Living Outside the Gender Binary: A Phenomenological Exploration into the Lived Experience of Female Masculinity
Vivre à l'extérieur de la conception binaire du genre : exploration phénoménologique du vécu de la masculinité féminine

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ABSTRACT

Individuals who express nonconforming gender identities challenge the dominant discourse in Western society, where the biological and reproductive sexed body is emphasized as the essential determinant of one's gender identity. The purpose of this study was to explore and gain understanding of the experiences of female masculinity. Participants who have come to accept and express masculinity as an integral part of their gender identities were interviewed. Through the exploration of the participants' experiences and reflections, 5 themes with 21 subthemes were identified that illuminate how the participants have maintained their nonconforming gender expressions despite considerable pressure to conform to gender norms. Implications for both research and counselling practice are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Les personnes qui expriment des identités sexuelles non conformes remettent en question le discours dominant de la société occidentale, dans lequel le corps sexué biologique et reproductif constitue le facteur déterminant de l'identité sexuelle de la personne. L'étude avait pour but d'explorer et de mieux comprendre les expériences associées à la masculinité féminine. On a interviewé des personnes participantes qui ont fini par accepter et exprimer la masculinité comme faisant partie intégrante de leurs identités sexuelles. L'exploration des expériences et des réflexions des participantes a permis de dégager 5 thèmes et 21 thématiques secondaires, qui éclairent la façon dont elles ont pu maintenir leurs expressions d'identité sexuelle non conformes, malgré la pression considérable visant à ce qu'elles se conforment aux normes régissant les liens entre les sexes. L'article présente une discussion à la fois des implications pour la recherche et pour la pratique du counseling.

The dichotomous categories of sex and gender represent one of the most persistent and all-encompassing systems for classifying people in Western society. The dichotomy of male/man/boy and female/woman/girl is seen to make a difference "in virtually every domain of human experience" (Bem, 1981, p. 362). This biological deterministic view has been reified, equating males with masculinity and

females with femininity, and situating those who express nonconforming gender identities as deviant (Bem, 1995; Devor, 2004; Feinberg, 1996).

The expression of tomboyism, which describes a period of female masculinity in childhood, is one transgression to the dichotomous categories that has historically been accepted to a degree (Halberstam, 1998). Tomboys have been distinguished from non-tomboy girls in terms of playmate preferences, participation in sports, rough and tumble play, toy preferences, mannerisms, interests, activity preferences, clothing preferences, and appearances (Bailey, Bechtold, & Berenbaum, 2002; Green, Williams, & Goodman, 1982; Morgan, 1998).

Tomboyism is fairly common in the experiences of girls. Burn, O'Neil, and Nederend (1996) found that, consistent with other studies, 50% of their 194 female college-aged participants acknowledged that they had been tomboys as children. Despite the commonality of this experience, tomboyism is expected to be only a phase in a girl's life, thus maintaining the expectation that a feminine gender expression is the norm for females (Hemmer & Kleiber, 1981). As a young tomboy enters puberty, the space she has had to express her masculinity no longer exists and she is confronted with a societal agenda that expects her to change her behaviour and preferences (Halberstam, 1998; Hemmer & Kleiber, 1981). In Burn et al. (1996), four categories of reasons were given to explain why the participants stopped being tomboys: social pressure from peers, wanting to attract boys, social pressure from parents/adults, and puberty/physical development. Interestingly, 14% of the participants who were childhood tomboys reported that they never stopped being a tomboy. Unfortunately, this was not further explored in this study.

Research interested in tomboyism largely reflects the expectation that it is a phase by focusing only on the childhood experience. An important exception is Carr's (2007) study of 27 women who identified as having been childhood tomboys. Carr explored the cessation and continuation of tomboy expression and found that 41% of the participants described maintaining an expression of tomboyism during adolescence. The participants who persisted in expressing tomboyism in adolescence attributed it to an interest in active pursuits (82%) and/or to a romantic interest in girls/women (64%). Although Carr's (2007) study focused on the transition from childhood to adolescence and did not explore the participants' adult gender identities, the study creates space for a narrative of adult tomboyism by acknowledging the possibility of tomboyism continuity.

Three exploratory research questions about tomboys for whom expressing masculinity was not just a childhood phase guided the current research:

1. What are the experiences of females who express masculinity in a culture that expects feminine expression of adult females?
2. How did the participant come to accept her nonconforming gender identity?
3. How does the participant understand her nonconforming gender expression?

By examining how female masculinity has been understood and researched within two theories of gender, further contextualization of this study is provided.

<div align="center">TWO VIEWS OF GENDER</div>

Beginning an exploration of female masculinity invites defining what is meant by the term *masculinity*. The meaning of the word masculine is so closely aligned with the male sex that it is difficult to define it outside of maleness. This challenge is reflected in research where masculinity is often considered to be what is stereotypical for men/boys as compared to women/girls, or is contrasted to femininity (e.g., Bailey et al., 2002). Research exploring female masculinity has considered masculinity as being expressed through personality traits, behaviours, interests, mannerisms, clothing preference, and appearance. Halberstam (1998) asserts "that although we seem to have a difficult time defining masculinity, as a society we have little trouble recognizing it" (p. 1).

