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“The labels don’t work very well”: Transgender individuals’ conceptualizations of sexual orientation and sexual identity

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ABSTRACT

The conceptualization and measurement of sexual orientation for transgender individuals is uniquely complicated by the way sexual orientation is rooted in dichotomous notions of sex and gender. The present research investigates the conceptualization of sexual orientation among transgender individuals by exploring the sexual identity labels they choose, the descriptions they provide for these labels, and their general descriptions of their sexuality. Participants included 172 adult U.S. residents, ranging in age from 18 to 65, who self-identified as transgender, transsexual, gender variant, or having a transgender history. Participants individually completed an online survey. Qualitative responses were analyzed via thematic analysis. Six themes were identified related to transgender individuals’ descriptions of their sexuality: (1) trans sexuality as complex; (2) shifts in trans sexuality; (3) focus on beloved; (4) relationship style and status; (5) sexuality, bondage & discipline / domination & submission / sadism & masochism (BDSM), and kink; and (6) separating sexual and romantic attraction. Discussion focuses on the ways that transgender individuals’ descriptions of sexuality fall outside the traditional research frameworks that problematize transgender experience, confute gender identity and sexual orientation, and inherently define transgender experience in both cisnormative and heteronormative terms.

KEYWORDS

Gender identity; sexual identity; sexual orientation; transgender

Sexual orientation is a multidimensional construct that encompasses identity, attraction, and behavior (Lauman, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) and is understood as an internal mechanism that directs sexual and romantic interests (Diamond, 2003; Rosario & Schrimshaw, 2014). The present research investigates the conceptualization of sexual orientation among transgender individuals by exploring the sexual identity labels they choose, the descriptions they provide for these labels, and their general descriptions of their sexuality.

Framing an understanding of sexual orientation among trans individuals

Sexual orientation research in the United States has historically reflected two dominant trends, one stemming from a premise of sickness and pathology and the other from a framework of minority identity (Hammack, Mayers, & Windell, 2013). Research on transgender sexuality has been similarly shaped from within these trends. Although only a few studies have focused directly on understanding the sexual orientation of transgender individuals, research from both of these perspectives has profound implications for the way in which transgender sexuality has been conceptualized. In particular, sexual orientation is conceptualized for transgender individuals from each of these perspectives in a way that contributes to the overall conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity. There is a general failure of sexuality researchers to treat gender identity and sexual orientation as independent constructs (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007) or to systematically explore the intersections of the two (Galupo, Bauerband, et al., 2014; Galupo, Davis, Gynkiewicz, & Mitchell, 2014). This general conflation of gender identity and sexual orientation often leads researchers focused on sexual minority experience to conceptualize sexual orientation based on cisgender assumptions (Galupo, Davis, et al., 2014) and researchers focused on transgender experience to conceptualize gender identity based on heterosexual assumptions (Galupo, Bauerband,
et al., 2014). This conflation distorts our understanding of sexual orientation and identity among transgender individuals.

**Transgender sexuality: Medical framework**

Transgender experience has been consistently pathologized in the medical and psychological literature. From this perspective the focus on transgender experience has been on classifying transgender types and diagnosing gender identity. The sexual orientation of the individual has been central to the way this literature has approached an understanding of transgender identity and experience. The centrality of sexual orientation in the conceptualization of gender identity is illustrated in Blanchard’s highly contested model of male-to-female (MtF) transgenderism (1989a). In this model same-sex desire is hypothesized to be the reason behind gender dysphoria where homosexual transsexuals see themselves as women attracted to men. Similarly Blanchard’s autogynephilic transsexuals are considered “nonhomosexual” individuals who are not attracted to men but are instead are sexually aroused by the thought of themselves as women. The way this theory connects two constructs—sexual orientation and gender identity—that are now generally understood to be distinct has not gone uncriticized in the academic literature (Coleman, Bockting, & Gooren, 1993; Moser, 2010; Serano, 2010).

