

'This is like seeing a human body totally from a different angle'

Experiences of South African cisgender partners in cisgender-trans* relationships

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

To date, the knowledge available about cisgender-trans* couples and their experiences is located in the global North. Research situated in the interest of trans*, transgender and transsexual people's lives most often furthers scholars' understanding of gender. In my research, I employed strategies to look at the experiences of the cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans* persons, in order to learn more about gender

Post-apartheid South Africa is a country that is vibrant with discussions in mainstream platforms about contemporary political and socio-economic matters, regularly framed in sexist approaches with clear patriarchal messages. How and where does the trans* masculine person find role models and what is that impact on the cisgender-trans* relationship?

Bringing together literature from the global North and South Africa, I formed a theoretical framework that served as the context to support my research. As a feminist, I employ both feminist theory and transgender theory in my qualitative study. I interviewed fourteen cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans* persons. From the rich data, five themes emerged and were analysed through a content analysis approach.

Findings indicate that through labour of love (Ward 2010), gender is co-created with the assistance of family members. This suggests that conformity to a heterosexual script is the ulterior motive for this collective co-creation of gender. Cisgender partners, who experience instructed silence, especially when it is partnered with isolation, are enfolded in deep epistemological loneliness. Nothing has been said about the numerous sexual partners that the trans* person had in the lesbian community prior to his coming out as trans*, and a collective community self-scrutiny might be at the root of lesbian policing. The final theme unravels the possibility that cisgender-trans* couples are well accepted in society, regardless of their sexual orientation, if they are willing and able to commit to a heteronormative script.

Key Words: Cisgender; Trans*; Cisgender-trans* couples; Relationship; Heteronormativity



Images: Peterson Toscano¹

Dedicated to the cisgender partners who participated in this research.

¹ Peterson Toscano, preparing for his stage show *Transfigurations*, Cape Town, January 2009. Images were taken by Caroline Bowley. Toscano is a cisgender activist raising awareness about the damage caused by gay reparative therapy. He is also vocal about cisgender privilege. His theatrical play, *Transfigurations*, features stage narratives of at least six people in the Bible who could according to him be understood as trans* or gender nonconforming. To find out more about his work, see his website: <http://www.petersontoscano.com/transfigurations>. Peterson Toscano and Liesl Theron presented together at the (Gender Studies) West Virginia Wesleyan College, September 2010.

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Trapped!

*I'm tired of this body
that was imposed on me
never given a chance...
never offered a choice!
fully dressed when we make love
covered by bandages
when we go out!*

*Love your body... they say
love yourself... they tell me*

*I cannot stand this casing!
that covers my true identity
and conceals the joy within...
I cannot feel my lover's breasts
against my aching chest!*

*My lover cannot touch me
cannot build me up
like I do her... Oh fucking hell!
Will I have to live
and die
in this cocoon; this shell
that deprives me
yet leaves me exposed
to pain and suffering!
to loneliness and hunger!
Love your body... they say
love yourself... you say to me*

*But your stares, your looks
remind me everyday
that something is wrong...
where do I go
I'm trapped
within myself and within
your constricting walls*

- Chan Mubanga²

² See Mubanga, 2010 at Reference list

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Introduction

Cisgender³ partners of trans*⁴ persons contribute to the act of co-creating gender through their performance in the supporting role in the transition process (Ward 2010). In this Master thesis I want to build on previous scholars' work focusing on this "labour of love" while highlighting the diversity of cisgender partners' experiences with respect to ethnicities, cultures and contexts beyond the global North from which this theory emerged. I plan to subvert the usual 'looking at gender through transgender' by looking at gender work through the experiences of cisgender partners in cisgender-trans* relationships. As an academic endeavour in its own right which takes seriously the silenced and marginalised experiences of cisgender partners, my research proposes that this perspective is also an important contribution to deepening gender scholarship, especially in the global South.

I have divided this thesis into four chapters, the first chapter of which creates a theoretical framework consisting of two sections. The first section highlights the literature which informed my thought process. I draw on theoretical literature from the global North to amplify the impact of northern lexicons in the shape of definitions and discourses on the identity formation and movements for justice for trans* people in South Africa. In this section I also present a brief history of the emergence of trans* terminology, cisgender-trans* relationships in history and the possible reasons for the invisibility of such relationships. The second section in my literature review aims to ground the reader in the South African context. I attempt to present all the sources available to me at the time of finalising this thesis, while simultaneously navigating challenges around the limited amount of forthright trans*-specific literature. Here, I draw on the work of a few South African artists working on trans*-related projects. Furthermore I utilise South African blog articles and organisational material with trans* content. I highlight organisational material, such as conference reports, informational booklets and the limited published South African articles, which is predominantly situated in advocacy, health, HIV/AIDS, sex work and other pathologising realms. In this South African context section I briefly consider trans* in history, approached in a South African trans* in a pre- and post apartheid time frame.

³ People who identify with their sex at birth.

⁴ I use the word trans* freely in my writing, indicating and respecting trans includes transgender, transsexual, transvestite and gender non-conforming. See more at the section: 'Definition conundrum' and at www.transactivists.org/trans/

In the second chapter, my choice of content analysis as a method allowed me to utilise a wider range of sources in addition to the limited literature in academic spaces. Although the disposition of content analysis gives me the option to draw on a wider range of sources, especially in the South African context of my literature review, it also creates a challenge in the manner I present my data and analysis. I raise this concern in the analysis section. In my discussion under the subheading 'ethics' I speak about the richness of the open sharing from interview participants, how my relationship to them or their partners positioned me in a way that I was trusted with deep and very intimate information, which, on the other hand, contributed to my own sense of distress and inner conflict.

The third chapter in which I present data and analysis became a challenge in that I had to decide to either limit myself to a much smaller amount of data, with more refined, limited themes analysed to a greater extent, or, as a second option, present a broader thematic selection of data which will create a platform for future research and articles. Because this research is the first to explore this specific topic in South Africa, I chose to present the broader thematic overview of responses in the hope of contributing to future research that is urgently needed in this field.

In the fourth and final chapter I discuss my data and analysis with four main findings, drawn from interviews and literature. I discuss my conclusion that cisgender partners and cisgender-trans* couples who manage to follow a heterosexual script might receive greater acceptance in South African society than cisgender partners or cisgender-trans* couples who deliberately subvert heteronormativity.

I proceed with suggestions for future research, in which I indicate my desire to continue to a doctoral thesis in this field of cisgender-trans* couples and trans* masculinities in South Africa and, perhaps, other African countries.

1. Literature Review

For some time, Brown and Rousley (1996) and Cook-Daniels (1999 and 1998) were considered the only authors discussing and giving space to representations of the Significant Others, Friends, Family or Allies (SOFFA) of trans* people. Their work formed the foundational canon on cisgender partners of trans* masculine-identifying people and their relationships. Scholarship in this area has only increased marginally in recent years, as noted by the few researchers in the field (Meier et al, 2013; Brown, 2009; Kins & Hoebeke et al, 2008; Lenning, 2008; Lev, 2004; Nyamora, 2004). Thus in South Africa, any research focusing on trans* became the 'first in the research area' (Nduna, 2013; Saunders, 2013; Theron and Collier, 2013; Van der Merwe and Padi, 2013; Stevens, 2012; Kim, 2011a; McLachlan, 2010; Theron, 2010; Vincent and Camminga, 2009; Kinoti, 2007).

The literature review is organised according to two main themes. The first theme explores literature from the global North, drawing on predominant theories from the social sciences and medical sciences. This body of knowledge creates a foundation of perspectives on transgender in general and, more specifically, on research around SOFFAs, cisgender partners and mix dyad trans-cisgender relationships. Research from the North, or 'global metropole' (Connell, 2012: 858) is not unproblematic, dominating and shaping the knowledge base in the global South and its local context. Material based in a South African local context comprises the second theme. Here I outline the South African context for trans* within the country's multiple and complex layers of culture, language, ethnicity and socio-economic realities. Noting the limited academic scholarship to date, I explore a broad compilation of sources, including South African media releases and published reports and material from (trans*) organisations. In this context, the available information focuses on legal and medical issues, as well as health care access for trans* individuals. This section includes a glimpse into the narratives that the general public in South Africa uses when thinking about gender, through a trans* and intersex lens. Due to the limited discussions on public platforms in South Africa in a broader context, juxtaposed with the rich discussions during the 2010 Caster Semanya debacle, I decided to additionally employ an intersex lens to contribute to this dialogue. I conclude by bringing together the theoretical arguments which underpin and inform my research focus.

1.1 Global North

1.1.1 Definitions from the global North: considerations of language and race

In this initial section of the literature review I will discuss my approach to the challenge of definitions and terminology in a field that is in its infancy. Firstly under 'Definition conundrum' I will explain my discomfort in using global North expressions which seek to nominalise trans*, and have by default become part of a now globalised terminological currency. This rather unusual introduction to definitions is followed by a concise history of some of the most known terminology that emerged from the global North, and sections mapping different aspects of this history. In the last section I proceed to build an argument for a more culturally diverse archive.

Definition conundrum

The research question tackles new terrain in South Africa and in the global South.⁵ As such, defining terminology poses several challenges. I want to demonstrate my resistance to unconditionally applying or adapting definitions from the global North within a context where gender and sex remain highly contextual, complicated and conflated, and where trans* and gender nonconforming communities are negotiating, resisting, dialoguing, exploring and deeply invested in finding space and voice to express self-defining terms. In my role as researcher, I am conscious of the possibility of importing and imitating global North expressions and by default imposing these upon emerging African discourses and/ or negatively complicating the debate around naming in the global South debate. My rationale for withholding trans* related definitions at this pivotal moment in the African trans* movement stems from my desire to avoid providing a set of definitions that might be more damaging than empowering to the discourse. I am aware that entering this new and complex area of gender research without the guidance of definitions might cause discomfort. Nonetheless, this is the discomfiting and contested reality in which trans* and gender nonconformative people function.

With respect to definitions relating to cisgender, I am a person who self-defines as cisgender and therefore feel more comfortable presenting my own understanding of the term, while also acknowledging that the definition was first used in the global North. The term cisgender was coined by Carl Buijs, from the Netherlands, in 1995. It is used to describe people who are non-transgender

⁵ My Honours research was the first attempt to explore the experiences of cisgender partners of masculine-identifying trans* partners in South Africa.

(Klein, 2008). Cis means “on this side of” or “not across”. Where transgender or transsexual is at one pole of the gender binary with “normal” on the other end, the aim in employing cisgender as a description or expression is to dismantle this notion. Cisgender is attributed to people whose gender performance conforms to normative assumptions and expectations of the sex-gender discourse⁶. The term cisgender is part of the African trans* movement’s process of subverting all global North imposed terminologies, I prefer the term ‘cisgender partner’ to SOFFA⁷ when referring to myself.

A plethora of definitions abound for sexual orientation, which can be defined as illustrating an individual’s preference and emotional attraction towards another. Sexuality encompasses the erotic thoughts, feelings and emotions and is a self perception of desire. A person’s sexual orientation can be directed to the same sex, opposite sex, either sexes or neither sex (Nagoshi, 2012; Lev, 2004; Devor, 1997). In the documentary ‘Boy I am’ Halberstam pointed out that ‘...we come to understand ourselves as gendered through our sexual practices’ (Feder and Hollar 2005). Butler (2006: 278) amplified that sexuality does not serve as a prelude to gender identity, nor is gender identity caused by sexual orientation. It is noteworthy that a study interviewing female-to-male transsexuals who have a gay or bisexual identity found that there was some confusion around sexuality in their early developmental years. The interviewees reported that they became attracted to men after they were aware of their ‘cross-gender feelings’ (Bockting, Benner and Coleman, 2009). One interviewee describes the incongruence as a feeling of ‘a faggot and a dyke trying to share the same body’ (Bockting et al, 2009: 695). To further complicate the understanding about sexual orientation, Meier et al (2013) reported results from an on-line survey, establishing the sexual orientation and sexual identity of five hundred and three FTMs from nineteen different countries, that half of the survey participants indicated a shift in sexual orientation after taking testosterone.

Recently, ‘transgender’ was the commonly used collective term to include many identities such as transsexuals, transvestites, fem queens, butches, female-to-male, male-to-female, cross-dressers and many more (Valentine, 2007; Lev, 2004). Virginia Prince, considered by many as the ‘grandmother’ of the transcommunity, adopted the term ‘transgenderist’ in the 1970s (Valentine, 2007; Cromwell, 1999; Feinberg 1996). ‘Transgender’ is defined in various ways (Mason, 2006); most definitions agree that under the umbrella-term ‘transgender’, people transgress gender norms by

⁶ Heteronormative expectations assume that sex, gender and gender identity are in congruence (Jones, 2009). Gender scholars problematise the socially assigned relation between sex and gender (Turner, 1999).

⁷ I am conscious that SOFFA as a term gets applied to any *significant others, friends, family and allies* and that cisgender partner addresses only the “SO” part of the acronym

expressing their gender identity differently from what is socially expected or assumed in relation to their sex at birth (Nagoshi, 2012; Factor and Rothblum, 2008; Lenning, 2008; Valentine, 2007; Stryker, 2006; Mason, 2006; Currah, 2006; Wilchins, 2004; Lev, 2004; Green, 2004; Cromwell, 1999; Devor, 1997; Feinberg, 1996). Related definitions include 'transvestite', coined by Hirschfeld in the 1920s (Lev, 2004; Feinberg, 1996). Harry Benjamin completed a medical degree in Germany in 1912 and started a medical practice in the United States soon after that. Benjamin, an endocrinologist had a trans-positive approach and initiated the idea that transsexual people cannot be 'cured' and pioneered the design that medical systems develop to assist transsexuals by means of surgery. The 'sex change' operation of Christine Jorgensen in 1952, which received popular media attention and Benjamin's first major publication on this subject 'The Transsexual Phenomenon' in 1966 popularised the term 'transsexual' in the 1950's (Whittle & Stryker, 2006; Lev, 2004; Devor, 1997). Today, 'transsexual' is specific to individuals who express a persistent desire to transition medically and surgically (Nagoshi, 2012; Mason, 2006; Lev, 2004; Wilchins, 2004; Feinberg, 1996; Devor, 1997).

While terminology is evolving on the one end, scholars grapple with both the usage of 'transgender' and 'transsexual' (Swarr, 2012b; Lenning, 2008; and Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Stryker, 2006). 'Transgender' and 'transsexual' are two separate identities - one based on a social construct and the second derived from medical discourse – and are in disunion with each other. Lenning points out that 'increasingly transsexuals object to be included in the catch-all phrase transgender' (2008: 12). Lev concurs that many transsexuals do not want to submit to the umbrella-term 'transgender' (2004: 6). On the one hand, some argue that the term 'transgender' emerged from gay and lesbian organised movements, and thus not from the trans* movement itself. On the other, some researchers claim that 'transgender' emerged from the grassroots trans* movement (Currah, 2006: 4) especially as a way of objecting to the pathologising effects of the medical discourse from which the term 'transsexual' emerged (Feinberg, 2006; Stryker, 2006). Thus, Halberstam, interviewed by Williams explains how transgender is a more politicised notion (Halberstam in Williams, 2011: 377).

The act of naming in contexts of emergent identities - is an important part of reducing an individual's expression of themselves or ignoring and misrepresenting them, thus rendering them invisible (Cromwell, 1999: 81). Therefore, to address the different needs of the transgender, transsexual and other related communities, the most recent move is toward using the word 'trans' with an asterisk: trans* (GATE, Global Advocates for Transgender Equality at www.transactivists.org). Attempting to be more inclusive without the limitations of previous definitions, Swarr argues that the use of trans* contributes to 'undermining Northern hegemonic' terminologies such as 'transgender' and 'transsexual', which do not provide for adequate means of expression (Swarr, 2012b: 5 and 28).

“Language is an imprecise tool”

I employ a direct quotation from Feinberg (1996: 97) for the heading above. The politics of language about transgender, transsexual and any other ways of defining gender identity emerge from speech communities, in context, and from the mobility of words as they travel, facilitated by both hegemonic and subversive energies. Thus, the ‘transfer’ of a definition to another geographical area, culture or language is already imbued with meaning (Hwahng, 2011: 164-186; Valentine, 2007; Feinberg, 1996: 101) contributing to the complexities of the importing of words and meanings. The need for health care, and for policies which guarantee this, spur the desire for universalising definitions and accessing health care often necessitates conforming to already accepted definitions of identity and ‘need.’ This may lead to serious consequences for transpeople’s rights, argues Winter (2009: 33) who made a strong case to recognise the diverse nominalisations used to describe transpeople, and argues against pathologising. In Winter’s recommendations to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health’s (WPATH) seventh edition of the Standards of Care⁸ (SOC-7), he critiqued the language of pathology (under his Recommendation 2) and argued that WPATH should broaden its scope internationally, beyond a North American and European lens in order to be more culturally competent (Recommendation 7) (Winter, 2009). The WPATH’s seventh edition of the Standards of Care was launched in 2011 and took seriously some of those recommendations made by Winter. In the history of the Standards of Care, previously known as the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care, this inclusion proved to be the first serious step indicating the need in health care for trans* people to be cultural relativity and cultural competence (SOC-7, WPATH 2012: 1).

From finding language to positioning class and its intersection with race

Surgery, hormones and continuous medical care are costly and not every person can afford to transition physically (Lenning, 2008; Mason, 2006). When transitioning becomes a luxury for a ‘range of individuals’, Lenning argues that employing the term transgender becomes ‘quite intentional’ (2008: 11). The ‘transgender’ definition as a collective category contests and contributes to the identity positioning discourse, but as Valentine pointed out it is deployed in ‘white, middle-class’ settings (2007: 33). The “assumption of whiteness” leads to the assumption that transitioning from female to male guarantees privilege and better social positioning for the individual (Volcano, 2013;

⁸ The Standards of Care is a set of guidelines, internationally widely accepted for the health of transsexual, transgender and gender nonconforming people. More information at www.wpath.org

Dozier, 2005: 309). Mendez (2010: 43) argues that in lieu of the 'right' skin colour and accent, 'social filters such as class, race and ethnicity' still position a trans* person 'among the socially dangerous'. Some bodies [genders] are simply superfluous both in mainstream and in marginal communities and their 'expendability' is intensified if the body is black (Halberstam, 2005: 3). "*Still Black – a portrait of Black transmen*" is a documentary (Kortney Ryan Ziegler, 2008) interviewing six black transmen. It illuminates the disparities between class and the privilege of 'having', and amplifies the resilience of the individuals. Their experiences also clarify the ingrained, automatic responses to the intersection of race and gender: a black female bodied person has transitioned and is now assumed to be the 'possible perpetrator'. Transitioned, but 'Still Black'. The ability 'to access' locates the politics of the transsexual-transgender discourse central in discussions of power, class and race.

Recognition and inclusion of a more culturally-diverse contribution to building the archive

Important inclusions in the cross-national trans* canon have been made lately by trans* individuals and scholars such as Cabral, Nanda, Winter, Hwahng and Valentine. Nanda (2000) published 'Gender Diversity – Crosscultural Variations' which explores sex and gender diversity in seven cultures. In 'Transgender Rights' (Currah, Juang and Price Minter, 2006), Cabral and Viturro (2006: 262-273) highlights the role of Travestis in Argentinean advocacy. Campuzano (2006) highlights the danger when transgender, travesti and transsexual as identities are by default included in sexual categories without careful differentiation. The focus of gender identity shifts to sexual orientation and excludes any options of alternative genders (Campuzano, 2006: 34 – 39).

Increasingly, scholars and authors from the global North recognise the need for including contributions from trans* people outside of North America and Western Europe. In the anthology 'Trans People in Love' (O'Keefe and Fox, 2008) eight contributions came from outside North America and Western Europe with one from South Africa. In 'Gender Outlaws' (Bornstein and Bergman, 2010) at least seven contributions are from outside the United States and address cultural, language and trans* matters uniquely grounded in indigenous areas. The important dialogues about language and culture on the one hand and intersections with arguments about 'white-centric patriarchy' and 'racialised gendering' Tokawa (2010: 207-212) on the other hand illustrate the exclusion of 'other' cultures in the global North. Tokawa strongly links transphobia with racist attitudes (2010: 212).

In conclusion working in a field where an identity and a movement are still in the beginning stages of emergence, it is challenging to be aware of language and terminology in use in the global North and sometimes 'tempting' to utilise those. It is political - being a cisgender person - to import words and

terminology about an identity that is not mine. I hope through this section of my literature review I was able to show the importance of consciousness about language and terminology.

1.1.2 Gaze and performance: Who is 'gawking', who is 'acting'?

Halberstam deploys Mulvey's gaze

For the purpose of this research, I employ Mulvey's theory of 'gaze' (1975). Her theory of the 'gaze' was first described in 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' in 1975, revised in 1981. She argues that women are stereotyped and objectified by three types of male gazes in the art of cinema. The first type of male look or gaze is enforced by the camera, in such a way as to serve a voyeuristic purpose and is mostly sensationalistic. The second gaze is generated through a leading male actor, objectifying female actresses – giving a visual clue to the audience, encouraging the stereotyping, and the third male gaze on the representation of the female body is that of the male audience (Humm, 1989: 106). Halberstam pointed out by utilising Mulvey's questions of what is pleasurable to whom, she developed a theory of spectatorship (2006: 576).

I draw a parallel between Mulvey's theory of the male gaze at the female body and the gaze on trans* people from gender theory, queer studies, feminisms, the medical fraternity and inherently the broader public under the guise of learning about and understanding gender through scrutinizing transgender. According to Halberstam, the success of the feature film '*Boys Don't Cry*' with a larger, mainstream audience can be attributed to the way the producers employed a 'transgender mode' of looking, through 'hijacking male and female gazes' enabling the viewer to see life through a transgender gaze (2005: 83).

From gaze, to partners' performing in 'labour of love'

Butler established the notion of 'gender performance' in 1990 and made the case that gender identity, as a social construct (Lenning 2008: 84) is performatively produced (Nagoshi, 2012; Wilchins, 2004; Butler, 1990). Butler further believes that performativity consists both of 'speech acts' and 'bodily acts' (Butler, 2004: 198). The performance of gender requires a continuous flow of performances, as Wilchins describes it: 'I call it into being by creating it moment to moment' (Wilchins, 2004: 133). In order to 'produce' gender performance, it needs support, co-creation (Ward, 2010) and comes to reality by means of 'repeated performances' (Nagoshi, 2012: 408; Butler,

1990). Co-produced [gender] performativity requires tedious acts of emotional, physical and sexual support (Ward, 2010: 238).

Dean Spade argued in 'Boy I am': 'Everybody puts on their gender in the morning when they get dressed. To just take one population and focus on their body modification is a sexist thing to do. It mirrors: only women are sexual beings, only queers are deviant – it is too narrow' (Feder and Hollar, 2005).

I want to further complicate 'gaze' and 'performance' by presenting literature about the coherent, active involvement from significant others in the lives of trans* people. A trans* person is not transitioning alone; their transition directly impacts on the lives of their partner and the relationship⁹ (Ward, 2010; Brown, 2009; Pfeffer, 2008; Lenning, 2008; Cook-Daniels, 2007; Nyamora, 2004; Lev 2004). I want to expand on the 'performance' discourse Butler opened up in *Gender Trouble* (1990) by stating that the performance includes partners or significant others of trans* persons. In order to do this, I want to stand still for a moment, focusing on a few trans* people in history. In the lives described here, all identified or expressed a masculine identity. The lives of Brandon Teena, (1972 – 1993) Billy Tipton (1914 – 1989), Dr James Allen (1787 – 1829), Nicholas de Raylan (1873 – 1906), Murray Hall (circa 1840 – 1901) (Valentine, 2007; Halberstam, 2005; Devor, 1997; Cromwell, 1990) to name a few, were recorded historically to showcase interesting and creative ways of living outside organised gender identities without others recognition of their gender incongruence (Valentine, 2007; Halberstam, 2005; Devor, 1997; Cromwell, 1990). The fictional Stephan Gordon, a 'mannish woman' in the *Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall could be considered gender nonconforming and on a transgender spectrum (Devor, 1997; Halberstam interviewed by Williams, 2011). This fictional, yet 'semi-autobiographical' book is usually presented as a lesbian classic, where the character's 'masculine identification makes him/her available' to be interpreted as a transgender icon (Valentine, 2007: 152). It takes effort to employ various strategies and elements of 'gender labour' not only from the trans* or gender nonconforming person, but also their partners (Ward, 2010). To 'construct realness', both persons need to 'forget other possibilities' (Ward, 2010: 252). Successful or effective gender presentation in order to create realness beyond suspicion requires continuous labour of co-production. This involves dedication from both persons, the trans* or gender nonconforming person as well as the partner (Ward, 2010). The 'intimate labour' of 'giving gender' is marked by 'elements of trust', 'secret knowledge' and often 'providing support' (Ward, 2010: 240).

⁹ For the purpose of my research, 'relationship' refers to people who share a close and intimate space, many times located in a household setting.

In all the historical lives of past trans* or gender nonconforming masculine identified persons, especially Tipton, Allen, de Raylan and to a lesser degree Teena, there is not much information about their wives' roles until the mentioning of their death, (Valentine, 2007; Halberstam, 2005; Devor, 1997; Cromwell, 1990) at which point, except for Teena, the partners or wives employed the 'labour of forgetting' (Ward, 2010: 246) by dismissing, disagreeing or claiming not to know they were female bodied. In the case of Tipton, his wife died three years earlier than him, but their adopted daughter also refused to speak of him by female pronouns (Smithsonian, 2011). An alternative motivation for the narratives of denial can be reasoned as the fear of prosecution (Mason, 2006). Mason stated that one only reads about these partners in history, when there was 'public scrutiny' after death or into cases of criminal trials once a person was exposed (Mason, 2006: 41). One very horrid narrative is that of Linck Resenstengel and his wife who were found guilty of 'defiling the sacrament of heterosexual marriage' in 1721 (Devor, 1997: 20). According to history Resenstengel's wife only learned about his female body some time after they married, but they stayed together until her mother was suspicious and disrobed him to discover a leather dildo which she submitted as evidence in the sodomy trial. For this crime Resenstengel was beheaded. For the sexual misconduct of continuation of participation in devious sexual acts the wife was 'punished with second degree torture' (Devor, 1997: 20).

These historical examples suggest that the consequences of 'not performing' gender can/could thus lead to death penalty. Nagoshi highlights Butler's 1990 theory that the social construction of gender requires 'repeated performances' in order to sustain the gender presentation (Nagoshi, 2012: 408). To bring us back to the 'performance of gender' (Butler, 1990) and the labour of 'giving gender' (Ward, 2010) focus should thus not only be on the trans* or gender nonconforming persons but requires the focus to shift and include the performance of the partners. Ward calls this 'collective work' that 'produces and sustains gender' (2010: 251).

Trans {spectacle}*

In a medical and health context, gender as a 'spectacle' (Serano, 2007) is amplified by the field of psychiatry (specifically, the work of Blanchard, Zucker and Bailey) which employs a range of stereotypes existing around the transsexual body, insisting that these bodies be explored and fetishised as sex objects. Ryan, in a paper delivered at the International Foundation for Gender Education Conference (Alexandria, Virginia) stated that according to Blanchard, Zucker and Bailey "we are transsexual because of sex, sex, sex" (2009: 3). Ryan summarises the rationale for 'the Zucker conservative clique' to continue treating transsexual women the way they do:

“We can be neatly divided into two groups: homosexual transsexuals and autogynephiles. According to the former, we are very feminine biological males who desire constant sex with masculine, straight guys, so we transition and get SRS¹⁰ in order to be constantly fucked by bimbos, while the latter states that we are more masculine, biological males attracted to women, who get off on cross-dressing, and masturbate to fantasies of becoming women, and obtain sex reassignment surgery for an ultimate full body orgasm of transformation into sexy girls, becoming the very object of our obsessive, sex-fuelled fetish.”

The transgender body became a gendered spectacle, a body only ‘performing’ gender as an act (Serano, 2007: 35 – 64). *Silence of the Lambs* brings that gendered spectacle to the audience in the form of Buffalo Bill, who is taking the performance a step further by conveying that he is a “woman trapped in a man’s skin” (Halberstam, 2006: 577). He is collecting the skin of females to make a “woman suit” for himself. Halberstam puts it this way: “[Buffalo Bill] is a man imitating gender, exaggerating gender and finally attempting to shed his gender in favour of a new skin” (2006: 577).