Biological/Essentialist

The biological/essentialist theory of gender development assumes that males and females are biologically different in ways leading to differences in behaviour patterns and roles between men and women (Diamond, 2000). Fetal hormone theory bases gender differences in biology, upon a critical prenatal period wherein fetuses become physically differentiated based on the presence or absence of hormones. Research has focused on measuring the behaviours exhibited by individuals who are known to have experienced atypical hormone levels during fetal development. One such study examined the play behaviour and toy preferences of 26 girls and 11 boys diagnosed with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH). CAH is a condition in which the fetus produces high levels of androgen, a hormone reported to have masculinizing effects on fetal development (Berenbaum & Hines, 1992). The girls in the study were said to exhibit increased male-typical play behaviour and toy preferences as compared to the control group of girls. Based on studies of CAH females, it has been proposed that a core component of tomboy expression is influenced by exposure to androgens during fetal development (Bailey et al., 2002). The causal link, however, between hormones and behaviour has not been firmly established, and the individual's agency, culture, and situational context may be underestimated (Bem, 1993).

Social Constructionist

The social constructionist view considers gender not as an inherent feature of the individual, but as a construct that identifies, labels, and considers certain social interactions as being appropriate for one's sex (Bohan, 1997). Gender is conceptualized as a process, something that we do or perform, rather than something that defines who we are. Research interested in nonconforming gender identities, using a social constructionist lens, is concerned with how these identities have been constructed and how their existence exposes the ways in which society's gender norms are established and maintained (Butler, 1990).

One such study is Carr's (1998) examination of retrospective narratives of 14 women who reported having been childhood tomboys. Carr identified two mo-

ments of agency—a rejection of femininity and the choice of masculinity—and argues that it is through "daily external and internalized (embodied) practices of resistance and conformity that gender identities are created and maintained" (p. 551).

FEMALE MASCULINITY: EXPRESSING A NONCONFORMING GENDER IDENTITY

Little research attention has been devoted to the existence of nonconforming gender identities of adult female-bodied persons. People who express nonconforming gender identities "fail to follow the gender scripts of the culture, [and therefore] they must find a way to construct a viable identity in a society that insistently denies them any legitimacy" (Bem, 1993, p. 167). Only two qualitative studies (Devor, 1987; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004) have examined how nonconforming gender identities of female masculinity are developed and maintained.

Devor (1987) focused on how gender was communicated by 15 gender-blending females (11 of whom identified as lesbians), described as "those people of the female sex who project gender cues that can be socially interpreted as sufficiently masculine" (p. 12). Devor examined participants' experiences in early childhood and adolescence, how they were seen now as adults in society, how they handled being misread as being men/boys, and how their gender was communicated. The findings suggested that it was important for participants to critically question both gender norms and the insistence of sex as a determinant of gender. Perhaps by challenging the insistence of sex equaling gender, space is created for individuals to both understand and express themselves more fully.

Levitt and Hiestand (2004) used grounded theory to study the developmental experiences of 12 butch-identified lesbians who described collective memories of not fitting in to the expectations of their sex and feeling they were innately different from other women. The participants spoke of the importance of having role models, community, history, and culture unique to the butch/femme community in the development of their gender identity. The authors described three interacting processes contributing to the development of the nonconforming gender identity of butch. They found that "butch gender is (1) experienced as driven by an essential aspect that (2) is reflexively construed in relation to the available social constructions of gender and then (3) performed in relation to contextual and internal needs" (p. 619).

Both of these studies reported that the gender nonconforming participants felt increased comfort assuming clothing, hairstyles, or mannerisms associated with men as compared to those associated with women. Participants conveyed a rejection of expressing femininity and described a sense of being in "drag" when they attempted to conform to physical expressions of gender norms.

Contained in both studies was an illustration of how gender norms are enforced in our society. Participants described instances of being vulnerable to being ridiculed, stared at, and harassed. The experiences of these participants demonstrate that the social pressures to conform to gender norms continue throughout people's lives.

Since Devor's (1987) study, many social changes have occurred, including an increased awareness of transgenderism, transsexuality, and gender diversity; the increased use of the identity labels "transgender" and "gender queer"; and an increased availability and visibility of the options for sex reassignment therapy. These changes may influence how individuals come to understand and accept themselves and express their nonconforming gender identities.

Levitt and Hiestand's (2004) study is important in that it offers insight into the potential processes that underlie the development and maintenance of a nonconforming gender identity. However, their findings cannot be generalized to all females who express masculinity. Those who express masculinity, but do not identify as being butch lesbians, must develop their identities without the support of the defined community, history, culture, or role models available to butch lesbians, which may influence how their gender identities are reflexively constructed.

SUMMARY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are several limitations in the literature that the present study addresses. First, the paucity of research focusing on the experiences of adults who express female masculinity serves to reinforce the ideal of a universal experience of femaleness equated with femininity. Second, little is known about how females come to accept themselves as having a nonconforming gender identity. For this reason, qualitative methodology was viewed as appropriate for an exploratory study of this nature (Osborne, 1990). Phenomenology was chosen, a research methodology that allows for a focus on the participant as a whole person and his or her lived experience (Klein & Westcott, 1994). Rather than approaching the phenomenon with predetermined hypotheses, the researcher strives to use participants' experiences to develop a rich description of the phenomenon, which will thus assist in a deeper understanding.