Blanchard (1989b) further suggested that sexual orientation for transgender individuals should be determined on the basis of chromosomal sex regardless of gender presentation or surgical status and classified into four categories: homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, and analloerotic. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition* (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980) similarly denoted individuals’ predominant prior sexual history as a subclassification of transsexualism with options of asexual, homosexual (same anatomic sex), heterosexual (other anatomic sex), or unspecified. In the *DSM-IV* the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder was accompanied by designations that recharacterized sexuality outside of the traditional sexual orientation labels that require a sex designation of self in relation to other (i.e. heterosexual, homosexual); instead subclassification options were attraction to females, males, both, and neither (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). No such subclassification based on sexual orientation is included in the *DSM-5* Gender Dysphoria diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Psychomedical perspectives of gender identity based on heteronormative assumptions of sexual orientation have led to a narrow interpretation of transgender experience and a narrow definition of transgender sexuality. As such, this classification does not always resonate with the diversity of experience among transgender individuals (Rowniak & Chesla, 2013; Serano, 2010; Veale, Clarke, & Lomax, 2012). In fact, as much of the research on sexual orientation among transgender individuals focuses on attraction, more emphasis is needed to understand the role of self-identification (Bockting, Benner, & Coleman, 2009; Bockting & Coleman, 1991; Devor, 1993).

**Transgender sexuality: Minority identity framework**

Transgender sexuality has also been conceptualized from within the larger LGBT minority framework. Sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer) and gender minorities (transgender and gender nonconforming individuals) are often discussed as a unified group based on shared stigma and community. However, transgender persons often experience more stigmatization than sexual minorities (Weiss, 2004) and a unique form of prejudice/transphobia (Hill & Willoughby, 2005; Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012; Nagoshi et al., 2008) and do not always feel connected to the LGBT community (Fassinger & Arsenneau, 2007). Transgender concerns have historically been minimized within the larger LGBTQ community where issues surrounding sexual orientation and LGBQ experience often take precedence (Hill & Willoughby, 2005).

Research focused on understanding transgender experience and influenced from a minority stress framework provides a wider understanding of sexuality among transgender individuals. Instead of sexual orientation defining transgender experience, sexual orientation has been used in these studies as a way to describe the diversity of transgender experience and is reported based on participant self-identification or stated attraction. This research broadens our understanding of transgender sexuality by emphasizing sexual diversity; for example, this research suggests that transgender individuals report a range of current sexual identities (Dargie, Blair, Pukall, & Coyle, 2014; Diamond, Pardo, & Butterworth, 2011; Hines, 2007), a range of sexual identities prior to transition (Rowniak & Chesla, 2013),
and that it is common for transgender individuals to endorse nonbinary/plurisexual sexual identities such as bisexual, pansexual, and queer (Dargie et al., 2014; Galupo, Davis, et al., 2014; Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2012). In addition, transgender individuals sometimes experience a shift in their sexuality following social or medical transition (Devor, 1993; Galupo, Mitchell, Grynkiewicz, & Davis, 2014; Kuper et al., 2012; Meier, Pardo, Labuski, & Babcock, 2013).

Transgender sexuality: Measures of sexual orientation and sexual identity labels

Sexuality measures typically assess sexual orientation on a single continuum with heterosexual on one end and lesbian/gay on the other (e.g., Kinsey scale; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Savin-Williams, 2010). Designed with the intent of better characterizing the multidimensional aspects of sexuality, the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) expanded the measurement of sexual orientation by prompting individuals to rate their behavior, attraction, and fantasies on a continuum of same- and other-sex attracted or to rate their community and political affiliation as falling somewhere between heterosexual and lesbian/gay (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985).

The way that sexual-orientation labels and measurements require participants to gauge their desire by making individual sex/gender designations in relation to the individual/group of interest is particularly complicated by transgender identity or history (Dozier, 2005; Lev, 2004; van Anders, 2015). Recent qualitative research has focused on the subjective evaluation of typical measures of sexual orientation (i.e., Kinsey, KSOG). When asked how well these measures capture their experience, sexual- and gender-minority participants raised a number of concerns surrounding the way sexual orientation is conceptualized and measured (Galupo, Mitchell, et al., 2014). For example, participants questioned whether a single continuum scale is able to capture the complexity and fluidity of their sexuality. Many participants challenged the conceptualization of sexual orientation as anchored on binary dimensions of sex and gender. This was particularly true for transgender, bisexual, and other plurisexual1 individuals (Galupo, Davis, et al., 2014) who were most likely to express that their sexuality could not be represented accurately within the confines of these traditional sexual orientation scales.

