Gender Identity within the Queer Community

Josef Faber

Department of Psychology, University of the Fraser Valley

PSYC 493A: Directed Studies

Dr. Donna Tafreshi

April 1, 2021

Transgender Identity within the Queer Community

Identity development encompasses a wide range of aspects of the human experience. It involves the assimilation and development of thoughts, feelings and experiences, such that a unique understanding of the world develops. This includes aspects of social, sexual and gender identities that can, once experienced, vary across the lifespan. Each of these elements cannot inherently be split from one another as they overlap within each other broadly. However, the development of each of these concepts as narratives can be understood through "master narratives" (MN) that are embedded within our culture and society (Bradford & Syed, 2019). These MNs can differ depending on one's location, environment or social circle, but common among them is the notion that they help to shape who we are as individuals. They are essentially the framework within which we understand ourselves and our surroundings and form our beliefs, thoughts and values. Separate from MNs are personal narratives that can inform, develop or even challenged MNs. Although separate from one another, these two narratives often intermingle and intertwine as they influence and shape our lives. In the current paper, I am particularly concerned with MN's within the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB), transgender (Trans), and non-binary (NB) communities and how differing master narratives within these communities might interact with one another. For example, the narratives between each identity group (and within each group) can lead to potential conflicts where those who identify as cisgender but LGB and those who identify as Trans, and only potentially as LGB or heterosexual may not see their goals and aspirations align. I aim to uncover a deeper understanding of how these MNs shape identity development and how they fit contextually within the lives of Trans, NB and LGB individuals in the context of the overarching LGBTQ2S+ community. Moreover, I consider how MNs within

the LGBTQ2S+ community might be developed and refined through group associations and life experiences.

Conceptualizing Identity

To understand the MNs and the communities in which they develop, it is best to first understand what identity means at an individual level. I will first look at what one might mean when referencing the concept itself. Although each of the following definitions will fall short of encapsulating the multiplicity of ways that identity might be understood, they will help in developing a foundational language for this essay. Beginning with a broader conceptualization of the term, the APA (2021) defines identity as "a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles". What may be lacking from this definition is the potential for identity to shift (even if slightly) within different physical and psychological environments. Individuals often take on varying identities in different contexts in their day-to-day lives (e.g., interacting with co-workers, close friends or family, etc.). The APA's (2021) definition for gender identity is stated as including "one's self-identification as male or female". This definition also goes on to say that "significant evidence now exists to support the conceptualization of gender identity as influenced by both environmental and biological factors". The former part of the definition used here does not fit within the context of many of the theories that will be reviewed here, but the latter caveat does help create a starting point for gender identity.

To further extend the gender identity definition, we can utilize queer theory, narrative philosophy and psychosocial genealogy of LGBTQ+ gender perspectives (see Watson, 2005, Raggatt, 2006 & Levitt, 2019). In contrast to the APA (2021) definition presented above, these theories do not restrict one's gender identity to the categories of male and female. Rather, from

these perspectives, gender identity can include both genders or even reject the gender dichotomy all together. This ideology is a rejection of rigid gender constructs that society perpetuates through its own MN (Mclean et al., 2020). Narrative identity, as discussed by scholars such as Raggatt (2006) and Mcadams & Mclean (2013), also embodies similar concepts as the above, though gender is not quite at its center. For example, some narrative identity theorists borrow from William James (1890) with his references to "social selves" (Raggatt, 2006), where individuals are not necessarily the same in all situations and circumstances. Under this interpretation, gender identity is not necessarily a fixed object that is easily defined, but an ever-morphing process that can look different depending on the aspect of the self that is emphasized within a given narrative. When discussing these narratives within the non-binary world, these different aspects may be more aptly considered fluid and not inherently evolving, but simply not configured to remain static at any given time. Identifying as a specific gender or no gender at all are simply different aspects and narratives of individuals and can manifest at indeterminate times and places (Levitt, 2016).

