

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Gender, love, and sex: Using duoethnography to research gender and sexuality minority experiences of transgender relationships

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Vincent, Ben and Erikainen, Sonja (2020). Gender, love, and sex: Using duoethnography to research gender and sexuality minority experiences of transgender relationships. *Sexualities*, 23(1-2) pp. 28–43.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2018 The Authors

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1363460718796457>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

This article uses a duoethnographic approach to explore the intersection of lesbian and queer sexualities and transgender identities in intimate relationships. By comparing experiences of gender and sexual identity negotiation within transgender relationships, the authors document how sexual identity borders are traversed, and how gender is negotiated and interrogated in and through these relationships. We argue that our differential experiences of 'queer' as an identity, our relationship challenges, and how we express/relate to gender are heavily shaped by feminist politics, and how social interactions are gendered.

## **Keywords**

transgender, queer, lesbian, identity, duoethnography

# **Gender, Love, and Sex: using duoethnography to research gender and sexuality minority experiences of transgender relationships**

## **Introduction**

The cisnormative<sup>1</sup> conflation of a subject's gender presentation and their genitals percolates throughout society (Kessler and McKenna, 1978), and the LGB population is by no means exempt. The construction of same-sex desire collapses gender identity, expression, and embodiment, such that the subject of gay male desire (for instance) is assumed to identify as male, be read socially as male, and be assigned male at birth. It is often assumed that if a member of a heterosexual or gay relationship comes out as transgender, that relationship will inevitably end as the gender identity of the trans partner no longer 'matches' their partner's sexuality (Meyerowitz, 2002). Additionally, a transgender person may feel distress through their gender identity being erased by a partner's sexuality, for example if a gay man talks of his partner as 'boyfriend' when his partner is a trans woman (who prior to coming out was positioned as a gay/bisexual

man). Conversely, a gay or lesbian individual may struggle with their non-heterosexuality being rendered invisible<sup>2</sup> if/when their partner is no longer read as 'the same sex'.

We draw upon Sanger's (2010) discussion of the heterogeneity of cis-trans partnership<sup>3</sup> narratives. Cisgender partners may or may not know their partner's trans status, and partners may meet prior to, during, or following a medical and/or social transition. Sanger notes that 'intimate partnership with a trans person challenged how they [cis partners] themselves perceived gender and sexuality' (2010: 2). The literature on trans partners near-exclusively considers cisgender partners, leaving the gender complexity some partners' experiences untapped. This paper builds on Sanger's contribution, unpacking trans partner narratives that fall outside of hegemonic narratives of what it means 'to be' cis or trans. We use the authors' self-narratives, through a collaborative study of gender and sexuality.

Little attention has been given to how interactions with transgender partners may impact gay and lesbian experiences of both gender identity and sexuality (re)negotiation. This is due in part to a cis-centricity within sexuality studies, which can reproduce the assumption that gay men and lesbian women only have relationships with people with the same gender (and/or genitals) as themselves. Our sexual stories share striking parallels – both authors came out as gay or lesbian, and each previously had long term sexual and romantic relationships with trans male partners (further, Ben Vincent is

married to a transgender woman). However, whilst Vincent renegotiated their sexuality away from gay, instead embracing the deliberate ambiguity of queer, Sonja Erikainen not only maintained, but felt a need to protect her status as a (masculine) lesbian. Whilst both authors might be described as gender non-conforming, Vincent came out as non-binary – identifying as neither male nor female (Richards et al., 2016; Yeadon-Lee, 2016). Erikainen experiences a resonance with the political category of woman, even while tensions are still present and intersecting with sexuality, which are illustrated within the duoethnographic account.

Following a brief review of trans relationships and self-expression through narrative writing, we theorise our use of self-narratives before accounting for our use of duoethnography (Norris et al., 2012) – methodologically, and ethically. Our analysis is then demarcated into three subsections: ‘traversing sexual identity borders’, ‘negotiating relational tensions’, and ‘interrogating our genders’. We relate our experiences to structural social forces in order to explore three key questions: how we struggled with identity categories, and why; what tensions we experienced between our sexualities/genders and our partners’ genders, and how these were negotiated; and what factors inform our relationships with our gender identities and presentations. Our analyses illustrate the complex and interconnected nature of the explanations we co-conceive. We summarize by recognising that our experiences of accommodation, resistance, and change are intimately entwined with and affected by our socio-political

commitments, notably to LGBTQ communities and feminist politics. We intend to show that our egalitarian, duoethnographic production of personal narratives not only functions to disrupt traditional 'researcher/researched' power relations, but opens greater recognition of the complexities of identity (re)negotiation in relation to emancipatory politics and interpersonal interactions.