Recent research has documented parallel findings for sexual identity; transgender and plurisexual individuals were less likely to feel that their sexual identity could be captured in a single sexual-orientation label (Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015). Transgender and plurisexual individuals were more likely than their cisgender and monosexual counterparts, respectively, to endorse multiple sexual identity labels and more likely to provide additional context for their identity labels than were individuals with normative identities. It is likely that by analyzing the descriptors provided by transgender individuals, we can gain insight into the way they conceptualize their sexuality. Given that current conventions in sexual orientation measurement and identity labeling do not resonate with transgender individuals’ experiences, additional research focused on the subjective experience of transgender individuals is necessary. In addition to providing a fuller characterization of transgender sexuality, this approach may also inform alternative ways of conceptualizing sexuality in general, as Hammack, Mayers, and Windell (2013) suggest that a subject-focused investigation of sexuality is needed to disrupt the assumptions of the dominant frameworks.

Statement of purpose

The present research investigates transgender sexuality by analyzing the sexual identity labels transgender individuals choose, the descriptions they provide for these labels, and the individuals’ general descriptions of their sexuality. By recentering on the lived experiences of transgender individuals and removing the theoretical frameworks of past research that conflate sexual orientation and gender identity, our thematic analysis focuses on identifying the aspects most salient to transgender sexuality. In addition, because past research has mostly investigated transgender sexuality separately for MtF (e.g., Moser, 2010; Veale, Clarke, Lomax, 2008) and FtM (e.g., Devor, 1993; Dozier, 2005) individuals, we include a diverse nonclinical sample including transgender individuals who identify with both transfeminine and transmasculine spectrums. In addition, to better reflect the diversity of the transgender community we also include individuals who self-identify as gender variant and agender.
Method

Participant demographics

Participants were 172 adults who self-identified as transgender, as transsexual, as gender variant, or as having a transgender history. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 (M = 32.29, SD = 11.62). All participants were U.S. residents representing all 50 United States and Washington, DC. Table 1 includes participant demographics with regard to racial/ethnic diversity, highest level of education, and socioeconomic status. There was limited racial/ethnic diversity within the sample, with 75.0% of participants identifying as White/Caucasian and 19.8% identifying as a racial/ethnic minority, with another 5.2% identifying as “other.”

Participants self-identified with a range of gender identity labels including female/woman, male/man, trans, trans woman, trans man, MtF, FtM, genderqueer, bigender, gender nonconforming, and agender, with many participants utilizing multiple labels simultaneously. For the purpose of describing our participant demographics and ensuring diversity of trans identities within our sample we asked participants to group themselves in one of four gender categories, provided by the researchers, that best describes their experience. Participants chose transfeminine (n = 47), transmasculine (n = 84), gender variant (n = 31), and agender (n = 10). Several demographic characteristics differed across these four groups (age, sex assigned at birth, and primary sexual orientation identity), and we provide this information in Table 2. Transfeminine participants were older, most likely to be assigned male at birth (98.8%), and most likely to endorse bisexual (25.5%) and lesbian (25.5%) as their most frequent primary sexual-orientation labels. Transmasculine (97.6%), gender variant (74.2%), and agender (80%) participants, in contrast, were most likely to be assigned female at birth. Transmasculine participants were most likely to endorse queer (28.6%) and heterosexual (26.2%) as their most frequent primary sexual-orientation labels. Gender variant participants were most likely to endorse queer (48.4%), bisexual (12.9%), and pansexual (12.9%) labels while agender participants were most likely to endorse queer (50.0%) and asexual (30.0%) labels.