Within the field of psychology, the most influential theorizations of identity development have included Piaget's (1964) cognitive development theory and Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory. Piaget's (1964) model primarily focused on early identity development; however, it did also include a final stage encompassing later years. This perspective also emphasized the influence of cognitive abilities on the forming of one's identity. Erikson (1968) described 8 stages of identity development across the lifespan, with each stage including conflicts that must be overcome before one can move to the next. The fact that there are descriptive stages that have distinguishing features creates a rigid structure that an individual would fall within. The lack of nuance between stages (as in how or when one might bridge

between stages) creates demarcation points with very little room for individuality. How each stage can fully describe all individuals at all points in their life leaves little room for the uniqueness that is humanity. With both of these models being fairly rigid and limited in their scope, it made room for further interpretations and newer adaptations. Unfortunately, even the newer iterations of these models relied on the same rigid foundational constructs (See Marcia, 2002).

It is because of the rigidity of the stage-based approaches, which do not comport with my own understanding of identity development, that several alternative theories will be employed to gain a deeper understanding of identity, and gender identity more specifically. Queer theory, narrative philosophy and Psychosocial Genealogy of LGBTQ+ Gender developed by Levitt (2019), will all be utilized to inform a MN approach when comparing and understanding identity within the contextual environments that Trans and NB individuals identify within. Each of these philosophies will be outlined, contrasted and combined with my own approach to gender identity in the hopes of fleshing out a fuller understanding of the concept within both the Trans and NB communities.

With the exception of recent work on homonormativity and transnormativity (see Mathers, Sumerau & Cragun, 2018, Bradford, 2019 and Fielding, 2020) the literature on Trans and NB individuals' accounts of their identities within the LGBTQ2S+ community is quite limited. To supplement this lack of material, I will expand my discussion to include a review of works that emphasize the development of gender identity as a whole, while maintaining my concerted focus on the LGBTQ2S+ community. An attempt to determine MNs within the LGB, NB and Trans communities, as well as the broader LGBTQ2S+ community will be addressed while also taking into consideration historical societal norms that can influence such MNs. The

works of researchers in the area of gender identity development will be considered as important components to form potential links between the formation of identity, its many facets within differing environments, and how conflicts could arise from such identifications.

Conflating Concepts

A part of the conflict that arises within society is the broader MN of gender and sex. Society's understanding of what defines gender is often driven by the sex organs that an individual is born with. However, for many individuals, sexual reproduction organs have very little to do with one's conception of their gender identity and even from a lingual perspective, "sex" and "gender" are very different concepts. Taking the definition of sex from the APA (2021), it talks about physical and biological aspects of the self whereas with gender it is about the psychological, behavioural and social aspects that are more prominent. Unfortunately, the connections drawn between the two have been perpetuated throughout society as a MN, such that it has become engrained as a social norm which can cause immense harm to those who do not fit within that mould (Levitt, 2019). Although the concepts of gender identity and sexual identity have overlapping aspects, they can also be conceptualized as distinct from one another. Sexual identity generally refers to which gender one wishes or desires to have sexual relations with. This encompasses heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, and a growing list of other identities that conform to a set of community based master narratives that illustrate why we might identify within that category. Gender identity is not about the sexual desires that someone holds but about how they express ourselves externally as a reflection of how they feel internally. The terms that make up this grouping generally fall into: cisgender, born the sex that you identify your gender with; intersex, born with the genitalia of both sexes (often altered at an early age by their parents to conform to one sex or the other (Creighton & Minto, 2001)); transgender, those

who were born one sex and identify as the opposite gender (often undergoing gender reassignment surgery (GRS) to have their external sex organs conform to their affirmed gender); and non-binary, individuals who do not identify as either gender. I will expand on the concepts of transgender and non-binary individuals below, with the understanding that there is always heterogeneity within any group of individuals and any explanation is non-exhaustive.

Before going further and describing these two groups of individuals, I find it necessary to point out that although Trans and NB individuals may identify as such, the entirety of their identity is not subsumed by this classification. Like any other individual in this world, Trans and NB individuals are simply looking to find their place in the world and to do so in a way that conforms to their inner being. There is vast complexity to any individual's life and by taking up this research project, it has occurred to me to fully realize and acknowledge this fact.