### **Transgender relationships and self-narratives**

The proliferation of queer theory has deconstructed and destabilised static and binary notions of sexuality and gender categories by advancing a conceptualisation of identifications as variable and unstable. Research on transgender identities has underscored the limitations of binary categorisations (Hines, 2010). Work focusing on transgender individuals' relationships (Bockting et al., 2009; Devor, 1997; Hines, 2007; Iantaffi and Bockting, 2011) shows how category boundaries are negotiated and problematized by those whose lived experiences do not easily fit within binary frames. Part of this deconstructive effort has been emerging literature documenting experiences of transgender individuals' partners (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler, 2009; Pfeffer, 2017; Sanger, 2010; Tompkins, 2014; Ward, 2010). Work on cisgender female partners of transgender men largely focuses on gendered labour performed in the context of sexual intimacy, and emotional and physical caretaking (Brown, 2009; 2010; Cromwell, 1999; Franklin, 2014; Pfeffer, 2008). Much of the literature considering transgender women's relationships prioritises particular aspects of health – sexual (Melendez and Pinto, 2007;

Operario et al., 2011) or mental (Gamarel et al., 2014). This paper contributes by focusing on gendered and relational tensions around category boundaries that can be experienced by partners of trans individuals, whose own gendered and sexual identities are, from the outset, already a product of coming out.

Our contribution builds on self-narratives of boundary negotiations. Relatedly, transgender autobiographical writing has become a subject of analysis in its own right (Hawley, 2015; Prosser, 1995). While such autobiographies have not generally sought to engage with academic knowledge production, they have implicitly (Stone, 2006; Stryker, 1994) and explicitly (Nordmarken, 2014) influenced transgender studies. We follow Ellis (2004) to the extent that biography becomes autoethnography when one's personal account is connected to 'the cultural, social, and political' (p. xix), although we differ in our execution and presentation.

### **Theorising self-narratives**

As others have argued, 'stories people tell contribute significantly to the identities they create, perform and live' and storied lives 'often take a relational focus... because the story defines who one is in relation to others' (Ellis et al., 1997: 319). We argue that by collaborating to connect personal experiences to broader social discourses, we are better able to understand how identities are narratively formed and re-interpreted, and

how identity negotiations take shape in broader cultural contexts as well as interpersonally.

Selves and identities are interactively constituted, and we convey impressions of ourselves to others in ways influenced by the interactive context (Goffman, 1959). How we narrate our identities and the meanings we ascribe to our self-narratives remain *emergent*, because they are re-framed contextually (Plummer, 1995). Thus, self-narratives are always partial and never neutral. The self and identity narratives in this paper are contextual interpretations constructed in a particular interactive setting. Similarly, we also reinterpret our past selves in relation to present circumstances, because storied telling of the self almost invariably re-makes the past through the interpretive lens of the present (Jackson, 2006). The factual distortions that might therefore result are only troubling if narrative accounts are understood as *objective* attempts at representation. Rather, our aim is to understand the significance of meanings that we attribute to our lived experiences in their interactive contexts (Ellis et al., 1997). This does not imply that our narratives lose their relationship with empirical reality. Rather, narrative production of the self is 'an empirical social process involving a stream of joint actions in local contexts themselves bound into wider negotiated social worlds' (Plummer, 1995: 24).



The self-narratives we present are relational, not only because they were interactively produced, but because they are implicated within broader cultural systems of power and connected to the lives of others. Limited frames of sexual and gendered identifications are possible in specific contexts; they are culturally and temporally constrained (Jackson, 2006; Plummer, 1995). As social products, our sexual/gendered self-narratives are constrained by the social resources that have been available to us, and we navigate our lives in relation to these. Collaboratively formed self-narratives thus offer an in-depth perspective on the culturally constrained and relational construction of identities. We shed new light on identity negotiations by bringing together Vincent's experiences of formulating a non-binary gender and queer sexual identity over the course of two long-term relationships (with a transgender man, and then later with a transgender woman), with Erikainen's experiences of navigating a masculine-identified lesbian identity in a relationship with a transgender man.

### **Building Collaborative Narratives via Duoethnography**

The earliest explicit duoethnography was presented by Joe Norris and Richard Sawyer, in a conference paper (2004) where they alternated their narratives to explore how attitudes towards their gay and straight sexual orientations were 'learned and relearned' (Norris and Sawyer, 2012: 14). Their conceptualisation of duoethnography drew upon Pinar's concept of 'currere' (1975), whereby autobiographical self-examination is used to retrace and reconstruct knowledge one has of oneself. An arguable difference that

duoethnography has from the method of currere and autoethnography is that as authors, we are sites, rather than topics of research. Our life experiences are valuable because of how they help produce meaning in relation to wider social phenomena, as Lund and Evans also demonstrate in their earlier application of duoethnography to gender and sexual orientation (2006) in relation to activism. We share a commitment to deconstructing 'what may pass as natural and normal' (Adams and Holman Jones, 2008: 383) – however, while our duoethnography may be potentially positioned as queer, we do not seek to couple it specifically to the contributions of queer theory.

