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The impact of the gender binary on gender nonconforming females' lives and psyches over time : an exploratory study

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of the systematically imposed gender binary on the lives and psyches of gender non-conforming females over time. To pursue this qualitative research, I conducted single, exploratory, hour-long interviews with eight gender nonconforming females aged 59 years and older. The interviews touched upon many themes including the multiple ways participants' identify their gender, sex, and sexuality (and the developmental trajectory of each); how each participant relates to notions of the gender binary; participants' experiences as gender nonconforming young people, or "tomboys"; ways that families, institutions and the general public have performed regulatory acts through the employment of manipulation, discrimination, and/or violence against participants' non conforming gender presentations; participants' various expressions of "female masculinity"; participants' accumulative experiences of the stresses of living as a gender minority; and participants coping strategies and resilience in the face of discrimination. Because there is little-to-no literature on the cumulative effects of the gender binary on gender nonconforming individuals' lives, nor is there readily available literature exploring the experiences of gender nonconforming females, this research works to expand social work discourse in this way.

The Impact of the Gender Binary on Gender Nonconforming Females'

Lives and Psyches Over Time:

An Exploratory Study

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The archetypal "man and woman" as representational of the essential human dyad has overwhelmingly shaped Western discourse. We see this gendered pair as *the* crucial characters in our fairy tales, novels and films; in our legal discourses that recognize one as either one or the other and only legally binds one to the *other* through marriage; in the fundamental theories that psychology has built itself upon—such as the Oedipal complex and beyond. As I will explore in the literature review, even the very language we use fails in recognizing gender expressions outside of this binary gender construction. Despite Western notions that there are but two genders, those who defy gender norms exist and persist in the form of the "sissy" or "tomboy"; the butch woman or the fey man; in the form of intersexed people, transgendered people, genderqueers, crossdressers, or as transsexuals. The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of the systematically imposed gender binary on the lives and psyches of gender non-conforming females over time.

There is little-to-no empirical data exploring the cumulative effects of minority stress experienced by gender nonconforming people over time. Additionally, there is little-to-no data that seeks to explore or even acknowledge the existence of gender nonconforming females, let alone gender nonconforming female elders. For this reason, I chose to conduct a exploratory, qualitative study that has started to address the lives and experiences of gender nonconforming females aged 59 and older with the hopes that my participants' experiences will help to shed light on issues of the stress, oppression, and resiliency experienced by gender nonconforming

individuals that have long remained invisible or relegated to the shadows. Because my interest was to research the impact of the gender binary on the lives and psyches of gender nonconforming female *over time,* my participants' ages were crucial.

And although people who do not conform to gender norms have existed throughout recorded history (Feinberg, 1996, pp. xi-xii) and continue to exist, there is little acknowledgement of their existence in our cultural discourses. Social work and social psychological literature continues to very much rely on hegemonic notions of gender as essential and the gender binary as "natural". (McPhail, 2004, p. 3). Not only does this insistence that gender is essential (vs. a social construct) shape the literature to render certain gendered lives unthinkable (and thus impossible), it also forecloses the possibility of lives lived outside of the gender binary.

If gender nonconforming lives are rendered invisible, impossible, unthinkable, the complexity of such lives goes unexplored. By insisting that there are simply men and women and 'that is all', and that these identities develop naturally, social work and social psychological discourses escape having to examine the ways that these seemingly simple assumptions about gender can wreak havoc and violence upon those who do not fit safely within the gender binary. Thus, it seems crucial that social work discourse, with its commitment to issues of social justice as is expressed by the National Association of Social Workers (2008) in their Code of Ethics begin to examine this issue (p. 5). Further, expansion on the complexity of gender identity only aids in preparing social work clinicians to be better allies to their gender-variant clients. It is for these reasons that this research and research that considers gender nonconformity going forward is now necessary.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The Gender Binary

The English language makes little room for possibilities beyond the dyadic notions of masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female. Intrinsic to this dyadic formulation, "men" are necessarily "male" and "masculine" and the "opposite" follows for women (Butler, 1990, p. 8). The O.E.D. (2011) defines "man" as "An adult male human being, and senses principally based on this. **a.** Contrasted with a woman." And "masculine" as "Of a personal attribute, an action, etc.: having a character befitting or regarded as appropriate to the male sex; vigorous, powerful. Of a man: manly, virile" (OED, 2010). Even the word "androgynous", as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2011) reinstates this gender binary, defined as something inclusive of *both* male and female rather than existing as a third (or fourth or fifth, for that matter) thing. The O.E.D.'s (2011) definition is as follows: "Androgynous: 1. Uniting the (physical) characters of both sexes, at once male and female; hermaphrodite" (OED, 2011). The gender binary is reinforced through the very language we use.

Despite the hegemonic nature of this gender binary, variation exists and persists in the form of the "sissy" or "tomboy"; the butch woman or the fey man; in intersexed people, in transgendered people, in genderqueers, crossdressers, or in transsexuals. Often, these variations are deemed "pathological", supported by the current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders that includes a "Gender Identity Disorder" (A.P.A., 2000, pp. 576-582), or are considered, more colloquially, "unnatural", as they stray from our current

essentializing gender "norms". These variations are also perceived as linked to or one in and of the same as those with homosexual orientations, as the literature will show, so that masculine men are assumed to have a heterosexual orientation while feminine men (or men with qualities perceived as feminine) are often assumed to have a homosexual orientation. The conflation sexuality and gender prevalent in our language and discourses means that gender variance that manifests itself outside of the gender binary, as something unto itself, often gets over looked.

The notion that there are multiple genders, multiple ways of inhabiting ones body with relation to genders regardless of ones biology, or that psychologically sound people can either conform or refuse to conform to our culture's gender norms seems missing from much of the Social Work and Social Psychology literature (McPhail, 2004, p. 3). If the literature is there, I have located it only sparsely, and when it does exist, it seems to be desperately trying to make sense of and to categorize gender nonconformity within the catchall term "transgender" (Fassinger and Arseneau, 2006). McPhail (2004) defines the term "transgender" as "an umbrella term to include anyone who challenges the boundaries of gender and sexuality" (p. 9).

Identity Terminology

While identity terminology is important, as it gives us language around which to build community (McPhail, 2004, p. 4), it is also necessarily insufficient as a descriptor of the very thing it aims to describe. McPhail (2004) writes: "using categories to classify people can be limiting and harmful, as well as inaccurate. Categories misclassify, exclude, and reduce the complexity of an individual's identity" (p. 4). For instance, not everyone who is gender nonconforming, i.e. those whose gender expressions do not conform to binary constructs of man/woman, male/female, or masculine/feminine, identifies as or would even think to identify with the term transgender (Fassinger and Arseneau, 2006, p. 23). The term transgender, now

nearly ubiquitous, has been infused with multiple and static meanings of its own that necessarily leave much out.

Resisting Norms

If we view gender nonconformists as those engaged in an action— as those who refuse to, are unable to, who resist conforming to gender norms, we are not simply referring to those who self-define as transgendered, or as butch, or as lesbian, or with any particular identity term, per se (though all of those terms are utilized in the literature). Instead, we refer to those, who by their very being gender nonconforming, challenge the hegemonic binary of man/woman, male/female, and masculine/feminine by literally *not conforming* to a set of norms deemed "natural". We refer to those who resist the powerful discourses that posit gender as essential. Butler (2004) writes:

> …a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the
> exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a *regulatory* operation of power
> that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption.
> (p. 43)

According to Butler (2004), the gender binary is posited as *natural* and any aberration *unthinkable* (p. 24). And so what happens when one, assuming gender to be an exclusively binary construct, comes face to face with someone who lives the unthinkable; lives a gender that exists outside of the binary?

