

THE DANGER OF SEEING TRANSGENDER PEOPLE, PARTNERSHIPS, AND FAMILIES AS “BORN THAT WAY”

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At state and federal levels, gay men and lesbians have won striking victories in having their relationships and families legally recognized. Legal recognition of same-sex marriage and inclusion of “out” gay men and lesbians in the military have advanced as Americans shift views on why people are gay or lesbian and *how* they become gay or lesbian in the first place. Increasingly, mainstream views are summed up by Lady Gaga’s hit, “Born This Way.” If gay men and lesbians cannot change their sexual orientation, then they should not be legally discriminated against when it comes to joining institutions like the military or marriage.

But not everyone embraces these ideas. In my earlier research, I have shown that convictions about the genetic or biological basis of gay and lesbian identities do not always lead to increased support for gay men and lesbians, just as (mistaken) beliefs about the biological grounding of racial identities have not ended racism. What is more, insistence on biological determinants tends to preclude alternative understandings of gender and sexual identities as grounded in personal choices or complex sets of factors.

Ambiguities and Paradoxes for Transgender Partnerships and Families

Consider, for example, women who are partnered with transgender men. Use of testosterone among some transgender men leads to development of facial hair, a deeper voice, and redistribution of body fat. Some transgender men also use fabric binders or surgeries to flatten their chests. In many states and jurisdictions, transgender men are able to legally change their names and sex designators from “female” to “male,” making them indistinguishable from non-transgender men. A considerable number of women who partner with transgender men, therefore, report being perceived as unremarkably heterosexual or part of a heterosexual couple. This is especially true if the couple is raising young children. Many assume this situation to be socially advantageous, but my experience interviewing women partners of transgender men suggests that the story is much more complex.

Over a period of two years, I conducted in-depth interviews with fifty women partners of transgender men. The majority of these women had previously identified as lesbian. Some had lesbian-identified partners who “transitioned” to live life as a man, while others met their transgender partner during or following his transition. For some of these women, being perceived by family or strangers as heterosexual or part of a heterosexual partnership did have its perks. Such women reported being accepted and welcomed in a way they had not experienced when they were perceived as lesbian or part of a lesbian couple. For instance, they noticed older couples smiling at them as they held their transgender partner’s hand in public – something they had not often experienced when seen as a lesbian couple. Some women also told me their parents were relieved and felt vindicated in thinking their daughter’s lesbianism had simply been a

“phase” they would outgrow. Paradoxically, this newfound acceptance confirmed the true depth of homophobia that exists in their families and communities.

Many of the women I interviewed did not take comfort in the perception that they were in a heterosexual relationship. Many said they valued their *queer* identities and felt both sadness and anger at having it erased or misrecognized by others. This was especially true when they felt that their queer identity was invisible to other members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. For example, women reported previously feeling a sense of camaraderie and recognition when encountering other lesbian couples, something they lost when their partner transitioned. In a sense, this group of women felt challenged by others’ failure to recognize them as they saw themselves – as queer women. And many reported that their transgender partner experienced discrimination within social locations previously considered “safe spaces” – such as gay and lesbian bars, clubs, and social events. Some reported that bathrooms became especially dangerous spaces for their transgender partners because of gender policing by others – even by those who are lesbian or gay-identified themselves.

For this group of women, sexual identity is not experienced as simply a product of biology or nature, something that they were born into. Their identities and relationships could not easily be subsumed into the categories of lesbian or heterosexual; and bisexual was an untenable category for some, since their partner could not be assured that they were attracted to them as a man rather than as a woman. Existing labels no longer quite fit them or their partnerships. Despite the fact that they were often perceived as heterosexual, they did not want to be perceived in this way. Instead, many understood their identities and partnerships as a challenge to the social status quo and discussed their commitments to politically advancing social equality. Espousing queer labels offered more wiggle room for them to define their own identities, partnerships, and families. They often understood identities, partnerships, and families in a more expansive way.

Social and Policy Implications

This research suggests a number of actionable conclusions:

- Rights claims grounded in ideas that people are “born this way” should be approached with caution. Rather, rights should be extended to members of stigmatized and marginalized groups without regard to specifying how people became members of such groups.
- Discussions of stigmatized and marginalized groups should sharpen understandings of the social processes and mechanisms by which stigma, marginalization, and discrimination operate, rather than focusing on the people who are *targets* of exclusion and stigma.
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, partnerships, families, and communities must not be classified or understood as damaged, inferior, or less-than others; instead, possibilities for understanding them as social barometers or innovators should be explored.
- Institutions, individuals, and groups must take care not to marginalize or exclude members of the transgender community and their loved ones. Gender policing and exclusionary practices and policies can be subtle as well as overt, and fighting discrimination means taking active steps to avoid these social ills.

Read more in Carla A. Pfeffer, “[I Don’t Like Passing as a Straight Woman’: Queer Negotiations of Identity and Social Group Membership](#).” *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 1 (2014):1-44.