Key features of duoethnography which resonate with our conceptualisation of our self-narratives include polyvocality – we maintain clear differences, and (unlike with co-constructed narrative) are not creating 'one story out of two' (Ellis, 2004: 72). This disrupts potential metanarratives in that readers are not lead to see either one of our accounts as a "better" navigation. Rather, we follow Norris and Sawyer in inviting readers to 'juxtapose their stories with the ones in the printed text' (Norris and Sawyer, 2012: 10). In doing so, we hope readers will gain idiosyncratic insights from synergy between our accounts, and re-examination of their existent knowledge and experiences.

### **Practical and Ethical Doings**

In beginning this project, we shared previous diary entries and pieces of writing to help contextualize our experiences and conceptions of our sexualities and gender identities

to each other. We then co-produced an interview schedule, and constructed questions to stimulate mutual reflection on how our relationships shaped our genders and sexualities, and why. We formally recorded and transcribed two hours of mutual, conversational interviewing. Thematic analysis was deployed – initially working separately, and then coming together to compare our analyses. In doing so, we found that the passages we had each deemed particularly rich greatly overlapped. We used these to construct our central themes of ‘traversing sexual identity borders’, ‘negotiating relational tensions’, and ‘interrogating our genders’. Our analysis is written in the third person to allow for a uniform experience for the reader and avoid inconsistency when each of us writes of ourselves, the other, or both. Our conversational passages are taken as verbatim quotations from our transcript, rather than constructed post-hoc as a designer-vessel to carry our intended meanings. Among the wide variety of different presentational forms possible when doing duoethnography, we resonate with the approach taken by McClellan and Sader (2012), juxtaposing excerpts of our conversation with passages of third person analysis.

In our analytical process, we recognised that some of our intimate conceptualisations of selfhood rendered us and others vulnerable in ways we could not justify including. This is another site of difference to autoethnographic approaches – our vulnerability was situated in opening up to each other, rather than through presenting especially vulnerable selves to the reader. Because our self-narratives are inseparably intertwined

with those of our (ex- and current) partners, this raises the question of 'our ethical responsibilities toward intimate others who are implicated in the stories we write about ourselves' (Ellis, 2007: 5). We must manage the privacy and consent of intimate others who are in our stories, and difficult to anonymize. Ellis (2007: 24) has defended her decision to conceal potentially hurtful or upsetting parts of a published autoethnography from intimate others implicated in her narrative by appealing to the "greater good" of research, arguing that one should assess on this basis the extent to which potential risk to others can be justified. However, we do not accept that concealment or potential risk to our intimate others can be justified by such an appeal. This limits the stories that we can publicly tell about ourselves, because some stories that we desire to tell would render others vulnerable. While we maintain that we have the right to tell our stories, we do not consider this to imply that we have *more* right to our stories than those who form an integral part of them. Following dialogues with those implicated in our stories (where possible), we omitted any details that they wished to keep private.

### **Traversing sexual identity borders**

The dualities of homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, and masculine/feminine flatten lived complexities under a simplified binary framework. The intricacies of gendered and sexual diversity can be rendered invisible due to how bodies are read through these lenses. For those of us at the borderlands of categories, boundary navigations can be at the forefront of our intimate lives, with ethical quandaries arising in mundane

interactions. This manifested through potential tension between desiring our partner's identities to be correctly recognised (as men or women), whilst not erasing our own gendered and sexual complexities in the process.

Erikainen: I struggle with the boundaries of lesbian identity because it's binarised. It presumes in most people's minds, and in my mind as well, a binary where you are either a female or a woman, who desires females or women. I cannot think of an identity that wouldn't have borders, and I think that's the issue: identities construct borders around who's included and excluded. My own experience has been that I have been excluded, by some people, from lesbian identity because of my relationship with a trans man. Him identifying as a man and me identifying as a lesbian are incompatible identities that render unintelligible our relationship. It was like: 'oh, well then, since you're with a man, you must be straight'. When I replied 'no, I'm a lesbian', they would say: 'ok, then he must be a woman'. And I would say 'no, he is not a woman'. For a moment, because of this, I started to identify as queer because I felt like I had to. I could no longer be lesbian because it didn't fit. Were reasons like this why you rejected gay identity?