In an interview Jeffrey J Williams conducted with Judith “Jack” Halberstam in 2011, Williams pointed to the “immense influence” Butler had on the contemporary thinking about “gender as a performance” in *Gender Trouble* (Williams, 2011: 366). Halberstam concurred by stating that Butler is an ‘incredible scholar’ by not only conceptualising new ways of thinking, but also leaving enough room for other scholars to participate in the dialogue with new or additional contributions. She literally invites others in, by not fully exploring all options – but leaving possibilities of discovery to other intellectuals (Williams, 2011: 366). Halberstam uses Butler’s analysis of “Gender as a performance” as a tool to employ in discussions about trans* woman “performing” gender:

“Why is this person a man if she says she’s a woman? I don’t care what she has or hasn’t done to her body; shouldn’t we respect the self-declaration of womanhood as much as the cultural construction of it?” (Halberstam interviewed by Williams, 2011: 366)

The ‘inexplicable and shameful notion of female masculinity became an untouchable category’ (Halberstam, interviewed by Williams 2011: 364). Women who are not interested in men, became ‘dowdy and ugly’ (Halberstam interviewed by Williams 2011: 364) but where does it leave cisgender women who are interested or attracted to [dowdy and ugly] masculine females or masculine identifying trans* people? The masculine female body transgresses gender norms to become the

¹⁰ Sex Reassignment Surgery

spectacle and the cisgender female partner who engages in this transgressing contributes then to a double spectacle.

'What kind of women choose penis-less men?'

Suspicions about the partners of trans* people were raised in 1981 with two separate studies pointing to the 'delusional' partners of trans* persons who were complying in the *'folie a deux'* relationship (Huxley, Kenna and Brandon, 1981). For the trans* person to be in a successful, meaningful stable marriage or relationship both partners had to accept the body of the trans* person yet also 'deny the past history' (Huxley, Kenna and Brandon, 1981). Chase argues that partners are thus required to live a fantasy in order for the relationship to be maintained (2010: 9). The research by Steiner and Bernstein assumes all partners of masculine trans people to be women [and heterosexual] and the authors were perplexed with what kind of woman chooses 'penis-less men' (1981: 178). Two possibilities were given as the reason for desiring as Huxley et al puts it: 'persons with severe psychosexual or gender problems' (1981: 134) or 'penis-less men'. Firstly this is an alternative way there will be no pregnancy and secondly it provides a minimum reminder of possible previous relationships with 'unsatisfactory emotional or traumatic experiences' (Steiner and Bernstein, 1981: 181). Fleming, MacGowan and Costos further express curiosity about the quality of relationships between female-to-male transsexuals and their long term female partners. They argue that like female-to-male transsexuals and their partners, would be 'typified as being depressed, antisocial and having a poorer self-concept' (1984: 584). Nyamora (2004), Brown (2009) and Chase (2010) illuminating the early work of Steiner and Bernstein 1981. Huxley et al (1981) and Fleming et al (1984), reflect on the pathologising choice of language questioning the legitimacy of the cisgender partner. Lev pointed out the pathologising language and assumptions of earlier researchers into the lives of the wives of transvestites by presenting these women as 'deeply troubled', 'codependent, unable to leave their unsatisfying relationships' and that they may suffer 'severe psychopathologies' (2004: 273, 274).

Cisgender body image, self perception and identity, and its impact on the relationship

Women are defined by societal norms, enforced by popular media dictating how 'a healthy body should look', what is acceptable to wear, how much she must weigh and how to apply make-up (Frost, 1999: 117; Grimshaw, 1999: 91). 'We can explain the potent mixture of disgust and desire produced by the transgression of bodily decorum...' (Arthurs, 1999: 140). Pfeffer (2008) argues that the definition of lesbian should be re-examined especially in the case of women identifying as

lesbian and partnering trans* men. Nyamora (2004: 1) complicates lesbian identity further by saying femme lesbians are invisible; they are not recognised by general public, nor within lesbian communities. He continues by highlighting femme lesbians who partner with female to male transsexuals' development and role as cisgender partners are dismissed (Nyamora, 2004: 1-2). It became clear through the work of Pfeffer (2008) that cisgender-trans* relationships are riddled with various body image challenges ranging from eating disorders, exercise, sexual intimacy and racial differences. Lenning (2008) states that excluding cisgender partners from research about trans* persons perpetuates the notion that trans* people are 'asexual' or living celibate lives. Pfeffer's interviewees mention long periods in their relationships where intimacy takes on 'alternative' ways of 'togetherness' replacing sexual intimacy with what Ward (2010) calls 'labour of love'.

Global North Cisgender-trans relationship research which acknowledges and includes race, ethnicity and cultural diversity*

Nyamora (2004) set the tone in highlighting the importance of race and ethnicity through utilising the femme identity lens. He draws the connection between greater acceptances of butch-femme dynamic in Communities of Colour than in White communities (Nyamora, 2004: 2). The relevance of accepting femme identity in its own rights contributes to a greater support network for the cisgender femme partner and potentially leads to a greater possibility of a relationship that is supported by the community (Nyamora, 2004: 2).

Pfeffer (2008) and Brown (2009) shared experiences of interviewees in interracial relationships who were challenged on differences they had with their trans* partners. Pfeffer (2008: 339) showcased a dilemma one White cisgender partner had when she discussed body image issues in terms of her partner, who is Asian and due to ethnicity has a more 'petit' body frame. She felt due to her bigger build and his genetically smaller size that she over feminised in an attempt to compensate. Brown (2009: 18) spoke of one Black cisgender lesbian partner who was in a relationship with a trans* man and had to make shifts to come to terms with the 'straight white man' and how that will be perceived in public.

Nyamora addresses the absence of research participants of Colour, noting the lack of Black voices and experiences in studying the experiences of cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans* persons. This is important because the experiences of Caucasian samples and literature 'may not apply to different groups of Women of Colour' (Nyamora, 2004: 17). There are great cultural and ethnic differences between people from different racial groups and attempts to apply research

results from one dominant ethnic group to other groups of ethnic or racial minorities not only leads to assumptions and overlooking life differences, it perpetuates inherent racism (Nyamora, 2004: 18).

Dozier (2005: 313) suggests that 'becoming a Black man' increases the risk of harm and hate crimes. Volcano (2013), Ziegler (2008), and Valentine (2007) concur with this notion while Ward (2010: 239) relates that when gender intersects with certain forms of power such as wealth and whiteness, the 'demand' for gender labour is more subtle, invisible and becomes more coercive.

The literature from the global North section informed my understanding of the terrain in which cisgender-trans* couples function. Language, culture and ethnicity intersect with the trans* person and the couple's ability to navigate elements of 'gaze' and 'spectacle' in their daily lives. The cisgender partners 'give gender' through the labour of love in the coproduction of gender. In conclusion, to fully understand gendered experiences from this cisgender-trans* couples perspective it is important to take language race, culture and ethnic diversities into serious consideration.

1.2 South African trans* contextualised

1.2.1 South African socio-political realities - visualising South African trans*

South Africa is well known for having a most progressive constitution (Klein, 2008; Sember, 2009), being the fifth country in the world allowing same-sex marriages under the Civil Unions Bill of 2006. South Africa showcases a myriad of other progressive laws and rights for its LGBT citizens (Vincent & Camminga 2009). Lesser known, but most desired by trans* advocates in other countries, is the progressive gender marker legal situation for South African trans* and intersex people. In 2003 South Africa's Sex Description and Sex Status Act was amended, allowing trans* and intersex people to change their legal documentation without proof of genital surgery (Act 49 of 2003).

Nonetheless, post-apartheid South Africa is still tainted by the legacy of its past, which not only focussed on race, but sex and gender were equally policed by the apartheid government. Oppression not only of black bodies, but an overall control of gendered bodies, sexed bodies and bodies in intimate relationships were monitored and violently policed from 1948 until as recently as 1994 (Swarr, 2012b; Baderoon, 2011; Sember, 2009; Vincent & Camminga, 2009; Karstens, 2008: 238; Keenan, 2006: 21; Hoad, 2005: 14 – 18; Retief, 1994: 99).

To understand South Africa in its current context, it is important to realise the many factors that contribute to the diversity of the country. Intersections between race and ethnicity, tradition and culture, language, class, medical, education, legal, and social aspects of South African citizen's lives illuminate daily interrelations with sex and gender (Swarr, 2012b; Bennett et al, 2010: 14; Klein, 2009; Steyn & van Zyl, 2009; Nel, 2007). The social meanings of everyday life in South Africa still carry the impact of not only racial but gendered oppression (Muholi, 2011; Nel, 2007; Salo, 2007).

I explore this context from my perspective within the trans* activist community. Until 2005 in South Africa (and Africa) no trans*, transgender, or transsexual organisations existed. With my former partner, Lex Kirsten, a self-identifying transman, I founded Gender DynamiX in 2005. Gender DynamiX is a human rights organisation, focusing its work on trans* and gender nonconforming individuals and SOFFAs. Gender DynamiX aims to bridge the gap between trans* people and their partners and the need for information about transitioning. Before Gender DynamiX's existence, trans* people functioned largely in isolation, with little support mechanisms, resources or information. Informal gatherings and 'underground' support groups were established and largely known by 'word of mouth'. Understanding the intersections of race, class, sex, and gender in the South African historical and political context for trans* persons must simultaneously be understood in the context of isolation and silencing which the lack of support structures and basic understanding brought to light.

1.2.2 No understanding of the present, without the past...

Unknown to many South African trans* people and more importantly, to most South Africans, our country has a rich yet rocky transsexual¹¹ history, woven as a thread through our recent legal history (Swarr, 2012b; Theron, 2008; Kinoti, 2007; Swarr, 2003). The decades of the 1970's and 80's are known by trans* people as the 'sex change-heydays', marked by the large number of streamlined surgeries and alterations of legal documentation. It is important to note that these so-called 'streamlined' surgeries, legal documentation, and related support needed to transition were only offered to white transsexuals (and notably with the requirement that they would after said change continue their lives as heterosexuals) during this time period (Swarr, 2012b, Vincent & Camminga, 2009). Furthermore, experimental surgeries were carried out on coloured transsexuals (Swarr, 2012b). This actively created a great divide in an already racially segregated country and left a legacy

¹¹ I am using specific the word 'transsexual' in cases where in our legal and medical history trans* people were pathologised and recognise legitimate only in the sense of transsexuals 'changing their sex'

of division long after apartheid was officially discontinued. A substantial number of coloured 'post-op' transsexuals were left with liminal and gendered lives, being called "specials"¹² (Swarr, 2012b). The South African Defence Force became the army of the State, exercising control over perceived 'homosexuality', by ensuring white military conscripts were 'heterosexual' and hyper masculinised (Swarr, 2012b; Vincent & Camminga, 2009). Smit (2006) argues that word-of-mouth information might have lead to a window of opportunity, with the possibility of white transsexuals making access of the military in order to transition.

A myriad of reasons may have contributed to the sudden change in 1992. The then ruling National Party, 'out of the blue' changed the legislation which prevented people from legally changing their documentation (Klein, 2008; Swarr, 2003). For eleven years following that ruling, trans* people in South Africa lived limited lives, occupying liminal spaces. Terrick (2009: 205-209) attested to a life in limbo for six years due to the 1992 decision. It was only through the perseverance of one intersex and two trans* activists (Sally Gross, Estian Smit and Simone Heradien) lobbying parliament, that Act 49, the Sex Description Alteration Act, was amended in 2003 (Hamblin, Nduna & Padi, 2013; Heradien, 2009; Vincent & Camminga, 2009; Smit, 2006).

1.2.3 Visibility through law: Amendment of Act 49 of 2003 and its current status

Klein noted in 2008 and Heradien concurred in 2009, six years after the amendment of Act 49, that the Department of Home Affairs was inefficient in the implementation of Act 49. Since its inception in 2005, Gender Dynamix has been engaged in developing strategies and lobbying the Department of Home Affairs to implement the amendment of Act 49 of 2003. As yet, Gender Dynamix has found little evidence of concrete success (Hamblin, Nduna & Padi, 2013).

1.2.4 Repercussions with the Civil Union Bill: One step forward, two steps sideways

While November 2006 was cause for celebration throughout South Africa for activists in the organised LGBTI sector and for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals, many trans* people did not share the same excitement (Vincent & Camminga, 2009), particularly unless they were defined as lesbian or gay. Many cisgender-trans* couples were impacted by the gap left between the 1961 Marriage

¹² Specials refer to coloured transsexuals, most often sex workers, who were "left without functioning genitals, after free, experimental surgeries" – (Swarr, 2012)

Act and the Civil Union Bill of 2006. According to the Department of Home Affairs, before a trans* person's application to amend their sex description (in accordance to Act 49 of 2003) will be processed, if they are in a cisgender-trans* relationship, married prior to 2006 (and thereafter) under the Marriage Act, and the trans* person 'came out' after the marriage, they are forced to divorce (Hamblin, Nduna & Padi, 2013; Judge, Manion & de Waal, 2008¹³). This is in direct contradiction with the stipulations in Act 49 of 2003, quoting directly from the Act:

'Rights and obligations that have acquired by or accrued to such a person before the alteration of his or her sex description are not adversely affected by the alteration'

This proves to be problematic for cisgender-trans* couples who are already married, but are no longer recognised as a married couple. Such an interpretation from the Department of Home Affairs has resulted in forced divorces (Hamblin, Nduna & Padi, 2013 and Theron, 2013).

While this remains a point to be challenged, which many trans* people and activists within Gender Dynamix are firmly aware of, no one seems to focus on the invisibility of the partner. Through the continuous enforcing of this legislation, it became an Act which also infringes on the right of a second person - that of a loyal, loving cisgender partner of a trans* person.

1.2.5 Sangoma or doctor? Conundrum of a dual medical system

It is estimated that eighty percent of South Africans regularly consult with traditional health care practitioners such as herbalists and sangomas¹⁴ (Kim, 2011a; Mafisa, 2011). Mafisa (2011) states that gender nonconformity and gender variance is not seen as a disorder by some traditional health care practitioners, instead it is acknowledged. There are more traditional health care practitioners¹⁵ in the country than western medical doctors, and these traditional practices existed long before western medicine was introduced. Kim (2011b) argues that there could be synergy between trans* advocacy for access of health care and the traditional health care system. In 2011, Gender Dynamix hosted a focus group discussion with traditional health care practitioners and trans* activists to develop the "Indigenous Comments on the Standards of Care, sixth version" (Kim, 2011a). The enormous practice of traditional health care represents one side of the duality; the other health care

¹³ Robert Hamblin & Sally Jean Shackleton and Christelle & Raven Delpont are couples interviewed by Judge, Manion and De Waal, sharing their challenges of inhabiting this liminal space

¹⁴ A Sangoma is a Traditional Health Practitioner (THP), a practice found throughout Southern Africa

¹⁵ In 2011 it was estimated that there was 185 477 practicing THPs.

system, being western medicine, which in South Africa is equally layered and multifaceted. It can be divided into private health care and public health care, which can then be further divided. Private health care ranges from fairly affordable general practitioners and medical providers in all needed medical fields, to highly expensive private hospitals. These services can be more 'accessible' if an individual can afford such medical aid, which brings the discussion back to employment, class and privilege. Public health care is state sponsored and riddled with challenges such as questionable deliverables, under-budgeting and insufficient staffing (McIntyre, 2009). The poor budgeting provided by the Department of Health and multiple other factors are responsible for the existence of only one official recognised public hospital in tertiary education and reports of two more hospitals delivering services to trans* health care specific needs. This results in a waiting list for gender affirming surgery of twenty six years (Bateman, 2011; Vincent & Camminga, 2009; Klein, 2008). Sixteen of the provincial tertiary hospitals throughout South Africa qualify to perform gender affirming surgeries (Klein, 2008). However Bateman argues that in order to access gender affirming surgery in private or public sectors and to continue on life-long hormone regimes a person needs 'deep pockets' (2011).

Local clinics, which often are easier to frequent because they are geographically closer, are most often not sensitised, skilled or 'interested' in assisting trans* people with their trans* related medical care, such as hormones and the relevant blood tests accompanying endocrinology (Nkoana & Nduna, 2013; Nel, 2008 & 2007).

Transgender, transsexual and gender nonconforming medical research, health research, and available knowledge in South Africa is mostly positioned in a HIV/AIDS realm. A few articles outside of the HIV/AIDS realm such as those of Nduna, 2013; Stevens, 2012; Theron et al, 2012; Jobson, Kaggwa & Theron, 2009; Kim, 2009, can be found and mostly represent recent contributions.

1.2.6 Early school drop-outs and the economic cycle of unemployment

For social and emotional reasons, many trans* people under-perform at school or in numerous cases drop out before completing secondary education (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Gender segregation with school uniforms and activities such as sports, contribute to bullying and discrimination (Kheswa, 2012; Theron, 2009). Lack of education and the already high unemployment rate in South Africa (SAnews.gov.za) contribute to the poor financial state in which many trans* people find themselves (Stevens, 2012). Regardless of South Africa's progressive constitution, many trans* people are still being unfairly dismissed when it comes to light that they are transgender (Van Zyl, 2013). Lower

education levels, under-potential and unemployment lead to significant challenges for trans* people in their daily lives, including homelessness, having to resort to sex work and other vulnerabilities (Hamblin, Nduna & Padi, 2013; Ouspenski, 2013; Kheswa, 2012; Stevens, 2012; Theron, 2010).

1.2.7 Homophobia → {Transphobia} → Hate crimes

Homophobia and transphobia are rife in South Africa. A recent spike of hate crimes was noted in 2012, (Soldaat quoted by Mposo, 2012) following the National House of Traditional Leaders proposal to the Constitutional Review Committee of Parliament to remove “sexual orientation” as grounds for non-discrimination from the South African Bill of Rights (Judge, 2012; Matebeni, 2012). The Constitution recognises LGBTI people as legitimate citizens (Muholi, 2010). Reid (2005, 2012) reported that the non-discrimination clause in the Bill of Rights provided a sense of belonging and citizenship. Hate crimes against trans* and gender nonconforming people in South Africa were historically less frequently reported and documented than those against gays and lesbians. Swarr (2012b) described an earlier example of a drag queen, Brandy Roeland¹⁶, who in 1990 was stalked and shot when the perpetrator discovered Roeland not to be female bodied. Roeland’s case amplified the controversy present still today, with service providers not sure which facilities; ‘male’ or ‘female’ to assign to trans* and gender nonconforming people. In another incident, Daisy Dube was a male bodied person, dressed in female clothing. She repeatedly asked the perpetrator to refrain from calling her ‘istabane’¹⁷, when he shot and killed her (Ekine, 2008; Theron, 2009). Swarr (2009) pointed out that the use of the ‘istabane’ narrative in daily life continues to emphasise an interrelation between sexual orientation and gender [identity]. Contradiction prevails when (documentation and) reporting is given on gender nonconforming, queer, and trans* individuals. There often is confusion and misinformation from one news report to another (about the same person), with some news releases reporting on these individuals as “transsexual or gay”. The murder of Thalepo Makutle is an example of such incidents (Griqua in Davis and Huffpost both 2012). Gender DynamiX reported in its 2012 TDOR¹⁸ media release on an additional four trans* hate murders for that year. ‘Trans* people are systematically sidelined’ (Kheswa, 2012); hence rejection,

¹⁶ Pseudonym

¹⁷ Originally from the isiZulu term ‘isitabane’ which means hermaphrodite and is usually used in a derogatory way to refer to LGBT people (mostly in townships).

¹⁸ Transgender Day of Remembrance

depression and discrimination are listed as reasons for suicide by trans* persons (www.genderdynamix.org.za).

In most African countries, state sponsored hate speech is backed by politicians, from pulpits, media outlets, and tertiary institutions, among other platforms. Religious leaders set the trend for everyone to follow claiming that homosexuality¹⁹ is 'unAfrican' and 'unnatural'. Often in South Africa and other African countries, homosexuality, trans* and any form of queerness is framed as 'unAfrican', 'against culture' and rooted in a discourse of 'western import' (Judge, 2012; Reid, 2012; Swarr, 2012a; Stobie, 2011; Sember, 2009; Muholi, 2004).

It is important to illuminate literature about South African hate crimes as it shapes the fear of transphobia and homophobia, and describes the impact on cisgender female partners as well as the lack of support and information they face on a daily basis. This reality creates the existent life experience and the social backdrop for trans* people and their partners in South Africa (Theron, 2009). Matebeni noted that the 'discovery' or 'disclosure' often becomes the pressure point for hate crimes and the rape of trans* people (2011: 55). Marais (2012) stated that the point of disclosure can be riddled with anxiety, doubt, fear and emotions linked to possible anticipated violent reactions, and that a person should carefully choose a public, safe space when disclosing such information.

1.2.8 Gender perspectives through an intersex and trans* lens

When gender gets turned upside down through performance, jest and being presented as a laughable spectacle, South Africans allow, appreciate and even participate in the notion. Clear examples of this can be found in blog articles such as that of Gray (2009) and "Just I and myself" (2010). The satirist, Pieter Dirk Uys also known as Evita Bezuidenhout, is well known and loved both throughout South Africa and internationally, and has received numerous international awards; the latest being the German-Africa Award in December 2012. This award recognised Uys's battle against any type of discrimination (Foat, 2012). More examples of public events that entertain and by default encourage spectators to joyfully participate in 'cross-gender' presentations can be found, not only through people of all walks of life attending drag shows, but also through the annual Cape

¹⁹ It is important to mention that inasmuch as trans identities are located in gender identity whereas homosexuality is described as sexual orientation, most leaders and the people of African countries regard every person who does not comply with the gender and sexual binary (heterosexual) as gay, or homosexual, not distinguishing between gender identities and sexual orientation.

Minstrel festival. A great deal of controversy surrounds this annual festival, (Swarr, 2012b; Jeppie, 1990) also known as the Cape Coon festival. For the purpose of this thesis I will directly quote Jeppie's usage of the word "moffie" and "hermaphrodite" when referring to the participants. While it is problematic, these words were the norm at that time. Jeppie (1990) alluded to the dual role the 'transvestite' played, by entertaining the 'whites' and the inner city's middle- working class, and was tolerated under those circumstances (1990). The conflation between gender and sex was amplified when historically, the 'prancing transvestite' (Jeppie, 1990) was referred to as 'hermaphrodite'. At its best, the participation of the 'moffies' has provoked public debate, entrenched in a conundrum of confusion between sex and gender (Jeppie, 1990). According to Jeppie (1990) the 'moffies' were highly stigmatised and under dispute of normality. Within the contentious discourse of the Cape Coon festival the 'moffies' and their role are part of the culture and somehow accepted. Meersman refers to it as a "healthy rite of rebellion" and an "aggressive assertion of public acknowledgement of cross-gender identity" (2011).

When cross-gender expression or behaviour is presented as the 'truth' – by means of the lived reality of trans* and intersex people – the South African public rejects the existence of any other possible genders. This is demonstrated by Du Preez, (2006), in which the opening paragraph announces that transsexuality made headlines in South Africa in February 2003. The South African Human Rights Commission indicated the need to rectify the Sex Description Bill in 2003 (Vincent and Camminga, 2006), yet no mention of the proposed and eventual amendment of the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act of 2003 was mentioned in Du Preez's chapter. Instead it focuses on a 'scandal'- that of a Senegalese model, Barbara Diop who 'fooled' people at the time, when organisers of the 2003 Cricket World Cup arranged that she walk out with the Zimbabwean team. Initially, she denied that she was transsexual, but she eventually relented and admitted it (TransGriot, 2010). Du Preez continued in the remainder of the chapter with prejudices, reinforcing old stereotypes claiming that transsexuality is the 'psychological dominance of the mother' (du Preez, 2006: 3), and stating that 'gender emerges, therefore, as a by-product of deviant sexual categories' (2006: 8).

Through personal life events and the highly discussed gender-debacle during the Caster Semenya saga in 2009, intersex people in South Africa have been dismissed and invisible. Although Caster Semenya²⁰ became known as the single most important incident and highly profiled intersex person in the South African public eye, Julius Malema, leader of the African National Congress Youth

²⁰ South African National Springbok middle distance runner

League, stated intersex people 'do not exist' (Swarr, Gross and Theron, 2009). More unsettling than the gender furor on its own, were the further deliberate attempts of Caster's management team to prove femininity above all else (Jezebel, 2009). Expectations of heteronormative 'normal' bodies and sexualities are still intact, and explain the national collective support for Semenya, especially after being affirmed again as the 'Golden girl'. As Schuman observed "Semenya must be what the public needed her to be: a woman, a South African woman, a black South African woman; a black, South African heterosexual woman; a 'normal' woman" (2010: 96).

Shortly before the Semenya catastrophe in 2009, the South African gay and lesbian film festival (named *Out in Africa*) experienced a similar gender policing treatment from the Film and Publications Board upon refusal to give permission to screen the highly recommended film "XXY". An allegation of child pornography was contested by the film festival in court (De Waal, 2009). In response Prinsloo et al (2011:142) raised the question of who decides about normal sexuality, sexuality that is transgressive, and in need of censorship (2011: 142).

Klein's research (2008), situated in a medico-legal discourse, illuminated contradicting theories by medical surgeons regarding the age of consent and ability of teenagers and young people of the same age group to make decisions about their own bodies. One surgeon believed it was possible for a fourteen year old intersex youth to give informed consent to surgery, yet a sixteen year old transsexual was not viewed as capable of doing the same. This thinking concurs with what Du Plessis (2006) calls the 'assumptions of heterosexuality' as 'socially and culturally natural' with perceived ideas about the intersex person seeking a 'normal body'. According to Malema, intersex does not exist in South Africa but then he contradicts that statement by saying that being intersex requires 'correction' (Gross www.intersex.org.za).

It is important to understand or unpack the meaning/s of gender, sex and sexuality in a South African context to illuminate the gender-mess in which the South African public understanding finds itself. This is the context in which the cisgender partner functions - in a country where gender, sex and sexuality are conflated resulting in the cisgender-trans* couple becoming either the spectacle or invisibilised. In a global North discourse, unpacking gender, sex and sexuality self defining terminology such as queer and transsexual (Brown, 2009) emerged. Through contextualising South Africa and the current understanding of gender, sex and sexuality I hesitate to import terminologies which will prevent a discursive exploration of South African indigenous expressions.

Stobie (2011) presented an analysis of masculinity, amplifying Zulu culture and masculinity in a journal article entitled 'He uses my body: female traditional healers, male ancestors and transgender

in South Africa'. This text describes the complex spaces that exist between having a male side and female side (Stobie, 2011: 159) and that South African people's notions and opinions of gender, transgender and transgressing gender require a multi-cultural discourse.

In historical context, trans* people have always existed. In South Africa, a short visual summary of historical news clippings can be seen in a photo essay in the anthology 'Trans' with a collection from the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action archival material (Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved, 2009). One person who notably stands out is Gertie Williams, dating back to 1955. Although Williams did not use language referring to 'transgender' and we cannot posthumously define a trans* person, Williams related strong desires to be seen as a man, mentioning prayers to God every night for a merciful change into a man, as no risk in an operation and no pain would be too high a price. Williams also abandoned dresses and make up, declaring to family members there would be no more use for it; 'I wanted to be a man, and nothing was going to stop me' (Chetty, 1994: 131). More examples are highlighted in '*Defiant desire: gay and lesbian lives in South Africa*' (Gevisser, Cameron, eds, 1994) of a drag culture and what could be seen today as trans* culture. Smit (2006: 283) noted that much of South African trans* history needs to be reclaimed.

In 1982 South Africans witnessed a series of news articles, unfolding the story of Elize van der Merwe's transition (Daily Dispatch, 1982; Rapport, 1982; Elize van der Merwe collection -archival material GALA). Van der Merwe had gender reaffirming surgery in 1975 and shared her whole story with the public. Her desire to complete her journey to be a woman elicited sympathy from the public at large. Van der Merwe's positive feedback from South Africans can most arguably be ascribed to her aspirations of marriage, fitting perfectly into the heteronormative frame, and longing to be 'normal' (Vincent and Camminga, 2009). In contrast Williams, who was black and described in Drum magazine as "a cross-dressing lesbian gangster" defied normative expectations and became a spectacle.

1.2.9 Transgressive visibility through art: a thin line between 'visualise' and 'spectacle'

Steven Cohen is controversial, using performance art platforms to dismantle gender, heteronormative expectations of masculinity and misogyny (Du Plessis, 2006). Currier (2011: 465) explains that the 'visibility of the spectacle' as a type of visibility succeeds in its purpose because these 'momentous' exceptional moments upend established routines and norms. Cohen makes use of public spaces and shocks viewers with work that illuminates "increased visibility of homosexuality

and transgressive gender constructs to the patriarchal norm” (Du Plessis, 2006: 20). In order to look at gender, trans* and gender nonconformity in South Africa on a visual platform, I highlight the work of a few selected artists with their contributions to the contemporary South African trans* archive.

From the ‘Gender binary farm’ – to the importance of ‘Feeling like a lady’

Beginning as early as 2004, South African photographer Robert Hamblin (www.roberthamblin.com) focused his art work on concepts of gender. A number of solo exhibitions, including photography and short videos followed by his artist statements address gender – looking at masculinity through a trans* lens. Hamblin produced short videos, speaking about the relationship with his father and grandfather and a very close butch friend he called, at the time, his brother. In ‘a legacy of men’ he addresses domestic abuse. Hamblin’s contribution to the South African trans* canon illuminates the importance of gender questions and contemporary gender issues while simultaneously addressing gender incongruence. In Hamblin’s latest body of work ‘When you feeling like a lady’ the viewer’s gaze and emotional engagement with the work forms a central part of this collection. The viewer is confronted by questions of voyeurism, gender and sex work. This aesthetic series of imagery was initially approached through an activist lens but in collaboration with the participants, was developed to utilise a purely aesthetic lens. The contribution to a South African archive and the creation of trans* visibility is important both for activism and trans* individuals, but when a trans* person is not merely a collaborator or participant, but is the initiator, it becomes powerful.