Seil (2002) points out that to live "with a nonconforming gender identity which is in conflict with rigid internalized social role expectations requires massive effort" (p. 30). It is important that research examines that effort and the ways in which individuals come to understand and accept themselves as having a nonconforming gender identity. This knowledge may enable counsellors to better support individuals who are stigmatized because of their gender expressions.

The current study will address the above limitations by (a) situating the study in today's climate of increasing awareness of gender diversity and options for sex reassignment therapy, (b) providing the opportunity to explore the expression of female masculinity or tomboyism continuation in adulthood, and (c) exploring the experiences of female masculinity with females who do not identify as a butch lesbian. Through the examination of the stories and experiences shared by the participants, this study will add to the understanding of gender and gender identities.

Terminology

Terminology that is inclusive of the experiences of individuals who challenge the dichotomous framing of sex and gender is not common in our lexicon. For many, the word "woman" is closely aligned with a feminine gender expression and reflects an assumption of adherence to gender norms. Several participants in this study indicated discomfort with the identity label "woman" and some qualified the term with other descriptors (e.g., "butchy woman"). For this reason, when discussing the experiences of the participants, we have chosen to use the term "female" rather than woman. All participants expressed comfort with the descriptor of female.

Throughout this study, we have used the term *queer* to refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities and identities. All of the queer-identified participants indicated acceptance with the word used in this way.

METHOD

Participants and Sampling

The inquiry was conducted in the city of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Of the 9 participants, 7 resided in Calgary and 2 resided in small rural towns but were involved in the Calgary community. Participants were recruited by advertisements/ posters placed within community organizations and publications; electronic newsletters; professionals who advertised as serving women or the queer community; and organizations serving women working in non-traditional employment (e.g., construction).

Participants were selected using purposive criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). Four inclusion criteria were identified: (a) acceptance and expression of masculinity as an integral part of their gender identities, (b) no current plans to undergo sex reassignment surgery/hormone treatments, (c) over the age of 18, and (d) English speaking. Participant recruitment continued until themes were saturated and a range of experiences was included in the data set (Polkinghorne, 1989).

The 9 participants ranged in age from 18 to 52 (*M* = 33.5). Two identified as heterosexual while 7 identified as being part of the queer community. Table 1 provides other relevant demographic information.

Design and Procedure

This study used a phenomenological methodology, chosen for several reasons: (a) it allows for the discovery of meaning, which is appropriate for an exploratory study (Osborne, 1990); (b) it minimizes scientific reductionism; and (c) it allows for an exploration of the phenomenon from an acausal, non-reifying framework (Owen, 1994). Phenomenology rests upon the assumption that there is a structure of a phenomenon, understood to be the "commonality running through the many diverse appearances of the phenomenon" (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989, p. 14).

An unstructured, in-depth, face-to-face interview was conducted by the principal author with each of the participants. Prior to beginning the interview,

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Chosen identity labels to describe gender and sexual orientation	Age	Occupation	Highest level of education	Children	Relationship Status	Race/Ethnicity
V	Tomboy, Male-Female, or Gender Blender (identified as being heterosexual)	30	Student	Masters degree	No	Married to a man	Caucasian, immigrated as child from Eastern Europe
Morgan	Transgender or Dyke	27	Graduate student	1 year grad school	No	Single	Caucasian
Abigail	Butchy Woman or Tomboy Woman (identified as being heterosexual)	35	Student	Technical institute diploma and 2 years University	Yes	Dating a man	Caucasian
Lynn	Transgender, Queer, or Genderqueer	28	Clergy	Masters degree	No	Dating a woman	Caucasian
Sami	Dyke	52	Graphic designer	Technical institute diploma and 2 years university	Yes	Married to a woman	Caucasian
Pablo	Butch	50	Safety professional	Grade 12 some technical school	No	Dating a woman	Caucasian
Jess	Butch or Genderqueer	18	Canvasser	Grade 12	No	Single	Caucasian
Joan	Butch or Gay	32	Retail manager	Technical institute diploma	No	Married to a woman	Asian Canadian
Randy	Butch or Boi	29	Instructor and student	1 year grad school	No	Single	Caucasian

participants were given a consent form to sign and a demographic question-naire to complete. The primary question for each participant was, "What are the experiences you have had as you have come to understand, accept, and express masculinity as an integral part of your gender identity?" Follow-up questions and prompts were used to support participants in exploring the meaning they had attributed to their gender expressions, their experiences in their families and close relationships, and their experiences within the dominant society. The interviews were audiotaped and lasted 1.5 to 2.5 hours.

The first author transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim and reviewed the tapes and transcripts to ensure accuracy. In order to organize the data, lines of the transcripts were numbered. The entire data set consisted of 6,612 lines or 149 pages of transcripts. Participants chose a pseudonym and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Immediately following the interview, thoughts and impressions of the principal author were documented along with any noticed nonverbal or para-lingual communication (Hycner, 1999). These field notes were included in the data set to assist with discerning meaning.