Vincent: I don't think it's the reason why I rejected gayness, though it might have been a big part of why I embraced queerness. I was thinking queer doesn't need to be nailed down, and I liked that. Which kind of implies that gay is nailed down. This is why we could say I went towards queer, rather than reconceptualising gay for myself as something with wider possibilities. I could have done that,

potentially. But I didn't have a very strong motivation to hang onto gay. I had been alienated from it because of the problematics – racism, sexism, transphobia – I associated with gay, but didn't see with queer. The way I saw it, people who tended to identify as queer rather than gay were much more receptive to addressing, more sensitive to those issues. My ex-boyfriend being a trans man helped me move from gay to queer due to the fact that, I'd be much more likely under a framework of gayness to be told 'you're not a real gay, you're in a relationship with someone with a vagina'. I would resist any reading of myself as gay in the past that would make those claims. I queered my gayness by being in a relationship with a gay trans man, yet this is problematic because of how it discursively positions romantic or sexual relations with gay trans men as transgressive. I would sort of say 'I'm gay, he is gay, and we are gay, genitals don't matter', so by queering my gayness I mean challenging cisnormative gayness. I could push for that kind of politics around gayness and queerness. Queer gay. The gay queer. And then the queer. Also, I had no way of answering or resolving the fact that my first really intense romantic and sexual attraction, was to a cis woman. Even after coming out I felt secretly like I was a bad gay, an imperfect gay, someone who didn't always know. And I didn't have any way of making sense of that at all. But that was much more possible under queerness than it was under gayness.

Erikainen: I find that fascinating, because I have associations with queer as white and male and, to me, queer is too open. It's the kind of broader criticism that has been made of queer as well, that in a sense, it can – it doesn't necessarily, but it can – silence gender differences. For me, it silences my gender. I identified as queer when I was with a trans man for a while because identifying as lesbian, I felt constructed him as woman. Yet, I can't let go of lesbian, because I feel queer almost erases my lesbianism. I could reconceptualise lesbian as less binarised I suppose. But I don't think I want to, and yet, by not wanting to I am being exclusionary to my partner's identity as a man in problematic ways which I wouldn't be if I were queer. But then, if I were queer, where is my gender? I find it very difficult.

As Halberstam put it, 'failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well' (2011: 3). If the 'gold star' gay or lesbian is one who has never had sex with 'the opposite sex', what are we? Differences over time may explain why Vincent never arrived at a bisexual identity – the desire for a (singular) girl in the past wasn't deemed significant or present when gay was arrived at, but left a mark that threatened gayness. Identity reconceptualization allowed Vincent to escape the thorny tensions between bodies, desire, and labels, which pre-dated the relationship with their trans male partner considerably. Both authors experienced their relationships with trans men as a catalyst to claiming 'queer', but negotiated that claim differently as positive and negative. This illustrates how the politics of gender intersect with sexual identities. There is a key

difference in that being positioned as a lesbian disenfranchised Erikainen's partner's gender in ways that being positioned as gay did not for Vincent's partner's gender. The difficulty experienced with labels therefore was differentially sourced – for Erikainen, this was about not misrepresenting their partner. For Vincent, it was how engaging with transgender politics highlighted intersectional exclusionary practices within gay male culture which was alienating. Gender is situated as the structuring characteristic of sexuality in ways that render unintelligible complexities and multiplicities of sexual desire and practice.

Yet, for Erikainen, queer as an identity was 'too open' in ways that silenced gendered differences; she needed an identity label that centres gender as a structuring reality of her sexuality (Franklin, 2014; Pfeffer, 2017). The 'gender-neutrality' of 'queer' has been conceptualised both as silencing gender difference and as being inclusive of all gender variance, depending on one's theoretical point of view. For Erikainen, 'queer' was not capable of fully encompassing her lived experiences where gender and sexuality intertwine inseparably to structure her life in sexual ways that are gendered, and in gendered ways that are sexual.

This highlights how 'gay' and 'lesbian' have different associated 'stakes' – leaving gay was perhaps easier for Vincent because it did not empower them in gendered (in addition to sexual) terms, as lesbian does for Erikainen. The shift from gay/lesbian to queer did not



give Vincent the feelings of erasure that Erikainen experienced. Vincent's experience of tension/sexual erasure came chronologically later, with their trans female partner.

### **Negotiating relational tensions**

Erikainen: The experience of being read as a 'woman' in a relationship with a man was an erasure of how I see myself, not just in terms of my sexual identity, but also in terms of gender due to heteronormativity. Being read as straight often then would position me as feminine – or at least more feminine than him – which I experienced as a misrecognition of my gender. There was a tension whereby if I came out as lesbian to people that didn't know about my partner's past, his status as a man was rendered in doubt, and if he didn't come out as trans, that erased who I was in many ways. I constantly felt a sense of misrecognition – either his or mine.

Vincent: I wanted to claim 'not straight' – I then didn't care about the further details. I wanted to be queer, in an umbrella sense. I wanted people to know my queerness. But it was problematic, because claiming non-straightness would out her [Vincent's trans female fiancée], in a sense. And I felt like that was unacceptable. I felt more protective of her than I did of my own sexual identity. I didn't feel that I had a right to defend my sexual presentation. It wasn't important enough to me. I felt pressure to do right by her.