‘Proudly African’

In a number of international exhibitions, activist and artist Gabrielle le Roux exhibits the travelling body of art: ‘Proudly African & Transgender’, a series with nine trans* and one intersex activists from various African countries (Le Roux, 2013: 54 – 68). Lesser known is the series of intimate portraits by Le Roux of Kayla and Laura, two trans women who were in a relationship from 2006 – 2007. One of the drawings in the series can be seen in the anthology edited by O’Keefe and Fox (2008). This work of intimate portraits rejects the notion of trans* people being ‘asexual’ or ‘celibate’ by assumption.

‘Real beauty’ questions femininity

Photographer Jodi Bieber (www.jodibieber.com) questions the notion of womanhood in the series ‘Real Beauty’. The work addresses important contemporary issues intersecting different South

African cultural viewpoints on what defines a woman. The award winning photographic series includes one transwoman adding to the 'collection' of South African woman. The significance of this inclusion is that it is 'unexpected', unannounced and in mainstream art, it is not with a trans* activism intention in mind. The trans* woman was included in this series as only one of the many diverse women rejecting normative notions of the 'perfect model body'.

Visualise Madame La Rochelle, Miss D'vine and trans inclusion in Faces and Phases*

Earlier work of photographer Zanele Muholi from 2007 and 2008 includes contributions from La Rochelle and Miss D'vine who collaborated²¹ with Muholi to ensure the visibility of black queer people's existence in South Africa. A gradual visibility of trans* masculine and feminine participants in the *Faces and Phases* series demonstrated through artist statements and other text that Muholi contributes to the visibility of black trans* people in South Africa (Baderoon, 2011). In the foreword of *Faces and Phases* (2010) Muholi ensures inclusion through acknowledgement that "signifies the transition from one stage of sexuality or gender expression and experience to another" (Muholi, 2010). Other authors (Salley, 2013; Thomas, 2013; Baderoon, 2011; Smith, 2005; Smith, 2004) have highlighted the work of Muholi, giving extended visibility of black South African (and beyond South Africa) trans* individuals. The July-August 2011 *Inkanyiso* exhibition at the Brodie Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg, specifically challenges the public eye to consume what Muholi calls: 'transfigures', with a substantial amount of trans* women participating in the exhibition. Muholi explicitly points out in the artist statement that she was "seeking to educate the viewer on the 'complexities and fluidity of gender'" (Muholi, 2011).

1.2.10 Recent inclusions in South African trans* research and academic work

Similar to Muholi's conscious inclusion of '*transfigures*' and that of scholars amplifying black trans* people through interpreting Muholi's work, a collection of academic work can be found that is deliberately illuminating trans* in South Africa. Nel (2009:39) noted that 'transsexuals have been, more often than not, misunderstood and misdiagnosed by their caregivers'. An example alluding to Nel's 'misunderstood' ideal can be found in an educational NGO booklet about LGBT teenagers, which uses confusing pronouns and descriptions. Examples of this include the description of *Alex*, who is male bodied, already embarking on hormone therapy towards transitioning, and in the text

²¹ Muholi refer to people who take part in the photography projects as collaborators and never view them as subjects

being referred to as 'he' (Bloch & Martin, 2005: 35). Matebeni carefully draw on positive imagery and text outlining the challenges of transsexual people, through documenting the life of Vanya in *Jo'burg TRACKS* (2011: 54-55). Judge, Manion and De Waal (2008) incorporates two interviews in '*To have & to hold – the making of same-sex marriage in South Africa*', highlighting challenges of cisgender-trans* couples. Examples of scholar's 'LGBTI' academic work which study trans* can be found in social sciences, medical, HIV, legal and other platforms, such as narratives on blogs and reports situated in the Human Rights frame (Van Zyl, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2011; Matebeni, 2011; Bennett and Reddy, 2009; Nel, 2009; Nel, 2007).

New voices contributing to the production of knowledge in South Africa at various academic levels are emerging. Nkoana and Nduna (2013) published a paper on engaging primary health care providers in townships in Pretoria with the focus on local clinics in relation to gender affirming health care access. Van der Merwe and Padi (2013) discussed the meaning of being a trans* woman in post-apartheid South Africa illustrated by their activism experiences in sexual and reproductive rights platforms. The authors shed light on challenges trans* women experience in mainstream feminist platforms. Mdletshe and Nduna (2013) argued in their paper that youth peer educators should be trans* inclusive and incorporate sexual orientation and gender identity in their training about condom usage. Nduna published a literature review of available knowledge in South Africa regarding what is known in the fields of HIV prevention and AIDS response among transgender people. These contributions by Nkoana and Nduna, van der Merwe and Padi, along with Nduna (2013) and Ndletshe and Nduna (2013) can all be found in the new psychology journal entitled *New Voices*; these are four selected papers from the 2011 Gender DynamiX Trans Health and Advocacy conference.

In addition to the four journal articles that were generated as a result of the Gender DynamiX Trans Health and Advocacy Conference, mostly located in the Health, HIV and Human Rights frame, a few more contributions have been added to the South African trans* canon. McLachlan (2010) explored the influences of spirituality and the spiritual identity development of transgender people. Saunders (2013) provided insight in to the experiences and expression of South African transadolescents. Trans* youth are at greater risk of being bullied and experiencing other possible problems at school, leading to depression and other emotional turbulences. Saunders interviewed three trans* youth and their parents to explore this 'untouched' field in South Africa. Van der Wal (2013) investigate the meaning of social, political and bodily discourses through the creation of personal photographic archives, with a thesis centred on ideas that trans* masculinity is a complex site of vulnerability (Van der Wal 2013: 2).

1.2.11 {In} visibility of {research into} trans* people's relationships – a look at cisgender-trans* intimacy

The available literature and knowledge concerning trans* intimacies, trans* relationships and cisgender-trans* couples are limited (Theron and Collier, 2013; Theron, 2010), particularly beyond that of Theron (2013, 2011, 2010 2009 to list a few). The earliest inclusion in an anthology addressing trans* relationships in South Africa is that of Karstens (2008) in an international compilation: 'Trans people in love' describes the relationship of two South African trans* women, identifying as lesbian. McLachlan (2010) describes information from two of the interviewees sharing about their relationships. Keenan's (2006) research made references to trans* people in relationships, including noting that one trans* man has a wife and child.

One well known cisgender-trans* couple in South Africa, Hamblin and Shackleton, who in one way or another both define themselves as queer and feminist, were interviewed together in 2008 for the compilation 'To have & to hold: the making of same-sex marriage in South Africa'. Shackleton (Shackleton in Judge, Manion & de Waal eds. 2008: 333) spoke of the safety of the [lesbian] 'club' and how much 'we rely on friendships and community' for safety. She concluded that part of the interview by stating that she believes that her 'long-time' and close friends are working through it. The same publication by Judge, Manion & de Waal includes the narrative of Delpont and Delpont, which describes the story of Christelle and Raven, a trans* woman and her cisgender partner. It discusses the impact that the discrepancy between the Marriage Act, the Sex Description Act, and the Civil Union Act, has on their relationship and their lives.

Prinsloo, McLean and Moletsane embarked on the EROTICS project between 2008 and 2011 to study how women from different socio-political backgrounds and cultures utilise the internet to exercise their sexual rights. The study was conducted in Brazil, India, Lebanon, South Africa and the United States. The South African component focused on two groups: lesbians and transgender, and emphasised how they utilise the internet to shape their lives and communication with peers. The transgender part of the study focussed on the Gender DynamiX website's discussion forum as a platform. The trans* masculine or 'boy talk' forum and trans* feminine or 'girl talk' discussion boards were analysed. The sense of being male or being female and how trans* people navigate through finding community and sexual orientation were amongst the highlighted themes in these discussion forums. Prinsloo et al (2011) analysed the 'body language' or communication style differences between the 'boy talk' and 'girl talk' forums. The analysis of the on-line content was followed up by qualitative interviews with ten trans* participants.

An extremely limited collection of written text exists in South Africa about the relationships of trans* people. Furthermore, limited literature investigates cisgender-trans* relationships. Published work that further specialises in trans* masculine and trans* feminine is a literature luxury we simply do not have. I managed to find a limited amount of written pieces through blogs, anthologies, conference reports and organisational material, which results in a small collection beyond exclusively scholarly work. "Dating for girls like us is a nightmare" (Van der Merwe, 2012) refers to the constant dilemma trans* people find themselves in each time they are courting, meeting, romanticising or embarking on the possibility of new sexual encounters. Marais (2012) concurred in the article 'To disclose or not to disclose' and further discussed how the disclosure decision affects trans* people in their daily lives both regarding employment and relationships. *Queer African Reader*, edited by Ekine and Abbas (2013) included two chapters addressing the intimate lives of trans* people, one chapter by Theron and one, a fictional contribution by Dlungwana (2013: 372), touches on the subject of a cisgender partner dealing with the early stage of 'discovering' her partner is trans*. Dlungwana is the first (besides Theron) South African author writing on the topic, who is a cisgender partner of masculine identifying trans* men. Dlungwana's fictional chapter narrates the slippery slope of initial gender identity confusion when language is not a precise tool, or differently said, when people try to navigate their lives beyond in their own languages, without the weight of western terminology. I find Carrol's very short blog post on a similar topic a fresh contribution to the discussion. This work focuses on not only defining roles, but how to adapt and apply words that do not correspond with those in the global North, instead of attempting to develop localised descriptions. Carrol (2013) speaks of the monthly blurring of gender lines when *ubaba*²² bleeds.

To date, only one resource guide has been produced in South Africa for trans* people (by trans people) addressing their sexual health. The booklet stretches beyond organisational 'safer sex and HIV' information. It provides physical safety tips, including 'disclosure' at a first-time date and alternative sexual lifestyles such as BDSM²³. 'Seldom-spoken-about' information such as physiological factors that are important to know during sex is highlighted, providing post-op trans* women information about neo-vagina lubrication and precautions that should be taken. From this guide, trans* masculine persons can learn about to take care of their bodies, going for regular gynaecology check-ups, and how to ease the pressure when binding their chests. Furthermore, this

²² Ubaba is the male household head, <http://inkanyiso.org/2013/06/26/2013-june-26-she-is-bleeding-man/>

²³ Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism

resource guide considers the partners of trans* people. It is written with an approach that is helpful for not only trans* people, but those who love them or want to be in relationships with them and for cisgender-trans* couples. During the 2011 Trans Health and Advocacy Conference, hosted by Gender Dynamix in Cape Town, a substantial allocation in the conference programme was made to give attention to partners and intimate relationships. The subsequent printed conference report written with a qualitative approach, gives information about all the conference sessions. Beyond merely reporting, this programme included two bodies of research about intimate cisgender-trans* relationships. The first inclusion focused on the presentation by Theron (Kim, 2011b: 21), in the form of a combination between the screening of the video clip, in *TRANSformations*²⁴, and my initial Honour's research findings. The second inclusion in the conference report was the research presentation by Wasserman and Hamblin, who worked with sex workers at SWEAT²⁵ for a period of seven weeks, in group discussions of a variety of themes about their own intimate lives (Kim, 2011b: 22).

²⁴ See reference list for full details of DVD

²⁵ Sex Work Education Advocacy Taskforce

Conclusion

Although trans* persons can be seen to perform their gender, I want to argue that cisgender partners engage in a much more unknown, undetected subtle performance in order to co-create gender. Their gender performance is so refined that we do not recognise it as a performance. As feminists and scholars who take gender seriously in respect for the trans* community, we need to be aware of the potential and actual marginalised gender experience of cisgender partners, and of cisgender people per se. I want to contribute to new understandings of gender by looking at this performance through the cisgender partner's experience. This Master's thesis aims to expand on the initial research which I embarked on in 2009.

In this literature review, I attempted to cross-fertilise the notions raised in global North discussions with critiques arising from the South African context. In this way, I raise questions which are foundational to my research, such as, to what extent do South African cisgender partners need to negotiate culture and ethnicity in their understanding of trans*? How can we understand power, patriarchy and gender through South African cisgender partners' experiences in a highly racialised context? Are there 'unique' South African experiences and how are these negotiated? What are the cisgender partner's experience, understanding and role in transitioning and co-creating of gender? How do South African cisgender partners' performance, body image and 'labour of love' intersect with culture, race and ethnicity? Gender performativity is supported by cisgender partners and requires co-creation and requires acts of emotional, physical and sexual support. How does that transpire in South Africa? I intend to turn the 'gender-gaze' to the cisgender partners to examine South African gendered experiences. In this process I want to uncover how cisgender partners and trans* persons employ language to form meaning of their own realities.

This literature review amplifies the reality that there is nearly no South African literature on trans* intimacy, relationships or cisgender-trans* couples. I was able to collect an important, but limited amount of literature that exists in South Africa. I want to emphasise that this literature remains in a variety of text and sources such as: blog entries, fictional and life story contributions in anthologies, organisational material (mostly situated in health and advocacy platforms), video footage, and academic work (besides that of Theron) subsumed in other thematic contexts.

2. Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

In this third chapter I outline the approach I am using in my research as a feminist, applying both feminist and transgender theory. I share about the lessons learned from my Honours Degree, which prepared me for this Master thesis. I illuminate my position as an activist with empirical knowledge, and how that has generated trust with interview participants ensuring rich data, which then raises ethical considerations about the design and purposes of the research.

2.1 Epistemology {flowing into Positionality}

Epistemology - the knowledge of knowing; the 'how' researchers come to a point of learning and knowing what they know and the guidelines that should steer their process of attaining this knowledge (Creswell et al, 2007: 238). Harding (1987: 25) defines epistemology as the nature and scope of how knowledge is attained and theorised. Questions about what the researcher seeks to know, which in this case include the politics of gender and sexuality, and attendant questions about the influences which shape information and how the knowledge that is produced is applied, concern feminist scholarship (Meintjes, 2012: 53). In my search to describe my approach I came to an understanding that I apply both feminist theory and transgender theory to my work. Harding (1987) illustrates my approach to feminist research:

Many of the most powerful examples of feminist research direct us to gaze critically at all gender (not just at femininity), to take women's experiences as an important new generator of scientific problematics and evidence, and to swing around the powerful lenses of scientific inquiry so that they enable us to peer at our own complex subjectivities as well as at what we observe. (1987:32)

Through a critical consideration of notions of gender that simultaneously takes women's experiences seriously, I facilitate the return of the 'gaze' to the construction of cisgender gender identities; in this case, I explore women cisgender partners' experiences to contribute to the emerging canon of transgender theory. Feminist theory is concerned with class, race, culture, socio-economic status and as Harding points out with 'gender assumptions, beliefs and behaviours' (1987: 31). As a feminist, in my process of learning, I am attempting to provide through this thesis, a new body of knowledge which is capable of bridging a 'feminist'/'trans* theory' silo-ization. Furthermore I make

a deliberate effort to illuminate experiences from diverse cultures, language groups and people who do not identify with global North realities.

Feminist epistemology is as Pereira (2002: 15) explains it, not simply about 'adding' new dimensions to already existing knowledge; instead it is about transformation, stimulating and revitalising progressive research. Another feature of feminist theory is its commitment to transparency, the ability to acknowledge one's own position inside the research, and ensuring the researcher's [sometimes auto]-ethnographic experience is not silenced, invisible or anonymous (Harding, 1987: 32). The researcher appears in the same realm as the research topic and participates under the same critical scrutiny (Harding, 1987: 31). I found this to be applicable in my own approach; as a scholar I engage in my research topic with a critical gaze but I am conscious that I am - due to my empirical knowledge - not free to escape from the same gaze. Lenning stated that she embraced a feminist epistemology challenge in that she is 'cognisant of its limitations and failure to consider participants other than biological' bodies, 'central to social research' (2008: 36). As an activist and in my academic work, I internalise a critical feminist approach to trans* experiences through my enquiring mind by exploring 'non-trans*' engagement and the meaning of gender in their relationships.

Rooted in a broader construction within queer theory, transgender theory emerged as a critique to feminist theory. Transgender theory considers the either/or dichotomy as it exists in feminist theory, which is problematic, especially for people who do not only live their 'fluidity' in a manner to transition from one to another but who deliberately occupy the liminal space of either/or (Nagoshi, 2012: 408; Lenning, 2008; Wilchins, 2004: 125; Namaste, 2000). In transgender theory, 'fluidity' has a more fluid definition. It not only describes the fluid movement from one end of a binary to the other, but it potentially becomes the 'new status quo'. Transgender theory recognises the fluid embodiment that gender identity incorporates (Nagoshi, 2012: 416).

Proclaiming feminist theory and transgender theory as the foundation of my work necessitated a critical internal thinking process. The personal person, the cisgender partner, Liesl, is a feminist who works full time as an activist in the first trans* organisation on the African continent. I am cognisant that my cisgender privilege enabled me (with the support of my trans* partner at that time), to initiate and start the first trans* organisation in South African. I am aware that in 2005 there was no information, support, or indication that a trans* person in South Africa could fully claim any of the promised values as a citizen under our constitution. This became the reason for my trans* partner to choose not to be the public face, placing me in the position to become the known 'founder' of Gender Dynamix.

Cisgender privilege²⁶ entails a contentious reality in South Africa, Africa and globally for trans* individuals and the trans* movement (Mbugua, 2013; Van der Merwe & Padi, 2013; Mbugua, 2011; Lenning, 2008; Serano, 2007; Namaste, 2000). There is a ubiquitous debate about the meaning of leadership within trans* space, and the meaning of cisgender leadership of trans* justice activism had lead me to deep reflection of both categorisations. Reaching beyond a formalised trans* movement and pondering individual life choices, the question then emerges – how does the cisgender-trans* debate materialise in knowledge production? On the one side: who gets to learn or study, who produces knowledge about whose lives? On the other side, there is Liesl as researcher, who engages in a research topic about cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans* persons, who is deeply emerged in the politics of knowledge production. The research focus explores the experiences of cisgender partners, hoping to return the voyeuristic gaze often used to scrutinise trans* people in an aim to ‘understand’ gender better. Bennett and Pereira (2013: 3) caution new researchers that the appreciation of the politics of gendered knowledge easily prevents from to seeing beyond gender and sexual identities.

2.2 Positionality {continues from Epistemology}

Why were transsexuals’ transitions encouraged under apartheid and illegal during the political transition to democracy? Why do white South African doctors claim that intersexuality is more common among black South Africans than whites, with scant research to substantiate their claims? How do white, black and coloured butch lesbians and drag queens reshape race and gender simultaneously? These and related questions form the fabric of this book (Swarr, 2012b: 37).

The similarities in this extrapolation from the book ‘Sex in Transition’ by Amanda Lock Swarr and my own narrative are striking. During 1997 Swarr, a cisgender partner of a masculine identifying trans* person from the United States, embarked on her research in South Africa to explore the intersections between processes of sex, gender and race during and post apartheid. She spent a substantial amount of time in South Africa, but we were worlds apart and yet so close to each other through this topic. During the same time I entered my first relationship with a trans* masculine identifying person. Upon opening Swarr’s book years later, my eye fell on this passage and it related well to my own questions of more than a decade earlier. Like her, my trans* partner and I were puzzled by the stark difference in experiences that trans* people who ‘could’ transition during

²⁶ <http://petersontoscano.wordpress.com/2009/10/15/privilege-of-non-transgender-people/>

apartheid had and those of a few years later when it was illegal. My partner fell into the fortunate 'cut-off' category of people who could still change their legal identity, provided they were able to prove they embarked on their transition before 1992.

The difference between Swarr's questions and my own was that, at the time I was not concerned with questions pertaining to the racial and intersex aspect. I was too enmeshed in my own situation. I was also not an activist at that time, nor was I politicised; I simply loved someone. Today however, fifteen years later, Swarr's are my questions too. They became part of my daily work as an activist and as a feminist.

The personal encounters within my first cisgender-trans relationship prompted me to become an activist and eventually contributed to my position in this research. My second cisgender-trans relationship was due to the first one²⁷, and led to the forming of Gender Dynamix. Eventually my exposure to trans* activism along with an eager search to learn more, steered me in a direction to embark on academic research.

Lenning (2008: 3) writes that as part of their research design, many feminist scholars reflect on their own empirical stance in relation to the research topic. This notion entails transparency regarding methods, challenges and concerns, contemplation and self reflection (Meintjes, 2012; Theo, 2010; Lenning, 2008; Dozier, 2005; Harding, 1987). This opportunity for transparency serves simultaneously as rationale to point out challenges and strains the researcher may experience which deserve theorisation (Matebeni, 2011; Theo, 2010; Mohlakoana, 2008).

I am aware of how my personal experiences as a cisgender partner to masculine identifying trans* person[s] form one of the threads that weaves through the fabric that forms my work, my activism, my scholarship, my life and continues to stay part of my being. Matebeni sums up my sentiment exactly:

Part of that reflection was the realisation that I was always in the field and the field was always and continued to be part of me (2011: 66).

Theo (2010: 36) writes that being intimately close to the environment and having empirical knowledge of the research topic may create the opportunity to reach interviewees. Being seen as a member of the community that is researched makes it easier for interviewees to be open, as they

²⁷ The second masculine identifying trans* person I was in a relationship with approached me, knowing I was previously in a relationship with a trans* person, to gather information about 'how to transition in South Africa' – as there was in 2003 no information available.

may assume that the researcher is familiar with the 'common cultural terms, customs and issues' pertaining to the topic (Dozier, 2005: 304).

Power imbalances are often skewed in favour of the researcher and although research participants agree to engage in research and avail themselves for interviews, they do not always feel empowered enough to indicate their discomfort with the interview process. Bennett argued in a presentation during the Trans Health and Advocacy Conference hosted by Gender DynamiX, that research into people's lives 'requires translating complicated private experiences into public knowledge' (Kim, 2011b: 27). Thus researchers should be cautious of this power imbalance when researching intimate and private lives.

I am aware that my empirical knowledge locates me in a privileged position to turn the gaze towards a deeper understanding of the struggles, frustrations, challenges and loneliness that cisgender partners share openly with me. Furthermore, I know many of the cisgender partners on a friendship level or through their trans* partners. Previous knowledge of parts of their stories and lives allowed me to steer questions in directions in which I knew would ensure rich context and provide me with the data I seek. Some of them know me and all of them know I identify as a cisgender partner, so for these reasons, it was also easier for them to shed light on their joys, discoveries and special intimate moments. There is a certain power and privilege attached to being so close to the research topic, which ensures rich data. Matebeni (2008: 91) calls this 'hierarchies of knowledge and power' and writes that this is not often discussed in the research field. She cautions about this and that the implications for research involving empirical knowledge so close to the field, can easily be critiqued as being influenced by personal feelings and emotions (Matebeni, 2008: 91). Theo (2010: 37) alludes to a similar process of analysing his own epistemology by noting how the researcher can be observed coming with their own activist agenda and 'performing advocacy, masqueraded as research'. Thoughtful positionality considerations guide the researcher to engage conscientiously with one's own potential and 'preconceived' influences to ensure the researcher be aware of how this might impact the research findings (Meintjes, 2012: 54).

Theo (2010: 20) points out the awareness of the researcher's understanding of multiple levels in which this power dynamics unfolds. Self-critical introspection during fieldwork, as well as constant reviewing and navigating through research questions as part of the analysis process, form the guiding practice of remaining honest (Theo, 2010: 20). Daily, I am attentive of the positions I hold: as executive director at Gender DynamiX, as a researcher in the field of cisgender-trans relationships,

and as an insider in the research topic in which I work, as a cisgender partner of masculine identifying trans* persons.

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2.3 Ethics

For the purpose of interview preparation, I provided the interview participants with consent forms, which included information about confidentiality and the option to choose their own pseudonym. Consent was discussed and I allowed enough time for questions that might arise from the content form discussion. After consideration, when I deliberated on how I could best protect their identities (and their partner's identities), I decided to relinquish pseudonyms and used a numbering system. This decision came after a careful thought process, as I am deeply aware of silencing people's [names] and voices. It was also difficult to use A, B, C for people I know very well, for an extended period of time, or those with whom I have meaningful friendships. I am reminded of Muholi's repeated comments that the people who appear in the photographs are not mere 'subjects' but collaborators (Salley, 2013: 107; Bennett, 2013: 173); they co-create the visual imagery.

My main access point to research participants was through personal friendship relationships with the cisgender partners or their trans* partners. Other entry points were through their trans* partners who are fellow activists with whom I share work platforms, and one of the couples was connected to Gender Dynamix. Their direct or indirect connectedness to me as the researcher or to Gender Dynamix, where I am the founder and executive director explains some of the participant's willingness to participate in the first place. That position was also the source of my concerns and personal complications. Importantly the cisgender partners' connectedness remained in my deliberations as an ethical consideration.

During my Honours research (2010), which I view as my pilot to this Master research, I had to navigate those spaces during interview time and after the interview. Two interviews that touched me tremendously regarding the daily lived experiences and struggles of loneliness and isolation were subsequently the two interviews that required emotional and other²⁸ aftercare (for both the cisgender interview participant and for me as researcher). I observed that during my engagement with the data, reading the text, analysing and writing, the topic areas that had the most significant impact in my own life, were the areas that I 'dwelled on' the most. I could deeply sympathise and, indeed, relived many of my own experiences. Previously, I noted that I was well connected to either the cisgender partners or the trans* partners in various ways. While I was deeply entrenched in the process of writing the analysis and more specifically, with the colour coded text discussing intimacy,

²⁸ Due to confidentiality I am not able to share the kind of 'other' aftercare or debriefing, it played out differently for the two different cisgender partners

one of the cisgender interview participants' trans* partner died. I knew him very well too. I was unable to engage with the text again until a month and a half later.

The following question resonates:

What does it mean to 'research' questions which concern intimacy, pain, pleasure, privacy and change as core realities? (Bennett and Pereira, 2013: 3)

Sexuality and intimacy form part of the complex considerations a researcher needs to reflect on and feminist scholars need to take seriously. Sexuality is shaped by our selfhood (Steyn and Van Zyl, 2009). There is no monolithic way of experiencing sexualities within one culture or community (Tamale, 2011). Tamale elaborates on a number of matters influencing sexuality [research] that need to be considered: the human body, gender identity, human psyche, emotions, dress, creativity and ethics (Tamale, 2011: 12). It is important to realise that regardless of how gentle a researcher attempts to be while discussing, questioning and using subtle probing strategies – the end result remains that a person's private life or parts thereof will be 'translated' into academic language and become public. What the interview participant considers to be shameful, sacred and possibly taboo enters through the scholarly process public domain (Mohlakoana-Mosala, 2013: 31; Theo, 2010). The quandary scholars deal with while making ethical decisions should righteously remain a dilemma; a matter that lingers in the mind throughout the research process.

Inasmuch as anonymity received priority as one of my ethical considerations, I was particularly sensitive to issues of language. All interviews were conducted in English with the exception of one interview, which was translated from Afrikaans to English. All of the cisgender partners and the researcher speak English as a second language, except for one Afrikaans-only speaking participant. In my view, language stretches far beyond spoken word, vocabulary and vernacular. In addition, body language and dialect are also part of a person's way of communicating a message. From experience as an activist who presented panel discussions and sensitisation workshops from as early as 2005 in South Africa, I know that in the earlier years, trans* related terminology did not exist in the way western understanding knows it today. Western applications of gender identities and terminologies were used less often in rural settings than in urban areas. It goes beyond spoken language or translation as an alternative. It stretches to a point where one wants to establish expressions and emotions, which can be so intimidating at times. For example, how does one 'teach a new term or word' to ensure both parties know what is being spoken about? Ethically, the question should remain: for the convenience of mutual understanding when giving a workshop, should a person 'teach a new word'? I recall from an experience I had in 2006, Mamelodi –east of Tswane (Pretoria):

'I introduced myself to a group of people in a township in Pretoria. I talked about transgender people and halfway through my introduction realised people were not on par with what I was talking about. I interrupted myself, and asked: "okay – so who knows what transgender means?" Absolute silence. I quickly realised I had to make a plan here or otherwise it would be pointless to proceed. I decided to let go of any learned, academic or political correct terminology and ask: "... is there anyone in the room who knows about people who had sex changes?" Everyone knew, and started bombarding me with questions. They were interested to know about procedures and hormones, breast augmentation and access to services.' (Theron, 2010)

Lenning (2008: 10) proposed that language should be critically analysed at the onset of research, as the usage of trans* related terminology and possible misrepresentation of words became intricate in her work. Language that implies gender expression is deeply political (Namaste, 2005: 2). Currier (2011) and Swarr (2012b), both scholars from the global North, tackled the 'slippery slope' of language in their academic work.