DATA ANALYSIS

After the process of transcription, interviews were analyzed using thematic cod-ing analysis. This form of analysis involved seven steps. First, the principal author immersed herself into the phenomenon by listening once more to all of the record-ed interviews (Colaizzi, 1978) and re-reading the transcripts several times. Second, transcripts were read line-by-line and significant statements that directly related to the experience and expression of female masculinity were identified (Colaizzi, 1978). Third, transcripts were re-read with the intention of discerning meaning from the significant statements. This intuitive process was dependent upon the principal author's empathic understanding of the subjects' experiences (Hycner, 1999; Osborne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989). Fourth, thematic analysis continued by reviewing the units of meaning and discerning relationships to look for larger themes. Fifth, a summary of each interview was created along with an outline of the meanings that had been identified for that interview. The sixth step involved bringing the data from all of the interviews together and grouping responses un-derstood to be similar. Each of the units of meaning, together with an illustrative quote, was recorded on a slip of paper, which allowed for comparison of units of meaning across participants; units could then be organized and reorganized into patterns of themes and subthemes. Finally, transcripts were reviewed again to assess whether each of the identified themes was present in the individual interview. The final step involved validating the findings by returning to the transcripts (Colaizzi, 1978). Themes and subthemes supported by at least 6 of the participants' experi-ences were included in the final list. A tentative clustering of subthemes into themes was then generated, and the second author reviewed the structure to validate and refine the clustering of themes and subthemes. This structure was later revised and verified to better tell the inferential story of the phenomenon.

Bracketing

Phenomenology recognizes the influence of the researcher in all aspects of the research inquiry. In phenomenological research, researchers are required to engage in the bracketing of their presuppositions and experiences of the phenomenon being investigated to minimize the effect of personal bias as well as to provide the reader with context regarding the interpretative process (Osborne, 1990; Patton, 2002). Throughout the duration of the study, the principal author rigorously engaged in and documented her process of bracketing. What follows is the principal author's description of bracketing.

Although I was not a tomboy, nor would I identify myself as expressing a nonconforming gender identity, my interest in this study is deeply personal. I am privileged to count among the important people in my life many individuals who express nonconforming gender identities and who use identity labels such as *butch*, *boi*, *transgender*, and *genderqueer*. Through witnessing the experiences of those who live outside the gender norms, I am cognizant of the emotional pain that enforced gender norms can create for the individual.

As a feminist and through my process of self-reflexivity, I identified three assumptions shaping both my worldview and the way I approached this inquiry: (a) female masculinity is a "normal" and "healthy" expression of gender in the same way that female femininity is "normal" and "healthy," (b) participants would have experienced discrimination or stigma because of their nonconforming gender expressions, and (c) accepting partner/friends/family would be integral to each participant's journey.

Credibility Checks

Three strategies were implemented to increase the credibility of the data analysis. First, at the end of each interview, participants were invited to reflect upon the interview experience and contribute any information that they felt had not been discovered through the process of the interview. Second, after the principal researcher had examined the transcripts and themes, an independent judge reviewed the transcripts and verified the found units of meaning (Hycner, 1999). The independent judge was an individual known to both authors who was familiar with the literature surrounding gender nonconformity. The principal researcher worked with the independent judge to achieve consensus with respect to the identified themes (Hycner, 1999). Confidentiality was maintained by the use of pseudonyms and by removing or changing all identifying information. Third, in-depth member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of the principal author's interpretations. In order to do this, a second interview was arranged with each participant to share the findings of the research (Colaizzi, 1978; Hycner, 1999). Participants were given a copy of their interview transcript and invited to consider whether there was anything they wanted to revise. This interview provided the researcher with an opportunity to check whether the understanding of meaning was accurate. Participants were then

given a themes questionnaire, which described the themes and asked them to identify which of the thematic descriptions resonated with their experiences. Findings were modified as necessary to incorporate feedback from participants. Returning to participants to validate the identified themes addressed the issue of "goodness of fit" (Osborne, 1990).

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the full data set identified 5 themes with 21 subthemes that pertain to the experiences of the participants as adults. These themes communicate the structure of the experience of expressing nonconforming gender identities: (a) *Understanding Self*, (b) *Social Pressure to Conform*, (c) *Managing Stigma*, (d) *Developing Self-Acceptance*, and (e) *Living Outside Gender Expectations*. Themes and subthemes during the analysis are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Identified Themes and Subthemes

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1. Understanding Self
    Feeling different
    Seeking congruency

2. Social Pressure to Conform
    Pressured to change by loved ones
    Judged by strangers: Discrimination, harassment, and threats of violence
    Facing employment barriers
    Being assumed to be a lesbian

3. Managing Stigma
    Internalizing
    Conforming
    Passing
    Considering transitioning
    Resisting
    Self-acceptance

4. Developing Self-Acceptance
    Reflective process
    Important people
    Community
    Critical analysis of gender
    Body acceptance

5. Living Outside Gender Expectations
    Playing with gender
    Strength of character
    Integrity to self
    Enjoying self as different

Understanding Self

Living in a society that equates female with femininity can marginalize the experiences of those who do not meet these expectations. Eight participants described having felt different from "typical" women because they do not express themselves as feminine. Joan acknowledged that she sees herself as different, "not just in my physical appearance, but that my thought process is a little different."

This sense of being different from other females had its origin in childhood. Seven participants related that as a child/adolescent, they understood themselves as being different from girls they knew as a direct result of their expressions of gender. V stated, "I saw myself as different from the other girls." This sense of difference was felt in relation to the interests and presentations that the participants saw other girls as having. All participants said that as children, they had felt more similar to boys as compared to girls with respect to their interests and/or how they expressed themselves.