Transgender

When one does identify as a Trans individual, it can mean a few things within the community, while also emphasizing a unique expression for each individual. Common amongst any definition is a misalignment with one's birth sex. The gender identity that they express does not match the sexual reproductive organs that they were born with. This can then manifest in different ways. To help with a broader, more general definition, three categories can be used: Those who do not identify with their birth sex and want to transition or have transitioned via GRS and hormone therapy, those who do not identify with their birth sex and choose not to undergo GRS or hormone therapy, and those who cross-dress. Cross-dressers often switch between the clothing they wear that emphasises a binary male or female visual presentation. Their gender identity may or may not conform to their birth sex and their sexual orientation can vary. This paper will focus upon the two former groups.

Non-Binary

Non-binary is not much different to Trans in that those who identify as such, do so in an array of different ways. They can switch between different genders, depending on how they feel and the environment they are in or they may not identify with any sex or gender at all, and choose not to conform to any sense of "feminine" or "masculine" that society may deem necessary. There is an inherent lack of conformity within the NB community that challenges the status quo of the binary nature of gender that society tends to be beholden to. These challenges have historically led to confrontations within society and even within the LGBTQ2S+ community (Wilchins, 2004). The fundamental goals for LGB groups early on precluded one's gender to help gain political movement for LGB individuals (Wilchins, 2004). This will be discussed further in a historical context later in the essay. Much of the overarching community today has come to embrace this aspect of the LGBTQ2S+ community, but the MN outside of LGBTQ2S+ culture is still contentious.

<div align="center">

Approaches to Identity

</div>

In this section, I will elaborate on the varying approaches to conceptualizing identity that will inform my general approach. These will include flexible models of identity development that rely upon different MNs than the stage-theory models popularized within developmental psychology (i.e., Piaget, Erikson). Queer theory utilizes LGBTQ2S+ culture to inform how it structures its understanding of gender and what is considered acceptable (Smith, 2003). These cultural social norms make up a large part of how those within the LGB, Trans and NB communities describe themselves both internally and externally COMMUNITY. The narrative approach incorporates the inherent social nature of humanity and how one may describe oneself as a football crazed NFL fan with their friends on Sunday and a loving caring parent the rest of

the week. These divergent identities are not linear nor created but ever evolving and morphing into new aspects of the same self through the narration of one life (Ricoeur, 1986). The psychosocial genealogy approach is generally informed by the work of the author as she has done extensive research within the LGBTQ2S+ community which has created a new understanding of meaning behind gender (Levitt, 2019). She sees gender as "radical and creative" (Levitt, 2019) which speaks to the continual evolving personal narratives that help to create shifts in MNs in the communities that espouse them.

Queer Theory

Queer theory (QT) is rooted in political activism and was developed as a means to help liberate those who were oppressed within a system that was predominately heterosexual, white and male. As described by Smith (2003), QT can be described as challenging all binary sexual norms and societal norms that highlight the "othering" of individuals that do not conform to general social norms as deviants. Much of the challenge stems from past literature that highlights the heteronormative features of Western society as read through a queer lens. Two of the most prominent figures in QT are Butler (1999) and Foucault (1978). Butler presents the concept of gender as a form of repetition that is ritualized and made "natural" by the very action of the repetition within everyday life. Butler argues that the very acts of some of the sub-groups within the LGBTQ2S+ that emulate the binary elements of sexual representation (cross-dressing or displaying more overt femme or masculine characteristics for example) are, themselves, displays of how gender is performative (Butler, 1999). Foucault (1978) emphasizes the connection of sexuality to power and how it is more of a cultural phenomenon than a natural one.