Recruitment

Recruitment announcements, including a link to the online survey, were posted on social media sites, online message boards, and emailed via transgender listservs. Some of these resources were geared toward specific transgender communities (e.g., nonbinary, gay FtMs, Two Spirit), while others served the transgender community more generally. Participants heard about the study primarily through online means, including Facebook (76.8%), Tumblr (7.7%), Twitter (0.5%), research-oriented websites/message boards (4.3%), and receiving a forwarded email through an acquaintance or listserv (5.3%). Other participants were directed to the survey by a friend or significant other (4.8%), and one participant (0.5%) did not provide an answer to this question.

Measures and procedure

The present study focused on information obtained from a demographic section of a larger online study
investigating gender identity and transgender experience. A structured sexual orientation question was presented to participants where they chose their primary sexual orientation from discreet options: heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, fluid, queer, asexual, and other. All participants were then asked to describe their sexual orientation and to list any other sexual identities they use via free response.

**Data analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to consider how participants described their sexual orientation and how they defined and used sexual identity labels. Analysis began with the second and third author independently coding data, looking for themes related to each category of identity. The research team met and discussed the coding categories and agreed upon an initial set of codes. The second and third authors then coded and sorted the data set using the initial set of codes and provided the first author (who served as external auditor) with a list of themes and sorted quotes based on theme. There was significant overlap in the ratings across the two coders; only three discrepant codes needed to be resolved via consensus of the entire research team. All three members of the research team agreed upon the final coding structure and met several additional times to discuss and solidify which quotes would fit under each theme. Final quotes were chosen to simultaneously exemplify each theme and to ensure that the table of quotes best represented the diversity of trans identities endorsed by the sample.

Several checks were included in our data analysis process to increase the credibility of our results. First, at the end of the survey we provided participants with the opportunity to reflect upon how our questions captured (and failed to capture) their individual experiences. Participants were also asked to provide feedback to improve the present and future studies. Responses obtained were incorporated into our analysis. Second, throughout the data analysis process we discussed the themes and made decisions via consensus. Because of the range of our collective experiences across sexual orientation, gender identity, gender presentation, and relationship experiences we came to these discussions with different perspectives. Our research team includes a professor of psychology who self-identifies as a bi/pansexual cisgender woman (first author), an advanced undergraduate student of psychology and LGBTQ studies who self-identifies as a pansexual trans man (second author), and an advanced undergraduate student of family studies and community development and LGBTQ studies who self-identifies as a gay cisgender man (third author).

**Results and discussion**

Six major themes emerged in participants’ descriptions of their sexuality: (1) trans sexuality as complex; (2) shifts in trans sexuality; (3) focus on beloved; (4) relationship style and status; (5) sexuality, BDSM, and kink; and (6) separating sexual and romantic attraction. All participant responses in the data set are represented in the coding structure and reflected at least one of the themes. Quotations are used throughout the paper to illustrate the themes and are accompanied by the gender identity label provided as a free response by the participant.
“It’s complicated”: Trans sexuality as complex

When asked to describe their sexual orientation, transgender participants’ responses can be summed up by the main sentiment, “It’s complicated.” Many participants described their sexual orientation using a series of labels, as illustrated by the following quotation: “It’s complicated. Graysexual, autosexual, questioning lesbian but so far pansexual” (genderqueer, trans”). The complexity is exemplified further by the following participants’ simultaneous endorsement of labels that are conceptualized in the literature as mutually exclusive (e.g., gay/straight; homo/bi): “Queer, Gay. Straight, Bi, Pan, Homo” (genderqueer). The use of multiple labels is consistent with recent quantitative research finding that sexual minority individuals who are also transgender are more likely than cisgender sexual minority individuals to endorse multiple sexual orientation labels (Galupo et al., 2016). The present findings suggest that for trans individuals, sexuality is not easily captured in a single label. Multiple labels, then, are used to attempt to capture the complexity of trans individuals’ sexuality. Even when choosing a single label, participants described choosing broader “umbrella” terms while acknowledging their choice as a way to reduce the confusion or complexity of their sexuality. This is exemplified in the following three quotations:

I often define myself as gay to simplify my sexuality. (male)

I like the term queer. As a bisexual trans person, I like using queer to sum up the otherness of it all. (female)

I am primarily asexual, but I think “queer” may apply, as things get complicated sometimes. (genderqueer/FtM)

In addition to providing their preferred sexual orientation labels, transgender participants often qualified their responses by including in their descriptions their sex/gender assigned at birth, their gender identity (present and past), the status of their bodies or body parts, and/or the way in which others classify them.