Erikainen: I started to present more feminine in relation to him, I wore dresses... I started to do that when he started transitioning so that he would pass more easily. He never wanted me to do that but I did it because I loved him and I wanted him to have a stable recognition of who he was by others. And yet, that resulted in a conflict for me, because at the same time I was rendering my sexual as well as my gendered self invisible so that he might be recognised correctly.

Vincent's respect for their fiancée's gender, and recognition of the distress that misgendering causes her, meant that misgendering her for the sake of validating their own identity as 'not-straight' in the eyes of heteronormative social actors (where an individual read as male, such as Vincent, saying 'girlfriend' is assumed to be straight) was unacceptable. Vincent felt ashamed about using gender-neutral language ('partner' and 'they') to construct an ambiguity – a middle ground that didn't misgender (though arguably does, through the erasure of female status) or 'heterosexualise'. Going unrecognised as 'not straight' holds a closer parallel to Erikainen's sense of erasure of her lesbianism.

Because Vincent does not construct their understanding of their gender in relation to clear and overt feelings of pain, they constructed a hierarchy of need within the context of their relationship that served to hush Vincent's transgressive choices of gender exploration and presentation they might otherwise make – which are also disciplined by

fears of microaggressions or violence. Vincent paralleled Erikainen's performance of femininity by 'performing maleness' (not hegemonic behavioural masculinity), particularly through clothing, in order to validate their fiancée's gender under a heterosexist, cisnormative public gaze. Vincent's fiancée appreciated (though never asked for) this, as it mitigated her sense of vulnerability to transmisogynistic violence. Gendered vulnerability of transmasculine and transfeminine partners is differentially constructed and experienced, informing Vincent and Erikainen's responses in relation to personal comfort. Femininity for Erikainen was unsustainable. Masculinity for Vincent was uncomfortable, but more tolerable due to their muted experience of gender.

By rendering our partners' genders visible through compliance with the heteronormative frame through which sexuality and gender are made culturally legible, we simultaneously rendered our own sexual and gendered complexities invisible in ways that placed us back in the 'closet'. We could only 'out' ourselves properly by 'outing' our partners as transgender, which resulted in a juggling act between 'outing' and 'closeting' ourselves and them. Thus, the 'relations of the closet' (Sedgwick, 1990) – the relations of the known and the unknown around sexual identity being visible or invisible to others – structure our experiences. As closetedness is 'a performance initiated as such by ... silence' (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 3), our silence about, or the invisibility of, our own sexual and gendered complexities was an act of strategic self-closeting through which gendered heteronormativity worked to legitimate our partners' gender identities. This can be seen

to constitute what Ward has conceptualised as the gendered labour of 'giving gender to others' by 'suspending self-focus' to help others achieve the gender recognition they long for by enabling 'someone's gender authenticity' (2010: 237).

Erikainen recognised her distress at the misrecognition of her gendered and sexual self to be a consequence of both her own identification with masculinity, and the culturally ascribed heteronormative, hierarchical, and mutually exclusive relationship between masculinity and femininity. Being read as feminine by others, in turn, positioned her as 'the girl' (which in turn is associated with characteristics such as submissiveness and compliance in hegemonic gendered discourses) in relation to her partner. This heteronormative dynamic also structured the importance of lesbian identity (and misidentification with queer) to her sexual and gendered self: while lesbian identity connotes women or females attracted to women or females in ways that rendered the complexities of her relationship unintelligible, lesbian identity enables female masculinity to become visible or recognisable, because the association between masculinity and maleness or men is unmoored in lesbian communities (Halberstam, 1998).

Vincent and Erikainen thus share a parallel in their relational tensions – feeling a (self-imposed) pressure to validate their partners' genders through performing masculinity and femininity, respectively. In both cases, this misrepresented Vincent and Erikainen's genders, despite only Vincent explicitly disidentifying with the gender assigned at birth.

While Erikainen accepts placement in the category 'woman', it might be more accurate to say her *gender*, as well as her sexuality, is lesbian. Erikainen's sense of gendered self has only felt authentically articulatable through the possibilities afforded to the category 'lesbian' as Erikainen experiences/constructs it. The microsociological experiences of tension in this section are produced through structural conceptualisations – that relationships are conceived by social actors in relation to dualities of male/female and masculinity/femininity as reference points. The inability to feel able to articulate sexuality can erase (and erroneously construct) gender, and vice versa.

### **Interrogating our Genders**

Erikainen: I don't really identify as a woman because I don't identify with any of the associations of the word 'woman', but people relegate me as a woman, when I walk in the world people see me as a woman. So, it's a position within which I am put, whether I want to or not, and it impacts me. But I do identify strongly with feminist politics, and I think that's why I don't actively refuse the category 'woman' being applied to me. I use the category 'woman' as a tool to resist gendered forms of oppression.