Experiencing congruency between one's outward expression of self and an internal sense of self was important for all participants; they related that it was important for them to express masculinity through their appearance. Participants spoke about their preference to have short hair and to wear men's/boys' clothes in order to be comfortable and express who they are. Lynn said that she prefers to present herself in a way that is more common for men: "If I see myself in the mirror and if I look like a guy, I feel good about that … I like to present myself in such a way—in that kind of more masculine way."

This sense of congruency between expressed self and internal sense of self is in contrast to the feeling of being in "drag" that 6 participants spoke about when wearing "women's clothing." Sami recounted, "If I wear a dress, I feel like I am in drag. It is so uncomfortable."

Social Pressure to Conform

Expectations of gender conformity in a society where the dominant culture equates femaleness with femininity are communicated in a number of ways. All participants described having had gender norm expectations communicated to them directly by strangers, loved ones, friends, and/or acquaintances. Whether this was through nonverbal communication, negative comments, or offers of makeovers, participants experienced clear feedback that they were not meeting society's norms.

Eight participants reported that as adults, they continued to experience pressure from a loved one to feminize their gender expressions. This pressure usually focused on their outward appearance, as illustrated by Abigail: "I get a lot of pressure from my boyfriend and my kid to stop looking like a little street thug and start looking like a 'grown woman'…. I don't want my kid to be ashamed of me." For 6 participants, pressure had come from a partner/lover. V described how a former boyfriend told her, "You make me feel emasculated." She added, "He felt that I wouldn't mature as a person and grow into a more feminine role."

Our society invests in the maintenance of gender norms and this was evident in the experiences participants had with complete strangers. All participants related that at times they felt judged by strangers for not meeting the expectations of expressed femininity. Gender expectations were communicated by strangers through judgemental looks, staring, rude comments, or harassment.

> There is the stigma and the bias everyone has when they will look at someone like me…. Yes, I am a real person with real feelings, and even though I may look differently, act differently, and dress differently, I am still a person. (Joan)

Eight participants experienced a form of discrimination, harassment, or threat of violence in reaction to their adult expressions of masculinity. For example, Jess related experiences of having "some random guy or some random [group of] giggling girls come up to me going, 'So are you a guy or a girl? … And they'll laugh and walk away." Five participants made the point that expressing a non-conforming gender identity can make one feel vulnerable to violence. Jess said, "I've been threatened, and I've gotten into fights downtown with guys I haven't even met before."

One of the few spaces in society where one must formally declare whether they are male or female is the gendered space of the public washroom. Entering the restricted space of the women's washroom represented an ordeal for many of the participants. Six reported that they experienced discomfort using the women's washroom because of women's reactions to them. Participants revealed stories of having people challenge their use of women's washrooms. Joan said, "I just don't use public washrooms … because when I walk into the ladies' room, I get the looks—the *looks* I get!" Lynn reported that the washroom represents a unique experience because "it feels unsafe when people start questioning you in that vulnerable setting."

Being seen as "different" in the dominant society has the potential to shape and influence one's career path. Eight participants acknowledged that they were aware that how they expressed their gender had the potential to place a limitation on their career in some way. Some spoke of the necessity to feminize their presentation in an interview.

> And after so many interviews, I had to sit back and go, "It is not my credentials, it is not my experience, what the hell is it?" I decided that I was going to have to feminize myself a bit…. In order to get that job, that is what I had to do. (Pablo)

A common perception is that female masculinity denotes a minority sexual orientation. All participants said that they had been assumed to be gay or a "dyke" because of their gender expressions. For participants who were heterosexual, it was a frustration that was constantly negotiated. Abigail said, "I get really tired of people inferring and/or assuming I am a lesbian."

For the participants who identified as being gay/lesbian/dyke/queer, the assumptions that others made about their sexual orientation were less troublesome

and in some cases helped them to be open about their sexual orientation. Joan explained: "For me it was 'Oh, you noticed.'"

This theme and its subthemes illustrate that there is considerable pressure in Western society to conform to gender norms as informed by hegemonic representations of sex and gender. In addition, they exemplify Butler's (1993) assertion that feminine expression for women and girls is not the result of choice; rather femininity is a compulsory norm taught through regulation and punishment.

Managing Stigma

All participants reported feeling that their nonconforming gender identities are stigmatized. Lynn pointed out that in our society, "a woman who seems more masculine is just an unfortunate problem, or 'Oh, she's just ugly.'" As participants described their experiences of expressing a stigmatized identity, they noted the harmful impact these marginalizing experiences had on their sense of self. Six participants expressed that their self-esteem had been negatively affected due to how they had internalized people's reactions to their masculinity. Lynn reported, "I feel ashamed when I hear them talking about [me, saying] … 'she's kind of not a boy, kind of not a girl.'" According to Pablo, "My self-esteem was affected by thinking that there was something wrong with me, that I was mentally ill or dysfunctional, or there was something really radically wrong with me." Jess noted there are times when "occasionally I still feel like a bit of a freak."