I feel heterosexual based on my birth gender, but lesbian based on my gender-identity. I feel like I am a lesbian, but lesbians do not accept me as such. (female)

I tick queer because although I have come out as attracted to women, as I don’t ID as a woman, lesbian doesn’t work for me. Also I am still married to a man. (genderqueer/trans”)

Calling myself heterosexual doesn’t feel quite right because I still have some female parts. (transgender)

Consistent with past research, trans participants’ understandings of their sexuality was complicated by the way sexual orientation is anchored on binary conceptualizations of sex and gender (Galupo, Mitchell, et. al, 2014) and the way sex and gender is often tied to gendered notions of the body (Spade, 2011). Despite medical perspectives on transgender sexuality that have traditionally rooted definitions of sexual orientation solely on natal sex (Blanchard, 1989b; DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980), biological notions of sex/gender were not the sole consideration in our trans participants’ understanding of their sexuality though it was sometimes one consideration of many that informed the way sexual orientation was regarded.

When discussing the complexity of their sexual orientation, participants’ general conclusion was that the current system of labeling doesn’t quite capture their experience.

In the past, I was a man, attracted exclusively to women—aka heterosexual. Then I was in transition, expressing an appearance of being a women—while retaining male sexual parts—and I was attracted to women—aka Bisexual. Now, I’m expressing being a women, and having female sexual parts—and am attracted to women—aka Lesbian. The labels don’t work very well. (transgender woman)

“My orientation flipped”: Shifts in trans sexuality

A central theme to the way our trans participants discussed their sexuality was by noting the shifts in their sexual orientation. Most often this shift was discussed in terms of their gender identity. Sometimes this was on the basis of their coming out to themselves or others, “I identified as a straight woman before coming to terms with being trans; now I identify as a gay man” (FtM or male). Often the shift in sexual orientation was based on social or medical transition: “Currently I would be Gay, but after MTF-SRS I will be Hetero” (female) and “My orientation flipped on HRT, but still straight” (female). This shift of sexual
orientation is consistent with past research that has documented sexuality shifts among trans men following testosterone use (Meier et al., 2013; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013). Our participants, however, saw the shift as relevant to their overall descriptors of sexuality.

In addition to gender-identity-specific attributions for shifts in trans sexuality, some participants described their sexuality as changing across context and time.

It changes and depends on the context. I sometimes say I am gay, fag queer, bi but lean towards men, that I don't have an orientation, gray asexual for stretches of time, periods of time when I fantasize about cis women then I lose interest … so queer. But gay. Basically, I don’t know and I’ve given up trying to tie myself down, but my attraction to men is a part of my identity and I think people assume I’m more interested in women as a trans guy if I say I’m queer. I’m much more immersed in gay male culture than queer culture. (male)

These general shifts in sexuality are consistent with multidimensional measurements of sexual orientation, such as the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, which allows for measurement of attraction in the past, the present, and ideal contexts (Klein et al., 1985). These shifts are also reflective of general theories of sexual fluidity and flexibility (Diamond, 2008; Zinik, 1985).