On Being 'Perceived as Gay'

This past year, the mainstream media in the United States such as ABC news (Hubbard, 2010), MSNBC news (Mulvihill, 2010), the New York Times (McKinley, 2010), and the Huffington Post (Graves, 2010; Koplewicz, 2010) turned its focus on a rash of what it has termed

"gay teen suicides". One of a few articles in the Huffington Post on this topic entitled "Gay Teen Suicides Pervasive, A 'Hidden Problem'" (Graves, 2010) reports that while current media attention covering gay teen suicides is a new phenomenon, teen suicide, and in particular, LGBT teen suicides have long been rampant. " 'While it's great to have this topic in the news, unfortunately this isn't news. This is an issue that has been going on for a long time,' said Leigh Powers, head of Information Services at the Suicide Prevention Resource Center" (Graves, 2010). The article also reported that lesbian, gay and transgender teens are "between roughly 1.5 and 7 times more likely then heterosexual youth to have reported attempting suicide" (Graves, 2010).

The major news sources listed above published articles referring to "gay teen suicides", even though at least one of the teens, Billy Williams, did not identify as gay but was *perceived as such* (LGBTQ Nation, 2010). LGBT news coverage, as well as local news coverage, of the suicides made an important distinction from their national news counterparts by reporting on gay teens and teens *perceived* as gay being bullied at school so much so that they were driven to commit suicide (LGBTQ Nation, 2010, Advocate, 2010, SF Bay Guardian, 2010).

What caught my attention about this alternative media coverage was not so much the idea that LGBT teen suicide rates were higher than straight peoples', but rather the idea that a teen could be "perceived as gay". Since being gay or lesbian (or homosexual, to use the terminology of the DSM IV-TR) refers to those who have same-sex sexual and romantic feelings, and does not describe how one necessarily *looks* or *acts,* I wondered if being gay or lesbian in our culture had somehow been conflated with being gender nonconforming. Otherwise, how could one tell another's sexual orientation just by looking at or interacting with him/her/them?

Researchers Schope and Eliason (2004) write on the issue of homosexuality as conflated with gender nonconformity:

Gay and lesbian individuals have long been told that much of the prejudice directed against them derives from their violations of sex role behaviors… The penalties inflicted upon those who fail to demonstrate their acceptance of the sex roles run from being avoided and isolated to being victims of violent, often murderous hate crimes. (Schope and Eliason, 2004, pp. 73-74)

Schope and Eliason (2004), in their empirical study on whether homophobia is more acutely directed at gender nonconforming gays and lesbians, asked heterosexual college students to rate how they would react to four distinct fictional gay and lesbian characters (2 males and 2 females each described in three sentence vignettes as either gender conforming or not) in a variety of social settings. (p. 82) Data were collected using an anonymous questionnaire. BJ, their fictional gender nonconforming lesbian character, was described to the participants in this way:

BJ is a physical education major, is short, somewhat stocky, and has short hair. She is most often seen wearing jeans and a tee shirt and keeps her room very messy. She likes action movies, watching sports of all types, and lifting weights. BJ is very outgoing and outspoken and belongs to a lesbian feminist group on campus. (Schope and Eliason, 2004, p. 83)

Participants in the study rated how they would react to seeing and interacting with BJ in various social settings.

In their conclusion, the researchers refer to "BJ", the "gay-acting" lesbian, as "so obviously homosexual" (i.e. masculine) that certain heterosexual peers reacted in negative ways

(Schope and Eliason, 2004, p. 94). Though the researchers do draw a parallel between gender expression and assumptions of homosexuality, there is insufficient analysis that explores *why* this parallel even exists.

In 2009, the National Education Association (NEA) compiled a document called "A report on the status of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in education: Stepping out of the closet and into the light" that utilized the research on LGBT students and teachers by over 25 scholars in the United States and Canada (p. iv). In its summary, the NEA (2009) writes:

> Bullying of GLBT students stems largely from a discomfort with students who do not conform to traditional gender roles in their appearance or behavior, i.e., who are gender nonconforming. A student's actual sexual orientation may be far less relevant to his or her social victimization than his or her gender identity or gender expression. (p. vii)

According to the NEA's 2010 study then, bullying of GLBT students stems from the bully's discomfort with the bullied student's gender expression more so than sexual identity. This raises the questions: what about gender nonconformativity causes such extreme "discomfort"? The NEA (2010) report highlights the gap in available literature on the "social victimization" (NEA, 2009, p. vii) of gender nonconforming students and the importance of further research.

While serving on the board of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, Butler (2004) reflects on the high prevalence of violence towards gender nonconforming or presumably gay bodies. Butler (2004) asks:

> …what sort of anxiety is prompted by the public appearance of someone who is openly gay, or presumed to be gay, someone whose gender does not conform to norms, someone whose sexuality defies public prohibitions…? The desire to kill someone, or killing someone for not conforming to the gender norm by which a person is 'supposed' to live

suggests that life itself requires a set of sheltering norms, and that to be outside of it, to

live outside of it, is to court death. (p. 34)

According to Butler (2004), the gender binary, which posits that there are but two ways ones

gender/sex can manifest (male/female, man/woman, masculine/feminine) and which roots itself

in the heteronormative assumption that sex between men and women is "natural" and "normal",

in turn make all those who stray from these norms "unnatural" aberrations from essential

"sheltering" norms (Butler, 2004, p. 34). Butler suggests that gender nonconforming, presumably

queer bodies, by not conforming to binary norms, "court death", or perhaps, in the case of gender

nonconforming teens, "court" bullying or harassment that leads to death by suicide or by murder.

In the following passage, Butler (2004) posits a theory of why people, who live within

gender norms, feel extreme "discomfort" towards gender nonconforming people—a discomfort

that leads to social victimization and death:

This violence [aimed at gender nonconforming individuals] emerges from a profound

desire to keep the order of binary gender natural or necessary, to make of it a structure,

either natural or cultural, or both, that no human can oppose, and still remain human. If a

person opposes norms of binary gender… and that stylized opposition is legible, then it

seems that violence emerges precisely as the demand to undo that legibility, to question

its possibility, to render it unreal and impossible in the face of its appearance to the

contrary… to say, effectively, that this body, this challenge to an accepted version of the

world is and shall be unthinkable. (p. 35)

Considering the pervasiveness of the regulatory power of the gender binary (as it infuses our

very language and the basic ways we organize society), and the violence and victimization that

accompanies it, it becomes clear why Butler (2004) writes that those who do not conform to the binary "court death" (p. 34).

In writing on the transition for women from a tomboy childhood into adolescence, a developmental moment in which the pressure to conform to gender norms increases exponentially, Halberstam (1998) writes " That any girls do emerge at the end of adolescence as masculine women is quite amazing" (p. 6). By this, Halberstam (1998) insinuates just how pervasive the pressure to conform is and just how terrifying the alternatives are (as expressed through bullying, harassment, violence, or murder). And yet, according to Feinberg (1996), gender nonconformativity can be traced back throughout documented history and is found across cultures internationally (pp. xi-xii). Regardless of the power and force of the regulatory binary, people have continued to resist gender norms.

The Sissy vs. the Tomboy

Another pertinent aspect of the recently reported rash of gay teen suicides is that each of the suicides reported on were committed by young people designated "male" at birth. Both "male" and "female" terms or designations are fraught, as is indicated in the media attention paid to the International Association of Athletics Federations' difficulty in establishing Olympic South African runner Mokgadi Caster Semenya's "actual sex" (Levy, 2009, p. 2). The fact that the suicides reported on where committed by male teens raises an important question for which we desperately need more literature: is it more stigmatized in the U.S. to be a gender nonconforming *male* child or teen than *female*? Is gender nonconformity more tolerated in young females?