In many cultures, sexuality and private matters are not spoken about and definitely not with strangers [researcher]. Silence in some cases, especially as part of dialogue in a communication process [when applied by a woman], can be translated into a very meaningful part of the discussion (Tamale, 2011). Stevens cautioned about silences and how researchers should be mindful that in some cultures, it is seen as a social taboo to talk about personal matters (Kim, 2011b: 27). Gune and Manuel (2011: 38) caution about the researcher's need to attain information, ignoring the need of the interview participant to retain cultural and social values. We need to 'guard against undue intrusion into their intimate and sexual lives' (Gune and Manuel, 2011:38). One should be extra cautious when issues of sexuality intersect with issues of bodily differences, and be very careful not to undermine the privacy of trans* people's bodily integrity (or that of their cisgender partners') in order to answer questions from one's own curiosity. Discussions about sex and sexuality, and how the body of the trans* partner impact the couple's experience of intimacy, enters the liminal space between creating new knowledge and fetishising bodies that are different than what we know. It requires a careful balance.

Translating silences into narrative is a skill that a researcher should try to apply when researching private and intimate matters. Other useful skills scholars should utilise are understanding and translating metaphors (Bennett and Pereira, 2013: 11). It is easy for the researcher, who is not familiar with the metaphors of the culture they are researching, to miss very important dialogue. For example, one of my interview participants discussed one of her family members who complained that their 'feet that is sore', which implied that her trans* partner by accusation 'spilled potions on

them', referring to the fact that he is a sangoma. These matters can become complex for a researcher who is not familiar with the context. Personally, as a white South African, who speaks the language of the historically known 'oppressor', with such a dialect that it will never escape me – I continuously interrogate my own assumptions. I try to be mindful to not fetishise cultures of people I share this country with, and theory overlook by default cultural norms, habits and examples that Afrikaans speaking and other white (including English) interview participants made in their interviews. Our country is riddled with cultural, ethnic and racial complexities. In presenting text from interviews, I feel it is imperative for scholars to be mindful of all the challenges that it presents.

2.4 Methods and Methodology

Methodology describes the theory, considerations and epistemology the scholar applies to build new knowledge. Methods are the tools the researcher utilises to collect the knowledge.

Methodology forms the guidelines for the research process and scholars present their methodology sections in a variety of creative manners (Vaid-Menon, 2013; Matebeni, 2011; Meintjes, 2010; Theo, 2010; Creswell et al, 2007; Cancian, 1992; Harding, 1987).

Qualitative methodology

The theme of my research work is of a pioneering nature in South Africa. Throughout the interviews, reading the transcripts and colour coded themes that emerged, I stayed true to a holistic approach that warrants continuous engagement with the narratives in the data. I found that qualitative research methods are alluring to me because they allow the researcher to reflect and discover new knowledge on an emotional and intuitive level. A definite advantage of qualitative research is evident in the rich texture of the data, allowing the researcher to bring the experiences of the interview participants into the research and resulting in a deeper understanding of the subject. (Saunders, 2013; Meintjes, 2012; Currier, 2011; McLachlan, 2010; Theo, 2010; Brown, 2009; Pfeffer, 2008; Creswell et al, 2007; Bernard, 2000; Cancian, 1992).

I feel grounded theory as a methodology is the most appealing to me on many levels. I have empirical knowledge of the research topic in that I am deeply enmeshed and identify with the common themes that emerged from the interviews. The 'interrelationship' (Brown, 2009: 12) that the researcher has with the research topic is grounded in interactions with research participants. The common themes that emerge enable the researcher to map patterns between categories

(Brown, 2009; Creswell et al, 2007). Grounded theory is a method which not only collects data from the field, but allows the opportunity for researcher to formulate an opinion and to include their own viewpoint as part of the knowledge they are producing (Dozier, 2005: 304). The results of qualitative research that utilises grounded theory is meaningful and adds value to the canon, therefore it is justified as being accountable to the community from which it emerged (Brown, 2009: 11).

Lessons learned

Using the Honours research as a pilot allowed for enough time and space to navigate changes and enabled the researcher to adjust where needed (Meintjes, 2010). I was sensitive about complex issues in the field of cisgender-trans* relationships and paid attention through my probing strategies to ensure cisgender partners were comfortable with the process. However, during the interviews for the Honours work, I was not confident enough to gently probe about experiences of intimacy. I paid attention to my probing methods and once I was with the interviewee, I chose the most efficient probe, allowing the mood of the conversation to guide me (Bernard, 2000: 191 – 201). I asked a fairly neutral initial question and relied on my ability to interpret body language by paying attention to the interview participant, while navigating through the questions. If I sensed any change in body language or ‘language-change’, for example, if the participant would directly answer questions and suddenly change to ‘generalisation’, I would steer away.

During the fieldwork for my Master interviews, I refined my skills to engage in a manner to communicate comfort, and I feel discussions about intimacy became easier. Despite my familiarity both in interviewing and communicating sensitive matters in the field of trans* and related topics through my activism at Gender Dynamix, I withheld one interview that was collected through my Honours fieldwork. The experience gained from the Honours work and subsequently in further studies and practice, allowed me to include that interview in this thesis.

Interviews, questions and consent

With certain interview participants, the opportunity to conduct an interview would not be repeated and these semi-structured interviews guided me in obtaining conversations that were dense with information, while allowing the interviews to remain sufficiently informal for interviewees to freely speak about topics many of them had not spoken about before. While reading through the interview transcripts, it became clear that an unplanned theme emerged. At the end of the interview when one usually asks: ‘Is there anything you would like to add or ask?’ I had the interview

and the interview process in mind. Nearly all interview participants replied with a 'yes'. What was intended to be a general courtesy question to end the interview, became a long 'Trans* 101' session. I eventually added a thematic section in the analysis chapter entitled 'When the interviewer became Agony Aunt'.

The in-depth individual interviews were semi-structured. I had a list of standard questions with me but was also guided by the conversation and answers the participants supplied. Some interviews steered in different directions but at the end I ensured that all 'standard' questions were asked, if they were not answered through the discussion itself. The interview style was quite conversational. At the start of the interview, I explained that the first few questions pertained to the trans* partner but that latter questions would shift to her experience and understanding. Questions such as 'how does your partner identify?' ensured demographic data but also gauged the chosen terminology the participant is familiar with. If the couple or cisgender partner spoke of FTM, transgender, transsexual or transman in their relationship, I followed their usage of vocabulary, aiming to ensure she was comfortable and not tripping over terminology.

Eight interviews took place in the homes of interview participants, two were in my apartment, two at the location where the Gender Dynamix office is situated, and two were in public spaces. Interviews were an average of about one and a half hour in length. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Broad research interest and questions

Initially I piloted this research in my Honours' year and decided not to change my questions drastically, so that additional information from the interview participants, compliments the preliminary research. During the pilot research, the research interest was focused on sexual and gender identity changes (if there was). The broad departing questions were formulated: How do the cisgender female partners of masculine identifying trans* persons view their sexual orientation in relation to their partner's identity; where did (or do) they find support and access to information; and what are the struggles and challenges they experience? The opportunity to learn from the pilot and digesting the information that was initially gained enabled me to refine my questioning and prompting skills. I was able to enhance my skills in the areas I was previously not confident in, specifically in intimacy related discussions. Furthermore, I developed an interesting looking for intersections between class and socio-economic status (which translate to access of information and support), ethnicity and complex layers of communication. I paid attention to the answers I received

(on the same questions I had, than before), but this time, guiding in parts of the conversation needed exploration.

The consent form provided a space where interview participants could indicate their consent to archive the audio recording and or the transcript at GALA²⁹ as part of the Liesl Theron collection, once my research is completed. Nearly all the participants agreed to this, without embargo restrictions. This is remarkable considering the stigma, some trans* partners choice of stealth and a number of cisgender partners who are not closely affiliated with LGBTI activism.

Selection of participants

I intentionally selected interview participants who are 'community based'. The imperative was the experience of being in a relationship, or previously being in a relationship with a masculine identifying trans* person. I sought relationships that had existed for at least a few months. I was not particularly interested whether it was a long distance, open or monogamous relationship, so long as the person had empirical understanding about sharing an intimate life with a masculine identifying trans* person. However I did not find persons who were in open relationships or any other construct aside from 'typical' monogamous arrangements. Two couples were in long distance relationships. During the beginning stage of my fieldwork to collect interviews for this thesis, I collected four interviews that I decided not to use. The additional interviews were one from Uganda, and three from the United States. Among the three interviews from the United States, two of the participants were cisgender male identifying, one heterosexual and one gay.

A very important consideration throughout the process of approaching possible interview participants was to diligently aim for the most diverse representation I could identify. I am aware that my sample is not completely representative of the demographic breakdown of our country. I did not successfully recruit [any] participant from or in a relationship with an Indian person. However, I want to argue that my research includes a small sample group (N=14) located in a fairly small minority community, across a large geographical area.

Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a process that requires the researcher to condense a broad range of data into themes. Given (2008: 120) defines it as an intellectual analytic method that categorises

²⁹ The Gay and Lesbian Archive of South Africa, now known as Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action

qualitative textual data into clusters of similar concepts. A wide range of data can be employed; independently from textual data, this research method allows the researcher to derive information from sources including images, maps, sounds, symbols, photos, postings on listservs, conferences, video and newspaper clippings (Given, 2008: 120; Krippendorff, 2004: 18).

The central and most important point about the approach of content analysis as an analytical research method is it that the actual content conceived in the research, serves as the object of analysis (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). Text is always qualitative (Krippendorff, 2004: 87) and rich in experiences, which means quantifying the data is not necessarily a criterion of this analytical research approach (Krippendorff, 2004: 87). As a feminist scholar, it was important to me to use an analytical method that allows me to consider all the information in the transcribed text, as important. This approach increases the researcher's understanding and provides new insights (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). All text is considered important and cannot solely be measured by the quantity of times a word or phrase is used, because it is possible that an experience will only occur in one interview. This text has a huge impact on an experience, which can be as important as data that occur in each interview.

I find content analysis a useful approach for a few reasons. Although I entered the field with a list of semi-structured research questions as a guide, I also allowed the cisgender partners to inform the data collection process by the narratives they offered. Secondly, in my literature review, I employed information from a broader source of texts. I utilised video, archival material, newspaper clippings, articles on South African blogs³⁰, and South African art and art galleries pertaining work about South African trans* people. Furthermore, according to Given (2008: 278) in order to use of data from publicly accessible websites and blogs, informed consent is not needed in content analysis of those sources.

I am aware of the challenge I experience regarding the mammoth amount of data I am presenting. There is such a nuanced collection of emerging information to be explored that each one of the thematic sections is dense enough to become a chapter on its own. The dilemma then rests in my presentation of data. I contemplated narrowing the themes down and focusing on one or two thematic sections only. Thus I am aware of the possibility that I might be critiqued for presenting data which I am not analysing to its fullest potential, especially since I decided on content analysis as

³⁰ Because South African literature is limited on trans* people and cisgender-trans* couples, I utilised South African blogs and art work. I am aware of the mammoth amount of information that will stem from international blogs and art work and therefore limited myself predominantly to South African sources.

an approach. Looking, for example, at only the language used by cisgender partners of 'the penis', or the absence of such language. Deliberations on language in addition to the emotions, demands for creativity and challenges posed by a penis or a new understanding of the penis could become a chapter in its own right. I was also particularly drawn to the thematic section in communication with the array of 'silences'. Silence on its own, could clearly become a whole chapter, or small dissertation. However, I decided to limit the depth of such exploration because I feel at this stage it will be more meaningful to contribute to the limited cisgender-trans* canon by including rich data from the global South, which was previously absent in this field.

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Cisgender Partners – at the time of interview

	Sexual Orientation	Age Range	Ethnicity Language	Education level	Relationship status	Transition status	Children
A	Hetero	25 - 29	Black Tsonga	Matriculated	Planning engagement, Discussing Lobola	HRT ³¹ , Hysterectomy, Legal transition	No, she wants
B	Lesbian	50 - 54	White Afrikaans	Matriculated	Not with partner anymore	HRT, Hysterectomy, Chest, Legal transition	2 Adult, from her previous marriage
C	Hetero	25 – 29	Black isiZulu	Matriculated	Married Marriage Act	HRT, Chest, Legal transition	1 toddler from her previous, want another, insemination
D	Bisexual	30 – 34	White English	Bachelors Degree	Married Civil Union	HRT	Want, insemination
E	Hetero	25 – 29	Black isiXhosa	Matriculated, work certificate	With partner	Social transition	2, young from her previous relation. Want another, insemination
F	Tomboy/ lesbian	30 – 34	Coloured English	Matriculated	With partner	HRT, Chest, Hysterectomy	No, want, insemination
G	Bisexual	25 – 29	Black isiZulu	Some Tertiary	With partner	Chest, NoHo ³²	No
H	Hetero	50 – 54	White English	Master Degree	With partner	HRT	No
I	Dyke	35 – 39	White English	Master Degree	Married Civil Union	Chest, Legal transition	No, want, insemination
J	Lesbian	55 – 59	White English	Honours & some Post Grad	Not with partner anymore	Social transition	2 Adopted, prior to this relationship
K	Lesbian	30 – 34	Black isiXhosa	Matriculated, work certificate	With partner	Social transition	No
L	Hetero	30 – 34	Coloured (Afr & Eng)	Matriculated, work certificates	Married Marriage Act	Post medical, surgical and legal transition	Baby & Toddler, both insemination
M	Bisexual	30 – 34	White English	Matriculated, work certificate	Married Marriage Act	Relationship began post medical, surgical & legal transition	1 Baby, insemination
N	Lesbian	25 – 29	Black isiXhosa	Matriculated, work certificate	With partner	Social & Chest	1 Young, from her previous. He wants another, not she.

³¹ Hormone Realignment Treatment

³² No Hormones, by choice

Conclusion

My research design indicates that both feminist theory and transgender theory are taken seriously, so contemplated those values throughout my research work. My empirical knowledge, or the closeness to the research topic (the cisgender interview participants or their trans* partners), ensures rich data but also served as one of my most significant challenges. The approach to this qualitative research employed grounded theory. I hope the research findings, which were analysed through content analysis as an analytical research method, will contribute to the cisgender-trans* archive of South Africa.

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3. Data Presentation and Analytical Findings

Introduction

After familiarising myself with the interview transcripts, I reread all the material, thematically grouping the experiences reflected in the interviews into categories which help to reveal critical aspects of the textures of the relationships I am exploring. The analysis will be therefore presented grouped in six themes, each of which is important to understanding the interviewee's representation of her relationship with her partner, an engagement which includes, of course, her relationship with herself, her own experiences within the relationship, her own negotiation of the meaning of transitioning processes and trans identities, and her relationship with those beyond the partnership. There are overlapping strands here, and sometimes, the thematic categorisation does not do justice to the complexity of an interviewee's narrative about her partner and her partnership. Nevertheless, because of the need to make comparisons among diverse individuals, in very different contexts, I have used the following thematic categories. I explain the range of each one at the beginning of the section in which I present the data and analysis under that category. I entitle these: "I am not used to being a wife"; "The person I love is a [new kind of] man"; "Relationship in transition"; "Communication" and "Epistemological knowledge". Themes evolved into creation of sub-themes. Within my deployment of a wide range of themes I aim to be sensitive to feminist research principles which consider questions of class, race & ethnicity, education (and as many as possible crosscutting realities that form and shape a diverse South Africa) as influential in shaping participants' approach to representing their experiences. Although the presentation of my findings is not themed according to those intersections, their significances form a consistent thread within the analysis under each theme.

Themes

"I am not used to being a wife"

This first theme came from the need to highlight cisgender partners' diverse ways of grappling with what their 'new' role should be, in a relationship 'like this one', and how they made sense or came to terms with something that was new to them. The subthemes that emerged include 'Identity as a partner of a man'; 'Expectations of self' and 'Expectations of others'. Some cisgender partners

grapple to reassure their own sexual identities while at the same time attempting to establish what their role as a partner of a man should be (lesbian continuum identifying partners) or how to be with a 'new kind of' man (heterosexual partners). In the subheading 'Expectations of self' I present the perceived expectations the cisgender partners had of their role in a relationship with a trans* man. Expectations from others include both expectations from the trans* partners and expectations from friends and family, which often manifested as expectations to 'fit into a heteronormative mould'.

Identity as partner of a man

Interestingly, with this sub theme in which cisgender partners present in their own unique ways questions dealing with the identity as partner of a man, the most powerful anecdotes came from partners who self identified as lesbian, bisexual or as a 'dyke' and in one case alternating tomboy and lesbian as her identity. This is important because the material reveals the interaction between cisgender partners' self-identifications within gender/sexual categories and their negotiations with their partners' gender identity.

...because one of my questions was what is expected of me ... I don't feel comfortable with this, what is expected of me as a lesbian person, do I really have to change and be straight? Me also, do I expect him to at least bend around some of his principles to try and accommodate me? [K]

Participant J spoke of how she shared very similar sentiments regarding 'power and control issues' which evolved from her stance on men in society. When she positioned her thoughts around these notions, she admitted that same-sex relations are equally riddled by 'power and control issues', but engaging in these with a 'man' struck her as too demanding:

... part of the reason why I don't want to be with men is because of patriarchy and because of the system and because of how men are ingrained ... There are always power and control issues. So I made it very clear that I didn't want to be with a traditional man, that there was nothing that would attract me and that I would always be a lesbian, that it's my identity and the fact that I am involved with you... I would certainly not consider myself heterosexual and he was a little upset with that, even though he had been a lesbian for years.

She realised her discomfort with being identified as 'heterosexual' might pose difficulties for them as a couple, yet she was not willing to alter her viewpoint. She continued later in the interview:

I think that [lesbian identity] would be a difficult thing for me to give up and I think it would impact on the relationship... I would anticipate that those issues are problematic. [J]

Although I will turn to the links between my analysis and the work of other theorists in my final discussion chapter, I want to note here Ward's (2010: 250) suggestion that through the 'Labour of alliance' femmes may experience sexism in their relationship with trans* masculine persons, and in order to self intervene they may draw heavily on feminist frameworks within this trans political spaces. The real 'labour' then, within this fixed trans* boundaries is located in 'adopting and adapting' to the 'ill-fitting role' of alliance, that of a gender supporter. Participant I draws on this idea, and also attempts to offer an analogy between the ways her choice of a 'man' entails an expected or questioned sexual orientation shift and her identity of a conscious white person in a post apartheid South Africa still riddled with racism.

And then in terms of my own identity – it's hard to be heterosexual. I mean it sounds silly to say, but actually... people wouldn't make homosexual jokes with you, assuming that I'm heterosexual and therefore I'm in agreement. It's kind of like being a white person. And you're standing at a checkout counter and the white person behind you says, 'oh these people, they can't do anything'.

Participant M, who is a bisexual woman, felt that she didn't experience a difference in her opinions of masculinity and femininity.

I've never seen the major line between male and female. There is no difference to me. It is how you are. If you're useless in plumbing, then you're useless in plumbing. It doesn't make you not a man. I'm a terrible cook, but that doesn't make me even less of a woman. So, gender as such hasn't changed for me in any way at all.

One cisgender partner was concerned that while she identifies as a lesbian, she definitely relate strongly with being a tomboy. It seems that she does not consider changing that view, just because she is now in a relationship with a man, yet she realises it might complicate matters.

I saw myself as a tomboy ... not as a male. I dressed like a male and I played soccer and cricket and all those things and I show a macho side, where even now in occupational therapy, I lifted this bag – it's supposed to be heavy – just to show this guy that I can do it, he doesn't have to do it for me ... And now, I'm so scared that I'm gonna mess things up... [F]

Participant G speaks of her expectation that she would be challenged by the fact that her partner is from another African country, projecting language and cultural differences to be an issue. Yet she is a very outspoken liberated South African woman, who in the 'normal course of life' doesn't care what others think or say about her.

It's not that I'm dating a Sotho guy or a Zulu guy, or a Xhosa woman. It doesn't come with all those other tribal things that I expected – that you automatically expect

when you date someone from another country ... or we're gonna have a language barrier issue – it's not that, it's got its own unique baggage and a lot of it comes in on the day to day ... Like me not understanding that it really matters to him how people see him. To me, it's like, what do you care what other people think? 'Well, they're busy looking at me and when they see me, they have to see me. That's why it's important that it matters what they see'. I wouldn't have that conversation with a lesbian or some straight guy – those people, they have their own things. But that ... perception that other people have of them is not as sacred, or as important.

I mentioned in the introduction to this sub theme that interestingly it was only among lesbian, dyke or tomboy identifying participants that I found evidence of this 'struggle' to position themselves as the partner of a man. I will present below the comments of the heterosexual-identifying cisgender woman:

We talk about it quite a lot and I would have love to get married to him before the transition. I would have loved because that would have made – I don't know because to me, it's more of bringing this out. Especially in our black communities because it's not really there. There are people that are still hiding. Very, very far from community and society. To me, it would have been so lovely. Mr and Mrs [old, female name] and surname would have been better for me than Mr and Mrs [new male name] and surname ... I would have loved it to come out as two females in a black community getting married to each other... [E]

Her comments fetishise same-sex marriage, which I found interesting. From the data I presented here, it seems it is difficult for lesbian, dyke or bisexual women, or not heterosexual women to imagine their role of being the 'wife', assuming the identity of a partner of a man, not always because of the gender-traits associated with manhood but usually because of heteronormative assumptions that 'manhood' entails a heterosexual partnership with a woman. To be imagined as 'that woman' clearly created a zone of discomfort for most participants.

Expectations of self

To keep the social and emotional structure of the femme-FTM relationship intact requires intimate labour in order to co-create masculinity (Ward, 2010: 245). Guided by this idea, I present findings from my interviews exploring this gender co-production through the ways in which it is marked by expectations the cisgender partners place on themselves. Participant H wholeheartedly agreed that 'You want to make the path easier.' The 'path' here refers to the path of transition which the trans* man is negotiating for himself.

Participant M spoke of her strategies in preventing her trans* partner (who lives a fairly stealth life) being 'discovered' as trans*, by accident, due to his inadequate bottom surgery which prevents him from urinating when standing:

... for instance, say [he] goes to the toilet, I would try and stop anybody from wanting to go in with him for instance ... any guy could accidentally walk in...

Participant K also shared her ideas about how she planned to support her partner in acquiring his masculine appearance. Through emotional and financial support she would thus co-create gender.

I'll be there every step of the way because I love him and I respect – I want him to be happy, so when the time comes, he is ready to take hormones ... I will be there.

She added:

I'm gonna be there for each and every step of his transition. I'm gonna support him. If it takes that he has to be on my medical aid... [K]

Participant C also actively assisted in co-creating of gender: 'I'm injecting him'. There is also the emotional impact of that nurturing. Another participant was not in a relationship with her partner during his surgeries she lived in the same communal house and shares his surgically-created physical change:

Taking care of your partner when they've had surgery. That's really, really tough ... Seeing your partner in pain and having them be sick is hard and being the person who takes care of them is also hard and being the only person that they count on to do that is also hard, which I think that partners of trans people are often the only people that take care of them ... I didn't have the same kind of pressure as his partner had at that time to go through the transition with him. It's very different I think being a friend because she [the partner] had to think about the consequences for her life and her love [I]

I interviewed Participant B about two years after their relationship ended. Throughout her interview she continuously blamed herself for everything in the relationship that struck her as unsuccessful. When I asked her about the lack of information she experienced and the subsequent communication breakdown, she blamed herself for feeling excluded.

Interviewer: Did you play a role there?

Participant B: Too little, too little

Interviewer: What do you mean too little?

Participant B: I would have liked to do more...gone with him to the doctors...

Interviewer: Hmm?

Participant B: ...and maybe talked about it more with him and not kept quiet.

Interviewer: So you felt excluded?

Participant B: Yes. I felt totally excluded. Afterwards I would hear from somebody else...maybe from [name] or from [name]... anybody else, 'hey! Did you hear this and that ...' [referring to her own partner's transitioning process].

The same participant was very disappointed when her expectation that his transitioning would miraculously solve all their other relationship problems was not fulfilled. She reflected on the difference between their relationship and those of the other cisgender-trans couples she knows.

The other couples always looked happy to me. Happier. [B]

Three Participants shared different kind of expectations regarding children.

There were times when I felt I want to have children, but I want to have my own children. [F]

Participant D mentioned considerations about the future plans to have a baby; she thinks it will be advisable to go for counselling in preparation:

... need to go for counselling... in order to bring a child into the world. You know what do we tell the child? How does the child grow up? What, how does the child act? [D]

Participant E expressed a number of expectations, some relating to her own children with her ex-husband and then her expectation to have a child with her trans* partner. Participant E felt riddled with inner conflict regarding what and how much she tells her young children that she has with her ex-husband. She questioned whether she only wants to tell them trans* related information for her own benefit or do they really need to know, and how much? On the other hand she felt if she did not tell them, her ex-husband or someone else might be 'outing' her trans* partner and spoil the good relationship her children have with her trans* partner.

They're still young, but they must see his physical being and refer to that physical being as, as what they would refer to him when he's got clothes on and his binder on. So that's a bit tricky for me because I don't know when to draw the line, when to understand what they see and not me trying to push this thing into their minds... Wouldn't I rather leave it as just lala - the male figure to them - and then bring up to them they've got two daddies and that's it? But something triggers always in my mind to say, but the ex will always tell them. And I don't want them traumatised by that. And the kids at school and you know? [E]

The prospect of having a child with her trans* partner creates an expectation to be prepared:

I want to be ready emotionally... and I want to be armed with info. I want my kids to be able to ask, how the hell did you fall pregnant, and be in a position to be comfortable enough to tell them. [E]

In another theme I present findings of partners who are willing and prepared to give what I call 'Trans* 101 Training' on the go. Fitting with this section of expectations, Participant E was expecting 'to get a lot of criticism from society'.

A few partners had expectations for and from themselves about diverse matters such as the impact of being in the 'public eye' – or at least in their direct community as the 'Trans* 101 Trainer', about children and about how to negotiate in the future the type of relationship they want to create. It is fascinating, though, that the majority of the expectations expressed by cisgender partners in my interviews hinged around an assortment of strategies to co-create their partners' gender.

Expectations of others

Based on the experiences of the participants in my fieldwork, it seems that tensions exist around what they imagine or experience their reality as is, of being a partner of a man, and of their own expectations too. To illustrate these dynamics, I will first share two different findings about participants' encounters with expectations from their partners.

Throughout the interview with Participant F, she shared in various ways, and through various themes, her anxiety about sex, intimacy and what he might expect from her.

The type of challenges are accepting the person for who they are, and, um, doing things that a "normal" couple would do ... because of my inexperience, I have no idea what to do except kiss – kissing.

Participant G speaks of a lived reality of 'stepping in and carry the onslaught of wrong pronouns' as her partner expects her to pre-screen all social events and predict if someone will use a wrong pronoun or his old name, in public; if her predictions are 'wrong,' tensions erupt in the relationship:

The moment we enter some places, I have to identify who's gonna be the most comfortable person to be around, who's gonna know we're dealing with a 'he' not a 'she' and just put it out there nicely, so that everybody else catches on because just that one person is gonna use the incorrect pronoun and that's gonna throw us completely off and it can ruin the whole night, really ... because I now know that we're gonna get home and there're gonna be tears. And if not tears, there's gonna be a rage that just lasts however long – it depends.

Two participants, one a bisexual woman and one a lesbian, pointed out complex narratives in which they share that their partners, being ‘typical African men’ expect ‘certain behaviour’ of ‘their women’. It is not only the assumptions and notions about the stereotyped African men that create their anxiety, but also to fit in with cultural norms they are not used to – both of them construct their lives in quite a western manner:

Because also, I haven't dated a lot of African people. I got so frightened because now he's an African man, so now my problem was, I got worried because... what is expected of me? To be an African wife, to be able to listen when I'm told without asking questions? Remember, I don't really have much root in the African culture... I was really afraid of that... [K]

Participant G felt her partner is obsessed with ‘an African woman’, a woman who he can ‘take home, who will have his children and be the homemaker’. While he is busy constructing himself, he needs a feminine character, ‘that will help him to navigate the world as a man’, while there is a ‘loving woman at home’.

Participant I, who is dyke identified, narrated a strong analysis about marriage, she says: ‘I'm married now. That's a very heterosexual thing to do.’ Regardless if people access the opportunity to get married through the Marriage Act or the Civil Union Bill³³, marriage is a heteronormative construct. For political reasons Participant I and her partner utilised the Civil Union, although he is legally male. She reflects:

I never really believed in marriage. ...we did the conventional thing and got married. But it was really difficult. It was difficult because, like as a joke he got me this bridal magazine and I read it and I completely freaked out. And I thought is this what women go through? That they see these – there's so much pressure. There's pressure to look good and be thin and be beautiful and have a tiara and a poofy dress and 300 guests. And it's crazy. You feel really like you're in this kind of weird mill of convention, that it's hard to stop and decide no. I don't want that in spite of everybody expecting that... [I]

Expectations created by societal norms rooted in patriarchy and fuelled by hatred could have been devastating for Participant A, if her partner had not arrived one day earlier back home from a work trip. A friend in their circle was previously unaware that her partner is trans*. He threatened to rape her, in Participant A's words: ‘he's gonna teach me, in other words, like he's gonna sleep with me to make me feel how's it like being with a man’. She continued:

³³ In South Africa any couples (same-sex, or opposite sex) can get married utilising the Civil Union Bill.