Who “I’m attracted to,” “like,” and “date”: Focus on beloved

Many of our participants described their sexuality in ways that avoided the use of traditional sexual orientation labels and favored instead descriptions that focused on the characteristics that guide their attraction. Sometimes the descriptions focused on the identity of whom they were attracted to—I like girls (transgender) and Tri-sexual (I like male female and trans) (female). Sometimes descriptions included gender and gender expression:

I’m attracted to feminine, and/or females and/or androgynous … (other) or body parts I only like vaginas—gender expression is moot. (genderqueer)

People usually read me as a guy, which is close enough for comfort in most situations. People rarely read me as genderqueer. Re sexual identities, I mostly date transmasculine genderqueers, sometimes trans men and occasionally non-trans men. (genderqueer FTM)

This “focus on the beloved” (Weinrich, 2014) approach taken by our participants reduces sexual orientation from two parameters (requiring a match of identity or characteristic of the individual to that of the beloveds) to one (characteristic of the beloved). These findings support Kuper et al.’s (2012) contention that some trans individuals “may wish to represent their attractions in ways that do not specifically reference their own sex or gender, which may be in transition, fluid or not fully captured by gay, lesbian, or heterosexual identity labels.” (p. 251). This approach has also been shown to resonate with transgender individuals in the context of sexual orientation measurement (Galupo, Lomash, & Mitchell, 2016) as this system of classification is seen as more inclusive of trans individuals’ identity and experience. For example, Galupo et al. (2016) describe a novel sexual orientation measure, the Gender-Inclusive Scale, that assesses attraction to masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and gender nonconformity (in addition to attraction to the same- and other-sex in the original version of the scale). Transgender individuals felt this measure better captured their experience of sexuality than do traditional measures of sexual orientation. The authors offer a slight modification to address the wording of the same- and other-sex dimensions. The suggested version of the scale includes attraction to women, men, masculine individuals, feminine individuals, androgynous individuals, and gender nonconforming individuals (Galupo et al., 2016). This modification allows all six dimensions to be assessed without requiring individuals to describe their attractions in reference to their own sex or gender designation.

“Monogamy,” “polyamory,” relationship style and status

Relationship style and status was an important context for many of our trans participants when describing their sexual orientation: “Technically I am bi, but I often just say gay since I am engaged to another man (male) and “Queer. Polyamorous. Submissive” (agender). For some, it was the central factor or only label provided by trans participants when describing their sexuality.

In a committed non monogamous relationship (polyamorous) for 18 years with a cis-gendered woman who has identified as straight, bi, and queer. (transfeminine)

Polyamorous. (transmasculine)
This finding is consistent with recent research that has suggested that relational status and relationship type play a role in some individuals’ conceptualization of sexual orientation (Galupo, Mitchell, et al., 2014), and these relational factors may account for shifts in sexuality across time and context (Manley, Diamond, & van Anders, 2015).

“Power exchange friendly”: Sexuality, BDSM, and kink

Another theme that emerged from the way our participants described their sexuality included elements of BDSM and kink. Sometimes this was indicated with single labels, (“BDSM”), or in reference to particular roles (“submissive,” “Switch boi, pansexual,” and “demisexual submissive”). Others provided more context regarding this aspect of their sexuality.

I am orientated to people based on their heart and not their genitals. My sexuality is also sensitive to power and kinky dynamics. (female to guy)

I’m into bdsm and the daddy + boy dynamic. (ftm/genderqueer)

Power exchange friendly. (m2f transsexual pre-op)

I am a sex worker and heavily into BDSM. (nonbinary)

Our participants’ responses regarding BDSM and kink go beyond framing their involvement as an individual or community experience. Rather, these findings suggest that for some transgender individuals BDSM and kink are seen as relevant to the core of their sexual orientation and identity. These findings resonate with emerging theories of BDSM as informing sexual identity (Bauer, 2014) and even of being a type of sexual orientation (Gemberling, Cramer, & Miller, 2015).

“I feel about sex the way most people feel about bowling”: Separating sexual and romantic attraction

Many participants described their sexuality in ways that made distinctions between sexual and romantic attraction. Sometimes this was indicated by using one label: “Aromantic,” “Gray-A,” “autosexual,” and “demisexual.” Sometimes two separate labels were used to document the discordance between romantic and sexual attraction: “homoromantic asexual,” and “panromantic greysexual.”

Others provided more detail in their descriptions regarding the way sexual/romantic attraction may be more or less important to their experience.