Schope and Eliason's (2004) research exploring the choices straight college students felt they would likely make relating to "gay-acting" homosexuals vs. "straight-acting" homosexuals

in a variety of social settings also looked at whether college-aged heterosexual men and women stigmatized gay men more than gay women. Schope and Eliason (2004) write: "The findings show that heterosexual males were more prejudiced against the gay men in almost every setting and situation than they were against either lesbian" (p. 94). They continue by saying that in a few instances, the discomfort around "gay-acting BJ", portrayed as a butch lesbian stereotype, rated higher than discomfort with "straight-acting Dave", the gender conforming gay male character. Schope and Eliason (2004) write "BJ was more threatening (than Dave) in this situation (in public) because she was so obviously homosexual" (p. 94). This study indicates that, according to their research, although gay men may make straight men more uncomfortable than lesbians, lesbians who are gender nonconforming appear "more homosexual" and thus are more likely to be discriminated against by straight men in public than "straight-acting Dave", a gender conforming gay man.

This study's data posited that heterosexual women were more comfortable with gay men, whether gender conforming or not, than they were with lesbianism (Schope & Eliason, 2004, p. 94). The discomfort caused by "Straight-acting Tiffany" was on par with the discomfort felt towards gay men, while "gay-acting BJ", the butch lesbian, "created somewhat more discomfort" than either "Tiffany" or the gay men (Schope & Eliason, 2004, p. 94). While this study concludes that heterosexual men are more discriminatory towards homosexuality and gender nonconformity than heterosexual women, and that ones homosexual orientation is more of a predictor for discrimination than ones gender nonconformativity, it is also insufficient as it relies on 4 limited stereotyped character vignettes to shape its data. It does not address issues of intersectionality, failing to consider how race and ethnicity, class, ability, etc… might affect results.

On Tomboyhood

Schope and Eliason (2004) write about "sex role" development for girls vs. boys, positing that in childhood the "formation of and forced adherence to the female gender role is much more complex than the male gender role. While boys learn firm rules of masculine behavior, girls find much more freedom and flexibility" (Schope and Eliason, 2004, p. 76). The researchers go on to state that, because of this gender flexibility, women who appear to take on both masculine and feminine characteristics are seen in a positive light, vs. men who exhibit feminine behavior (Schope and Eliason, 2004, p. 77).

Carr (2007) writes "Both scholars and lay persons commonly believe that when it comes to policing gender, parents, peers, and others control boys more rigidly than girls" (p. 439). She goes on to introduce the "tomboy", the term commonly used in the U.S. to describe a gender nonconforming female child. "Sissies", or feminine-acting boys, Carr posits, are less tolerated than "tomboys" (Carr, 2007, p. 439). In her review of the literature on tomboyhood, Carr (2007) continues by beginning to formulate why this might be the case:

> Several scholars have theorized that tomboys are granted more social and parental acceptance than their 'sissy' counterparts… because tomboys display socially rewarded 'masculine' traits or behaviors… and/or because of beliefs that tomboyism is transitory. (pp 439-440)

Carr (2007) brings up two relevant points in understanding why tomboyism is considered acceptable for young females: one, that traditionally "male" or "masculine" traits are "socially rewarded" (p. 349) when exhibited in childhood and two, that it is commonly believed that tomboyism ends at the start of adolescence.

Psychoanalyst Jalas (2003) writes "'(T)omboy' is the category for girlhood cross identification and behavior, anywhere from the age of two through to the end of latency" (p. 1), thus theorizing "tomboy" as a phase of development in which a "girl" "cross-identifies" as a "boy" and adopts "masculine" behavior and characteristics, rather than "feminine". Indeed, much of the literature on tomboys utilizes essentialist binary constructions of gender and gender expression to describe and give meaning to the tomboy (Jalas, 2003; Hall, 2008, Peplau and Huppin, 2008). Hall (2008) begins her article on tomboyhood by writing "Some girl children act like boys" (p. 555), indicating that there are essential and marked sets of "girl" and "boy" behaviors.

Understandings of "masculinity" and "femininity" range across cultures and tend to shift in definition over time (Butler, 2004, p. 10). Butler (2004) writes:

> Terms such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' are notoriously changeable; there are social
> histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending on geographical
> boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose.
> (p.10)

Yet the binary insists, as it must to remain hegemonic, that these terms are static, natural, fixed. (Butler, 2004, p. 43) Even though what it means to be "masculine" or "feminine" shifts according to environment, each particular environment is, in part, governed by gender norms that determine intelligibility and shape social interaction (Butler, 2004, pp. 41-42).

It is equally important to note that, though concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" are shaped within cultural constraints, the literature reviewed for this paper consistently fails to address issues of how race, class, and ethnicity (among other "cultural" markers) inform gender expression. Because the literature does not take into consideration the "cultural constraints" that

necessarily shape the "masculinity" or "femininity" referred to, it forecloses any possibility for us to imagine variation from a White, Western, middle class manifestation of these gender expressions—participating in further regulation of what the binary allows for.

Female Masculinity

Peplau and Huppin (2008), in their study of gender nonconformity in children and its potential link to adult homosexuality write:

> …it is instructive to note that during the past 30 years, young adults have come to view instrumental 'masculine' qualities in women more favorably, with self-sufficiency, independence, and assertiveness carrying less negative connotations than in the past. Further, the majority of women undergraduates today rate themselves higher on standardized measures of masculinity than did earlier cohorts. (pp. 151-152)

This, Peplau and Huppin (2008) agree, indicates that behavior once considered "masculine" and the domain of "maleness" and, when expressed by young women, a predictor for adult homosexuality, no longer contain those connotations (p. 152). What I take away from these assertions and statistics is that particular masculine qualities (and in particular, behaviors) are *not just* the domain of maleness, but rather is a set of qualities that are given signification in particular moments "depending on geographical boundaries and cultural constraints, on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose" (Butler, 2004, p. 10). This said, current "masculine" behaviors, such as self-sufficiency, independence, and assertiveness, have, in contemporary times, been reassigned meaning and are no longer the sole domain of males.

"Extreme Male Identification"

"Masculine" characteristics or behaviors are *certainly* not reserved just for male children, as it is reported that around 50% of adult American females report having been tomboys in

childhood, thus exhibiting "girlhood cross identification and behavior" (Peplau and Huppin, 2008, p. 150; Jalas, 2003, p. 1). Carr (2007) makes the distinction between "androgynous" tomboys and "masculine" tomboys—citing empirical research that posits that "androgynous" tomboys are considered acceptable, whereas the "masculine" variety indicates pathology (Rekers, 1992, p. 440). Halberstam (1998) elaborates on this theme:

> Tomboyism is punished… when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification (taking a boy's name or refusing girl clothing of any type) and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence. Teenage tomboyism presents a problem and tends to be subject to the most severe efforts to reorient. (p. 6)

Halberstam (1998) draws distinction between acceptable "masculine" behaviors that have been redefined as appropriate behavior for girls and women (such as self-sufficiency, independence, and assertiveness) from behaviors and attributes that are still considered to be the domain of males (choosing male names and preferring "boys" clothes, etc…). The "punishment" Halberstam refers to likely takes many forms, but is most notably disturbing as it takes it's cues from the ever pathologizing Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR (2000). In the DSM IV-TR (2000), Gender Identity Disorder in girls is described as such:

> Girls with Gender Identity Disorder display intense negative reactions to parental expectations or attempts to have them wear dresses or other feminine attire... They prefer boy's clothing and short hair, are often misidentified by strangers as boys, and may ask to be called a boy's name... (APA, 2000, p. 577)

Feinberg (1996) writes of growing up in the 1950s in upstate New York as a gender nonconforming female whose gender expression could be interpreted "to be the sign of extreme male identification" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 6). Feinberg writes:

> When I was born in 1949, the doctor confidently declared 'It's a girl.' That might have been the last time anyone was so sure. I grew up a very masculine girl. It's a simple statement to write, but it was a terrifying reality to live. (Feinberg, 1996, p. 3)

Feinberg (1996) goes on to describe growing into a gender expression that was not merely "tomboyish" but was considered problematic, controversial, alarming to those living within the gender binary to those who witnessed it (p. 4).