Because when [partner's name] went away, like he [the 'friend'] came to the house, and fortunately I wasn't there. He left a note underneath the door and he said he was there to check up on me and I must call him, he left the phone numbers, but I didn't see the note cause I got home late and I got back early to work. The next day, [partner] came back. That same night, that guy came again and said I he was coming to 'check on me', if I'm doing fine or what. But he was like surprised to see him [partner] there... he wasn't expecting to see him there... maybe he was hoping he would find me there alone and he could take advantage of that. [A]

Besides the expectations from their partners that they 'manage' others' heteronormative expectations about gender identity, they also encountered expectations about their role as 'gender workers' which came from various sources. Work colleagues created additional expectations, especially because this couple met at the same company, hence everybody claimed a need for explanations.

I get it from work. People send e-mails. You are – you just divorced your husband and you're dating a 'woman'? What's wrong with you? [E]

Participant A had a particularly difficult time at her family home. She grew up in the house of her aunt and had to leave, the second time for good. At the time of the interview she had left for the second time and the couple were discussing engagement. But in South Africa in most black communities engagement and subsequent marriage are organised within a dual system: Civil Law, (rooted in Northern law and customs around marriage) and Customary Law, which differs from one context to another. For participant A, her partner and his male family members were required to offer her family lobola³⁴. It would be impossible for them to get married in a traditional manner without lobola. Ceremonies to negotiate and later to present the lobola are public events, in the sense that the whole neighbourhood, the entire community, friends, family and extended family attend these *msibenzis* (events). Given that she already left her family home permanently, I asked her if lobola ceremonies would still take place. She replied: '...that one it's compulsory ... it must be done'. Despite her family's rejection of herself, her partner's gender identity, and of their relationship, payment of lobola was a non-negotiable element of what would make that relationship possible:

³⁴ The tradition of lobola entails the male family members of the groom conducting a meeting and agreeing on a 'price' or arrangement that will be offered to the bride's family.

...okay what they told me is: 'what are people gonna say?'... Do they care more about people than me? ... So I never got an answer for that... I don't know whether they gonna accept or not cause... there was no discussions... if they not gonna accept then we just gonna go hmm to the Home Affairs and sign ... cause there's no other way ... If they don't want me to get married to him then I will anyway.

Family expectations often make claims on women's bodies and autonomy to decide about children. Family pressure about grandchildren can be a tricky situation for any couple where one partner for a reason cannot conceive in the case of cisgender partners of trans* men the lens gazes at the trans* partner's 'incapability to produce' the desired expectations:

And they told me that 'You need to find a man, we need grandchildren and stuff'... and then I told them 'He is a man and I'm gonna have babies'... I mean I'm not the one who don't, who can't have children. [A]

Family and interaction within a heteronormative society can cause a great amount of anxiety to the cisgender partner. In relationships where the cisgender partner identifies as lesbian she not only has to navigate through identity questions that might arise, but also 'how to function' as a new member in this heterosexual club of expectations.

The person I love is a [new kind of] man

Reading the interview transcripts, cisgender partners had many ways to share the experiences they had to learn and relearn a new body, a partner with a different body. On the one hand lesbian partners expressed sentiments on how they had to adjust to the person they love, being a man, and women who were used to being in sexual relationships with men – the heterosexual and bisexual participants – had to rethink what it is to be with a new kind of man. One participant summarised it by saying: 'This is like seeing a human body totally from a different angle.' [M] From this overarching theme three sub themes emerged: 'He is occupying male spaces'; 'His [masculine] behaviour'; and 'His body: image and impact'.

He is occupying male spaces

When Participant A discussed lobola and marriage in the previous subtheme, she presented ideas about the expectations put on her by her family as a 'woman getting married'. These also illuminate what her partner's occupation of male spaces may entail. Not only does the process of negotiating lobola occupy a male domain, but on the groom's side of the family, the negotiations take place only through other men in the family as facilitators. Seeing that his family were prepared to enter the

lobola negotiations clearly indicated that collectively, by accepting the partner as an incoming husband, the men in the family accepted and assisted in subverting mainstream male spaces with this 'new kind of' manhood. Participant A confirms: '...they hmm, [his name] family is gonna send lobola...'

Participant K elaborated on how she and her partner grappled with living in two worlds. When he was in South Africa he felt his new freedom as a man, and chose to be a 'new kind of' modern man, wanting to wash dishes, cook and do other household chores. When she accompanied him on vacation to Botswana, where his family and many friends live she noticed the challenge to conform to expectations of being a proper 'African man'.

For sure there's a lot to learn because as much as he understands me, when I was in Botswana, that's not how – he's more open-minded than the people that are around him... our relationship is different because in his previous relationship he was expected to perform the duties of a husband – of an African husband ... he's used to be respected in that way. He's used to being put in a position where he's the only one who's supposed to talk... he wasn't exposed to doing his own washing ... he loved to cook, but as an African male figure, you know the girlfriend or the person who you stay with is supposed to cook for you every day... We share the responsibilities... He is able to iron for himself and show that he really loves ironing, but he was never given that opportunity.

Participant E explained that the one side of the family is Xhosa and the other side, Zulu. Her partner is Swati, from Swaziland and his mother is extremely supportive of his masculine gender presentations and encouraged him all the way; she is also quite influential in their family. Through the following narration it becomes apparent that to occupy a male space in a highly gender segregated ceremony subverts gender norms on many levels:

...in our black culture when you go to funerals the men will have to be in a separate area and the women will be in separate areas and they will dress a certain way... women are not allowed in the kraal³⁵, but he's allowed in the kraal... Men must be in a kraal, women must bring them food and raw meat. They don't eat meat cooked in the house. So we'll bring raw meat for them and they will braai³⁶ it for themselves with the – in an open fire outside. They eat certain parts of the meat when the animal has just been slaughtered, like the heart, the liver. We eat tribe... No woman is allowed in there, no woman is allowed to eat that meat. But he is! He's so fortunate... the grandfather had passed away. And his funeral was in Swaziland – when you go to a funeral, there's ushers, like security guards that will wait from the gate all the way to where the graveyard is. Now what they do is they check for women that are

³⁵ A rural village of huts, enclosed or protected by wooden posts

³⁶ To cook meat on open fire, most often with the glowing red coals, not the actual flames

wearing trousers, pants and you will be sent home. Women that do not have scarves over their hair will be sent back. Men that are not wearing jackets will be sent back. As they're walking, one of the security guys is actually from the [his surname] family, so he knows that this person was born female. This person is dressed in a suit and tie, there's no way that he's passing here. Apparently, the mother turned back and said, young man, you do not do that to my son. He's a man, he's coming in here. And the guy was arguing that: 'but he's got breasts'. 'Don't you have breasts? [Replied his mother]... Just because yours are flat, now they're regarded as normal? They're not normal. His are normal. Let him pass.

In another example Participant E shared how her partner's mother and brothers support him, by encouraging him to occupy male spaces. She noted that she grew up 'very westernised' but she observed how her partner's family value traditional customs. Normally when buying a car or moving into a new house or office, it needs to be celebrated in a manner that thanks the ancestors.

... they call it in Zulu, they say ubiga. Ubiga is to announce. To announce to your ancestors – to say thank you, you've placed me with a car... they will probably, like when we opened the office, we had a ceremony, but we didn't slaughter. But the first bottle of whiskey or anything strong like that we had to pour at the door here. That is for them [ancestors] because they are regarded as being underneath. So it's for them to drink first... that is a sign of saying thank you. Only a man can hold that bottle and only a man can pour. And they know exactly where to pour in all the entrances. But he did it. The mother and the brothers told him to do it.

Through the data I presented above it became clear that occupying male spaces both serves as a gender confirmation to the trans* partner but also formed centre stage for constant negotiations the cisgender-trans couple experience.

His [masculine] behaviour

The following data offers insights into participants' representations of partners' [masculine] behaviour. Being a trans* positive activist myself, it remains a challenge to present data that agree with the stereotypical conception about trans* masculine people and their 'moods'. At the same time, the participants' material involves engagement with what they have experienced as 'masculine' behaviour from their partners. In this theme I grouped behaviour by trends such as 'boys behaving badly', behaviour due to experimenting how to be 'that new guy' and also data showcasing positive and pleasant behaviour.

Participant G shared how going out to public spaces became more and more difficult when shop attendants or servers at restaurants make pronoun mistakes. In her opinion her partner does not consider her, or the intention the couple had for a romantic dinner, instead he becomes rude and unpleasant:

We'll have to cancel the meal and go home and start something up fresh because it just became a bit unbearable.

Two participants described anger outbursts and temperaments that were difficult:

...he's just – he's a wonderful person, but I mean he does have his moods and stuff. And I mean he's scolded me out a few times and I don't feel like – I feel like I'm not being treated right. [F]

He bottled up and bottled up and bottled up. And there were anger outbursts... Yes, terrible anger outbursts. [B]

Four participants had unique ways of sharing how they experienced that their trans* partners definitely affirmed their power position in their relationship. Participant F is reminded of her previous unpleasant experience of men who 'claim ownership' of women's bodies through possessive behaviour:

I told him, please don't give me hickeys, I'm working. So, he was – I think he was upset because he couldn't mess on my neck... [F]

There have been some things that I have to adjust to even with silly things... When we holding hands he likes to have his hand over mine... and the one time he was like 'stop trying to be a man' and I was like 'what do you mean?' And he was like 'no you do this all the time!' And I was like who came up with this rule that the man's hand goes over so it was silly things like that... [N]

He mostly made his own decisions and only informed me about it afterwards when he'd already decided it was going to be done. [He] was a private person. I could also not go into the bathroom when he was shaving. [B]

He wasn't really a chauvinist but he had some chauvinist ideas. And I don't think that all men that are transgenders [sic] are chauvinists... There wasn't enough of equality because of this perceived male influence. [J]

One interview participant alluded to how she observed her partner's attempts of various possible masculine roles:

I think even [name] started experimenting a little but by trying to consciously not do a feminine thing and do a masculine thing and it was a bit silly in a way. But I could understand it as well. [H]

One participant gave a very detailed scenario of these stereotypical incidents during one evening at a house party:

There were quite a few trans people there so I pulled a chair out for one of the [trans*] guys to sit next to me. He looked at me, looked at my partner and then moved away. I didn't read*

into it at the time... but then I thought oh maybe he thought of something before he sat down... at some point my partner asked if I had to do what I did earlier? I asked 'what did I do?' And he was like... that I treated them³⁷ like a woman... [interviewee asks, reflective] what is your issue? Is it the fact that they confronted you? And maybe you got embarrassed and you didn't know what to say on my behalf? As much as they do not want to be treated like a woman I do not want to be treated like a child. So seeing that you have assumed the role of the middle man, you can report back that they should take this up with me and not try and talk to me through my man and I should be on my knees apologising because it's not happening and I would like another glass of wine while you at it. Please be a man and pour me a glass of wine. [N]

Self assertive posturing, especially in the beginning of transition is sometimes at the root of power dynamics that cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans* men experience. Examples of this unfold typically in forms of 'role-play' and the trans* partner's insistence in gendering activities. Masculine behaviour become visceral for the trans* partner through controlling who may pull out chairs for whom. Participant N felt her only resort left in that discussion was to communicate to her trans* partner that she 'understand' this message by conforming to this gendered activities and she asked him to go and pour her a glass of wine.

At the end, Participant N's interview has the following closing remark:

In fact what I also find interesting is being in a space, a room full of trans men and they all trying to play each other out who is more masculine than the other one and I am like guys 'are you not already going through so much without having to play this power trip?'*

In the introduction of this section I mentioned the balance to ensure not slipping into already existing stereotypes of trans* men and masculine behaviour. The following data brings equilibrium. Three participants shared with delight how their trans* partners shared equally in household chores and that seemingly there are no gendered power issues:

... with him, he cooks. No one that I had a relationship with cooked... chores and everything he does. [C]

I do the dishes, he does the dishes. I iron, he also irons. We do it together. So it's not just you must iron alone, you must do the washing alone. He looks after the baby also. He's not working at the moment so he's looking after the little ones. It's a 50/50 thing. [L]

I mean we equal. Now there's no such thing as the olden days that the hmmm, the men has to support the family and the woman has to stay home. Now it's equal. I provide, you provide – we mix and match... [A]

³⁷ Using 'them' as a gender neutral pronoun.

Participant A identifies as a heterosexual woman and she tried in her own way to explain to me that she experiences a more affectionate type of intimacy with her trans* partner than with previous cisgender male partners:

Hmm, okay most of the things that I do with him, I wouldn't do with a normal guy... cause the way I act it's like, it's like the way we act it's like not normal in normal relationships. I mean... traditionally... but I mean if you are with a guy with a normal guy you behave a certain way... like the way we play, the way we you know the way we talk it's not like, the, the normal relationship guy and girl thing. It's like you know it's like two friends. It's like two friends you know I don't know how to put it.

According to participant A, her trans* partner also behaved differently than she is used from other cisgender guys when it comes to tastes in food:

...he loves milk tart. I never been, I'll have never been with a guy who's interested in sweet stuff! It's the first time.

Participant I related adolescent behaviour from her trans* partner in a very comical way.

I didn't count on adolescence. Because [he] really basically went through a bit of adolescence and that was – it was a little, I suppose, surprising and kind of fun... He went through the stage of wearing his pants so that they were falling down... He doesn't do that anymore. Now he wears belts. [I]

One participant who identified as bisexual and had previous experience with behaviour of cisgender men suggested that her partner's behaviour was sometimes gentle to the point of frustration. The following quotation builds on this interviewee's desire for 'manliness':

... I've never met a man who can be so kind and caring even though you've got pms. You are in the rantest [sic] of raves. I promise you, I could be pulling out my hair and he looks at me and goes, that time, and he leaves the room, which is sometimes more frustrating... Because you want to get the fight done right now and it's not happening because he fully understands what you're going through right now and he's gonna get out the way... Womanly things that you would be so embarrassed in front of a man – tampons, blood, you know all these kind of things... All the good factors that a woman needs is certainly in a trans person. [M]*

The data I presented in this theme described how the trans* partners occupy male spaces and their gendered behaviour. I also illuminated undertones of the cisgender partners' own assumptions about what constitutes 'masculinity'. Equally to their trans* partners who asserted their masculinity through role-play and behaviour, it seems the cisgender partners assumed certain emotions befitting to their [trans*] male partners, while other emotions and behaviour like compassions, sensitivity and contribution to household chores were 'surprising' or even frowned upon.

His body: image and impact

Subsequently, it is important to look at the various ways in which 'his body' and body image have an impact on him and the cisgender-trans relationship.

... he doesn't want to be touched, he doesn't identify, and his vagina doesn't mean anything to him. He wants to have a cock and that's the only way he can feel really sexual... [J]

For some participants, there were concerns related to a number of bodily matters, but negotiations about and the future possibility of bottom surgery provided anxiety and uncertainty.

...but we've talked about it and we've both agreed that I do not want the bottom changed. Go for top surgery, do anything you want, but just do not change the bottom, I like it the way it is. [E]

The bodily stuff, the every second week injections... that kind of stuff that he experiences can sometimes be, not scary, but worrisome because you don't know what the health consequences are and you're concerned for your partner. Questions around surgery... Bottom surgery or not? What surgery, if bottom surgery? ...Um, bottom surgery, god, I looked at so many websites and there is a YouTube video of a trans – of lots of stuff. So I looked at so much stuff. But a lot of those surgeries are not available in South Africa. And I really don't like the idea of phalloplasty³⁸. I hate it, in fact. So, we'll see what happens with that. We'll see what [he] – it's his body, he gets to decide. I don't like that idea. The pictures are just really awful and disturbing. Have you seen those? Like a slab of... [I]

One participant's partner had a phalloplasty and the method used included growing an expander on his arm, in preparation for the 'forearm flap' method. The bodily issues that mattered to her came from two different practical examples. In certain spheres where he interacted, he chose a stealth life, for example, her grandparents did not know that he is trans*. The manner, in which the skin graft on his arm healed, 'provided' him with a reasonable excuse; to tell to people it was a burn wound.

I know why the burn mark is there and where it's from, but how do I explain to a 74 year old, uh, this is his penis? [M]

She also shared another reality regarding his surgery that causes anxiety.

...he needs testicles still and he needs to urinate through the penis still. At the moment he's still urinating as a woman. Which is a bit of a frustration, because we've got a toddler, who

³⁸ To construct surgically a phallus

now has to learn how to wee, and the question is, is he going to be able to stand and wee, or is he gonna sit and wee like mom and dad. [M]

One participant clearly summarises, what she suggests, is at the root of the distress that the trans* masculine partners struggle with.

How do you be a man when you don't have a man's body, and how do you get other people to recognise your identity when you don't have the body that is the cue for everybody to treat you in that way, and what kind of man are you gonna be if you're gonna be a man? He'd already shaved his hair. He'd already started binding his breasts down and appearing masculine in public. [I]

Their bodies caused distress to both the trans* partners and the cisgender partners. Three participants shared:

For a very long time [he] would just avoid going to toilets out [sic]. Now he is starting to go to the man's toilet or the disabled... [H]

...the question about the packer... you need to be careful of what you're putting in because one day you're gonna be wearing your shorts and it's gonna fall. And that is gonna freak me out, and I'm thinking this thing is gonna fall and we're gonna be walking, holding hands together and then what? ... It's all the things that when you're thinking with shock, oh my god, you must be wearing very tight underwear because if that thing falls, it's gonna be a huge thing. [K]

I think my issue is being especially when he was still binding, it would take us eons to get out of the house and for me it was about does he feel comfortable? And for him, his comfort is not inside, it's on the outside. [G]

One participant shared that her trans* partner was totally disgusted by his own body, even after surgical and medical transition.

I think this is where our problems started, because hmm... [he] was a private person. He always had an issue about his body... because his whole being is 'male' and ... with the female body. I think that is what put him off... He shuddered. He said he shudders for his own body

Interviewer: and with the transition?

Still half a person. He told himself he's half a person... the hatred of his own body... [B]

Participant B and her now trans* ex- partner are still in contact, although he married another woman. She spoke of a telephone conversation:

... when I speak to him, although he tells me he is lonely, he is lonely, he is very lonely and there are times when he's quite depressed, very depressed that he tells me 'I can't anymore. I

can't anymore'. Not because of his relationship, because of the whole story [referring to his body image issues].

The impact of the trans* partner's bodies in the cisgender-trans relationship were also situated in the realm of discussions about having a baby together as a couple. Some women had a child or multiple children from previous relationships. Two participants, shared anecdotes about how they went through the insemination process with their partner. The first two participants felt that they really wanted a baby:

I realised, you know, I can still have a child. Either adopt a child, or basically have like some artificial insemination... [F]

I don't want a baby. I want [his] baby. And I feel really, I often feel really sad that I can't have his baby. And this is such a strange thing – I've never felt this before with anyone. And... maybe that's just how it feels when you really love someone but I hadn't ever felt that kind of yearning before to combine myself with him and have a baby. [I]

One participant did not share the same sentiment with her trans* partner.

...he has mentioned he dreams of seeing me pregnant and I don't even think I would want to get pregnant again... [N]

Two participants shared their experiences because they had already gone through the insemination process.

We went to the hospital, the formal way, through a whole procedure. There also you have to see the psychiatrist, they explain everything to you... they were very professional. I didn't feel funny at all. [L]

Interestingly, the second participant greatly elaborated about the expected gender of the baby.

Then the dreaded question came, is it gonna be a girl, or is it gonna be a boy. Girl would be good due to the fact that mom is definitely a female, and dad has got quite a few features of a female, but not quite there... But due to the fact that both of us didn't want a girl, I was luckily pregnant with a boy. [M]

The last participant and her trans* partner had discussions about using his egg and then she will carry the baby, but they would still need a sperm donor. She noted that they really wanted a boy and had a great deal to say about the baby's appearance.

How are these eggs going to be in me? Is the baby gonna come out looking like me? I want babies to look like me. I've got big eyes – all my kids got big eyes. This one must have big eyes. Is the baby gonna be attached to me as the two were attached to me... like bond? I've got so many questions about the baby thing. I was reading about sperm banks and the fact that they

give you the profile of the donor and we were talking the other day that [boy name]...is gonna be our son, it has to be a boy, we were talking that [he] must somehow look like the [other] two because they're quite light. He must be light... so whatever sperm donor we're going to get. And he's saying now the kids must have curly hair. I'm like, ok, my daughter's got curly hair, but this one has 'kroes'³⁹ hair. He said, I want him to have curly, I'm like- I don't have a coloured⁴⁰ kid! I am so black, I love him black. It needs to be a black kid that's just light.

The person I love is a man – and based on the data I presented here, there are rich viewpoints of how his body, his body image, and his body shortcomings made impact on the cisgender-trans* relationship. The data also showcases the manner in which he negotiates and interacts while occupying male spaces. Some trans* partners behave in a manner that fits within the stereotype that is associated with trans* masculine people, by many while other trans* partners demonstrate strong efforts in 'becoming a new kind of man'.

Relationship in transition

Clichés, clichés, clichés...a certain set of clichés are present when speaking and reading about cisgender-trans* relationships and intimacy. Testosterone induced behaviour, no-go areas, less sex, more sex, better sex, different kind of sex – these are all topics and comments that cisgender partners in cisgender-trans* relations often hear. Here I attempt to address some of those 'truth and myth' clichés by presenting participant commentary.

Four participants spoke about the impact that the trans*partner's relationship with his body had on their intimacy and the way they interacted.

Because he's very fussy when it comes to that part of his anatomy. There are certain things that make him happy, but that certain thing doesn't always make me happy, which makes it a bit frustrating in that line. And I can think that is the biggest frustration now between us. [M]

I remember in the beginning, the first month, I was not allowed to put any finger in there or anything at all. I was not allowed to kiss or lick or do anything to it. I was not allowed to see the breasts, they'd always be covered. I was not allowed to see the strap-on itself... there are days where I'd want to go down and he'd say 'no, you're gonna wake that thing, I don't like it'. [E]

I realised ... he wouldn't let me touch him there, I mean we did practice oral sex but much later on when he was much more comfortable with me. That took a long, long time. And ja, he

³⁹ African textured hair

⁴⁰ Mix race

wasn't open about his body, he was a very good lover but not open about his body in the same way as me and often times if we didn't have lube or we didn't have a dildo, I would encourage him to kind of touch me there or whatever, but it was always hard for him but he did try and be open... [J]

I think in fact, our sexual relationship is probably better than it was right at the beginning because he's so much more confident. And he likes his – he's really into himself whereas before he was much more distant from his body and it was an effort for him to keep present. Now, he's fully present. [I]

The trans* partner's relationship with his own body and himself have a strong impact on the couple's intimacy. This is affected by his inhibitions, his comfort or discomfort being naked, and what can be seen or not seen. Three partners had the following to say:

Oh, it was magical, believe it or not. It was magical. We were dressed, we were both dressed but it was magical. That's when I realised that you know what, me and this person, we have something going on. We have a very deep connection. The fact that we got intimate but there was no intercourse as such ... it was magical. [C]

And

... when me and him started to get physical because he was shy, he couldn't take off his clothes in front of me, even when we were sleeping, he would change just before I got in the bedroom and I would find him changed already and he would go into the bed and even when we were kissing ... he never felt comfortable taking off his clothes in front of me... [C]

I've noticed when we were both naked, if I can put it – he's bound. His binding and well ... I've noticed when we were kissing for the first time, I've noticed that he's got - I'm not sure how to put it, I don't think it's a dildo, but it's an artificial kind of penis that is being put into him that is there, that you know. And I've learned that that one is not the one that he is using for any intercourse. So, I've learned a lot. [K]

In the beginning, I think we were fine... I don't know how we got – we were fine. Strangely, I don't - it's only later that [he] was binding in bed because when I met him we were very free with each other and it's only much later – about maybe two months into our relationship – that things changed dramatically and there were now these... [G]

A few participants elaborated on their experiences with their trans* partner's genitals, toys they use, and dildos. Furthermore, they discussed the ways they related to the penis and were expanding their sexual repertoire. The first two anecdotes were from lesbian partners and the last two from heterosexual women.

We tried some things for a while... Like we tried blow jobs on a dildo, for instance, to see whether that would be exciting or not. And I think both of us felt like we were pretending a bit, so we kind of abandoning the idea. We still do it occasionally, as a kind of fun, but we

both know we – you know, it's a bit of a game. Um, I think for [name] and I the – when we're in that space, in that intimate space, we're our realest selves, so we don't do a lot of pretence in that way. And I'm very quiet in bed, anyway. Yeah, so I guess we, we tried some of that stuff, but both of us felt a bit like we were acting. It's a bit of a game-playing. [I]

... all my life, I didn't have much exposure to – to penis, but I got very much exposed to the fact that he's got a penis, or a dildo, or whatever sex object we'll be using. Yeah, it's just all the physical things, but all the basic things in terms of us expressing ourselves, or loving each other or making love that wasn't a problem. [K]

It was my very first time using a toy but this is something that I learnt with him and now I even say "Why don't we go and get something new?" We go out together and we check things out and we make jokes, you know and say that would be nice when we're doing that... [C]

... the challenges were sexually, I was used to a stick and now the stick is not there. Even if we go and buy the stick, it wouldn't react the same was as a normal stick. So, I had to adjust quite a bit there. But it wasn't a lot of work because with my previous husband, he used to force himself onto me when he's drunk. So I hated the stick... But obviously there were times where I would feel for a stick. And I'll tell him. Like, I want a stick now. This flat thing is getting on my nerves. He'd say, Ok, let's buy one. And we would go to an adult shop, go in and I'll choose what I want... and there are times where he would want the stick because the stick also satisfies him. He normally says when he's got the strap on, he feels that it's real and the way he would control it and the way he would come, it would be like real. So there are times when he would want to feel that and I don't want the stick at all. I mean I haven't used it in over four weeks because I don't want it. I enjoy the sex bit I get from the natural thing than with the stick... you get men that have the real penis and they don't know how to use them. And you get people like [name] and they don't have penises and they know how to use what they've got... It was, an adjustment, but a better adjustment to a better thing. [E]

Interviewees shared intimate information about the actual 'positions' in lovemaking, the 'role' in bed, thoughts on submission, and how the actual lovemaking changed. These changes were narrated either as the changes within the couple's sexual behaviour over a period of time, or for her as the partner in a sexual relationship, comparing previous experience and knowledge to this relationship.

...we have evolved where intimacy is concerned for the better... I think the first year was the most trying for me, especially, I found that I kind of had to be submissive or at least I felt that way and that was something new and that was something I had never had to deal with... so yeah but I don't know anything can work if people want it to work and when you no longer want it to work it won't... [N]

I think I'm a very dominant person. I might not be dominant, socially, like when I'm out there... but at home, in bed, in our bed, I think I've been – what do they call it? – The subdominant? I, from underneath, I push my power upward. And that's given us a lot of issues, because Africa men aren't pushed or aren't carried or lifted by their women. And that's a behaviour that I've

had forever. And that hasn't always turned on my partners... the way in which we've talked about it has not come from that kind of an angle. It's been... 'I don't want you to expect to go down on me, or things like that'. But here it's got a masculine – not pride – but value attached to it. As in, by doing this, you're cheapening my value as a man and that's kind of been a bit crippling at times to a point where I don't know what to do because you know, when you have your clothes off, you just have your desire, in that way and now I find that I'm not as confident about how I wanna do things because at any point I could do something wrong and that will end things for the next two weeks and who doesn't wanna have sex for two weeks? [G]

Participant A said they usually made love in what she described as, the 'normal way' and after a year it changed drastically. She noted that she has no say in the 'technique' or way they make love.

There is a change... the first time we use to do it like in a normal way use hmm, fingers and stuff but now I mean it's changing so it's changed so much... it's boring to him. He wants to change; he wants to do other stuff... The only problem is, he can't do it that way. He has to use something... So he's only wish is that he can actually, I mean have that organs that a man have. ... I was used to what we did before... things suddenly have to change and I still think that we could have left it... So now it's like everything it's over! I wish that he could do what we use to do before but now he's not gonna like it. He doesn't like it anyway.

Interviewer: So he's not even open for negotiation?

Interviewee: No! ... He's not gonna negotiate. Don't like to do it and that's it! I have to live with it.

One participant shared her analysis of his body's need for stimulation to a point of orgasm. She is bisexual, leading to the knowledge and understanding of how to please both a male and a female body. This allows for satisfactory lovemaking for him, but she is not sure of her overall level of satisfaction.

I think when it comes or sexuality or having sex, it's still difficult to ask sometimes. Due to the fact that I play both roles, which is very good, because I know what a woman wants and I know what a man wants, but unfortunately I'm stuck in the – right in the centre where I have to give both what a man wants and what a woman wants to get him satisfied in that line and it becomes very frustrating sometimes. He's – the question there is will this part of his anatomy ever please me? [M]

Negotiation and communication seem to play a very important role, especially in the relationships of a few of the participants that were interviewed. They had to 'relearn' their techniques or intimate skills, but they also argued that their relationships were deepened.