One of the ways in which participants had tried to manage the stigma was to attempt to conform to expected gender roles and behaviours. Seven participants shared experiences when they had modified their expressions of gender as an adult in order to present themselves as more feminine through physical expressions of self (e.g., growing their hair longer and/or wearing feminine clothing). Participants described feeling discomfort while trying to conform to society's expectations. Sami noted, "[I was] trying to be girly … longer hair and the perms and that kind of thing. I just hated looking in the mirror because … I felt really ridiculous."

Participants described an awareness that at times choosing to adopt feminine accoutrements allowed them to move more easily in society. Lynn explained: "Nothing feminizes faster than a purse…. If I carry a purse, it makes me [a woman because the assumption is] that anybody that is carrying a purse is probably a woman."

Seven participants regularly experienced being identified as a boy/man or having people express uncertainty. Sami related: "I still get mistaken for a guy…. It's not a big deal. I just got used to it after a while." When the participants had the experience of being seen as a man, they expressed an awareness of the option to "pass" as being male and to not correct the mistake. Joan said, "If somebody calls me sir, it's just easier to [say] 'Yeah, whatever,' than to say, 'Actually, it's ma'am.'"

A common assumption with regard to people who do not conform to gender expectations is that they are in "the wrong body." As masculinity is reserved for the domain of men, it is not surprising that 7 participants had wondered whether

they should consider sex reassignment. Pablo reported, "I was told that I was too male, too masculine. I questioned transitioning and I decided that wasn't really what I wanted." The option of transitioning offers the possibility of living a life with less conflict around gender expression as Jess revealed: "The pressure is there to want to just be accepted at face value sometimes."

A strategy participants utilized to cope with the stigma was a commitment to resistance. All participants conveyed that they had consciously worked to resist letting someone's opinion of their expressions of gender affect how they feel about themselves, or to change how they express themselves. Lynn said, "If people feel uncomfortable with my gender presentation, it is their issue and their discomfort. It isn't my job to make sure everyone around me feels secure." Participants acknowledged the mental energy it takes to resist internalizing others' judgements. Randy spoke of the necessity to prepare herself mentally for the reactions strangers might have toward her. She explained how having a "fuck you attitude" allowed her to dress and express herself freely. She went on to say, "I can do that, but I can't do that always. I feel that it takes a lot of energy. Sometimes I just don't have that energy."

All participants said they had come to accept themselves as having a nonconforming gender identity, which provided an important strategy to cope with the stigma society placed on their gender expressions. This self-acceptance was acquired against the backdrop of a society that actively teaches and strictly enforces appropriate gender roles and expression. Sami said, "You are supposed to conform, and because you are supposed to, you do. It is nice when it comes to a time when you can say, 'That is not who I am. This is who I am.'"

Developing Self-Acceptance

Within this theme, participants related experiences of coming to accept their nonconforming gender identities and discerned factors that facilitated the process of acceptance. All participants reported consciously engaging in a reflective process in becoming more accepting of their nonconforming gender identities. Joan stated, "I am comfortable in who I am … partially because I've done all this retrospective, introspective stuff and this is who I am. I can't change who I am. I'm not going to change who I am."

Expectations of gender conformity are communicated pervasively throughout all areas of society, and therefore having a safe haven that affirms oneself was important to participants. They all spoke about the importance of having someone validate and accept their expression of gender. V related, "Unless you have somebody that really supports you, as who you are, then you do kind of have to mould yourself and try to fit in." Participants noted that having a supportive person provided space and assurance to explore and accept themselves more fully.

Community, whether comprising a group of friends or the larger queer community, provided participants an accepting environment where they could explore their nonconforming gender identities. Six participants said that a community was integral to their development of self-acceptance. Jess said, "When I started

realizing that there were more people out there like me, it really allowed me to just open up and … allow myself to express this."

Another means of facilitating self-acceptance was developing a critical analysis of gender. For 6 participants, coming to accept themselves involved a conscious, reflective process of questioning gender roles and the rules for appropriate expressions of gender. V illustrates her reflective process: "I have had people say, 'You know, you should be acting more like a girl.' It got me to thinking about what … men and women are supposed to be doing."

All participants revealed that, in order to come to accept themselves, it was important for them to reject the expectations of femininity. Lynn related, "I don't fit clearly into the categories. I don't have difficulty identifying myself as female, but I have difficulty with feminine…. I'm fine with having a uterus, just don't expect me to be frilly or something." It appeared that by rejecting the expected link between femaleness and femininity, participants were then freer to create their own expressions of gender.

Through the process of questioning assumptions and rejecting gender expectations, participants revealed a sense of agency regarding their expressions of gender. In achieving self-acceptance, all participants revealed that it had been important to develop a more complex understanding of gender beyond the binary model that equates femaleness with femininity.

> I disregard the rules for codes of behaviour because I think they are false in their assumptions that girls have to be soft and boys have to be strong. I think that at least today the spectrum of gender identity possibilities is much greater than it was, and it is more appropriate to have masculine females. (V)

Revealed in V's statement is a context for her to place and understand her own experience as a healthy expression of self rather than as something deviant or problematic.

As participants developed a perspective to frame their nonconforming gender identities, they became freer to accept their physical bodies. Six participants conveyed the importance of accepting their body as being female. These participants described that, although their body was not congruent with their inner sense of self, the process of coming to accept themselves necessitated accepting their body as being female.