I also consider myself grey-aseexual, in the sense that I seem to feel about sex the way most people feel about bowling. On occasion, I am attracted to people, but I don’t seem to be as interested in that whole area of life as most people. (male side of neutral)

While I am gay and attracted 99% to men (I only want to have romance with men, only strongly desire or go out of my way for relationships with men) sexually I am more flexible and would fuck a girl, although I wouldn’t want to commit to her etc. I don’t have interest in specific females the way I do with males. (male)

I’m not attracted to much of anyone these days. On the other hand, my interest in having sex (with any gender) is rather high. (mtf but a little nonbinary)

Gray a, almost asexual in addition to being pan. (agender)

Pan-romantic, The idea that you can be romantically involved with out being lustful, so you can have two straight men dating they may have sex, but it’s because of the proximity they have together and the amount they care for another not because of the lust. (agender)

Asexual due to end stage cancer. (male)

The disaggregation of sexual and romantic attraction is often highlighted in the asexuality literature. Consistent with the way asexual individuals often endorse dual identity labels to make the distinction explicit (Flore, 2014; Przybylo, 2013) it is important to note that even nonsexual/verisexual individuals find the distinction meaningful (Galupo, Lomash, & Mitchell, 2016). This was made clear in our trans participants’ responses where sexual and romantic attraction were described in discordant ways.

Conclusions

The present research focuses on understanding transgender sexuality from the perspective of transgender individuals by exploring the sexual identity labels they choose, the descriptions they provide for these labels,
and their general descriptions of their sexuality. In addition to providing a fuller characterization of transgender sexuality it has been suggested that a subject-focused investigation of sexuality is needed to disrupt the assumptions of the dominant frameworks of sexuality (Hammack, Mayers, & Windell, 2013). As such, this approach may also inform alternative ways for conceptualizing sexuality in general. In particular, by centering on transgender experience, the present research allows a conceptualization of transgender sexuality outside of the traditional research frameworks that problematize transgender experience, conflate gender identity and sexual orientation, and inherently define transgender experience in both cisnormative and heteronormative terms.

**Limitations and directions for future research**

We recruited participants who identify as transgender, transsexual, gender variant, or having a transgender history, which we used as broad terms intended to encompass many different gender identities. Because our recruitment strategy emphasized recruitment through transgender community resources, individuals who see their trans experience as more of a history or status may be underrepresented within our sample. Although our intention was to recruit broadly within the transgender communities, it is important to note that the use of transgender as an umbrella term is rooted in White middle- to upper-class conceptualizations of gender and can function to erase distinct subgroups (Valentine, 2007), which may partially account for why less than 25% of our participants identified as racial minorities.

Our sample demographics may have also been impacted by our choice to recruit our participants online. Participants represented a convenience sample collected online. Although online sampling is useful for LGBTQ research, where privacy and access issues are unique from the general population (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005), online samples have been shown to disproportionately represent educated, middle class, White individuals (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2008). Because our sample demographics reflect this trend, interpretation of our findings should be done within the noted demographics. This is particularly important given that recent research has highlighted the way gender and sexuality may be uniquely experienced among people of color (Kuper, Wright, & Mustanski, 2014; Levitt, Horne, Puckett, Sweeney, & Hampton, 2015). Additional research is necessary to evaluate whether the themes identified in the present research related to transgender sexuality would resonate with transgender and gender-nonconforming people of color.

Despite the limitations of recruitment, we received a geographically diverse sample with a strong representation across gender identities. The present research extends the current transgender sexuality research by including individuals who endorse gender-identity labels within both transfeminine and transmasculine spectrums and also by including individuals who identify as gender variant/nonbinary and agender. We did find demographic differences across transfeminine, transmasculine, gender variant, and agender participants with regard to age, sex assigned at birth, and primary sexual orientation identity. Future research is needed, however, to consider how the themes described in the present research might be similarly or differently expressed across participants’ gender identity.