Vincent: In a sense that's true for me as well. I am situated socially as male whether I want to be or not. And yet, I do resist identifying with the category 'male', even whilst recognising that I benefit from others relegating me to that category in certain ways.

Erikainen: I think that's really interesting, because we come from the 'opposite perspectives' of the binarised power dynamic. This is how I read it: your rejection of the category 'man' being applied to you does a lot of the same work as me accepting the category 'woman' being applied to me, because of the power dynamic that comes with the position 'man', in lots of ways as 'over' the position 'woman'.

Vincent: Though an important caveat for me is that I don't reject maleness as a *feminist* endeavour. My rejection of 'gay' and what I see as toxic masculinities have been informed by my feminist politics, and whilst I wouldn't separate the negotiation of my gender identity from my politics, I articulate my felt sense of gender as being neither male nor female; I could very well hold all the same positions that I do and be male – I simply feel that I am not. Otherwise I feel this would judge the category of 'men' to be politically problematic in and of itself.

This extract raises difficult questions about the notion of 'choice' in relation to gender identity. While one does not choose how gender is experienced, one can exert agency in how identity is expressed (relative to cultural/temporal possibilities, and disciplining by risk). Neither Vincent nor Erikainen are content with the assignation of gender to them, yet Erikainen's relationship with masculinity is clearly entwined with being positioned as 'woman', just as Vincent's rejection of both masculinity (without embracing femininity) and maleness is

rooted in being read as 'a man'. It follows why Erikainen then does not claim a non-binary experience of gender – like queer, Erikainen feels this would prevent *her* use of womanhood to resist patriarchal oppressions. This is not to say that postmodern gender identities such as 'non-binary woman' are judged impossible or inferior. Simply, they do not fit with Erikainen's construction and experience of her sense of self. We identify how a personal sense of 'fit' is informed by emancipatory gendered politics, and negotiated to avoid a sense of losing oneself.

Vincent: [I haven't presented non-normatively due to] the exposure to violence I think I would be putting myself under. I mean, given my muted sense of gender, it hasn't been worth the perceived risk for me. When I have, I felt enormous anxiety about doing so, because of the unknown threat, including not being taken seriously, even within the queer community, or insecurity about being viewed as 'fake'. I felt vulnerable about wearing a rainbow scarf. I feel a hell of a lot more vulnerable wearing lipstick, which is why I've done so very infrequently. And, also, I rarely feel in the mood because I feel gender in a muted way, not in a feminine or in a masculine way. I quite like the subcategory of being demi-gendered, as I feel this gives me permission to explore masculinity or femininity to the extent I may wish. In the absence of fear of gendered violence, I would queer things more visibly. I'd be more playful. Because, when I was younger and a little less aware I've done things like gone out in full drag on the streets of South London. And that wasn't just playing around, that felt more important.

Erikainen: The more I presented feminine with my partner, the more I was perceived and treated as feminine. Like, men opening doors for me, or offering to carry my bag. I loathe those gestures of masculine protectionism being applied to me. I feel more vulnerable and more threatened if I present feminine. I feel more sexualised too, and I am. When I dressed more feminine, I was sexualised much more than I had been at other times. If I present masculine, however, I'm not explicitly sexualised by men, basically ever. Masculine is how I would like to be gendered, but there is also a sense of shelter around it. I sometimes feel like my lesbian identity and my gender presentation protect me from heterosexism.

Hegemonic gender relations operate not only through the overall subordination of femininity to masculinity, but also through the differential subordination of femininities embodied by different subjects in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). Dominant cultural frames construct femininity as (sexually and otherwise) submissive, compliant, and vulnerable in ways that extends to all subjects who identify with, present, or are relegated as feminine. This explains why Erikainen experienced masculinity as providing a sense of 'shelter', and why Vincent considers it important and accurate to recognise that they can experience certain privileges even in the process of being misrecognised as male. Erikainen's identification and presentation as masculine should not, of course, be taken imply that the cultural connotations attached to femininity cannot be or are not challenged and re-empowered by subjects who identify as feminine.



The consequences of the overall subordination of femininity to masculinity are different for female and male assigned subjects, which is illustrated by Vincent's sense of feminine gender presentation as risky. Male assigned subjects embodying femininity contaminate the presumed relationship between masculinity and 'men' or males and between masculinity and superiority by 'choosing' femininity over masculinity, and thus claiming the feminine position as equally or more desirable as the masculine position. They thus challenge and threaten the presumed superiority of masculinity and unsettle hegemonic gender relations more generally, which is why femininity embodied by male assigned subjects is particularly strongly policed with violence, through transmisogyny. Such challenge to hegemonic gender relations is a challenge to the superiority and power of masculinity over femininity.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aims to tap into an innovative approach to accessing and producing insights into how sexuality and gender identity are reconceptualised or transformed through intimate interactions. We aim to speak to LGBTQ community discourses beyond ourselves, and this work thus has analytic as well as emotive implications (Anderson, 2006) – our experiences are intertwined with LGBTQ communities and feminist politics, and reflect how subjects may navigate gendered and sexual belonging in relation hegemonic sexual categories and feminist discourses.