You almost had to relearn. I actually felt uncomfortable at times, when me and him had to be intimate because there was a sense of me not understanding what to do. I didn't know if he was satisfied. I didn't know that what I was doing was what he wanted me to do. As time

went on, we spoke about it because we have a very open relationship... Normally in a relationship, it would be said that the man has to make sure that the woman is satisfied and what not. In my case, I had to also make sure that he is also satisfied... after whatever that we do, we are both satisfied... because with other relationships, it's a guy and with him, if he ejaculates its fine. It's done. You can visibly see but with him, it's something that I had to learn. I had to learn his body. As much as there were things that were similar to what I had, it was hard for me because I was doing it with another person and I had to learn him... [C]

I needed a manual, apparently. But a lot later, strangely, a lot later... I do feel that I have a better sexual partner now than I did even in the beginning and at the beginning of any relationship the sex is scorcher! It's not as frequent now, but it's definitely better. At least I know the body that I'm dealing with and I know its demons. I know its triggers – some of them. And I know what the no-go areas are. [G]

I found that I had to do a lot of negotiating but not just me but we both had to negotiate... it took some getting used to mentally, physically and of course sometimes your emotions take a knock and get in the way. I have had to be patient even with myself and realistic ok it's not personal, it feels personal but it's really not personal and try and hold onto that... and remember that this person is also going through their own issues. [N]

Despite good communication and negotiation of intimacy, one participant shared some frustrations.

Sexually he still needs to be brought to his peak like a woman, and I'm asleep by then... It takes a lot longer... The process to where you want to get to is a lot longer, especially in the female relationships and this has been sexually a problem for me. Because I would love to have a quickie, but a quickie takes an hour (laughs)... That frustrations I think is the biggest one that we can think of right now. [M]

One participant experienced frustrations and difficulties on a completely different level. She had a personal history of negative sexual experiences, which resulted in anxieties about sexual interaction. This had an impact on her relationship. She initially anticipated a 'body without a penis' would not be a 'body that can penetrate' or want to penetrate.

I actually, you know, was happy because I didn't want somebody to penetrate me, especially a man... he was, he's just like the sweetest person I've ever met, although when it comes to having sex or whatever you call it, I'm very reticent because I'm like afraid of what I might do and what I might not do. And, um, I'm not very, uh, familiar with the different sexual pleasures and stuff like that, so to me, it feels like it's all one-sided... The thing I do is, if he feels like doing something, I actually do, but he can't expect me to also feel that way and that's my expectation of him. If I don't feel like fooling around, like he'll say, 'let's go have dessert' or something like that and I don't really want to – I feel like it's going to be an ongoing sexual relationship where one person is not going to really be happy with the timing and the place and all that. [F]

Participant M was introduced to her trans* partner after he had a phalloplasty and she assumed that 'transitioned' meant 'completed'. She discovered that this would have an impact on their sexual life.

...a couple of operations and everything works. Surprise, surprise, it doesn't all work (laughs)... Does it get stiff? No... I did not know it would not get erect. I didn't know it was just gonna be something that would be hanging around for the show, I really actually thought there was something more to it, which there isn't. And in sex, he wants that part of his body to be the focal point, which is not where he's getting his orgasm from because his sensory organs are not there, which at the peak of sex, it's difficult to be holding that part of the body and still being able to do everything else and being able to concentrate on yourself (laughs). So I think that is maybe another reason why the quickie is an hour long, you know?

Two participants, in particular, were very happy with the increase in their sex life from being with a trans* masculine partner. The first one, in a tongue-in-cheek tone, recommended testosterone.

Yeah, and testosterone is great! I highly recommend giving your partner testosterone. It makes them jags.⁴¹ And when he was going through his adolescence, it was so nice to be constantly wanted by someone. You'd be like walking away and he'd be like ::tsk tsk – makes a noise:: I'd be changing or anything he looked at me, he was like always attracted to me. It was so – it was really a nice experience. Yeah, highly recommend it. [I]

I mean I'd never had sex like I had with [name], never ever. I was in my fifties, I have been a lesbian since I was twenty eight and I've never experienced anything that was so satisfactory... The sex intimacy loved being in bed being more romantic than any other intimacy I've had. Emotionally, as a supportive relationship, it was disastrous. [J]

Other participants remarked on the decline in the frequency of sex and how that was different for them than for their partners. The first participant talked about her partner needing more frequent sex than they had. Two additional participants felt that they, themselves, wanted sex more frequently.

I think his only gripe is that it's not often enough you know? ...he always says to me if only we had the sex life we had in the beginning and I say to him babe enjoy married life while you can you know... there is times where it's maintenance as he says you know? But there's time where we really, really click and we really just go for it you know? [D]

...because when I talk about little, it was once in three, four months... What I see in those last two years... Although neither one of us cheated, slept around, we were just there in the same house... we still shared a bed, we were just there. [B]

Participant B highlights one of the most intimate periods of their ten year relationship; a time during her partner's recovery from a surgery, during which she assumed a caring and nurturing role.

⁴¹ Afrikaans word for horny

He was happy, he was happy. I still got the flu at that time and I was also for two, three days at home. He was happy. If only it could have stayed like that (Giggles).

And from another participant:

We had a sexual relationship for a while and then that stopped because [his name] didn't feel comfortable anymore. I regretted that very, very much for a very long time but its fine we just sleep separately. There is no sex between us at all...

Interviewer: How did that make you feel, as a person?

Participant: Probably less loved. ... there is no more intimacy left... The feeling sometimes goes up and down. Sometimes I feel really warm when we have had a good conversation... [H]

Cisgender partners' intimate sharing of their relationships' most sacred spaces and experiences shed light on the complex and emotional situations. While a number of participants shared information on actual lovemaking, others seemingly grapple with gendered notions and stereotypical assumptions that are illuminated through this aspect of their relationship.

Communication

Cisgender partners had different points to share regarding communication. Some were challenged in the process of forming language to facilitate their understanding of 'transgender'. Communication from 'others' who are constantly scrutinizing the cisgender partner or the cisgender-trans* relationship, or who are acting as society's self appointed 'gender police' all have an impact on the cisgender-trans* relationship. A number of participants discussed the impact of 'silence'. This silence could be a result of the trans* partner choosing to not inform people about their trans* status (stealth) or the silence in the relationship due to 'certain topics' that were not openly discussed. This section foregrounds data indicating the actual language being used by cisgender partners and couples. I will demonstrate how the actual lexicon mirrors the negative connotations that exist toward and about transgender people. Occasionally, cisgender partners who are new to transgender-related information and people or cisgender partners who are not necessarily politically conscious make use of the same language that exists in the broader society.

Assumptions and prejudice being communicated to cisgender partners

The heteronormative society, where cisgender partners and trans* persons 'come from' and live their daily lives, is riddled with ignorant comments. This ignorance puts strain on the cisgender partner, who is attempting to navigate her own way through understanding her position in this 'new

world'. Two participants reflect on the prejudicial language that some trans* people and cisgender-trans couples hear publicly, on a regular basis.

We would walk on the beach front and people would look to see if it was a man or a woman, and then they'd be aghast and then they say 'it's a woman'... people would look and then just as they would walk past they would say 'god, that's actually a woman'. [J]

Sometimes these mirrored reflections from society come in the form of facial expressions:

...but I'm seeing the looks I get from people that know that this person was born female and uh here's this other female with this person comfortably walking around the mall holding hands, kissing and jumping all over each other. [E]

And:

Because I see them changing the way they look at him because of what they already know. Because of the info they are getting, they somehow change their attitude towards him. [E]

Derogatory comments like 'I had heard all this stories over the years about trying to change the sewing machine into a fishing rod' shared by Participant H, inform the cisgender partner's preconceived ideas about entering into relationships with trans* partners.

One participant, who met her trans* partner at an online dating site, contributes to the reality of the negative assumptions made about trans* people. She said:

If he had maybe put his profile on transgendered, I probably might not have even looked at it! [D]

Her narration discussed how they almost did not take their online relationship further, based on her not being informed and his anticipation of negative reactions. It became clear that many cisgender-trans* relationships may not even begin, due to already existing prejudices.

...at that stage how the conversation was going, and then he threw in this 'I am transgender' and it was like 'wow what the hell is that?' ... and I got all quiet and he got all defensive and he said, 'Oh well clearly you don't wanna talk to me anymore' and he like hung up from the internet on me, and I still like thought to myself you know I might not know what it is and I Googled it and I did a bit of research and whatever, and the same evening I got in contact with him again... and I said to him 'you know what let's just talk about this! I said, 'yes it was a shock, yes you probably scared the living daylights out of me but let's discuss it, let's talk about it... [D]

She said they then could continue talking 'as two normal people'. [D]

Interestingly, two of the participants who identify as bisexual, speak of their relationships as either not 'normal' or 'real' heterosexual relationships.

You sometimes wish you had a real heterosexual relationship where you could say get on, do the job and thank you, goodbye, go to sleep now, whereas in a gay relationship, it's not like that.[M]

...because admittedly it's not a normal relationship. It's not as easy, it's not happy go lucky... [D]

Language slipping on the slope of sexual orientation and gender identity

During the initial stage of their relationship, one participant was under the assumption that her trans* partner was lesbian and hence thought she 'had to change' and also be a lesbian. She was uninformed and he was not equipped with adequate language at that time to tell her the difference. She grappled a lot with understanding how to position herself, while admitting her own discrimination and prejudice. As a heterosexual woman who never heard language about gender identity or transgender-related vocabulary, she struggled to understand the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity.

I was just, it was just normal like even if after I met him everything was just normal because I couldn't get it into my head that he is trans because then I didn't know he is trans. So I couldn't get it in my head that he is like that. So I was thinking that I'm dating a man. [A]

And

...about this type of thing. So maybe I could see that I was 'one of those' I said to myself that I'll never be in love with another woman... and so it happened to me. Then after that I've started to change the way I think about people... I started dating him. I've seen it so many times and I said to myself, 'No I'm not gonna do that, this is, this is not on'... 'This is not happening'. So after it happened to me then I started my opinion of this thing. This thing... [A]

Another heterosexual partner says she did not know the difference between gay and lesbian (sexual orientation), and trans* (gender identity).

I knew about lesbians and gay people. I did not know there was a difference between a lesbian person and a trans. I did not. [E]*

The absence of the word 'transgender', or any trans* related vocabulary, does not necessarily always create the conditions for confusion. Similar to the commentary that participant A shared, it potentially creates a platform for approaching understanding of complex issues in a simplistic way, as a creative alternative.

I do remember him sending me an email because he was away at the time. He sent me an email saying I've discovered something really important that I – that was important for me to realise and that is that I'm a man, that I'm actually a man. So it was kind of different, I didn't know the word then. But I didn't see it as a confession or as a great, you know, like coming out or anything, I think it was, we just had a discussion about what that meant. [I]

Participant D shared how she viewed her trans* partner outside of that equilibrium:

...when I found the job that I wanted and I like etcetera they met [him - citing his name] as him. He was my fiancé, [he] was my husband, [he] was my boyfriend, he was my man!

The complexity of language and usage of definitions (which are not always 'standardised') indicates challenges when doing research involving people's own ways of identifying themselves. A few of the participants employ the word 'gay' when referring to lesbians.

...if somebody had come to me and said to me was I gay or if I was straight... [D]

I had definitely been into the gay type of life, but I don't think I ever saw myself as gay. I would say I was always bisexual. [M]

Although my children knew I was gay, it was difficult for me to tell them what was going to happen now. [B]

I did go out with men and I never really saw it [this] as a gay relationship. [L]

Body language

One cisgender partner shares how through the experience of her trans* partner, she learned the meaning of occupying masculine spaces through body language and the interpretation of bodies in those spaces.

And there was another occasion where he had strapped his breasts down... and this was when he was overseas and he related this experience to me where he was on a bus and there was a woman in front of him and he was just kind of like you do on the bus – make eye contact and kind of engage with people in that kind of silent way and she got off the bus at the same stop as he did and he got off after her and she looked behind her and looked at him with fear because she thought that he was following her. And how that was – we had a, we talked a lot about that and what it meant to claim an identity that women were afraid of. And that was also a big learning curve for me because it made me think about occupying an identity separate from yourself [sic] that has a political meaning. [I]

Body language often includes the couple's way of expressing love and intimacy publicly. One interview participant who grew up in a more western setting than her partner, who was raised in a traditional community, expresses how she would often seek affirmation of their relationship by

being able to hold hands in front of his family. When asking her if she feels their relationship is supported, she replies:

A lot. A lot. They're behind him all the way. It's okay. I'm not sure that they would be comfortable with us holding hands in front of them as much as they know. And you know how it goes – they know it right enough, but they don't – I don't think they need to be exposed to it, as a very Africa family. They know and I think that's good enough for them to just know. [K]

Supportive messages that are communicated

For participants in my research communication took the form of verbal language, body language and facial expressions. All three of these are 'communicated' in emotional ways, indicating supportive or unsupportive behaviour – in various degrees. Communication forms a large part of people's lives. Any relationship functions in a relational space and is not isolated from the interaction of other people. The data that I present is subdivided into the ways that cisgender partners experience support and lack of support by family, friends and community through communication.

A number of participants shared narratives of their own family's knowledge of their trans* partner, who are supportive of them as individuals or couples.

The one place I found real understanding is with my younger sister, because she'll ask after him, she'll ask after us. She's basically taken on the relationship in pretty much the same way she's taken on my other relationships with other people. [G]

My father and my mother and my sister been absolutely fabulous and my brother-in-law have been amazing. They've been really good support. They came to my engagement party and my father did a speech and yeah, they've never ever had an issue. So, my partner is my partner and his identity is he and his and that's how he's referred to and it's been absolutely fab. [I]

We told my mom, she just... sorted of accepted it. She also thought that we were just joking and then just accepted it. [H]

One partner shares that all her family members who liked her partner and were supportive of their relationship, are deceased.

...all the people who had like, who had wanted him to be part of the family... they all passed away. So now, oh we don't know. There were three people who really liked him. It's my mother and two of my uncles... [A]

Participant B has adult children who are supportive:

I thought they were going to say 'ooh no! What are you doing?' They were totally different. The children said 'it's mommy's life, as long as mommy's happy.'

And participant N's daughter is still in primary school, but it does not seem to cause any concern:

[Name] sees him as the dude that he is. She really, really does. Kids are pretty easy going, much more than adults.

Participant C and her partner decided to get married at the Department of Home Affairs with family support both sides of their respective families:

On that day, it was my mom and his uncle. After that we just went out for lunch on that day. His uncle is actually a psychologist so he counselled us after lunch.

Another participant shares about the support from both of their families by speaking of them collectively:

Most of the people, in fact all of the people that we have told I would say are fine... All the important people in our lives know and that they accept it. [H]

Four cisgender partners spoke of the support that their trans* partner receives from his family about him and their relationship.

The family is so supportive. They don't refer to him as a she. It's always been a 'him' ever since they were growing up... that's the type of family it is. The mother was interviewed on, on, on, uh, [name of another trans guy's] documentary, I think it's a few months ago and she was relating the same story to say she's accepted it a long time ago. [E]*

[Trans partner's name] one sister has probably been the best in immediately embracing her brother and buying male things and I think she knew long ago herself because she has... met some people like that in the past... I think she knew, I think she even said to [name] she came back from one of her stints, saying [name] is actually a transgender and told the parents... [H]*

His father said it's still his child. It was difficult for the aunty, difficult. I think it still is. She accepts it but it's still difficult. It's heart sore for her. [B]

...his mom, giving birth to your child as having such an intimate relationship with your child's body. And I think that's something worth looking into; is mother's relationships with their children's bodies.... But his mom's come around and she's great, she's supportive. She's learning herself. She doesn't see him that often, which makes it harder to get used to new names and pronouns and things. [I]

Another participant shared about her trans* partner's mother, who accepted the relationship, but not him as a male.

I would say his mother accepts the relationship accepts the marriage and accepts the children and that but she still doesn't accept that he is a boy. She is still holding onto the other part and the other family members are ok and accept it because she was at the wedding... But other than that they accept it to a certain limit. [L]

It is interesting to note that three cisgender partners reflected on the difficulty that mothers have in accepting the transition of their children. In the aforementioned examples, it seems that as difficult as it is for those mothers to understand and accept the process, they are trying and are working towards full support.

Participant C shared that her partner has a company with business partners and she says '*I think he worked with them before he transitioned, but they know... Everything is fine*'. She goes on, offering her own analysis of that relationship, situated in racial and cultural discourses:

You know, with us, with the black race, it's what can I say, I don't know if 'voodoo' is the right word for this. It's a very – you know if you talk about such issues the black community would tell you about witchcraft and you being cursed and what not, but I find it easier to talk to a white person about it. I think the white race understands much more than the black race because they don't have such things as witchcraft... they would think of other things that are coming – 'oh no', it means that 'the family was cursed and we were bewitched' you know and things like that. The black community it's really not something spoken of like imagine in my community when I met [name], it was the very first time of me hearing of a trans person. I had never heard about it, I had never read about it. It was my very first time. So it's something that is never spoken about, you understand, but I believe now that I know of the trans community I believe that there are trans people in my community because we are this community so it's something that is hush-hush issue, a hush-hush topic.*

In the above excerpt, Participant C argues that she believes white people are removed from cultural norms and beliefs in witchcraft, voodoo and other indigenous spiritual traditions. From her perspective, distance from such cultural norms reduces some of the challenges white people face in understanding or accepting previously unknown expressions of gender and sexuality. In this way, whiteness becomes a culturally 'sterile' space, making trans* identities more easily accessible through the experience of whiteness.

Emotional support is communicated to cisgender partners and cisgender-trans* couples through friendships. A few participants shared about their friendships:

I think if we had to compare between [his] friends and family, I would say there is more support coming from friends than family... For me it has mostly been my friends who have to come to terms with it... [N]

And she [a friend of participant] said 'oh you guys are still together, you guys are so cute'... And all of my other friends that have met [his name] had approved even before I told them he's actually my partner. They come to the house, we go party together. They like him, they do. [E]

I do have two friends, which are my personal friends whom I've told about. I remember the girl friend that I had, seeing him for the first time and going, (gasp sound) he's got so much facial hair. And you go like yeah, don't you see. And she goes, 'but it's a man!' Of course, way out his ear, you know, so that was the one incident and the next one was just 'Hi. I don't see anything'. You know? But these, both of these two friends were very close to me and I trusted they would keep the information to themselves. But they'd never seen him any different either because they were informed about him even before him arriving... [M]

My best friend actually she knows because when we met, we were staying together, we were sharing a flat so I told her about him and I told her about the situation so she knows and with her, it is also something that we never talk about. [C]

The friends from that time, they were like suspicious but I didn't tell them straight out. I never really told any of them straight out because I just felt that it was none of their business, it's my life but because they were neighbours of my grandmother, they automatically found out but they never actually brought up the issue, they never actually spoke to me directly and said what is this relationship and what is happening, and are you happy whatever. So I've never really discussed it with anybody and the friends I have now, it's just a non-issue. It doesn't exist because they are meeting him as [name] so that history has got nothing to do with them. [L]

... but I think three of my, no, two of my friends have probably stuck with me through anything, through up's, downs, girls, boys whatever... That are my friends and they've been my friends all along. I've lost, there were one or two girls that were my good friends, a few guy friends that were good friends but they didn't like the fact that I was maybe hanging out with gay girls and gays and whatever. So of course that relationships slowly but surely dwindled, but I think your true friends, my true friends have stuck with me all along. One of them, there's two of them, the one knows [name]'s status, her and I are very, very good friends. She knows everything; I know everything that sort of thing. She knows about [name], my other friend doesn't. She knows everything but that! [D]

It is significant to observe that a number of these cisgender partners found support and camaraderie from friends who are notably either not informed about the trans* partner's trans* status, or their friendships are structured in ways where the topic is not discussed.

The silence becomes noisy

Before I share data about communication that indicates lack of support, I feel it is necessary to first look at more examples of 'silence'. I came across various 'acts of silence' and in some of the

interviews, the silence was so loud that it could not be ignored. I find that silence, as a topic, is very important because if cisgender partners or cisgender-trans couples are evolving in silence, it indicates that those relationships exist by default without potential support or understanding.

I've not gotten to a point where I tell them that [name] is actually a trans man... I want to be comfortable enough to pick up the phone and say 'mommy, we're actually going to take "T" now'. You know what I'm saying, and her understanding what "T" is and saying: 'Yay! Ok go for it'... I want to get to a point where I can do that... [E]

The example above suggests his desire for silence. Not sharing information with her family, who she suspects will be supportive, about his trans* status prevents her from building her support network with her own family. It minimises her opportunities to access support.

One cisgender partner stated that her trans* partner did not communicate with her at all. Therefore, there was not enough information available to her about trans* related matters, nor his transition process. She says:

I think if [name] was the other type of person who could talk easier, it would have perhaps been better because I would have understood...

Interviewer: So what would you then say is the reason for the split between you?

It's because we never talked about it... or he... if we'd talked about it... there was too little communication. [B]

Another trans* partner withheld information about his transgender status from his cisgender partner for a substantial amount of time, only telling her when a number of people urged him to share this information with his partner.

He didn't disclose to me for quite a long time... I think it was a year. I'm not sure, but yeah, it took about – just fewer, um, lesser than a year. And, um, yeah, he told me he has to tell me something. Now everybody – like his sister was telling him to tell me. [The place of his accommodation] was trying to get him to tell me. Everybody actually that he disclosed to told him to tell me before it's too late you know. [F]

Participant J relayed that although she is no longer in a relationship with her former trans* partner, they still communicate regularly. Although he informs her of his wellbeing and progress, she feels that he is providing misleading information; his reports do not correspond with the facts that she has been researching, so she is left with guessing to fit the puzzle pieces together.

...he's been telling me that he's on hormones and he's never sent a picture. I definitely know it's his fantasy, do I believe that he has done it...? But I now accept him as [male name]; I don't call him [female name] anymore... I read up a lot because he told me he had gotten a

penis and the stuff that I was reading just wasn't correlating. So that upset me but I read a lot about the hormones and what they do and what the process is...

There are times in cisgender-trans* relationships when partners feel it is necessary to filter communication from each other in order to 'protect' each other from prejudices and information from 'outside'. This need may be real or a projection of the person's own fears. Regardless of the urgency and reality, such self-imposed silences might cause emotional strain to the relationship and the 'silenced' individual.

I think [name] and I probably went through those stages where we felt concerned for each other and then censored ourselves because of it. We don't want to give each other responsibility for the stuff we experience in... I don't know, for our concerns. So I think we still do have stages where we go through like that. [I]

Couples do not exist in a vacuum. Five cisgender partners spoke of the decision made as a couple, not to tell other people about his trans* identity. The results of the emotional toll that this approach takes play out differently for different couples. When I asked participant L if she told anybody, family, friends or anyone else, she replied:

Not really. Not immediately. It was only afterwards. I think a couple of years but not immediately... My mother I only told much, much later the whole situation.

Another couple decided not to tell anybody:

We didn't really discuss it with people, with outsiders. You know it was none of their business. [H]

Although participant M says she filtered who would be able to understand and not discriminate, leading her to disclose only to some family members.

My mother, my dad, my brothers and my sister. They all know about it... But it wasn't something I was gonna blurt out to, say my biological father or my grandparents because I don't think or know if they totally understand exactly what it means. And due to that fact, I'm also scared that they may push him away if they know the truth.

The majority of the time stealth, in its various forms, is the rationale for why trans* people or couples decide not to disclose.

It was a decision on his part basically I think. Because he always said he wants to be a man and he wants to integrate into community with no questions. If people see him as a man, then they will accept him as a man. So you don't bother about telling anybody about this because it's just going to bring in questions and maybe feelings about his which wouldn't be necessary. Because people don't like change. [M]

One couple follows a western lifestyle in many areas of their relationship but constantly juxtapose western ideas against traditional ideas. For example, in Participant C's words, 'we got engaged and then we did the lobola, thing ... but we did not slaughter and... then we went to the Home Affairs to get married legally...' I asked C if her family knows about her partner's trans* status. She replied:

On my side of the family, my mom knows about it, but my dad doesn't know about it. We decided not to tell him because he is a very traditional person so we don't want him to start going all traditional on us.

Chosen silence in a family setting, where the trans* partner's family knows he is trans* but there are never moments of communication, may lead to suppressed tension or missed opportunities of support. Everybody needs to come to terms on their own. One cisgender partner relayed how she observes her trans* partner's mother still struggling with the topic, especially considering that no discussion about it takes place. Family tension also can potentially lead to a breakdown in the cisgender-trans* couple's communication.

On his side, we hardly ever speak about it so I can't even explain how it's handled but we would sit and they would address him as a male, but it's not something that we would discuss and say, ok this is how we feel about [name] and this is how we feel about him transitioning and what not, you know, but I sense from his mom, she has a bit of a challenge accepting it. She has accepted him but there are times when like on Father's day, she would never call him on Father's day and wish him a happy Father's day but she would call the other brother... I think that is also even hard for me to talk to him about it because I feel maybe should I tell him about it because he'll feel hurt. [C]

One participant had quite a few incidents to narrate about thinking creatively to avoid possibly negative situations. For example, her trans* partner's mother came to visit and a few of their invented stealth stories were nearly exposed. When her trans* partner changed his name years ago, he made use of the opportunity to change his surname too, leaving him with a different surname than his brothers and mother. The couple fabricated one story to explain the different surname, but when his mother arrived for the visit the story was told differently.

Then the question came up because his surname is different. And I didn't know how to answer that his family is [surname] and he's a [surname], and why. I couldn't quite give answers, so I think I just said, well he had an argument and he decided to change his surname. Quick and easy... But what my grandparents thought was, oh his mom was a [surname], so he must have been born before they got married. So, that their wavelength went in that direction was ok with us, but his mom corrected them. She said 'no [name] was born while we were married', so we had a bit of confusion that day... [M]

On another incident with her grandparents, everyone became confused by the explanations.

I actually made some – a mistake. [Name]’s mom came to visit and I said [name]’s eldest brother lives in [city name] and my grandmother said, but isn’t [trans partner] the oldest? And I said, ‘yes but the two that’s on that side, the eldest one of the two’. And I went (gasp!) god! ‘And I always see the other two brothers as the brothers, because they are the brothers of him Ok? So whenever I say the brothers, I don’t mean it as an exception, that he’s not part of the brothers, but he’s not part of them.’... It confuses my grandparents quite a lot because I talk about the eldest brother and [name] is the eldest son in his household. [M]*

One cisgender-trans* couple who chose a completely stealth life had a very bad experience when they were exposed. The chosen silence of their relationship became very noisy and had a huge impact on their life. The whole situation prevented them from accessing support financially, emotionally and otherwise. Their relationship, their relationship with the participant’s mother, and her mother’s life was in turmoil for a few years.

...but we’ve had a few hardships with family and with people outing us etcetera so we tended to be very secluded... When she [her mother] got introduced to [trans partner], she was introduced to [him] as a man. We chose not to tell her anything! We didn’t say anything, we just carried on. When [name] decided he wanted to get married, he went, he asked her for her hand in marriage or whatever it is! She obliged, she threw a bit of a party for us, like an engagement party where he proposed and that was our engagement. About three, four months, three months later she got an anonymous email saying that her daughter is a lesbian and is about to marry a woman. It was an anonymous webmail account. We, we still don’t know who sent the email and she phoned me, she was in an absolute state she was crying she didn’t know what was going on. And I went and I said to; and I phone [him] and [name] said alright we’ll go and tell her, unfortunately at that stage [name] used to drink quite a bit, and I don’t know if it was his release mechanism or whatever and the night we chose to tell her, I think he got a little bit over anxious and got a bit too excited and I don’t think it went down very well... And she phoned me the next morning and she said ‘please come around I need to talk to you’. Anyway we told her the truth, she had a nervous breakdown. She had to go and see a psychiatrist; she was put on pills... [D]*

Participant D and her partner lived on the same property and worked at the same company as her mother. She continues:

But she didn’t take it very well and our relationship hit rock bottom. It was horrible, it was terrible, and needless to say I moved out. [Name] and I moved in together. She never visited us, she never phoned us, she didn’t do anything ... And then about a year later, even a year and a half later we started getting a little bit closer again... Anyway over the years we slowly patched it up. The only thing that we do regret is that before she received the email [name] and she were like inseparable and that relationship got broken... My mom and I have always had a very, very close relationship...

Participant D and her partner lost their accommodation and nearly their livelihood, but the greatest loss was the emotional support from the well-connected relationship they both had with D's mother.

...she was very majorly in depression. She was on medicines, drugs, she went for counselling and I think the fact that from the time of the email that; or put it this way, before the email [name] and I were always there. We were visiting, we lived there! [Name] stayed with me in the house. We got the email and that communication stopped everything like fell between the cracks. We didn't sit and have coffee anymore. So not only did she feel like she had lost me to [name] as he was, but she had lost her daughter, she had lost [name] per se...The fact that [name] has proposed to me in front of friends, in front of families. She felt had been a mockery to her because she felt that everybody was laughing behind her back and actually they weren't..... she almost lost her job. She wasn't sleeping, she wasn't eating. You know it really, really affected her badly and I think I wasn't there to support her because I was now with [name]... she lost her whole family per se. [D]

...it was very difficult at first because I mean I love my mom to bits, she's, she's everything to me. It was difficult because I basically also didn't have a support system. [D]

So for like three years following that we were, it was [name], me and me! You know, me, myself and [name]. [D]

For D and her partner, the exposure of his trans* identity meant that their relationship had to function for years in isolation without any type of support.