> I questioned transitioning and I decided that wasn't really what I wanted…. I had to come to terms with the fact that I am in a female's body, and it may not be exactly the representation of the mental image I have of myself, but it is what I have…. I have to come to terms with it. (Pablo)

Living Outside Gender Expectations

As the participants reported the process of coming to accept themselves, they expressed a sense of freedom and empowerment to explore and express themselves in whatever way felt appropriate in the moment. The stories participants shared

revealed an understanding of gender as something that is "done" or communicated rather than a static quality. There seemed to be a sense of playfulness and fun surrounding the freedom to express oneself independent of socially prescribed norms. All participants reported that playing with how they expressed their gender and calling attention to their masculinity was one way they enjoyed themselves as being different. Lynn illustrates:

> I've always joked that if I ever get pregnant, I'll have to grow a beard … if I am going to have something that is so obviously feminine, I need to mess it up somehow. Not mess it up like ruin it, but mess it up by challenging it.

This sense of play extended to entering the domain of maleness. Seven participants reported that one way they enjoyed playing with gender was by intentionally trying to pass as being a man. Randy expressed enjoyment in passing as a man when she goes dancing at a gay bar: "I can pack, I can wear a tight tank top, and I am a guy. The guys at the bar will hit on me…. I love that my masculinity is real."

Participants also revealed a sense of agency surrounding how they were "read" by others. Eight participants described how they enjoyed making their gender difficult for others to read. Rather than being easily categorized, they preferred when people had difficulty identifying their gender. Pablo explained, "I like playing with gender…. It sort of gives me a little smile on my face to know somehow I have confused people." There was a sense that by purposefully making one's gender difficult to read, the participants were more in control of how they were seen, which allowed them to take on a proactive stance. Joan explained, "I don't think it's to be mean or anything like that. I like to keep people guessing."

The journey to self-acceptance was an important one in the participants' lives. All participants described a relationship between the acceptance of their nonconforming gender identities and developing strength of character. Pablo explained, "In the long run I think [my expression of masculinity] has made me a stronger person and even more accepting of myself, which is a nice outcome. I think I am lucky in that way."

Participants expressed an understanding that they had made a choice to honour their self-integrity rather than submit to the pressures to conform. Eight participants described coming to accept themselves as expressing masculinity in relation to becoming more authentic or developing greater self-integrity.

> At times I wish I had taken the initiative years ago, and at times regret … missing out on so much of life as it could have been. I must say, I am proud of myself for following my heart and [now] living my life as "me." (Sami)

All participants indicated that they have come to enjoy themselves as being different. Rather than view the expression of masculinity as problematic, participants indicated that they had come to see their nonconforming gender expressions as a positive aspect of their lives. V's comment illustrates this nicely: "My husband and I joke that I would be the one riding up on a horse to do the rescuing. I am not ashamed of being a male female. I revel in my difference."

<div align="center">DISCUSSION</div>

This inquiry has offered insights into the understanding of females' nonconforming gender identities and the processes through which gender is constructed. The findings of this study suggest that gender is experienced both as innate and as something that is performed. Contained in the stories and experiences shared by the participants was an early and robust sense of preferred gender expression. Participants perceived their masculinity as being innate, which compelled them to express their nonconforming gender expressions in the face of considerable pressure to conform. They understood themselves as being qualitatively different from the majority of girls when they were children, and now as adults, they saw themselves as being different from typical women. The notion of an intrinsic experience of gender is in agreement with arguments made by many transsexuals who feel there is a biological basis for transsexualism that is not accounted for within a social constructionist viewpoint (Devor, 2004).

The results suggest that one of the motivating forces in the expression of a nonconforming gender identity is an individual's commitment to expressing themselves in a way that feels congruent with their internal sense of self. In light of the considerable pressures to conform, it is not surprising that participants described strength of character and independent thinking as integral to engendering self-acceptance. This is in line with Levitt and Hiestand's (2004) finding that an integral aspect of maintaining a nonconforming gender was participants' desire to communicate gender in a way that felt "true to themselves" (p. 617).

Through the embodied practices of masculine expressions, participants were able to experience themselves as masculine, thus achieving a sense of congruency between their inner and outer selves. The desire to express one's gender identity through one's physical body suggests that the participants' gender identities are not "mere cognitive abstractions, but embodied practices" (Carr, 1998, p. 549). As participants developed self-acceptance, they came to appreciate their difference and were more likely to express masculinity through their appearance. This experience of the participants supports Seil's (2002) assertion that gender identity needs to be expressed for healthy mental processing.

The findings of this study illustrate that there is an aspect of gender that is actively and mindfully enacted. The data revealed decisions of participants to actively resist or conform to gender norms. While the participants identified feeling more congruency when they expressed masculinity, many described making efforts in their adult life to appear more feminine in order to meet a goal such as employment, or to achieve freedom from scrutiny. That participants expressed a conscious choice of "putting on" femininity, or playing with their gender expressions by emphasizing masculinity, suggests there is a reflective or conscious element to gender expression, which is then performed within the context of the situation. It denotes an awareness of choice and personal power as to how the participants opt to present themselves.