Narrative Philosophy

Narrative philosophy focuses on the stories that we tell about our lives, both to others and to ourselves. Raggatt (2006) uses the term "conversation of narrators" to suggest that the stories we tell about our life are not inherently one-dimensional or singularly plausible to tell. The life we lead and the stories we tell are a mixture of elements and of times that speak to a specific moment or life event that is meaningful to the individual. Another aspect to this is how one expresses their identity with different groups. How someone identifies with family members and with friends can differ dramatically. To contextualize these aspects of gender identity, we can look to an LGBTQ2S+ individual who has not come out to their family but has to their friends. If asked about their life experiences up until that point, the answer they give to this question will vary depending on the position of the individual with whom they are speaking. The components emphasized within each narrative would alter how the story plays out and what key elements are in each telling. The fact that the narration that comes with living one's life can alter, shift or differ depending on the environment that one is living in or the company that they are keeping relates directly to how non-binary individuals are able to express themselves differently and more fluidly throughout their life. It could also be a part of the journey that many Trans individuals partake in when they are finding ways to express their own gender identity and how it fits with their inner self.

Psychosocial Genealogy of LGBTQ Gender

Levitt (2019) describes gender identity as an ever-evolving aspect of individuals that relies upon learning about different ways of being. As new methods are discovered, such as exposure to other methods of expressing gender (non-binary, femme, cross-dressing), they are better able to articulate and feel confident within themselves. Where one individual may start off as identifying as homosexual, they may find that although they are attracted to their born sex,

their identity does not conform to that same sex. Learning about the array of subgroups within the LGBTQ2S+ community can help to shape the way they see their own identity. By being able to see that others have transitioned or identify as the other sex, their own gender identity can take shape. This can then lead to furthering that ideal through GRS or simply living as either binary gender. The question of how this new variant of themselves, vis-a-vis their gender identity, continues to fit within the gay community is brought to bear as they grapple with how others perceive them and how they wish to be perceived.

Historical Understanding of LGBTQ2S+ Communities

Before the discussion of community conflicts can begin, a summary of some of the history of the LGB, Trans and NB communities must be done. It is only by reviewing the roots of these histories that current divides can be understood. A discussion on LGB, Trans and NB communities will be included with an overlapping narrative, as each community has influence on, and directly relates with, one another.

LGB

The LGB movement can be connected back to the civil rights and women's movements in the 1950's and 1960's. These movements paved the way for minority groups to protest and come together to develop strategies for how to proceed in gaining more rights and freedoms. The Stonewall riots in 1969 were the start of the national political movement within the US that showcased how the LGB community was being treated. It was also the start of much of the politicization of the LGBTQ2S+ community that has affected each letter of the acronym in different ways (Wilchins, 2004). A great deal of progress has been made with respect to the laws for the overall LGBTQ2S+ community, but it has been a long road to gain those rights and

freedoms. For instance, sodomy laws in the US were only removed from the books in 2014. In Canada the sodomy (called buggery in Canada) law was changed for those who were 21 or over in 1969 between a husband and wife or two consenting adults. It was further changed in 1988 to 18 years or older and renamed from buggery to "anal intercourse". Unfortunately, that same law is still in effect and cases are still being brought against those youth who are not over 18 years old and engage in consenting anal sex. None the less, in all states in America and all across Canada, two individuals of the same sex can marry and have the same rights as heterosexual couples (Canada, 2016). These political winds of change have been invaluable in making the lives of those within the LGBTQ2S+ better and far less stigmatizing. Unfortunately, those same political movements have made it harder for some individuals who do not identify as homosexual but do fall under the LGBTQ2S+ banner.

Transgender

The transgender community can trace its roots back to the 1960's where cross dressers would congregate in spaces in which they felt comfortable to express their identities. At the time "transgender" was not even a term that was widely being used within the community. It did not come into prominence until the 1990's when the idea that sexuality and gender should be separated began to gain traction. It was from within LGB culture that subgroups, such as cross-dressing individuals, were able to find their own way by creating underground cultures. Much of this breaking off of groups is due to the lack of desire to take on the mantle of gender issues and of gender variations within the gay community. The gay movement, during the 1980's, had chosen to focus on sexuality and the rights therein. Much like heteronormativity, homonormativity had, and still has, its place within gay culture. The acceptance of "butch" and "femme" individuals was the norm in the late 1990's and early 2000's, both in gay and lesbian