**Implications for research and theory**

Participants described their sexuality in ways that challenge traditional research frameworks for understanding transgender experience. The medical literature in particular has used “biological/anatomical” sex as a basis for classifying the sexual orientation of transgender individuals (Blanchard, 1989b; DSM-III; Hammack, Mayers, & Windell, 2013). However, our participants did not use biological indicators of sex/gender as the sole basis for describing their sexual orientation, and in many cases it was not a factor at all. Rather, individual (gender) identity was more likely to guide sexual orientation self-identification. This finding was consistent with recent qualitative research on critiques of sexual orientation measures where participants’ sexual and gender identities were central to the way in which they viewed sexual orientation (Galupo, Davis, et al., 2014). In addition to being more likely to focus on gender identity (versus gender/sex) our participants described their sexuality in ways that highlighted fluidity, relational factors, and a disaggregation of sexual and romantic attraction. Participants also described their sexual orientation in reference to transgender-specific experiences. For example, participants described shifts in their sexual attraction and
sexual identities that they attributed to coming out as trans to themselves or others and/or to transition-specific experiences (e.g., hormone therapy, gender affirmation treatments and surgeries).

These findings have important implications for sexual orientation researchers, who should note the unique context in which transgender individuals experience and define their sexuality. This may be particularly important when interpreting trans individuals’ scores on traditional measures of sexual orientation or when trans individuals are given forced-choice labels and grouped based on sexual identity for research purposes. Caution should also be exercised when comparing sexual orientation or identity labels across transgender and cisgender individuals. Recent research has focused on the development of sexual orientation measures that better capture the experience of transgender individuals (such as the Gender Inclusive Scale described earlier in this article). The Gender Inclusive Scale may represent a measure of sexual orientation that avoids cisgender assumptions present in traditional scales (Galupo et al., 2016) while still resonating with cisgender experience.

The present findings also have important implications for transgender researchers, as they suggest a need to expand our understanding of transgender sexuality in ways that better reflect the lived experience of trans individuals. In particular, these findings point to the need to conceptualize transgender sexuality in a way that decenters models of sexual orientation from exclusively focusing on gender/sex or from making cisnormative assumptions. One such example is the recent work of Tate (2012), who posits two lesbian identity models that acknowledge trans identities. The current identity model includes cisgender women, transgender women, and genderqueer (female identified) individuals within the definition of lesbian; the life-course identity model also includes transgender men and genderqueer individuals of all identities as long as they identified as female at some point in their life. By allowing for the possibility of gender diversity, Tate (2012) provides a way for conceptualizing lesbian identity that does not assume a cisgender identity. Van Anders (2015) provides a new and comprehensive framework for understanding sexuality that extends beyond traditional theories of sexual orientation. Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT) is a model of partnered sexuality that is inclusive of diverse sexualities and gender identities, while making distinctions between eroticism and nurturance (which parallels the way our participants’ discuss sexual/romantic attraction). Van Anders’s model moves beyond a focus on just gender or sex and adopts an integrated gender/sex framework by including both socialization and biology/evolution while also remaining sensitive to identity.

The present findings suggest that a reframe around gender/sex is critical for making trans identities visible in a model of sexuality. By including identities not specifically related to binary conceptualizations of sex or gender, van Anders’s (2015) gender/sex framework is inclusive of multiple labels including “woman, man, trans woman, trans man, ciswoman, cisman, gender-queer, intersex.” By allowing for binary/nonbinary and cisgender/transgender articulations of gender/sex, the types of nuanced dimensions of sexuality provided by our participants are able to come into view. Future research is needed to consider the ways that transgender individuals’ experiences of sexuality directly map onto these new ways of measuring or theorizing about sexuality.

Notes

1. We use plurisexual to refer to identities that are not explicitly based on attraction to one sex and leave open the potential for attraction to more than one sex/gender—for example, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and fluid. The term plurisexual is used instead of nonmonosexual because the former does not linguistically assume monosexual as the ideal conceptualization of sexuality (see Galupo, Davis, Grynkiewicz, & Mitchell, 2014).

2. When discussing the results of the present study and when referring to our participants, we use the term trans as an inclusive term to be sensitive to the range of gender identities endorsed by our participants.

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References