This inquiry also supports Carr's (1998) assertion that agency is vital to gender identity. Similar to the participants in Carr's study, the participants in this research identified an awareness of rejecting femininity and choosing masculinity. Carr's study reported that it is through the "daily externalized and internalized (embodied) practices of resistance and conforming that gender identities are created and maintained" (p. 550). Conceptualizing agency as integral to the processes of gender identification provides a lens through which one may understand the underlying psychological motivations that engender the development of nonconforming gender identities.

Interestingly, most of the participants stated that they preferred to make it difficult for people to categorize them as male or female. Additionally, several participants referred to the practice of "gender fucking," which they defined as a deliberate attempt to unsettle others and encourage contemplation about the naturalness of gender. By engaging in these practices, participants actively encourage the deconstruction of sex and gender.

This research project illustrates how heteronormativity, the perspective that privileges a normative congruency between sex, sexuality, and gender expression (Ekins, 2005), operates within our society. Bem (1995) points out that not only is the traditional view one in which there are dichotomous sexes, but it includes the expectation that these two sexes are attracted to each other. This creates a division of people into two categories—female/feminine/attracted to men and male/masculine/attracted to women—and it positions heterosexuality as being the natural result of biology. Tewksbury and Gagne (1996) point out that when one's expression of gender varies from perceived biological sex, the common assumption in our society is one of sexual deviance. As illustrated by this study, a female who expresses masculinity is often assumed to be lesbian. It is possible that the heterosexual adolescent girl's decision to cease tomboy expression is informed by her fear of being assumed to be a lesbian. This may be one explanation as to why female masculinity is more commonly expressed by queer-identified females.

This research project contributes to an understanding of the development and maintenance of a nonconforming gender identity through the identification and illustration of the theme of Developing Self-Acceptance. Through the data analysis, five subthemes were found that illustrate processes that engendered participants' self-acceptance: development of a critical analysis of gender, experiencing acceptance and validation, finding community, developing body acceptance, and engaging in a reflective process.

Through their stories and reflections, the participants acknowledged their work in "unlearning" the internalized messages of shame by developing a critique of the conflation of sex and gender. Developing such a critique allowed participants to redefine their expression of gender from being problematic to being constructed, appreciated, and enjoyed. This critique also informed the participants' reflective process of coming to understand and accept both themselves and their nonconforming gender expressions.

It was within the context of a community that participants felt able to safely and unapologetically explore their gender expressions. Within the literature examining marginalized identities, the experience of an accepting community is understood to be integral to the formation and maintenance of non-normative identities (Devor, 2004; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004; Saltzburg & Davis, 2010).

Perhaps one reason it is less common for heterosexual individuals to express nonconforming gender identities is the lack of communities where nonconforming gender expressions are accepted. Interestingly, in this study, only 1 of the 2 heterosexual participants described the importance of community as compared to 6 of the 7 queer-identified participants. Additionally, there is an absence of identity labels that heterosexual women can use to describe themselves other than the childhood moniker "tomboy" (Carr, 2007). Devor (2002) points out that "to be unnamable is to be socially invisible" (p. 9). This is in contrast to the queer community that offers a prolific range of identity labels (e.g., butch, boi, transgender, genderqueer, boy/grrl).

IMPLICATIONS

This study has illustrated that individuals who express nonconforming gender identities experience substantial overt and covert pressure to conform to gender norms. This has several implications for counsellors working with clients who express nonconforming gender identities. The experience of participants illuminated how the pressure to conform and the sense of being judged can impair an individual's sense of self and self-worth. Individuals who challenge gender norms are vulnerable to being stigmatized and victimized (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998). Therapists can work to engender self-acceptance by acknowledging and respecting the complexity of gender. Clients can be encouraged to examine, question, and deconstruct dominant gender norms and gender discourse in our society (Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002). It is important to support the individual in accomplishing a deeply personal expression of gender rather than reinforcing gender boundaries by encouraging clients to conform to gender rules (Tiefer, 2000).

Rather than focus on the individual's inability to fit rigid gender roles, it is worthwhile to consider and question society's inability to understand gender beyond binary roles (Denny, 1997). Therapists who have considered and challenged their own internalized gender norms are in a better position to offer positive regard, support, and understanding (Carroll et al., 2002).

A subtheme noted in this study was the importance of having accepting individuals and community in the participants' journey to self-acceptance. Therapists can support clients in finding/developing this important support system. Clients can be encouraged to locate Internet sites and community organizations that create space for alternative expressions of gender. It is also worthwhile for therapists to assist clients in identifying literature, both fiction and nonfiction, that can

contribute to a sense of community and may facilitate self-understanding (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004).

As much as this study has the potential to contribute to the understanding of nonconforming gender identities, specifically female masculinity, further research is needed to address certain limitations of this study. First, the majority of the participant sample was homogeneous in terms of education level, sexual orientation, and race. Second, the participants were considered members of the same group who express female masculinity despite the diverse identity labels used by the participants. While commonality was found, it is likely that there were unique experiences and understandings of gender that were not discovered through this research project. To address these limitations, it is important that research be conducted that includes a greater proportion of participants from diverse cultural, sexual, and educational backgrounds and considers the diversity within any participant sample.

It is hoped that this study will encourage readers to question the perceived "naturalness" of the binary model of sex and gender as well as the gender norms that define our society. As we reconsider gender, each one of us is freer to examine the ways in which we both resist and succumb to the pressures of gender conformity.

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