Conflations of Sexuality and Gender

Jalas (2003) refers to the ICD-9 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems) definition of Gender Identity Disorder in children, and in particular, to a comment below the classification, linking the retention of a "cross identification" (Jalas, 2003 p. 1; World Health Organization, 1992, p. 217) into adolescence with the later development of homosexual orientation (p. 3). The association of gender nonconformity in children (which is considered pathological) with adult homosexuality (no longer officially considered pathological in diagnostic texts) in the ICD-9 not only seems to re-pathologize a particular manifestation of homosexuality (what used to be called the "invert") but also forges a causal link between sexuality and gender. Pathological aberrations from gender norms in childhood imply a future homosexual identity.

All of the literature reviewed thus far points to the fact that tomboyism is viewed as an acceptable gender expression for girls until the onset of adolescence or unless the "cross identification" is too strong and the child is deemed "pathological" in their "cross identification".

Gender nonconforming children who exhibit extreme "cross identification" are deemed pathological and are recommended treatment by the American Psychiatric Association and by the World Health Organization, the two most reputable and influential health and mental health organizations in the world, who further insinuate that the gender nonconforming child will very likely grow up to be a homosexual (if the disorder goes untreated?). It should come then as no surprise that gender nonconforming youth are bullied, taunted, harassed, killed and more frequently commit suicide. Our language; our sense of normalcy, of naturalness; supports the idea that any aberration from the binary is unnatural and should not/cannot exist and for it to exist and persist would render it real, natural, normal, worth identifying and protecting.

The (Gender Nonconforming) "Gay Brain"

Over the past twenty years, operating under the assumption that gender nonconformativity (and/or homosexuality) is abnormal, medical researchers have sought to understand why certain people have a homosexual orientation, with much of the studies orienting themselves as much around gender expression (without naming it as such) than anything else (Peplau and Huppin, 2008, p. 147). Peplau and Huppin write:

> Today, the neurohormonal theory of sexual orientation is a leading biological
> perspective. This theory proposes that exposure to particular prenatal hormones during a
> critical period before birth affects the development of brain structures that in turn
> influence sexual orientation. (p. 147)

The researchers go on to explain that, according to recent research, if a female fetus, for instance, is exposed to high levels of testosterone, her brain will function "as a male brain", leading to the female developing a desire for women in adolescence (Peplau and Huppin, 2008, p. 147). This theory remains one, as it has tested to inconclusive results (Peplau and Huppin, 2008, p. 147).

This theory is also reminiscent of the O.E.D.'s (2011) definition of "androgyny" as inclusive of both "male" and "female" and as "hermaphroditic" (O.E.D., 2011). That to be female and have a gender expression and set of sexual desires other than the norm is to be female and have "male" parts (whether hormonal or chromosomal).

Peplau and Huppin (2008) investigate several other medical *justifications* for homosexual orientation—all of which seem to link lesbianism to a "'masculinized' neuroanatomy" (pp. 148-149). This link, between lesbianism and masculine femaleness, renders invisible, or indeed unthinkable, the possibility for the existence of a femme lesbian, as well as labeling all gender nonconformity "homosexual". The conflation also serves to perpetuate certain stereotypes (lesbians are butch, gays are fey), certain silences (that gay suicides are simply because of homophobia, not because of a restrictive and regulatory gender binary that render life at times unlivable and that, in this silence, insure that the binary remains hegemonic), and certain erasures (discourse that fail to address gender nonconformativity).

Recognizing Gender Variance

Fassinger and Arseneau (2006), using a definition of "transgender" that includes even those who do not themselves identify as such (p. 22), address the paucity of hate-crime or civil rights legislation that protects transgender (or gender variant) people:

> At this writing, for example, 16 states, as well as 173 countries, cities, and government
> organizations, have workplace antidiscrimination laws explicitly naming sexual
> orientation… However, only 3 states and 203 pubic and private employers prohibit
> discrimination based on gender identity or expression. (p. 42)

In light of these facts, it seems urgent that empirical research that acknowledges the existence of and explores the experiences of gender nonconforming populations be undertaken. Because our

culture's discourses have yet to truly acknowledge that gender nonconforming people deserve the right to a livable life and have yet to begin acknowledging ones right to exhibit gender nonconforming behavior as something that should be protected by law, by teachers, by institutions, discourses that claim social justice as an aim (including those of Social Work and Social Psychology) must begin to address these populations and these concerns. My research intends to do just this.

Queer theorist Salamon (2009) writes about how silence, pathologizing theories, and the constant threat of danger leave those with queer genders and sexualities to become philosophers of their own existence, working constantly to justify their existence:

> Queer folks are natural… phenomenologists, since careful reading of our surroundings, of the physical and social circumstances through which we move, is often a matter of survival. There is the metaphysical mode of queer investigation: what am I that I am so unlike the other people around me? There is the epistemological mode: if I "know" I am queer, how did I become to be so? My gay brain or gay genes? Exposure to the "wrong" hormones in utero? The fraternal birth order effect? Unsuccessful navigation of the stages of psychosexual development? (p. 227)

In the passage above, Salamon (2009) begins to formulate language for the experience of those living outside of heteronormative and gender norm. She articulates an existence that seems filled with a sense of isolation ("what am I that I am so unlike the other people around me?"), as if on some level, the body in question is not recognizable within the larger, non-queer, group. Also articulated in the passage above is the navigation of pathologizing medical and psychological discourse that come from the normative center and attempt to make "sense" of queer sexuality and gender (but only through a rigorous "othering" of it as unnatural) that queers must undergo.

Social Work, as a profession, espouses a commitment to issues of social justice in the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics*. (2008) In the *Code of Ethics* (2008), NASW puts forth that one of Social Workers "ethical principal(s)" is to "pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people" (p. 5). In light of the bullying, suicides, harassment, and murders shouldered by gender nonconforming individuals, why has Social Work discourse barely touched upon the topic of gender nonconformativity (McPhail, 2004, p.3) and instead has left it to those at the mercy of regulatory and often violent norms to fight for and philosophize for themselves? Is it because, as McPhail (2004) suggests that "(S)ocial work has largely adopted the oppression model in… research, practice, education, policy and advocacy work" and that "(T)hese essentialist constructions rely on the binary categorizations of male/female and heterosexuality/ homosexuality" (p. 3)?

Butler (2004) argues against the notion that to ask institutionally recognized discourses to acknowledge gender nonconformity would be to ask these discourses to include a host of "new genders" (p. 31). Instead she argues: "…it is a question of developing within law, psychiatry, social and literary theory a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity we have been living for a long time" (p. 31). In a sense, Butler (2004) is asking for dominant discourses to move away from merely avoiding or seeking justification for gender nonconformativity, but instead to begin to acknowledge that gender nonconforming lives have, and will continue to, exist and should begin to acknowledge them.

Perhaps one of the most important reasons to encourage the proliferation of social work literature that addresses gender nonconformity is, as the NEA (2009) study indicates, that so much of what we consider homophobia is, in fact, fear and violence rooted in an extreme

"discomfort" with those who defy gender norms (p. vii). It seems from the literature and from resources such as *Trans Respect vs. Transphobia Worldwide,* home to the "Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) project" (TRTW, 2010) that keeps track of reported homicides of trans people in approximately 180 cities internationally, that those who are gender nonconforming are a "vulnerable and oppressed…group(s) of people" (NASW, 2008, p. 5).

What are the experiences for gender nonconforming females of living in an environment that conflates their nonconforming gender with a homosexual orientation? What happens when one is "perceived as gay"? Concurrent with the data above that conflates sexual and gender identity, and because there is little written about the experiences of specifically gender nonconforming people, literature that addresses current research on the disparity of mental health outcomes of lesbian and gay people vs. heterosexuals (assuming that some of the data reflects the experience of lesbian-identified gender nonconforming females) seems relevant.