Our analysis identified three central themes that allow broader social understanding to be inferred from our individual responses to gendered and sexual experiences. The first centred on the differential relationships we held with (the problematics of) binarised gendered and sexual identities. We found that our relationships towards declaring (an ambiguous) 'queer' identity were differentially motivated. Whereas Erikainen felt a pressure to conform to queerness because lesbian identity was no longer intelligible to other social actors in relation to her partner, Vincent embraced queer as a tool that they felt was more suited to anti-essentialist resistance rather than a 'reinterpretation' of gay. Two sub-themes lay behind explaining the differential feelings held towards adopting queer as an identity/descriptor. Firstly, the manifestation of self-erasure in the contexts of the relationships, and secondly, how our gendered politics have been shaped in relation to how we are delegated in our gendered social interactions.

The second analytic section addressed tension between self-articulation and our partners' needs for gender legitimacy. Tactics of accommodation were used – Erikainen's conscious feminisation, Vincent's gender-neutralising language – to avoid disenfranchising the genders of their partners. Yet, these needs also disciplined and limited our genders, as well as our relations with sexuality. For Erikainen, they rendered invisible the ways in which the expression of masculinity is intertwined with how she constructs her gendered self, whilst Vincent is uncomfortable being rendered as male, but more so as a hegemonically masculine heterosexual male even whilst this would serve to legitimate

their fiancée most effectively, under the contemporary heteronormative and cisnormative social framework.

Finally, we reflect upon the motivations and politics connected to the articulation of our genders. Vincent stresses that even while accepting Erikainen's view that their rejection of maleness does similar work to her acceptance of the category 'woman', their non-binary gender identity reflects a felt sense of gendered self, rather than suppression of any 'true' maleness (or femaleness) in reaction to feminist politics. Both gender articulations were, however, influenced by the overall cultural subordination of femininity to masculinity, and the differential consequences of this power dynamic to differently embodied subjects. Non-normative (feminine) gender presentation was experienced as risky by Vincent, whereas Erikainen felt non-normative (masculine) presentation provides a sense of shelter against heterosexism.

Duoethnography enabled an in-depth perspective on sexual and gendered identity negotiations, and the creation of a collaborative, reflective account illustrating the ethical and personal trials and tribulations of self-understanding. Our experiences reflect, and are embedded within broader discursive frames of sexuality and gender that create bounded identity categories. Our self-narratives illustrate how these categories can be simultaneously limiting as well as empowering for subjects whose experiences are located within the 'borderlands' of identity categories.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cisnormativity is the assumption that all people are cisgender – identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

<sup>2</sup> In a manner analogous to bisexual erasure, when a bisexual individual is in a relationship that other social actors are likely to read as ‘gay’ or ‘straight’.

<sup>3</sup> Relationships where one partner is cisgender and the other partner is transgender. There is no mention of non-monogamous relationship models.

## References

- Adams T and Holman Jones S. (2008) Autoethnography is Queer. In: Denzin NK, Lincoln YS and Smith LT (eds) *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. Los Angeles, London: Sage, 373-390.
- Anderson L. (2006) Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35: 373-395.
- Bockting W, Benner A and Coleman E. (2009) Gay and bisexual identity development among female-to-male transsexuals in North America: Emergence of a transgender sexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 38: 688-701.
- Brown NR. (2009) "I'm in Transition Too": Sexual Identity Renegotiation in Sexual-Minority Women's Relationships with Transsexual Men. *International Journal of Sexual Health* 21: 61-77.
- Brown NR. (2010) The sexual relationships of sexual-minority women partnered with trans men: A qualitative study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39: 561-572.
- Connell R. (1995) *Masculinities*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Cromwell J. (1999) *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, bodies, genders, and sexualities*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Devor H. (1997) More than manly women: How female-to-male transsexuals reject lesbian identities. In: Bullough B, V. B and Elias J (eds) *Gender blending*. Amherst: Prometheus, 87-102.
- Ellis C. (2004) *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*, Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York, Oxford: Altamira Press.
- Ellis C. (2007) Telling secrets, revealing lives relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative inquiry* 13: 3-29.
- Ellis C, Bochner AP and Tillman-Healey LM. (1997) Relationships as Stories. In: Duck S (ed) *Handbook of Personal Relationships* Oxford: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Franklin K. (2014) Gender labor, assimilationism, and transformative practices: the relational negotiations of cisgender women and their transgender men partners. *Sociology Compass* 8: 648-659.
- Gamarel KE, Reisner SL, Laurenceau J-P, et al. (2014) Gender minority stress, mental health, and relationship quality: A dyadic investigation of transgender women and their cisgender male partners. *Journal of Family Psychology* 28: 437-447.
- Goffman E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Halberstam J. (1998) *Female masculinity*, Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- Halberstam J. (2011) *The queer art of failure*: Duke University Press.
- Hawley JC. (2015) Trans-Autobiographies as Sites for Decolonization. In: Shands KW, Mikrut GG, Pattanaik DR, et al. (eds) *Writing the Self*. Stockholm, Sweden: Södertörns högskola, 193-201.