subcultures. To identify outside of those norms was to not fit in with those who were already considered to be misfits of society. It was this early intolerance that led to division in the LGBTQ2S+ community of transgender individuals. The ability to identify within gay culture depended upon the desire to sleep with one's own sex, a category not all transgender individuals identify with. This left the Trans and cross-dressing community to find their own voice within the community. While the political LGB movement was still making its mark in the 1970's, cross-dressing conventions had started to take place within the US. The 1990's were even busier with one or two conventions a month (Wilchins, 2004). The capturing of attention and of prominence across the US had created a new movement for Trans individuals that looked to be recognized as a unique aspect of gay culture. The T was added to LGBT in the early 2000's and the transgender movement had begun. The division between those who were mainly fighting for sexuality rights and those who were fighting mainly for gender rights could still be seen but the two groups were stronger together than apart. The fight was more of an uphill battle with the lack of support from the LGB community early on, which meant that new rights had to be fought for and new laws instilled to accommodate not just sexuality but gender differences.

Non-Binary

Those who identified under the Trans nomenclature could also identify as genderqueer. This terminology was used for those who did not fit into either of the genders or sex's definitions and who did not feel as though a "binary" choice was apt. Those who do identify as NB have been a part of the Trans movement from the start, but have only relatively recently started to come into a more prominent role within the LGBTQ2S+ community. None of the actual letters here directly represent those within the NB community, but the Q (Queer), T (Transgender), 2S (2 Spirit) and the + all try and include many of these individual gender identities. The separation

from a Trans identification for NB individuals takes place between the lack of acceptance of identifying as either gender, where the Trans community generally focuses on "maleness" or "femaleness" that juxtaposes their born sex. Many Trans individuals still identify within the binary classifications of gender, which has been termed transnormativity. That has created a division within the LGBTQ2S+ community that can place the LGB, Trans, and NB communities at odds with each other.

Community Conflict

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MASTER NARRATIVES

The evolution of one's gender identity can be complicated as these identities can range from male, female, both, non-binary, genderqueer and a variety of other terms. The same is true for sexual identity which can develop over time. This can include gay, straight, queer, bisexual, pansexual or a plethora of other identities. It is when gender identities evolve beyond the general norms of the gay community that conflicts can arise. As has been laid out in the history of Trans and NB individuals, there have been issues that have precluded those that do not identify in a particular manner from the grander movements that have tried to progress LGB rights. The political motives behind the LGB community have been connected to gay marriage, anti-discrimination and the proliferation of gay rights, whereas the transgender and non-binary movements have been connected to accepting individuals for who they are with respect to the variation of their gender expression. In the latter case, sexuality is not necessarily within the purview of the movement. Rather, the ability to transition (or not) without judgement and to be able to authentically identify as a man, woman, both, or non-binary individual, regardless of sexuality, is at the forefront (Wilchins, 2004). Although some Trans or NB individuals may still identify as a non-heterosexual individual, much of the focus is not necessarily on the sexuality

side, but on gender expression, as that aspect of their self is under the most scrutiny by society at large. And although these two groups, Trans and NB may have a common ground to stand upon, they do not identify in the same ways. Transgender individuals often identify as "transwomen" or "transmen" or as "women" or "men" without the need to necessitate a prefix to further alienate themselves from society or their own sense of self. From the non-binary perspective, it is a more fluid approach that does not find itself in a space of dichotomy, but one where gender is without boundary. There are multiple levels at which conflict can arise within the LGBTQ2S+ community which can take form of transnormativity or of homonormativity (see Wilchins, 2004,). These can be seen as aspects of the MN's that influence these communities in meaningful ways and in ways that can create complications between individuals.

Homonormativity

Transnormativity

A more rigid model may see these as conflicts of the self, implying that an individual is "stuck" in one stage of identity development and hampered by some inner turmoil, waiting to relieve it and to move on to the next stage. For narrative theory (Raggatt, 2006) and Levitt (2019), this conflict is not necessarily a hindrance but one narrative amongst many other concurrent ones. Although the two worlds could one day collide, the very understanding of their identity and gender identity may still not align, as each environment has its own underlying MN that informs how they appear, feel and interact in that environment.

Conclusions

The Proposed Next Step

Methodological Approach to Study

References