Realities of Violence

In early February 2011, a blog called *Unfinished Lives* (2011)*,* "which remembers and honors LGBTQ hate-crime victims, while also revealing the reality of unseen violence perpetrated against people whose only "offense" is their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender presentation" (Unfinished Lives, 2011), published a story on a woman named Laura Gilbert. Gilbert and a friend went to a bar they had never been to in their hometown of Opelika, Alabama to celebrate the friend's birthday. Gilbert reported that she felt uncomfortable when she arrived because everyone stared at her and that, upon leaving, was surrounded by ten women and 2 men who proceeded to beat her. Gilbert remembered one woman yelling: "'If you want to look like a man, you can get hit like a man!'" (Unfinished Lives, 2011). Though the story was

understood as evidence of a hate-crime specific to Gilbert's sexual orientation, there is evidence that Gilbert's gender nonconforming presentation was *the* major factor in the attack.

Kennedy and Davis' (1993) text is a sociological exploration of working class butch-femme lesbian culture in 1930s-1960s Buffalo, New York. The researchers interviewed multiple people who lived in that community during that time. One participant was quoted as saying "The life was dangerous. Straights would beat you up, just come down to the bars looking to beat up queers, persecution and harassment" (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, p. 81). Another participant explained why she felt that lesbians that identified and presented as "butch", and by "butch" the authors mean females with "various combinations of masculine inclination and sexual interest in women.", (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, p. 327)) were the recipients of more harassment by straight people:

> Fems didn't look like homos. When they were walking on the street they didn't get any harassment so gay life was not so difficult for them… (For butches) (T)he biggest problem is going out on the street, and who bothers a fem when she goes out alone. (Kenney and Davis, 1993, p. 170)

As is true today, at least in Opelika, Alabama, females appearing to display masculine characteristics are regularly recipients of violence and social stigmatization.

How do gender nonconforming people cope with living with such stigma attached to their bodies and selves? Kennedy and Davis (1993) write of butches in previous eras having difficulty not letting the stigmatization effect self esteem and self regard:

> …the butches' constant confrontation with the straight world, and the unmitigated disapproval it generated, led to extreme stigmatization and, therefore, isolation. Narrators

sentiments of pride were commonly accompanied by equally powerful feelings of self-

hate. (Kenney and Davis, 1993, p. 185)

Stress and Discrimination

Social psychologist Meyer (2003) originated the term "sexual minority stress" that refers

to the social stigmatization of lesbians and gays as cause for psychological stress and poor

mental health. My interest in Meyers works assumes that some of this stress comes from being

perceived as gay or lesbian, which likely indicates gender nonconformativity. Meyers writes:

The concept of social stress extends stress theory by suggesting that conditions in the

social environment, not only personal events, are sources of stress that may lead to

mental and physical ill effects. Social stress might therefore be expected to have strong

impact in the lives of people belonging to stigmatized social categories, including

categories related to socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. (Meyers,

2003, p. 2)

Of course Meyers leaves out in this equation issues of intersectionality, as well as assuming that

issues of gender can somehow be pried apart from issues of sexuality, which, according to the

literature, we should not.

Meyer (2003) writes that minority stress likely exacerbates *any* existing disorder that is

typically worsened by stress (p. 679). He differentiates minority stress from other general types

of stress by suggesting that it is…

(a) unique—that is, minority stress is additive to general stressors that are experienced by

all people… (b) chronic—that is, minority stress is related to relatively stable underlying

social and cultural structures; and (c) socially based—that is, it stems from social

processes, institutions, and structures beyond the individual rather than individual events

or conditions that characterize general stressors or biological, genetic, or other nonsocial

characteristics of the person or the group. (p. 676)

Meyer's (2003) model for defining minority stress could certainly be applied to the stress

experienced by bullied gender nonconforming teens. In fact, further research is needed exploring

difference in gender expression within LGB populations as pertaining to minority stress (such as

Schope and Eliason's study that tentatively begins to explore the question: do gender

nonconforming LGB people experience more stress then those who conform to gender norms as

is indicated in the NEA's (2009) report on teens?)

In one of the few pieces of empirical literature on minority stress to make mention of

gender differences within the LGB participants in their study, Hequembourg and Brallier (2009)

ran focus groups to gather data on sexual minority stress that were separated by sex (male and

female) and seemingly did not include transgendered people. (p. 276). In their review of their

data, Hequembourg and Brallier (2009) write "Respondents… observed that heterosexual men

act particularly threatened by lesbians who *fail* to conform to conventional social scripts of

femininity" (Emphasis my own. p. 280).

What are the effects of the gender binary on gender nonconforming people? It is

understood in the literature that discrimination on the basis of gender nonconformativity or for

being "perceived as gay" exists, but what are the effects of this discrimination on the individuals

who experience it? What does it look/sound/feel like? How often is discrimination experienced?

How do the gender nonconforming individuals who experience this discrimination experience it

today versus 30 years ago? Because there is no literature that specifically addresses these

questions, I worked to gather data that begins to explore to the little documented lived

experiences of those who have survived and persisted as gender nonconforming over time through interviewing gender nonconforming females aged sixty and above. In studies I located that address lesbian population aged sixty and above, the experience of this cohort who are gender nonconforming continues to go unconsidered.

Lesbians Over Sixty

Goldberg, Sickler and Dibble (2005) use twenty-year-old unpublished data on the lived experiences of lesbians aged 60 and above. They write "(M)ost of the women reported that they had experienced discrimination due to their lesbianism" (Goldberg, Sickler & Dibble, 2005, p. 199) and later, when listing some of the ways the data expounds upon this experienced "discrimination", list sexual identity-specific challenges this cohort faces:

> …lesbian elders face a number of unique issues or added concerns directly related to their sexual orientation including: physician bias, unequal treatment of same-sex couples, stress arising from homosexuality and fear of being exposed, and discrimination in healthcare. (Goldberg, Sickler & Dibble, 2005, pp. 204-206)

According to these researchers and the collected data, gender identity was not found as a concern for those interviewed or was not a salient enough concern to mention.

Although this research did not focus on my target population's current needs, but rather on the culmination of a lifetime of experience, I was interested to explore how particular historical eras have shaped my participant's experiences and shaped their outlook. In a study of gay, lesbian and bisexual elders living in the Midwest, Orel (2004) reflects on the paucity of studies on LGB elders. She writes:

(P)resent cohorts of GLB elders were raised during a time in which homosexuality was

considered illegal, immoral, psychopathological, sick, and evil. Most GLB elders were

forced to remain silent and invisible for self-preservation and survival. (Orel, 2004, p. 59)

Because my research cohort included those "perceived as gay", I was curious to learn how my

participants' experiences differ from those who could remain "invisible" in eras when

homosexuality was far more stigmatized than it is today and to know ways my participants may

have fostered a certain "invisibility" of their own.