- Hines S. (2007) *Transforming gender: Transgender practices of identity, intimacy and care*, London: Policy Press.
- Hines S. (2010) Sexing gender; gendering sex: Towards an intersectional analysis of transgender. In: Taylor Y, Hines S and Casey ME (eds) *Theorizing intersectionality and sexuality*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 140-162.
- Iantaffi A and Bockting WO. (2011) Views from both sides of the bridge? Gender, sexual legitimacy and transgender people's experiences of relationships. *Culture, health & sexuality* 13: 355-370.
- Jackson S. (2006) Interchanges: Gender, sexuality and heterosexuality: The complexity (and limits) of heteronormativity. *Feminist theory* 7: 105-121.
- Joslin-Roher E and Wheeler DP. (2009) Partners in transition: The transition experience of lesbian, bisexual, and queer identified partners of transgender men. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 21: 30-48.
- Kessler SJ and McKenna W. (1978) *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Lund DE and Evans RE. (2006) Opening a can of worms: a duo-ethnographic dialogue on gender, orientation, and activism. *Taboo* 10: 55-67.
- McClellan P and Sader J. (2012) Power and Privilege. In: Norris J, Sawyer RD and Lund DE (eds) *Duoethnography: Dialogic Methods for Social, Health, and Educational Research*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 137-156.
- Melendez RM and Pinto R. (2007) 'It's really a hard life': Love, gender and HIV risk among male-to-female transgender persons. *Culture, health & sexuality* 9: 233-245.
- Meyerowitz JJ. (2002) *How sex changed: A history of transsexuality in the United States*, Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press.
- Nordmarken S. (2014) Becoming Ever More Monstrous Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness. *Qualitative Inquiry* 20: 37-50.
- Norris J and Sawyer RD. (2004) Null and hidden curricula of sexual orientation: A dialogue on the curreres of the absent presence and the present absence. *Democratic Responses in an Era of Standardization*. Troy, New York.
- Norris J and Sawyer RD. (2012) Toward a Dialogic Methodology. In: Norris J, Sawyer RD and Lund DE (eds) *Duoethnography: Dialogic Methods for Social, Health, and Educational Research*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 9-39.
- Norris J, Sawyer RD and Lund DE. (2012) *Duoethnography: Dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press.
- Operario D, Nemoto T, Iwamoto M, et al. (2011) Unprotected sexual behavior and HIV risk in the context of primary partnerships for transgender women. *AIDS and Behavior* 15: 674-682.
- Pfeffer CA. (2008) Bodies in relation—Bodies in transition: Lesbian partners of trans men and body image. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 12: 325-345.

- Pfeffer CA. (2017) *Queering Families: The Postmodern Partnerships of Cisgender Women and Transgender Men*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pinar W. (1975) Currere: toward reconceptualization. In: Pinar W (ed) *Curriculum theorizing: The reconceptualists*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan, 396-414.
- Plummer K. (1995) *Telling sexual stories: Power, change, and social worlds*, London, New York: Routledge.
- Prosser J. (1995) No place like home: The transgendered narrative of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. *Modern Fiction Studies* 41: 483-514.
- Richards C, Bouman WP, Seal L, et al. (2016) Non-binary or genderqueer genders. *International Review of Psychiatry* 28: 1-8.
- Sanger T. (2010) *Trans People's Partnerships: Towards an Ethics of Intimacy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stone S. (2006) The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto. In: Stryker S and Whittle S (eds) *The transgender studies reader*. London, New York: Routledge, 221-235.
- Stryker S. (1994) My Words to Victor Frankenstein. Above the Village of Chamounix-Performing Transgender Rage. *GLQ* 1: 237-254.
- Tompkins AB. (2014) "There's No Chasing Involved": Cis/Trans Relationships, "Tranny Chasers," and the Future of a Sex-Positive Trans Politics. *Journal of Homosexuality* 61: 766-780.
- Ward J. (2010) Gender labor: Transmen, femmes, and collective work of transgression. *Sexualities* 13: 236-254.
- Yeadon-Lee T. (2016) What's the Story? Exploring Online Narratives of Non-binary Gender Identities. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social and Community Studies* 11: 19-34.