Throughout their interviews, two other participants shared various examples of the emotional strain they experienced because their trans* partners actively prevented them from speaking to anyone or from seeking advice or counselling. Their silences were instructed; they were not allowed to reach out.

Interviewer: So if he, in other words, began with – say for example testosterone, did you know what to expect?

Participant B: No, not at all. Not at all. He didn't speak to me about it. I, myself just saw the beard growing more, he gyms, he's getting more masculine and the other changes and so on.

Interviewer: And was there anybody with whom you could talk to who was also, like you, a partner? Or was there someone with whom you could, if a person can say it 'exchange notes'?

Participant B: I think I could if I wanted to, if I could... I wanted to but I couldn't, seeing that [name] said it's his life, his business.

Interviewer: So he didn't want you to...

Participant B: No.

One trans* partner felt that since he is an activist, his cisgender partner should not discuss or seek advice about their relationship, nor about trans* related questions she might have because that might have resulted in him being viewed negatively by his peers.

I'm the person who has, at their doorstep, so much information, so many numbers I could dial for info. But I think because of the status of the person I'm with, and how he sees himself, I think he's just unrealistically protective of our relationship and what goes on in it, so in a way, kind of being asked, directed (whispered), to not really speak... I'll be honest. When I first understood that all doors were closed, like for having an issue, and I'd bring up but I need to – and I've thought of this – and it's like 'No, you can't because of this that and the other', these became issues that manifested themselves differently in our relationship because I couldn't deal with that thing or the other... so you're constantly a relationship in trouble and in recovery from recent trouble – it's like, it's a soap opera with only two characters in it, so it's not really pretty... and some of my friendships suffered because I could only turn to my friends, but at the end of the day, these are people I work with... [G]

Both Participant B and G indicated that they experienced emotional distress due to being actively prevented from seeking advice, information or counselling. At the time of the interview, the relationship between Participant B and her trans* partner had been over for more than a year, but she retrospectively suggested she should have 'done more research or talked about it, even if I had to do it secretly'.

Messages communicated, showing lack of support

A few cisgender partners shared narratives of communication that indicate a lack of support. Lack of support is sometimes communicated in subtle ways, like avoiding a topic in day to day discussions, or ignoring it for years. One participant shares:

My eldest sister doesn't understand – at all. In fact she's not somebody who's been exposed to much and she's not somebody who tries to learn anything, so she's happily ignorant and, you know, content, but it's still not something that comes between us because instead of talking about my relationship, she completely avoids... [G]

The same cisgender partner creatively organised her life around creating separate spaces where she would interact with a certain friend, who is hostile towards her partner. In her words, she did not lose a friendship; she created separate spaces.

I didn't actually lose a friend. I do know that there is a friend I can't for instance invite to a dinner where my partner and I are gonna be present because she makes him feel uncomfortable. And as much as she knows about trans issues, unlike – ironically, she's the one that's got gender studies under her belt, but she insists on using the incorrect pronoun*

and she completely refuses to acknowledge that she's dealing with a person who identifies as such and it makes things awkward, uncomfortable and confrontational, so I've learned to separate the two relationships... it's a bit testy. [G]

Another participant relayed that years of silence and avoidance of the topic built up to a family argument.

There are some people who can't seem to get over it. They seem to but they are not truly over it because they have never really discussed it. I would say my brother's one of them... in the beginning of the relationship in a sense that they would ignore him, they wouldn't communicate or I don't know him and then afterwards they would pretend like it's fine we understand and a few years ago, probably about six years ago, there was an argument and then everything came out because what [name]... because he's a person who wouldn't want to take other people's problems on himself and it's almost like he felt obliged to explain the whole situation to them and let them know... [L]

Participant F shared that she heard that her brother made a mockery of her trans* partner:

My brother actually, I think he also knows. Because he said – um, something at the funeral. He was laughing. I don't know what it was about, but he said, 'there's [her name]'s girl – boyfriend. And they were laughing...

For one participant, lack of support and constant rejection was not only expressed through communication but resulted in losing accommodation at her family home. Her aunt rationalises the rejections as an attempt to avoid admitting to transphobia, or rejection of him and them as a couple, due to their cultural 'otherness'. The excuse for rejecting the couple was situated in the family's prejudice against traditional African cultural norms and traditions, because he was also a sangoma.

...cause I was staying with my aunt and she was making a fuss of everything. She was really not happy about it... and then I left. I didn't pack anything I just left, like the way I was... Yes and the thing is I was living with my, my aunt at the moment. I left with him. I mean I lived with her for most of my life... ever since I was six years. I stayed with her, her husband but now they were like, the things they were saying man it didn't make any sense to me cause they, they would tell me that hmm, their feet is sore – that means hmm, maybe he spilled a potion on them...and stuff... the neighbours told him [aunt's husband] that there's this traditional healer's came to his house and they were wearing sangoma's clothes, I mean that's insane! They told me that they don't want him in the house then I kept him out of the house but still they told me that he's coming to the house and hmm, it was really stressful. I couldn't stay there for much longer. That's why I had to leave and I left without telling them where I was going and I didn't pack anything. I just left the first time I didn't pack anything. Only the second time that I did come fetch my clothes and... But it was the biggest move I made and the, I mean it was the stepping stone to what the... a better life... I don't regret leaving... cause otherwise if I didn't I didn't move out maybe me and him would be finished by now. [A]

Two cisgender partners spoke about rejection and the lack of support their trans* partners faced, from their own friends. The first example was communicated to the participant in a manner that was difficult to interpret; she had to guess about the situation. The second participant clearly shared how her partner ended up without any more friendships.

...there were some people who were not really accepting of the transition and I don't know, he has never really said it up front but I feel that he was somewhat battling with it himself even though he didn't say it in those words but you can pick up things and what not and he was also trying to make sense of a lot of things just for himself... [N]

...he has no friends. The only friends he has are [name] and [name], a couple... it wasn't like this before. He had many friends. A school friend of him laughs. She says it [his transitioning] is madness. [B]

Interviewer: So you would say it was because of this that he lost his friends?

Participant B: Yes... Some of the... friends were mostly the [sports club] girls and I think you know yourself... they say 'No!'

Interviewer: So you would say it is directly because of the transition?

Participant B: Yes.

Losing friendships can be as emotionally taxing as the realisation of lack of support from family members. One cisgender participant noted that inasmuch as her partner's family is 'supportive in a way', they are actually absent. In narrative, this absence was quite 'magnificent' given the ordeal of her trans* partner's status being exposed to her mother, resulting in a few years of total isolation:

He's family like I said they are there, but they, they not there... So yeah, it, it was difficult as probably much for him as it was for me, you know not having a support system. [D]

The challenge for participants and their partners is distinguishing between an actual lack of support, demonstrated through verbal communication, and the maintenance of silence, which then manifests as a lack of support. Previously, participant H indicated that her trans* partner's sister is supportive and told the parents that he is transgender. The parents replied: '*...you shut up. Don't say a word about that...*' Participant H continued to explain that her partner's parents suspected this from his childhood, but did not allow him to act on it. When I asked her how she thought it made her partner feel, she replied:

I think he has regretted it and felt that his parents should have done more... [H]

In the section about silence and exposure of stealth, Participant D discussed the impact of being cut off from family on the couple's life. Participant A also had to leave the home where she grew up, in

order to save her relationship. One participant speaks of the emotional toll that family exclusion took on her partner:

His step-father doesn't speak to him at all and that was hard, because [name] always had a need to please his step-father and takes a lot of responsibility for their relationship... so that was hard because it caused him a lot of pain. And even though he sometimes, I don't think acknowledged the kind of pain that it caused him, so it was difficult to support him through that. [I]

To ensure that extra measures are taken to protect the identities of the cisgender interview participants and their trans* partners, I will paraphrase the following experience and not bring it into the context of a specific couple. In addition, I summarise this section about 'lack of support' with my analysis about said incident. Exclusion from family members in any direct or indirect way may manifest with different experiences on emotional, psychological and physical realms. One interview participant's partner was instructed to refrain from using his family name [surname], which is itself, a harsh and real message of rejection. In reality, it can potentially cause a loss of income, should the person have a career built upon his surname. The deeper, more visceral message, in such an exclusion or lack of support is situated in patriarchy. When the family's father denies the trans* man's entrance to the world he imagined he was a part of, he is dismissed from his rite of passage to potentially carry on with the family name. '...which I think is a really cruel thing to do' [Participant X]

Constant scrutinising, gender policing and the lesbian police of the 1970s

Identifying the exact origin of the policing faced by cisgender-trans* relationships, may be an impossible task. Interview participants who identify as lesbian, noted their surprise at the reactions they experienced from other lesbians and the LGB[T] community. This is partially because they associate themselves with that community and partially because they expect a greater deal of understanding within that community. Scrutiny was revealed through other people's curiosity and was sometimes fuelled by the 'need to' police the spectacle. One participant shared a conversation with a curious person:

I remember when we first started dating, there was a lady that loved [name] very much and the very first time I slept over at his place, she said to me, 'when you get there, you must touch his private parts'. I said 'huh?' she said 'you must check if it's there.' Excuse me, you know. I just left it as it is and as time went on, she couldn't ask me directly, but she tried to get information and she wanted to know if he's really a man, you know, does he have a penis? You know? What happens? And I said to her 'you know what, he did surgery, and he's trans and he's my boyfriend. Let's leave it at that. End of topic. [C]*

One cisgender partner spoke of incidents where heterosexual men's curiosity got the better of her. The first incident was a work colleague, who looked over her shoulder at the photos of her partner she was viewing during lunchtime on her computer, and then remarked:

'Oh who is that? Is that a girl or a boy?' I said 'what does it look like?' He said 'I am asking, because I'm not sure' I said, well shouldn't you be focussing on your own work?'... He said 'no need to get touchy'. I am not; I am just trying to draw the line where it needs to be. I don't want to get into other peoples personal business and I continued. I did not want to entertain it or have to explain anything. [N]

The second incident happened in a social environment with male friends:

Even some of my male friends I remember we were at a braai one time, and there was a transgendered guy at the braai, it wasn't someone I knew and one of the guys that I know, they like 'oh that's the kind of guy you like' type of thing 'you don't like them real like us'. [N]

One heterosexual cisgender partner assumed that most prejudice or ignorance would come from heterosexual people, yet she was struck by the opposite. Her trans* partner and their partnership experienced the most resistance from his lesbian friends. When she speaks of the 'big thing' I translate it to mean scandal or spectacle. She says:

You know the other time we were speaking with another of our friends who is also a trans [sic, you know it's funny how you would expect this issue to be a big thing in the heterosexual community but it's actually big in the LBG community and when they hear trans, I don't know what they hear, they just hear something totally different... they [lesbian friends] would call him a she. We've got friends that actually sometimes do call him a she and say 'she has gone to extremes and she has gone overboard'. Maybe to them they think he's just an attention seeker or something like that or why did he do that? Or why did he go to such extremes. Why couldn't he have just stayed lesbian or whatever you know with our friends it's more like that. [C]*

Participant N elaborated on her emotions, and the impact of lesbians scrutinising her intentions as a way to measure her credibility as a [lesbian] person:

It's been, especially the lesbian community I found the most, I am trying to use a nice term here, I just found them the most hard crowd to get through... it was hitting harder because with straight people you know you always face some kind of nonsense, some kind of ignorance and people not understanding things but not asking the right questions to find out about things and making all kinds of assumptions so that you expect...because with lesbians you think they know what it is like to be side-lined and have to, you don't think when you have a trans partner people would freak out as it were and when they do you are like 'ok I didn't see that coming'. If all of a sudden I am not a real lesbian please show me a real*

lesbian. What is the definition? Clearly I have broken the code. So when I was living under the umbrella of a real lesbian how was I different? What was different about me?

Participant J was appalled at the extremes to which 'lesbian policing' could go. The impact might have been more severe than 'just policing' because it came from people [lesbians] who were policing the behaviour and identity of others in their professional work capacity. When the first incident occurred, she decided to get a second opinion. She was dismayed that the first incident repeated itself.

I went to visit two Gynaecologists and I was having a lot of trouble, I was having a lot of urinary tract infections. I'm in my second phase of menopause so I don't get wet anymore and I needed advice. I was having this different kind of sex and I was getting urinary tracts and I wanted to know what it was. Both of them tell me to stop having that kind of sex.

Interviewer: What did they mean by 'that kind'?

Participant J replied: kind of with dildo, dildo sex. [Penetrative]

... But no safety tips or what precautions and as I was saying, I was enjoying my sexuality, it's just causing me urinary tract and a bit of thrush and I got a fright and will it be better with a condom on the dildo, what lube should I be using? Should I be shaving? They couldn't or wouldn't engage. I was most horrified. I felt most vulnerable. I'm known in the lesbian community, I knew these women and the fact that I even revealed I felt like it was the lesbian police force all over again from the 1970s and early '80s. And I really didn't get the kind of help that I needed, in fact they told me not to have that sex anymore. Just have normal lesbian sex. [J]

Another cisgender partner, who is active in the LGBTI community, feels she is losing credibility as an activist from the perspective of her lesbian friends:

I've been a lesbian... I've experienced some challenges as a person who's always been very involved... The lesbian community feels very much betrayed by me... I feel like finally I've got somebody that I love as a human being, but the community where I operate now is questioning definitely. These few questions – what are you now? You've betrayed us. You've been the voice of lesbian all along then who's gonna be talking for us, for our rights and all those things. [K]

The following quote is interesting because it indicates that it is not only cisgender people who aspire to ensure that everyone follows the 'correct' gender script. Participant N, her partner and a trans* woman went out for a few drinks one evening. When her partner left the table to get more drinks, Participant N was questioned by the trans* woman:

So she leaned forward and she asked me 'so do you wish [name] was a girl?' And I was like 'what?' and she was like 'no lets both be girls and be honest about it, you are a lesbian, you

know'. I was like... I would not have wasted, I can get girls anytime I want and that's not even from a place of arrogance, I can really be with a woman if I wanted to be, but I am not with this person to compensate for not being able to be with a woman'.

I asked Participant I if she noted any shifts from the LGBT sector and the feeling of 'community support'. She gave a very strong narrative of what I will call, 'active exclusion':

I don't have access to some of the spaces that I used to have access to, but on the other hand it's become less important for me, I suppose. I'm happy to leave those spaces behind... you become a non-person - really - in those spaces, because you don't have any legitimacy. And your legitimacy is through suffering with your partner and being a lesbian person, you know. You can't claim it anymore and therefore you kind of don't exist. Your partner does, though, because their trans. You become invisibilised. You're the non-person. But your transgender partner is still recognised. They're still the 'T'. [I]

Notably, only one heterosexual cisgender partner (participant C), gave accounts of gender policing and constant scrutiny. The majority of her examples originated from her partner's lesbian friends. Participant N gave examples from heterosexual men (who did not scrutinise as much as they were curious). All other examples of the different ways cisgender partners were scrutinised were by the 'lesbian police' and sometimes friends from within the LGBT community. This raises a serious question about the source of such scrutiny from populations which were assumed to be supportive because of their membership in a marginalized community. Are the origins of such stigma the result of an internalized transphobia within LGB communities?

'Trans 101 training'*

What I call 'Trans* 101 Training', refers to the amount of time and energy cisgender partners, trans* persons or the cisgender-trans* couples spent on educating and sensitising other people. Another aspect of 'Trans* 101 Training' speaks to the amount and quality of communication within the relationship, to ensure the cisgender partner knows and understands 'trans*' and all related topics.

The first seven quotes discuss how 'Trans* 101 Training' takes place in relationships and becomes a communication medium for the couple. Conversations were sometimes focused on the cisgender partner's need to know information. At times, these conversations result in a kind of information overload:

[Name]'s really forthcoming about information, I'm lucky in that way. He shares, he's good at talking. I think at some point he probably got tired of telling me stuff cause he felt either that I wasn't listening or that it was too much information... I think that was probably like maybe he got tired of educating me all the time, or being my teacher. [I]

And I said to him, 'you know what, we've discussed a lot of things, we've been open about a lot of things. Let's discuss this? Let's talk about it, you tell me what it is? Tell me how it is, tell me what you expect etcetera'. And we started talking about it and i think that helped a lot because obviously he's done so much research. He's gone all of that but then in a way he could guide me to what I wanted to know. [D]

... when we were talking he shared quite a lot and that's when I started researching on trans men and ftm's and mtf's. [E]

If there is something I need to know, we put the child to bed at night and I'll just look at him and say, what is that...? [M]

In other relationships, trans* partners relied on external 'tools' to help them ease into conversation or 'Trans 101 Training':

I asked and he explained. He took it [his packer] out and he showed me, and he explained. He sat with me down and he explained. He's more like me on the education side because he sits you down and explained the whole thing step by step and everything like that. [K]

... and then after it [Exquisite Gender DVD⁴²] played, he just kept quiet and then he said 'I don't know what to say'. Then I said to him, 'No, I know, but I just need you to reassure me that this is what is happening and I just need you to be comfortable with me so that I can be comfortable with you... but now that I see it here, now that I saw on this DVD that ok, there are trans people out there. Now I understand really what's happening and now I understand who you are.

[Name] has bought every last book available I think. I have read many of them. Some of them are a bit junk but some of them are exceptionally good. I have even read male to female. [H]

Cisgender partners share how they actively give 'trans* 101 training'. Some do so through conversation, while others also make use of external 'tools' in their sensitisation work. One participant teaches young children and has access to a psychology book about trans* youth. She shared:

I know children I work with; children five years old, and I know that a child who is five years old wouldn't be lying it just takes parents such a long time to figure it out and that was just fantastic for me and I have left that book on the coffee table and one of my mom's fell upon it and has got a trans child in her group and she is so grateful that I had this material. It has been wonderful to just leave books around and people who need them can see them. [H]

⁴² See reference list for full details of DVD

Participant J found herself clarifying issues of language and orientation by speaking candidly to her friends about the relationship between bodies and identities. She spoke to her attempts to change their understanding:

When they met him and they realised that maybe they were attracted to him too, straight friends, they wanted to understand what it meant to be with a woman who wants to be a man. So I would talk about it very openly sexually and also mentally and why so many of his troubles I see as related to this being unhappy in his body and that is a very deep and painful issue and there needs to be openness and acceptance so yeah, I spoke a lot to friends and at [the secondary education institution where she works] and the importance of it. [J]

Two cisgender partners emphasised the need for sensitisation and 'Trans* 101 Training' focused on black communities.

It is a big challenge but I think it also goes back to that issue of knowledge. They don't have knowledge, they don't have information so now they take the situation and they analyse it the way they see it and then they make up their own conclusions without facts, without knowing ok, this is the situation, this is what happened and what not... I like to teach people and with this issue, I think it would be very nice for the black community to know about such issues, and with Gender Dynamix, I think it would be very nice, I would say if you can just take this issue to our community, our communities really needs it. [C]

It's just helping them know what is really going on. We can't hide it anymore, especially in our black communities, I feel like I'm playing a big role because it hasn't been out and here am ,as comfortable as I am, I talk about it anyway, you can ask me anything and I'll tell you. They ask me about sex. I tell them. Because I don't think there's anything to hide. It's more helping them to realise that if they're gonna have kids that are gonna trans [sic], they need to understand that it is possible. It happens. [E]

Participant M's partner chose to live a relatively stealth life and, as a couple, they are 'just living their lives' and not feeling the need to be activists. She says, when they see the need, they will inform people, but she will not actively engage in 'Trans* 101 Training'

You⁴³ gave us a DVD. Gender Dynamix DVD [TRANSformations]. We've watched it and everything and straight after watching it, it's gone and landed up in the garage in a good spot there. It's got its own little spot, but mainly due to the fact that we have got straight friends that do come and visit. If they want information, I'll gladly give them information, but I'm not going to intrigue them into trying to know something they don't need to know about.

⁴³ Interview participant refers here to interviewee

'Trans* 101 Training' can be taxing on both the cisgender partners and the couples. Participant I provided an example during which she accentuates her 'loss of feeling validated' during such processes:

[Name] and I were playing this role of re-educating everybody we knew. So every time you opened your mouth, you – a person also felt free to kind of challenge what you are saying. Like I feel this way, and they were like well, well, well you can't feel that way because that's not true or whatever. [I]

Verbal communication became riddled with emotions for most of the cisgender partners in this research. It proves to be the site of loneliness, resistance, prejudice and exposure of the level of ignorance amidst society in general. This chapter also demonstrates exactly how powerful silence can be. I balance communication messages of 'lack of support' with those of support. Cisgender partners want to eagerly engage in 'Trans* 101 Training' with visions of a better future.

Epistemological knowledge

Cisgender partners of trans* persons often find themselves isolated in their search for information. Once that information is found, they may not have anyone to share this information with. As they are discovering new knowledge – with whom do they share this knowledge? In this section, I divide cisgender partners' contributions in the following sub-sections: 'Epistemic loneliness', 'Methods of knowing: Oodles of Googles' and 'When the interviewer becomes the Agony Aunt'.

Epistemic loneliness

Cisgender partners know the interaction and the connectedness between silence (as presented in the Communication section) and epistemic loneliness. Silence (and isolation), stigma and internalised stigma are all foundational to epistemic loneliness. Epistemic loneliness closes in on you, when you realise you cannot talk. The cisgender partner's knowledge of this makes the loneliness real; they know about the loneliness.

It was very confusing at that point and considering that fact that there was no one to speak to at that time, I didn't know anyone from Gender Dynamix and I didn't even have an option to call someone and say: 'I've got a problem here, can we talk?' [C]

Who do you speak to? You can't speak to all your lesbian friends about it... I'm quite isolated. [J]

Participant B was hopeful that her trans* partner's aggression might be alleviated as he found his 'new self':

I was quite relieved in the beginning. I thought now everything's hunky-dory, nice. For about a year, for a year and a half everything was good and then I thought 'No, huh uh. This is now just an extra burden on me because the stress is just getting worse and worse'. And you can't really speak to anybody about it.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you wanted to know?

Participant B: [very long silence] 'Yes' [followed by very long silence]

Interviewer: Uh hmm?

Participant B: ...I could have handled the whole situation in a completely different way, because I didn't really understand everything. I think I still don't understand everything completely...

:: [Participant B breaks down] ::

Another interview participant who experienced (like Participant B) instructed silence, shared the following:

I have had questions, many, um, I mean closer to the surgery, there were a number of things I wanted to ask – I could only ask the surgeon, but we had a limited time with him. There were things to ask after the surgeon, but I didn't have any access to him then. So, in a way I've kind of exiled myself from all the resources that are out there, especially in our context... [G]

Interviewer: It's quite an isolated space

:: [Participant G breaks down] ::

Two cisgender partners outlined narratives that attempted to explain the context in which this epistemic loneliness is rooted:

Sometimes you not even questioning but because some things are new to you, you can only but ask. You not asking from a place of ignorance, not asking would be ignorant, but asking is just trying to get more information and if the person you asking doesn't have information then it is ok, but at least it opens up some form of communication so when the information does become available you can bounce ideas again and chat more in depth...And then you find yourself feeling guilty like oh shit if I ask it may seem like I am... and then you don't ask and then you feeling all sorts of things inside and you know you going to explode for totally the wrong reason and you don't want to get to that stage... You can't explain it to other people and sometimes you can't even explain it to yourself. [N]

For Participant I, this epistemic loneliness emerged from a complex space. Both Participant I and her trans* partner found themselves in the same friendship circle. Similar to her process of working through the new knowledge of understanding her partner's new identity, the friends they could usually confide in were working through the same processes. She explained the difficulty in

approaching her friends for advice, while she is also their 'Trans* 101 trainer'. Simultaneously, the 'topic of discussion' she would like to explore, is the 'topic of discussion' they do not want to address:

Sometimes there are not spaces and it's hard because you're taken away from your friendship circles where you would usually talk about that stuff and you don't have your kind of partner necessarily to talk about that stuff with either... In fact my best girlfriend at that time, through a lot of [name]'s transition, she had her own very hard time with his transition. I mean, the thing is lesbians we often have very small friendship circles that are quite close. And you know everybody slept with everybody and you might have a dinner party and everybody has some kind of intimate relationship with everybody there. So you know, she had her own hard time about feeling like she was losing someone from her community and he was becoming a man, which, you know, she didn't love men. So, me talking about my difficulties or challenges or even magical stuff around our growing relationship or anything like that was not really accepted... Because [name]'s transition was a catalyst for a whole lot of people's questioning of their own identities and you know really deep stuff, so it ended up that even if I started a conversation talking about how I felt, it would end up – we would end up talking about how they felt. So that was kind of, I thought this conversation was about me? [1]

It seems that this epistemic loneliness emerges from the cisgender partner's real sense of knowing there is no one to confide in, or no one who would understand and empathise with her.

Methods of knowing: Oodles of Googles

Cisgender partners use various methods of finding information. In a country riddled with disparities in income and access to internet, not all interviewees have the means to pursue research online.

Two participants did not have access to the internet, one of whom was in a relationship with 'instructed silence' from a trans* partner who was withholding information. I recall a conversation Participant B and I had, in the beginning of her trans* partner's process in 2004 and referred to that in the interview:

Interviewer: ... is that the time that you received the most information? Or were there other times, other sources elsewhere that you...

Participant B: That was the very first time. I think you informed me the most

Interviewer: So that was basically your source of information?

Participant B: Yes

Another participant did not have access to the internet, but found her trans* partner forthcoming with information:

I did have questions, but because there was no one to ask I had to ask him... He had to give me answers, because he had no choice, otherwise where will... who else would have provide the information? So he's the one who knows that he has to give me answers. Yeah. So he, he really did tell me everything. The surgery and stuff cause that was the part that I was mostly afraid of like: 'will it be painful or what's gonna happen, how long will it take, how long will he be in hospital?' After that⁴⁴, will he be able to use the hands and see it was just a normal scar... If he provides the answers then I know then I can be able to help him... [A]

Participant C mentioned during the interview that 'this conversation' is one of her platforms to access information. Participant K notes that she learns from her partner's trans* friends. She says she is willing to learn, will ask around at Gender DynamiX and adds:

I'm not sure if there are books or anything, but there is an article that he [her partner] wrote, my partner wrote in an LGBTI magazine about how he expresses himself about being a transgendered man. I'm sure with that piece of information somebody else will learn more, but it's limiting. [K]

For those with access to the internet, online chat rooms and discussion forums on websites provide a space for trans* people and their partners to find peer support, Participant D says:

I think since [name]'s been on the Gender DynamiX forum⁴⁵... he's had a lot of friends that he might not be friends with but there's people he can talk to. I also started getting quite involved on the SOFFA forum, but that seemed to have just died down, people just moved on, or maybe they not with their partners anymore.

Reading books, online 'life story accounts' from trans* people and experiences from contexts different from one's own may be helpful, but there come a stage when a person needs more.

Participant G put it this way:

May way of finding information- it's very embarrassing, but I just read, but I know that in the stuff that I read, a lot of it is talking about American and European stories so people come from their own backgrounds and one of the things that I found in most of the books is that each story is unique... I know at the end of the day, I'm reading a manual to a camera, but it's not the model of camera I'm using. [G]

Finding information on the internet can be disheartening at times, as Participant E shared:

The first few times when I researched there were stories about transgendered people and the hardships they had to go through in society, especially in our black communities – there was

⁴⁴ Phalloplasty using fore-arm flap method.

⁴⁵ Gender DynamiX had a forum with three sections for trans* masculine, trans feminine and SOFFAs – from 2005 until 2012.

not a lot about black communities, by the way. So this was to me the first ever that I'm hearing about trans people in the black communities. And the fact that this person was from Soweto! I was like ok, um, you're from Soweto and you're a trans person, how on earth did you survive there? I've never stayed in a township before. I've always been brought up very modern. My family's from town and I know a mall and from a mall is home... So when I met him, it was like the first time I've come to a township. I learned quite a lot of things. And when I was researching, I was saddened by a lot of rejects that they will get from people, or the type of attitude that people will give them and, especially under Christian, um, lifestyles.*

One participant commented on the growing visibility of trans* information:

There is so much more information coming out now that what there was five years ago. I'm going to use my grandparents as an example. My grandparents never knew anything about trans-ing [sic]. And a couple of months ago, I walked in there and they said, Ahh, we just watched an operation on TV on a man that became a woman. Do you know what they did all? And for somebody of 75 to come to you and say, we know what trans is, whereas three years, two years prior, they would say gays, oh no, you don't even let them in, the mentality of people has changed due to the fact that information is so easily available now, more easily than what it was, even five years ago. [M]*

It is clear that cisgender partners have access to different platforms of gaining information and these sources vary in reliability. However, many challenges remain for partners who have no access to the internet, are not in close proximity to a trans* organisation or have no access to a person knowledgeable enough to share information.