Texts like Fienberg's (1996) and Kennedy and Davis' (1993) who chart the existence of

gender nonconforming women in the last century are some of the only texts I have found that do

so. Kennedy and Davis' (1993), through interviewing and historical research, tell a succinct story

that includes the experiences of "butch" identified, gender nonconforming females who

identified as such during these intensely socially regulated eras. Kennedy and Davis' (1993) text

is evidence that gender nonconforming females and those who were "visibly homosexual", were

so even during restrictive times and managed to create rich and complex culture (through the

proliferation of lesbian bars, through the development of butch-femme style, dress and behavior,

and through building community) that likely acted as a protective factor against the serious

backlash experienced (through public anonymous beatings, police arrests and brutality, and

family estrangement) by members of the community for existing as visibly homosexual, gender

nonconforming, or in partnership with someone gender nonconforming. (Kennedy & Davis,

1993)

Kehoe (1988), comparing data she compiled in 1980 on lesbians over sixty with a study

from another researcher of gay men over 40 suggests that for lesbian elders, social isolation

occurs because of this cohort's unlikelihood to frequent lesbian bars or participate in public

events (such as Gay Pride day) (pp. 63-64). Kehoe (1988) writes that, in general, lesbian elders, who experience discrimination on the basis of their sex, age, and sexual orientation, are rendered invisible:

> … there seem to be fewer stereotypes of lesbians over 60 than there are for older homosexual males. Perhaps this is due to the greater invisibility of the women and to the fact that they are triply disregarded: as female, as aged, as deviant. If they are thought of at all by the heterosexual public at large, it is as pathetic, freakish figures, rejected by their families and hiding out of shame. (Kehoe, 1988, p. 64)

In the passage above, Kehoe, writing as a lesbian over 60 herself (Goldberg, Sickler & Dibble, 2005, p. 211), does not seem to be writing from an objective place keen on reporting facts, but rather from an emotionally charged place complicated and weighed down by society's disregard of the elderly and abhorrence of that which strays from gender and sexual norms. Her view of straight society as perceiving lesbian elders as "pathetic, freakish figures, rejected by their families and hiding out of shame" (Kehoe, 1988, p.64) is cause for alarm and further investigation.

Protective Factors

There is nothing in the literature that acknowledges the generally invisibly rendered lives of gender nonconforming females'—especially elders'-- lives. Butler (2003) writes:

> So it is not just that a discourse exists in which there is no frame and no story and no name for such life, or that violence might be said to realize or apply this discourse. Violence against those who are already no quite lives, who are living in a suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark. If there is a discourse, it is a silent and melancholic writing in which there have been no lives, and no losses, there has been

no common physical condition, no vulnerability that serves as the basis for an

apprehension of our commonality, and there has been no sundering of that commonality.

(p.25)

I quote this passage in full because it beautifully articulates what my review of the literature has

attempted to show: that not only is gender nonconformity absent from the discourse, but that the

absence means that those left out are not seen, are not understood, are rendered invisible,

unthinkable, impossible, inhuman. And, most importantly, these lives, as unnamed, can be

rendered inhuman and not worth grieving, for to grieve a life one must first acknowledge a

commonality. And if these lives are not grieved, they must not matter. If these lives do not

matter, we must not need to acknowledge them.

Sexual and gender minorities have, in the past century, developed communities which

serve to create commonality and to provide much needed mirroring for community members so

rejected and unrepresented by the general public. As community has served as a protective factor

for gender nonconforming and queer people, so have many other things, such as identification

with a group, creating families of choice, and a sense of freedom from binding traditionally

gendered roles (Crocker and Major, 1989; Riggle, et.al., 2008; Ellis, 2007). These factors are

indeed signs of incredible community resilience. I was interested in exploring my participants'

experiences resiliencies in this research. And while these protective factors and modes of

resilience are crucial, they were not the main focus of my questions. Meyer (2003) writes that

resiliency-focused literature is "consistent with American values of society… that emphasizes

control, freedom, and individualized determination" (p. 691). He continues:

Viewing the minority person as a resilient actor may come to imply that effective coping

is to be expected from most, if not all, of those who are in stressful or adverse social

conditions. Failure to cope, failure of resilience, can therefore be judged as personal,

rather than societal, failing. (p. 691)

And, indeed, in these days of so much unacknowledged violence committed against gender

nonconforming people by others (TVTW, 2010), a deeper, more accurate understanding of the

effects of the regulatory binary on gender nonconforming females experiences appears crucial.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Purpose of the Research

      The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of the systematically imposed gender binary on the lives, psyches and bodies of gender non-conforming females aged sixty and above.

Research Questions

      What are the experiences of gender nonconforming females when living in a culture, a society in part structured by the gender binary? What are the ways that that the gender binary gets utilized as a regulatory force in the lives of participants? What are the effects of the gender binary on gender nonconforming participants over time?

Research Design

      Description of the general research strategy. Because of the dearth in available literature on the topic, and with access to no other empirical data on this topic to compare data to, this project required exploratory qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods allow for "research procedures to evolve as more observations are gathered and… typically permit the use of subjectivity to generate deeper understandings of the meanings of human experience" (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p. 34). Because what would be uncovered by conducting this research was unknown and because no precedent had been set, the utilization of a research

method that provided room for methodological flexibility and to literally *explore* participants' experiences was deemed necessary. Additionally, because the purpose of this research aimed at exploring subjective experiences, using quantitative methods would fail to garner the quality of data the area of research requires that utilizing that qualitative methods would.

Regarding data collection, coding, and analysis, this research was anchored in constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory is based on the principle that data is collected, coded, and analyzed free from a guiding "preconceived logically deduced hypothesis" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 5). Also, the creation of theories and all analysis occur *during* data collection, so that the researcher is constantly working with the material as it is collected, allowing the data, itself, to guide the research (Charmaz, 2010, p. 5). Throughout the research process, particular aspects of the topic continued to unfold and because of this, the course of the research was analyzed and readjusted with every step forward.

Constructivist grounded theory allows for the utilization of the entirety of the researcher's experience engaging in the research as an integral part of the data, and thus, the researcher's position was a part of the analysis. Additionally, "grounded theory is an inductive qualitative method that begins with observations and looks for patterns, themes, or common categories" (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p.224). As common themes emerged in the data collection, grounded theory methodology helped frame the process by allowing for subtle shifts in the data collection and analysis as unanticipated themes surfaced.

The method used for sample selection. The initial target population for this research was gender nonconforming females aged 60 and above and utilizing both purposive, theoretical sampling as well as snowball sampling, 8 participants were recruited and interviewed. In the course of conducting the research, two participants were recruited who were age 59 (turning 60

this year) and were allowed to participate. One of these participants was turning 60 shortly following the interview and because of this was deemed eligible. The other 59 year-old participant was included in the study due to her enthusiasm in taking part in the research and the limited pool of participant respondents.

Description of the data collection instrument. Minimally structured and exploratory interviews were conducted with the eight participants using an interview guide to frame the conversations. According to Rodwell (1998) in *Social work constructivist research,* "(c)onstructivists assume that realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic" (p. 26), it "assumes that there is no objectivity, but that the knower and the known are interactive and inseparable" (p. 28), and that generalizations cannot address necessary particulars (p. 31). Participants were encouraged to bring up what they thought relevant so that data collection was collaborative between participant and researcher, each taking turns guiding the conversation. Questions around tomboyhood and the onset of adolescence emerged as interviews accumulated, as did questions about influential music and literature, and first experiences at gay bars.

Sample. Eight gender nonconforming females over the age of 59 answered recruitment flyer and email efforts, discussed and signed informed consent forms and proceeded to interview. Because of the specific nature of the research, purposive recruitment methods allowed for focused recruitment. Participants were first recruited from presentations made at LGBT Seniors luncheons located in the Bay Area in Northern California. Following this, the Human Subjects Review Board approved an addendum to the recruitment strategy by allowing the researcher to utilize relevant list-serves for recruitment purposes. Snowball sampling methods were utilized as well, and once participants had referred all potential participants they knew, recruitment slowed

down. Additionally, at eight interviews in data collection had reached theoretical saturation and so the decision was made to stop recruitment once eight participants were recruited and interviewed.

All participants identified as "white" or "Caucasian", despite efforts to recruit an ethnically and racially diverse pool of participants. This was due to two main factors: that the organizations contacted through recruitment efforts were composed of primarily white people (and this was likely influenced by the researchers own whiteness as well as by the Bay Area's racial/ethnic make up) and that because the initial participant contacts were with white people (and social segregation exists), the majority of the recruitment through snowball sampling were to those with similar racial and socio-economic identities as already-recruited participants.

