective.

Moreover, the significant other is grappling with changes in their own orientation and presentation, as evidenced by the many who said they simply didn't know how to behave with their partner now that they (the significant other) admitted struggling with their own gender orientation. Changes to the gender roles in the couple dynamic forced a lot of significant others to question not only their own gender orientation and presentation, but their sexual orientation and presentation as well. Those who at one time presented as gay and lesbian now have to face the issue of presenting as heterosexual, and vice versa, thus causing them to question their own orientations. Consider a heterosexual couple that stays together after the male partner reveals a transgender identity and decides to undergo sexual reassignment surgery, as many of my participants did. The female partners' sexual orientation doesn't necessarily change (at least not in action, as suggested by the number that chose celibacy after transition), but certainly their sexual presentation does. Now being seen as a lesbian, the cisgender partner must grapple with the fact that her orientation no longer matches her presentation, either. Hence, the significant other is providing us additional insight into the dimensions of both gender and sexual orientation and presentation.

Application to Future Research
Presumably, when participants "check the appropriate box," they are inclined to check their biological sex, not their gender orientation or presentation. What this study has exposed is that one's gender presentation equally affects one's experiences as their orientation. Thus, for example, if we are trying to understand the experiences of transwomen and we only

provide gender boxes that denote two or three orientations, we haven't really tapped into how that gender identity connects to their experiences. When participants only have two or three boxes to choose from it would likely produce a range of experiences, from positive to negative, giving us no understanding of what may have contributed to the differences in those experiences. Hence, the need to expand our conceptualization of gender to include both orientation and presentation is of great significance to the utility of our work as gender scholars.

If future work were to include multiple measures to assess one's gender ***and all of its dimensions,*** then we would be better equipped to understand how one's orientation and presentation affects one's experiences in the larger society. This work suggests that the more one's orientation and presentation conflict with one another, the more social challenges the individual faces (regardless of whether that person is transgender or cisgender). Accordingly, I would urge future work to investigate this possible correlation further.

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