When the interviewer becomes 'Agony Aunt'

While conducting these interviews, I was not aware of the depth of loneliness that some of the cisgender partners experienced, nor was I aware of the extent of need for information that some of the participants possessed. The interview process provided the opportunity for some of the partners to gain much needed information, which they otherwise would not receive. 'Instructed silence' was a serious reality for a number of cisgender partners. The interview became an exchange of knowledge. I approached them for the purpose of research and they were absolved of the blame attached to seeking information for themselves. They were then 'allowed' to talk to me. In a sense, both parties produced [new] knowledge, each with different objectives in mind.

Participant A enquired about a number of surgery related matters, including: the procedures, effect on reproductive systems, and hormones. It seems that she heard new information during the interview and she tried to digest the information, incorporating it into a self-analysis. During her processing she negotiated if he 'really' needs the procedures:

Oh uh hmm, but anyway if one wants to do it, who can say no? ... but it's not a must to do that, I mean, people don't have beards you don't have any breasts then you're a guy... but I mean, to like do the what you call it? Vaginectomy... yeah, I don't know? It's not... anyway who am I to say because I don't feel what they going through... people feel that they need to do this.

I looked through the transcript of the interview with Participant K. She asked about hormones, the effects and how they are administered, followed by more questioning:

I was just worried when it's time for hormones. I don't really know the process where it starts and where it ends... and I'm just too scared

Interviewer: [Explained]

Participant K: They are injected?

Interviewer: [Explained, one and half pages of transcript later...]

Participant K: Prompt for more information

Interviewer: [Explained one and half more pages]

Participant K: Just one more question, now....

Interviewer: [Two more pages, interspersed with another prompt, explanation continues]

Participant K: and another question...

Interviewer: [Explained last page]

Participant E had questions at the end of her interview, too:

Interviewer: Is there anything else you can think of regarding...

Participant E: No, but I would like to know more about the changes that are going to happen to my partner... So maybe if you can send me materials...

Throughout the interview, Participant F indicated signs of anxiety about intimacy. She was quite proactive and came prepared to the interview; she decided to make use of this interview 'opportunity':

And I actually have it in a little book here, but – do you want to see it?

Interviewer: oh, ok, if you want to.

Participant F: I was hoping to read it [questions] to you... My questions:: flips through book :: I can't find it now. Next time I'll show you, sorry about that...

Interviewer: No, it's not a problem. Don't worry... Do you feel you are supported with the information you'd like to know?

Participant F: I actually know quite a bit... but what is my role when it comes to sex? Because he's a man, but you know, the only thing...

Interview material analysed in this final section: 'Epistemological knowledge' shows that the first two subsections; 'Epistemic loneliness' and 'Oodles of Googles' explain or contribute to the context that formulates the need for an 'Agony Aunt'. Cisgender partners who experience isolation and lack access to any information were in dire need of 'consultation', seeking to redress their situation during the interview.

Conclusion

Data presented in this chapter emerged from very deep emotional spaces within the cisgender partners who shared information. They generate sophisticated narratives that resonate with feminist understandings of gender and sexuality, though most partners exist outside of the scholar's terrain in the ways they navigate their experiences on a daily basis. To imagine the role of being a woman or wife of a man means to inhabit a site of distress for many cisgender partners, especially the partners who identify along a lesbian continuum. It seems that most cisgender partners assumed a (sometimes self-imposed) role of co-creating gender, and the available 'template' of what this masculine gender should look like unanimously proved to be a heteronormative male role. The cisgender partners themselves struggle to fit into the prescribed heterosexual label, yet it seems that between themselves and their trans* partners, the heterosexual masculine role is the chosen role for all the trans* partners. Family expectations and scrutiny are housed under the assumption that the trans* partner will be a masculine heterosexual person only. Further cisgender partners observed how they (sometimes consciously) contribute to this stereotyping when conforming to the trans* partner's need, understood through his participation in gendered activities.

Open communication often was compromised by different forms of silence. Acts of silence include decisions about stealth and partners filtering communication to each other in order to protect each other's feelings. Instructed silence, when trans* partners prevent cisgender partners from seeking information or talking to others, creates spaces of loneliness and isolation. When cisgender partners or couples function in isolation and silence, they lack access to support, from families and friends.

The absence of trans* terminology does not always create confusion, it potentially opens opportunities for creatively localised alternatives. Intimacy provides two strong outlets for communication.

It seems that language, behaviour and negotiations (or the absence thereof) in the bedroom proves to be the domain to which patriarchy is invited as the third partner into most relationships. From cisgender partners it is also possible to learn that meaningful communication in all realms of a relationship forms a strong bond or partnership.

University of Cape Town

Forgotten to remember⁴⁶

[...]

Chorus

“She said she was so lonely
Wrapped up in the fabric of my past
I kept her in a bubble
Taken away her light
And she was so brave
The girl from which I grew
The choices that we make
Sacrifices that we take”

- Simon de Voil

⁴⁶ ‘Forgotten to remember’ is from Simon de Voil’s first solo album ‘Sacred Earth’ since his transition.

4. Discussion

Introduction

A mammoth amount of interesting information emerged through the data presented. Cisgender partners shared narratives of experiences in their relationships that were difficult for them because they were challenging, frustrating, perplexing and deeply intimate. The information offered was embedded in layers of cross-cutting values such as different aspects of language, culture, their understanding of masculinity and femininity, situated mostly within and communicated through heteronormative messages. Four themes surfaced significantly, and deserve deliberation. I present this final chapter by including these themes, after which I conclude the discussion with suggestions for possibilities to explore further research, which might build upon my findings here. In the first theme I will bring together literature and data I found in South Africa, discussing the labour of love, to more specifically establish who co-creates gender? The second theme looks at communication and silence, with a focus on different 'kinds' of silence and their impacts. The third theme investigates the double spectacle: do [lesbian] cisgender partners require policing to gain control? The final theme unravels the possibility that cisgender-trans couples are well accepted in society, regardless of their sexual orientation, if they are willing and able to commit to a heteronormative script.

4.1 Labour of love: what does it take to create gender and who is involved?

The co-creation of gender requires 'collective work that produces and sustains gender'. Ward (2010: 238) explains that 'FTM identities remain reliant upon labours of femininity that nurture and witness them'. A few participants gave examples of actively contributing to the co-creation of gender by injecting their partners. Participant K mentioned that she includes her trans* partner on her medical scheme. Another example is Participant M who assists in the co-creation of gender by 'protecting' her partner's trans* status and ensuring that no one will accidentally walk in the restroom to discover her partner. This nurturing has an emotional impact (Ward, 2010: 251). Participant G repeatedly experienced emotional strain when her trans* partner was publicly addressed with the wrong pronouns. Cisgender partners often experience the consequences of failing to facilitate the creation of gender. Participant N mentioned that even holding hands in the 'wrong way' became a

cause for an argument. A number of cisgender partners happily engage in 'Trans 101 Training', but that potentially results in situations where a person is involved in a constant process of defending, positioning and explaining oneself. What started off as an information session might become a habit and eventually can lead to a laborious process.

Through the findings I presented, it became evident that cisgender-trans relationships are riddled with the collective 'gender labour', as Ward calls it. This co-production of gender seems to be motivated 'to validate and celebrate their partners' masculinity' (Ward, 2010: 236). Participant E named a few family events where her partner's masculinity was celebrated through participation in very gender segregated cultural traditions.

A few partners described the result of the co-creation of gender as a compromise on the level of sexual and emotional intimacy. Participant G says she lost her confidence in bed to the point that she was scared to do something that could potentially lead to two weeks of no sex. Brown (2010: 569) points out that sex shaped around supporting a person's gender identity issues can take an emotional toll and lead to sexual deficit or 'burn out'. Negative body image affects intimate relationships negatively and impacts how trans* men and their partners engage in mutually-fulfilling sexual and non-sexual intimacy (Pfeffer, 2008: 326). Participant B attested to this, saying they had sex about four times a year, during which her partner '*shudders for his own body*'. Participant H says there at the request of her partner, there is no sex between them, which makes her feel '*less loved*', though she later learnt other strategies of validation in the space of intimacy. Ward (2010: 246) explains that femmes give gender to FTMs by offering moments of realness and compensating for gendered shortcomings. Participant M explained how she draw on her love making skills of both experiences with cisgender men and cisgender women to combine these in building her partner up, sexually stimulating him, but concluded '*will this part of his anatomy ever please me?*'.

Realising the challenges and emotional burdens my interview participants shared, I have no choice but to agree with Ward (2010: 237) when she illuminates that cisgender partners 'suppress the complexity of their own gender and sexual subjectivity in the service of this goal'. Participant A shared her complex confusion, thinking for months she was dating a lesbian, while being prejudiced towards same-sex relationships, which resulted in deep emotional inner conflict. In 'Becoming a visible man', Jamison Green shared his great relief when his former partner said she wanted him to be happy and it gave 'courage to risk the unknown' as she would 'continue to appreciate me' (2004: 23). According to Lev, transitioning issues from the cisgender partners' side often lead to neglecting the self, while attention is given to matters such as betrayal, fear of social ostracism and an

unknown future for themselves and their children. This can be a time of emotional distress (Lev, 2004: 279).

Even in a conspicuously patriarchal society such as South Africa, some cisgender men are supporting other [new] trans* men entering the club. Participant A reflected that her partner and his family will offer lobola to her family. The tradition of lobola entails the male family members of the groom conducting a meeting and agreeing on a 'price' or arrangement that will be offered to the bride's family. Again only the bride's male family members take part in this negotiation. For his family to have reached the point of deciding that they will enter lobola discussions, they already discussed it internally. His male [and female] family member supports and assists in the co-creation of his gender. At the time that Participant A was interviewed, we did not know yet if her family would reciprocate in the lobola discussions. What makes this collective co-creation of gender by [mostly male] family members significant is that they are engaging in a process that ultimately supports heteronormativity. The purpose of all of these family discussions is to unify two people in the most acclaimed, ultimate heterosexual act. By getting married all questions of inconspicuous gender identity will be resolved. Are they supporting [only] his gender identity or are they supporting the couple's wish to be recognised in heterosexual marriage, therefore proving their 'normality'? The co-creation of gender in this case is to facilitate the couple's efforts to conform to a heteronormative script.

4.2 Communication: silence is not golden

In my analysis chapter, a sub-theme, 'The silence becomes noisy' emerged from the theme 'Communication'. In it, I uncovered the impact of silence and discussed various silences. Signs of silence and multiple acts of silence are woven through the entire analysis and in this discussion theme; I will try to bring all of the noisy silences and their impacts together.

Acts of silence include decisions to live a stealth life. Self-imposed silence occurs when partners filter information or communication to each other in order to protect each other from hurtful comments and opinions they hear. One example by Participant C was when she noted that her mother-in-law phones her partner's brother on father's day, but not her own trans* partner. Such silences can lead to the deterioration of communication. Participant N laments that *'you can't explain it to other people; sometimes you can't even explain it to yourself'*. This clearly indicates that silence oftentimes becomes the site of loneliness or isolation. Another aspect of silence is communicated through

cultural expectations; Participant K panicked and asked a rhetorical question. Not sure what would be expected from her relationship with an African man, she said: *'To be an African wife, to be able to listen when I'm told without asking questions...'*

Active silence occurs when trans* partners decide not to communicate information to their cisgender partners. Additionally, when the trans* person decides to live a completely stealth life, the situation can lead to a life-long existence of filtered communication and many types of silence. Ward (2010) speaks of the 'labour of forgetting' when the cisgender partners play a central role in erasing a feminine history, in turn providing a masculine realness. Participant M constantly mentioned examples of scenarios where she co-created gender by not only employing the skill of 'forgetting' but also providing a masculine reality.

A number of cisgender partners mentioned that they are supported by a good friend, who shares all the 'woman talk' moments with them. Participant D refers to these friends as *'my true friends who stuck with me all along'*. However, when one begins to closely examine those friendships, especially for Participant D, L, M and C, all of those friends either employed the labour of forgetting, or the cisgender partner did not disclose her partner's trans* status. Silences build up to multiple complications that play out differently for the couples who deliberately employ silence. Participant D narrated a very complicated situation when the exposure of her partner's trans* status left them in a dire emotional and financial situation which also made a huge impact on the mother's life. Brown (2002: 21) cautions that the authenticity of sexual minority women is often questioned. Similarly, Participant K pointed out that she thinks her credibility as a lesbian activist is under scrutiny. For some cisgender partners in situations of silence or lesbian partners who are excluded from community spaces where they previously had right of access, there is a definite message of being silenced. Participant I says: *'You become invisibilised. You're the non-person'*. Lev (2004: 279) pointed out that for many lesbians who are sexually involved with a man and hence perceived as heterosexual; dealing with these assumptions becomes a very troubling experience which results in conflict.

I found 'Instructed silence' to be the noisiest silence of all kinds of silence. Among my interview participants, a few cisgender partners were prevented from talking to anyone or seeking advice. In these relationships, the trans* partner provided reasons such as his prominence as an activist in the community and the negative impact on their credibility if their partners need information or space to debrief, counselling or conversations about their relationship with other people. Instructed silence becomes loud and noisy because, as I indicated, it is 'instructed'. I reason that it adds an

intensified layer to the silence. It is different than when a trans* person or couple discusses and decides to live a stealth life. That silence is lonely, but it is consensual. When a person [the cisgender partner in this case] is instructed not only to be silent, but prevented from reaching out when they need information or are lonely, it borders on violation. It is emotional abuse. These instructions and other related masculine behaviours are communicated as 'instructions'. When communicated as an order from a masculine person, it is rooted in patriarchy. It concerns me that most of the instructed silence was from trans* partners who are activists. The following quote from Baderoon (2011: 408) resonates well:

Presenting perhaps the most intractable problem, there are understandable concerns among feminists, including trans and other queer feminists, about the continuing problem of patriarchy, which does not go away when people change genders.

Reading through the data it became evident that all other communication channels in those relationships were in crisis too. The instructed silence was intensified for one cisgender partner who's trans* partner did not communicate any trans* related information to her: he reasoned it is his body, his life and he is a 'private person'. Participant B was not employed and they did not have access to internet at home. She experienced a deep turmoil of loneliness under 'instructed silence'. The exaggeration of epistemic loneliness is unmistakably visible from the cisgender partners who reported instructed silence. The amplified awareness of loneliness without anywhere to turn creates the intensity of feeling that I call 'epistemic loneliness'.

4.3 Double spectacle: [lesbian] cisgender partners – policing required to gain control?

A theme that emerged with strong anecdotes from cisgender partners about curiosity and more specific 'scrutiny' deserves elaborated discussion. A few participants noted their dissolution when they realised gender control was often employed by other people in the LGBT community, and in most of the interview participants' cases from lesbians. I closed the section in my analysis covering 'lesbian policing' with a question pointing to the possible root of such scrutiny. On the one hand there is the masculine identifying trans* partner who become the 'dowdy and ugly' (Halberstam interviewed by Williams 2011: 364). Then there are women, like Participant N who were told by cisgender heterosexual men: 'oh that's the kind of guy you like... you don't like them real like us'. These women became the addition to form a 'double spectacle'. Besides this noted curiosity of heterosexual men, all the other cisgender partners who reported experiences of scrutiny noted that

the policing was by lesbians. Twice, Participant J had the experience of being ill advised by lesbian gynaecologists about her sexual activities with a trans* man involving dildo-sex. Participant I and her trans* partner had a particularly hard time with their circle of friends. I use the description 'double spectacle' when cisgender partners admittedly and publicly subvert gender notions and reject their [lesbian] community scripts, siding themselves with the 'other'. By default, they then become part of the spectacle, providing the double spectacle.

'No one knows better than members of a minority to police their own' (Califia, 1997). Bringing gender (identity) into the discussion complicate matters further, it is been said that trans* people further problematise affairs by blurring the lines between women and men. (Califia, 1997) In a similar way any people ascribing to a variety of labels, which are transgressing the accepted heteronormative and 'secondary' homonormative are 'problematic'. Califia continues (1997: 103) by stating:

'Unfortunately, certain segments of the gay male and lesbian communities have already taken steps to distance themselves from bisexuals, transgendered people, sadomasochists, and anybody else who doesn't fit into assimilationist politics.'

According to Nyamora (2004: 120) femmes and lesbian partners in White communities experienced more policing and control than those who are in Communities of Colour. This finding is based on a larger visibility of the butch-femme discourse with people in Communities of Colour, which leads to a more flexible supportive community. In contrast, Nyamora's study, White communities with a lesser presence of butch-femme representations are less supportive. In the South African context, it is difficult to find substantial evidence for or against this finding, but the important point is to ensure substantial contemplation along racial and ethnic lines.

Participants I, N, G and K and their respective trans* partners, are all in individual capacities, well known for their activism in many LGBTI and feminist spaces towards equality, human rights and social justice in South Africa and other African countries. Having to shift an identity in its totality not only erases a history of her (their) activism and community participation, but may also lead to devastating emotions such as depression (Cook-Daniels, 1999: 1). They are known for their accomplishment in the lesbian and gay community at large or in the smaller circle surrounding them. Some lesbians took on them such kind of activism, which are not always situated in the organised LGBTI sector, but in spheres of their own lives, to ensure better labour, medical, social and other conditions for themselves, their partners, their relationships and life in general.

Sexual minority partners of masculine identifying trans* persons (including the trans* persons and the couples) are challenged with many prejudices, accompanied by the sense of loss of community (Lev, 2004; Brown, 2009; Cook-Daniels, 1998, 1999; Shackleton in Judge, Manion & de Waal eds. 2008 and Theron, 2009). Many times, the trauma of a 'loss in community', is not only a translation of a feeling of loss, but is accompanied by scrutiny. For some cisgender partners or cisgender-trans* couples, it is the result of a choice they made after (prolonged) exclusion, scrutiny, prejudice and incidents of rejection.

I want to return to what unfolds in the sub-section under 'Epistemic loneliness' when Participant I dismantles the intricate space in lesbian communities, offering a possible contribution to internalised trans*phobia. The statement compliments what Califia (1997) argues, that trans* people blur gender lines. The 'lesbian policing' gets complicated when people in the lesbian community do not know who exactly to police. Participant I mentions that in '*very small friendship circles that are quite close*'...'*everybody slept with everybody*'. Lev (2004: 279) points out that many lesbians that are sexually involved with a man, are perceived as heterosexual. This notion becomes a very troubling experience and may create conflict. I want to agree and argue that Lev's statement is considered, but usually in context of the 'official' cisgender partner of the masculine identifying trans* person. Nothing has been said about the numerous sexual partners that the trans* person may have had in the lesbian community, prior to his coming out as trans* and who are now investigating their own sexualities. In these communities, there is a collective memory of sexual experiences that employs a collective scrutiny and eventually results in the community members collectively policing the 'culprit' and his partner.

4.4 Elize and Gertie: heteronormativity runs through it

In this fourth theme, I want to bring together a few observations from multiple themes in the analysis chapter, to support my suggestion for consideration that regardless of the sexual orientation of an individual – the ability to comply and adjust to fit into a heteronormative mould results in acceptance of the two individuals and as a couple, within a cisgender-trans* couple context.

As departure point, I am returning to Elize van der Merwe and Gertie Williams in my literature review in the South African sub-section: '*Gender perspectives through an intersex and trans* lens*'. Both of them were at the time, in mainstream media and widely published: Williams in the 1950's

(Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2009, Chetty in Gevisser, Cameron, eds, 1994) and van der Merwe in the early 1980's (Daily Dispatch, 1982; Rapport, 1982; Elize van der Merwe collection -archival material GALA). Van der Merwe had gotten positive feedback from her exposure in media and received hundreds of letters in support through the mail (Collection -archival material GALA). Williams was known as the 'cross-dressing lesbian gangster'. Williams was deviant and was clearly not fitting into a respectable heteronormative mould. Van der Merwe's support was undoubtedly due to her unfortunate circumstances; when a fiancé left her 'in the cold', un-married. She had aspirations. She wanted to get married and fit into a heterosexual life style. Williams was uncontrollable. Williams 'hated to be a woman' (Chetty, 1994: 129) and when Williams received a proposal, Williams⁴⁷ replied: 'I am a man myself, so you'll have to forget about it' (Chetty, 1994: 130).

Looking a bit closer at the interview participants and their trans* partners in this research with marriage in mind, it seems that the desire to be married becomes a tool of acceptance. Discussed before, Participant A's partner's family will enter lobola negotiations. Participant M self defines as bisexual; she and her trans* partner are married and through artificial insemination, have a child. Participant I identifies as dyke and lesbian; she and her trans* partner are married. She mentioned in her interview:

'I'm married now. That's a very heterosexual thing to do... And for all intents and purposes, actually we have a really conventional heterosexual relationship in spite of my best efforts. We pretty much fit into that and I'm not really resisting anymore or feeling like I need to explain anything to anyone. [I]

A number of cisgender partners noted that their trans* partners had a lesbian history. Collectively, these trans* people's family, friends and support structures, know this. The cisgender-trans* couples in my research that manage to gain acceptance as couples and integrate well in society, present as heterosexual (at least from the outsider's gaze).

In my attempt to construct this suggestion point of acceptance, it is important to not be fixated on the cisgender women's sexual orientation, but rather to shift the gaze to their individual presentations and to the cisgender-trans* couple as a unit. I want to borrow from Dozier's (2005:304) usage of the 'perceived sex' and speak of the mixed dyad couple's perceived heterosexuality/ heteronormativity. There are a number of relationships that manage to adapt well

⁴⁷ I am cognisant that I repetitively use 'Williams' – it is to avoid pronouns. It does not feel right to use a female pronoun for a person who made such explicit, remarks of resistance about their gender identity.

in their communities. If one looks closer, it was seemingly possible for some cisgender partners to 'occupy the role of the girl' (Ward, 2010: 243). This willingness to fit into a heteronormative position enables the couple to enjoy the same [perceived] privileges that heteronormative life offers. The rewards are well worth it. Participant D's mother had an engagement party for them. Participant A's partner's family plans to 'close the deal' on heteronormative acceptance by offering lobola. Participant C's mother and uncle joined them for lunch when they married. Participants I, L and M also enjoy blissful and interactive family life.

The opposite was true for couples that do not confirm to heteronormativity. Participant D's happy days were soon over when an anonymous emailer alerted her mother to the '*lesbian her daughter is about to get married to*'.

To behave defiantly and outside of heteronormative expectations may not only punished by family, friends, the lesbian police and society, but also oftentimes by the trans* partners. Participant N did not only make a mistake of pulling out a chair for a trans* friend of her partner, it was in front of people. It was a public mistake. The acknowledgment of the mistake was demonstrated publicly to ensure she, and other guests, take note that he will not sit on a chair that is pulled out for him by a woman. The trans* friend then proceeded to communicate the message through her partner as a spokesperson. She was eventually reprimanded through all possible channels for her grave mistake. At that moment, Participant N decided that the most well placed response would be to continue with gendered dialogue that they would understand and ask that her partner pour her a glass of wine. The following finding from Dozier's (2005:304) paper resonates:

When sex is ambiguous or less convincing, there is increased reliance on highly gendered behaviour; when sex is obvious, then there is considerably more freedom in behaviour.

Nagoshi et al (2012: 413) found in their research that the self-construction of gender roles with their interview participants remained stereotypical. The experiences conveyed in my interviews indicate the same sentiment. The cisgender partners who constantly objected or who were in identity and power dynamic struggles with their trans* partners, also had more significant problems fitting into a heteronormative mould. The cisgender partners who posed as heterosexual, or at least who were able to conform to a heterosexual script, had relationships with fewer repercussions from society and from their own partners. Brown remarked in her research discussion:

...preliminary support for Califia's 1997 suggestion that bisexual women may be best prepared to 'handle the contradictions of a relationship with an FTM (Brown 2009: 22).

In my research with fourteen (N=14) cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans* men, I managed to interview and gather experiences of women with a variety sexual orientations. Five identify as heterosexual, three as bisexual and six identify across a lesbian spectrum. One of those six participants alternates between lesbian and tomboy and another uses 'dyke' as a political identity. In my observations, their ability to adjust or conform to what might be perceived as a heteronormative lifestyle, guaranteed society's view of relationship success. Their relationships and the manner in which they choose to construct their families are validated (Scott, 2013: 157). In contradiction, the cisgender partners who manage to conform to a lesser degree of heteronormativity, or contribute to relationships that are perceived as heterosexual, were also in constant conflict with their adaptation and acceptance of their relationships. I want to conclude that it appears that the greatest 'labour of love' is then, the labour to perform heterosexuality.

Conclusion

With this discussion, it becomes evident that in my findings that cisgender partners are participating in various forms of labour of love. Contributing to the earlier findings of Ward (2010), I want to suggest that in order to co-create gender, cisgender partners are supported by family members in the co-creation process. It seems that heteronormativity becomes the ulterior motive for the co-creation of gender. Silence, or acts of silence, presents itself in many forms, in which instructed silence has the most significant impact on cisgender partner's emotional wellbeing. When instructed silence is partnered with isolation, a deep epistemological loneliness becomes unbearable. The couples in a double spectacle phenomenon, where both the cisgender partner and the trans* masculine person are punished for subverting the order and blurring the gender lines. They can somewhat correct this by indicating their conformity, or at least their desire of living a 'normal'/ heterosexual life by keeping their sexual orientation where it 'belong' – in the bedroom or at home.

Suggestions for further research

As previously indicated throughout this thesis, it is evident that cisgender-trans* relationships as a broad theme in South Africa, is a new research topic. Research can be conducted in many directions, and contributes to both a South African and International canon in both transgender studies and in the cisgender-trans* discourse. My personal research interest may potentially lead me to further examine the impact of heteronormative desire and how that ultimately shapes the trans* movement in Africa. Another research interest I have is concerning cisgender-trans* couples

and intimacy. I would like to learn more about how intimate spaces are negotiated in South Africa and Africa, situated in a patriarchal society, which provides patriarchal role models. The trans* movement is internally struggling to find its feet within spaces that are marked with trans* power imbalances, with existing tensions between the trans* patriarchs and trans* feminists. How do intimate relationships within those realities look? If the personal becomes political, then this intersection between cisgender-trans* relationships' intimate spaces and the shape of the trans* movement in South Africa and Africa is an important one to investigate. There are legions of options that still need exploration, but those mentioned here will shape my future scholarly interest.

Conclusion

I approached this research with the motivation to combine both my personal activism and empirical knowledge, and formalise that collective knowledge through the production of scholarship. I vastly expanded my knowledge through the literature that was produced and situated in the global North. As a feminist who binds them self to transgender theory, I also understand the importance of recognising the identities of the locality I find myself in. Given this, I therefore reject global-North-by-default-terminology. I found support in this approach through the work of Lenning, who suggested that language and the usage of terminology should seriously be considered throughout the research design. I presented literature generated from South Africa, to contextualise the realities in which cisgender-trans* couples negotiate their daily lives. The work on labour of love by Ward, has a significant influence on my own work and immensely guided my deliberations through the analysis process. It strikes me how important the work of Swarr's *Sex in Transition* is, as contribution to the South African transgender studies canon. Beyond that, Swarr's work amplifies the imperative need to include knowledge of gender identity in other [read mainstream] scholar and political platforms. Transgender/ trans* does not only belong within marginalised and visibly limited research areas. I seriously considered the suggestion made by Nyamora, that research participants should not be recruited solely from one demographic; usually being from people in White communities and then conclusions generalised and applied to people from all communities. Brown's (2009) research findings indicate that sexual-minority women who are able to adjust or renegotiate their sexuality are able to consolidate their new identity as the partner of a trans* masculine person. I have made the observation that cisgender partners (as individuals) and cisgender-trans* couples who are able to adjust and conform to heteronormativity or live as 'perceived' heterosexual couples, are well accepted in their communities.

This pilot research exploring the cisgender-trans* couples lives in South Africa, was a relatively small study. Qualitative research is not interested in proving the importance of the findings through sample size and the quantity of experiences or occurrences. I managed to present findings under a broad thematic section which forms a foundation for future research explorations. It leaves open many options for analysis. I hold the opinion that my findings in this research are significant and not only pioneer a foundation for future research located in South Africa, but contribute to an international cisgender-trans* canon.

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Annexure: Guided interview questions

My guiding questions:

1. *Introduce yourself*
2. *Before you were in this relationship, how would you define your sexual orientation?*
3. *How long are/were you in this relationship?*
4. *Where and when did you meet?*
5. *When / how did you find out re your partner being trans*?*
6. *Your family's reaction?*
7. *His parents / family?*
8. *Your friends?*
9. *[Work places]*
10. *[Public spaces]*
11. *Disclosing/ outing*
12. *Kind of relationship: monogamous, open, committed etc?*
13. *Engage, plans of marriage etc?*
14. *Children- any plans?*
15. *Where do you access info re trans*/ his transitioning etc?*
16. *Are you involved in his decisions re his transition?*
17. *If you need to talk about [your] relationship challenges /heart talk – with whom do you talk?*
18. *Do you experience any challenges because your partner is trans*?*
19. *The way how you perceive femininity and masculinity, how would you describe that?*
20. *Roles/ “gender roles” in your relationship?*
21. *Intimacy – what, how [regular] any changes since he is on hormones etc – if any transition started...*
22. *Emotions, mood swings... & intimacy?*
23. *Is there anything you would like to add or ask?*