With regards to socio-economic status, participants ranged in identity. Two participants identified themselves as "upper-middle class" with one of these two first identifying as "darn lucky" having recently retired from a career in academia. The other person who identified as upper-middle class continues to work as a carpenter. One participant identified as "working class" and continues to work as a plumber. Another identified as middle-class and continues to work as a "construction worker". One participant replied to my asking her to identify her socio-economic status by saying "considering I'm a woman, I'd say lower-middle class." Another said that according to a sociology book she had read, she identified herself as lower-middle class. Another participant simply stated that she had "come from a middle-class upbringing". The final participant stated that she was "middle-class with working-class roots".

All participants identified as female, with only one reporting that she identifies "mostly, probably as female" although is often perceived as a "guy" and explained that that feels right too.

All participants but two identified as lesbians, with one of the two non-lesbians identifying her sexuality both as "like a straight guy" and as "queer" and the other as simply "queer". All participants identified as "gender non-conforming" although what that meant to each varied. With regards to gender identity, one identified as "butch", two as "soft butch", one as gyn-andro (as similar to androgynous, but adding emphasis to the "gyn"—meaning woman-- by putting it before the "andro"—meaning man). One participant identified as having a gender that was "on the butch end of the spectrum of androg". One simply identified her gender as "mostly female", but that it "shifts around a lot" and that sometimes she feels "like more of a guy". Two participants stated that they don't have any terms for their gender identity beyond "woman", though one out of the two reported being somewhat regularly mistaken for a man. All participants have lived with their current gender expression consistent for twenty years or more.

Data collection. Following the approval of the researcher's methods by the Smith College School for Social Work's Human Subjects Review Board (see Appendix E for full Human Subjects Review Board application), which outlined the procedures followed to protect the confidentiality of participants, recruitment began. The method of data collection and measures to protect the confidentiality of participants were as follows: an Informed Consent form was presented to each participant at the beginning of the first interview (see Appendix B). This form clearly stated the researcher's affiliation with Smith College School for Social Work, gave an overview of the proposed research, articulated what the participant's involvement in the research consisted of, and explained that the participant was free to completely withdraw from the study at any time, up to a particular date. When distributing the form, each participant was given the option of having the Informed Consent form read aloud to him or her in order to ensure the voluntary nature of each person's participation in the research regardless of his or her ability

to read. After securing a signature from each participant, each received a copy of the form to keep.

In order to safeguard identifiable information, all participants were assigned a numerical code. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher. All data collected for this study was kept electronically on the hard-drive of this researcher's personal, password-protected computer. The digital voice recorder, used for the interviews, was kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's file cabinet. The signed consent forms were kept in a locked drawer in the researchers desk, separate from the digital voice recorder. The content of each interview was subtly yet sufficiently changed to protect the identity of the participants.

All data collected during this study will be stored for three years as required by Federal regulations or longer, if the researcher requires. The data will always be kept electronically and password protected. After the three years or when no longer needed, all data will be destroyed.

Due to the nature of the research, participants were not anonymous, as each met with the researcher individually and in person. Appropriate steps were taken to ensure the participants' confidentiality. Findings did not include any potential identifying information, such as participants' names, any names they may mention in the interviews, or any other specific and identifying detail they may include in their interview.

Each participant was individually interviewed in person for the allotted time of up to one hour. Each interview began by first reviewing and having participants sign the Letter of Consent (Appendix B). Afterward, each participant was asked if they had further questions or comments. Then, the interview commenced when the researcher turned on the digital recorder and beginning the interview by asking each participant stating their gender self-identity, their racial/ethnic self-identity, their sexual orientation, their socio-economic status, and their age. This data provided

the study with a preliminary understanding of exactly who access services and where, as well as shaped the data by providing a basic context to the experiences of the subject pool (for instance, data collected from 8 White participants will differ from data collected from a ethnically diverse pool of participants).

Because there is such a dearth of literature on the lived experience of this population, the interview questions were broad and exploratory (such as "what is your experience of being a gender nonconforming person in our world today?"). Minimally structured, qualitative interviewing methods were used as well as the interview guide approach to ground open-ended questions in topics established prior to the interview (Appendix C). These topics included and focused around the participants' varying experience of themselves in public, community and private spheres. To best contribute to the aforementioned gap in knowledge and literature on the topic of this research, it was important that participants were empowered to bring up whatever they felt relevant, rather than have the researcher control the content and flow of the interview.

Data analysis. The researcher transcribed each of the eight, hour-long interviews. Following this, each interview was reviewed and notes were taken in the margins indicating the general topics being discussed. Then, any salient themes that had come up again and again in the content of the interviews were noted and each assigned a color code. In-vivo coding was utilized to name these themes in the words of participants. Finally, each theme was focused on individually using theoretical coding and relevant quotes that seemed to encapsulate this theme were pulled from the interviews to support the theme.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Introduction

The findings of this research are the culmination of hour-long interviews with eight gender nonconforming females over the age of 59 years. Through the coding process, salient and overlapping themes emerged from the interviews. This chapter will present these themes in the words of participants. Themes include participants' relationship to their gender identity (and whether they feel within or without the gender binary); the ways that participants' sexuality has informed their gender identities (or vice versa); and participants' childhood experiences, with particular attention paid to participants' relationship to the term "tomboy". Additionally, the ways that participants' gender expressions manifest is explored, with a focus on participants' gender expressions and roles as expressed through dress, manner, and career choices.

Two large themes that emerged in the coding process concern participants' experiences of violence and discrimination and the coping and resilience used to counter the negativity they experienced. These sections will explore the negative responses participants' receive regarding their gender expression from strangers in public; the stress participants' expressed feeling in response to experiencing discrimination; coming out as lesbian or as gender nonconforming in various eras; lesbian bar culture; the benefits of living in the Bay Area; influential literature; and the importance of community.

Gender Identities and the Gender Binary

In discussing participants' gender identity, two participants identified their gender as "woman", neither claiming a qualifying term that would set their gender apart from other "women" as had other participants, using terms such as "butch", "androgynous", "gyn-andro" or "soft butch". When asked why one of these two women felt she was thus "gender nonconforming", she stated "I consider lesbian as gender nonconforming all by itself", claiming her lesbian identity as somehow shaping her gender in ways that rendered it outside of the binary. The other woman also identified strongly with the term "lesbian" and stated that she sometimes gets mistaken for a man.

> I get mistaken for a man, amazingly. Partly because I wear baseball caps or something. My hair is kind of long right now compared to what it often is. I think its more just body language and posture and... and that's in the "outside", you know, the straight world.

Although these two women experienced themselves as living definitively "outside" of the heterosexual "world", their internal experience of their own gender was that they were "women"—as opposed to "men", thus positioning themselves within the gender binary.

"The world is trying to cut me in two". For other participants, however, their gender identities felt more complex. Some expressed discomfort with societal pressure to fit into "one box" or the "other":

> Its the two-ness that I can't deal with. That's one of the reasons I like lesbian culture. When I'm in an all-women space… I don't feel like the world is divided in two, so I feel more comfortable. If there are 200 women there, there are 200 genders. In the rest of the world I have to live like there are two and I have to negotiate it (being one or the other).

One participant described feeling as if society's gender binary wants to split her in two and that alternate gender identity language, in this case the term "gyn-andro", helps to her to feel that her gender is cohesive:

> Somewhere, not that many years ago, maybe in the 90s, something came to me and I drew it. I have a little picture of a cartoon person and outside there there's this cleaver coming trying to cut me in two. And once I realized that's how deeply I felt it inside, that the world is trying to cut me in two, it helps to have something to say, you know, "I'm gyn-andro" or something like that.

"For myself, I identify mostly probably as female... but that's kind of… floaty".
Other participants described experiencing their gender as something that has shifted over time with many explaining that it continues to shift. Shifts in gender identity sometimes occurred because of how participants were perceived:

> …Because I'm not identified as female from the outside, people go "oh guy guy guy" all the time… I just let it ride sometimes and I just become that, I become what they see and then a lot of times when I want to educate I say "no, no I'm female and females can look like this".

Other times, participants' shifts in gender identity were associated with particular eras in their lives. One participant describes that at as child, she was a tomboy and had intense "cross gender identification", but that as a teen and twenty-something year old tried to fit in as a woman. Her attempts at living as a "woman" including getting married to a man and having a child. Now, as has been the case for the past thirty years, she lives much more in a male or masculine gender identity, identifying as a "straight guy". "I have this whole range of experience you know from

being more male… as a kid and then becoming female and then, like, now I'm more male identified… and as I get older and its, like, its kind of fantastic."

One participant described her experience of becoming accepting of herself as a more masculine thirty-something year-old (thirty years prior to the interview) and coming to accept herself as gender nonconforming, while then later having to acknowledge feeling as if her "softer" side had somehow fallen out of balance with her more "dominant" masculine side:

> You know there a lot of word games you can pay around masculine/feminine stuff, there is this deep masculine side that wants to be dominant. And from thoughts of "am I really more of a man than a woman?"… Initially it was like "this is too much" or "this is not right" or "something's wrong" or… something critical, and then it was like "this is who I am". And then in a lot of the internal work I've done its like "well what about this feminine side? Where is it and what are the judgments I've put on it, how have I not held it in balance?"

One participant wondered if her gender nonconformity was due to potential intersexed physiology. "Well as far as I know, I seem to have all the plumbing to be female, I know there are differences that can happen and sometimes I wonder if I don't fit in because of those, I don't know."   This participant then later explained that perhaps it was her "gender role identity" that was unconventional, rather than her "sex". "From the things that I've read there's gender identity, sex identity and gender role identity. I feel like I really do not have a conventional gender role identity. That's what I call it."

Three participants identified "butch/femme" dynamics as feeling like a perpetuation of some sort of binary:

There were rules about butch/femme and I remember being with a very butch woman and being like "I don't think this is what I'm supposed to be doing". It felt like I was right back in that rules game again. Like what? Wait a minute. What it is that I really want? What feels comfortable?

For these participants, any fixed gender role identity or dynamic seemed to feel confining.

Many participants had terms they used to describe their gender identity that were common terms within particular lesbian contexts. Having other lesbians understand their identity terminology was crucial in them building a cohesive sense of self and helped shape not only interactions with other lesbians, but allowed participants a sense of themselves outside of the limited language provided by the main stream to describe gender. Two participants identified as "soft butch"; one as "on the butch end of the spectrum of androg". Another identified as gyn-andro and explained what that term meant to her:

I really didn't identify with the idea of androgynous for two reason: 1 is that "andro" is in front, whereas gyn-andro kind of puts the woman part in front. With gyn-andro... its still not perfect for me because it sounds like a split, I don't feel that split very much… because the words are structured with meanings... like there's two…

One participant identified as a "straight guy"; and another very much so identified with the term "butch".

Linking Sexuality and Gender

Western understandings of queer sexuality often conflate it with gender nonconformativity, creating discourse that infers both that gender nonconformity is indication of homosexuality or that all queers are gender nonconforming. Participants spoke to being

"perceived as a lesbian" due to their gender nonconformity. Other participants viewed their own genders and sexualities as either one in and of the same ("I consider myself gender nonconforming because I am a lesbian…I think of being a lesbian as gender nonconforming all by itself.") or as inextricably linked—each identifying term as informing the other. Participants also shared experiences that highlighted the different trajectories of coming into their gender vs. their sexuality.

"I was not like them". One participant reflected on her childhood attraction to the word "queer" as a term she felt explained her sense of social alienation. "I related to the word queer when I was about 11 and hearing the word queer for the first time. But my sense of queerness was not about attraction to girls, but more my gender role identity." Another participant described the early life experience of sensing she was different, even though at the time she identified as heterosexual. "I never identified as gay 'til I got out of my home town, but I identified as different, I was not like them."

On participant described that while identifying as a "woman", she came to briefly identify as a lesbian. And although her desire for women has not changed since first having sex with a woman, because her gender identity has shifted away from the term "woman" she no longer feels that the term "lesbian" applies as it conflicts with her gender identity:

> I slept with a woman and it was like, there was no question... I was gone from my marriage in less than a month... you know its like oh! This is an option! I never knew it was an option... and I guess I would've identified as lesbian but now that doesn't fit me... at all.

As the noun "lesbian" is often defined as meaning a woman who loves other women, two participants, neither of who identify as "women" described not relating to the term for this reason.

"People pretty much assume I'm a lesbian". Participants shared thoughts on being perceived as lesbians because of their gender presentations. One participant spoke about her parents' difficulty accepting her gender presentation. "Maybe because I was perceived as a lesbian, that's what disturbed my parents so much, that people thought I was a lesbian because of these (nonconforming) gender things." Another participant wryly commented on the ways in which her gender nonconformity is so often assumed to indicate her having a lesbian identity, implying that one has to be totally unaware of lesbianism to presume her having a heterosexual orientation. "People pretty much assume I'm a lesbian… they got to be either from the mid west or pretty naïve or both not to…"

Other participants reported that when their gender presentation became more overtly nonconforming, others started to assume it indicated they were lesbians. "Yeah. I think when I cut my hair and changed my clothes a little people probably started calling me a lesbian and stuff..." Wearing short haircuts and men's clothing often meant that participants were assumed to be lesbians.

Conflating sexuality and gender. Some participants saw their gender nonconformity and queer sexuality as indistinguishable. One participant, when responding to the question *"Do you have a term that you like to use to describe your gender presentation?"* said: "You mean like gay or something? I probably fit more the soft butch…" Another participant responded to the question *"How do you identify your sexuality?"* with: "I don't see myself as lesbian, but sort

of. I mean... queer dyke… butch…" This participant seemed to see her sexuality and gender identities as interlinked.

Getting Sir'ed. Many participants reported that they were often perceived as male. One participant responded to the question: *"Do you feel generally that you're perceived as gay?"* in the affirmative, further stating that beyond being perceived as gay, she is often mistaken for a man. "Oh yeah. I'm half the time perceived as a man. 'Sir can I help you?' um, no you can't. I say, excuse me, you got it wrong buddy. And they go 'Ohhh sorry!!'" As was quoted earlier, another participant explained that the "straight world" often saw her masculinity and assumed she was male:

I get mistaken for a man, amazingly. Partly because I wear baseball caps or something. My hair is kind of long right now compared to what it often is. I think its more just body language and posture and ...and that's for the "outside", you know, the straight world.

Participants who worked in the trades described that because the trades are often considered "men's work" in our society, the workplace became a place where passing as male was frequent. One participant described getting called "Sir" when at hardware stores:

And you know I did get called 'Sir' a lot 'cause I've always been into construction and would go to hardware stores and you know I'm 5'9" which was, back then, pretty darn tall. It was just a little bit embarrassing, for them… kind of in a way. 'Cause as soon as I said something I'd have a female voice but it was weird and it happens all the time still, it's happened the entire 40 years...

One participant described that even before she identified as gender nonconforming or as queer she was often mistaken for a man:

A lot of people my whole life have noticed that I've been kind of a little bit male... Even when I had long blond hair carrying a baby-- you know its obviously my kid and I'd get sir'ed and it was kind of hard for my son because he's very conservative you know I mean he's a staunch defender of me but he's also very conservative and it was painful... times when we'd go to a restaurant and they'd go "right this way sir" ... he'd be... he wouldn't know what to say and I was not as adept as I am now at you know… Or just, like, I'd ignore it... and even now hanging with him is a little difficult...because he introduces me as his mom and people go "shut up!!!" (Laughing)

This participant described that for her conservative son, her passing as a male felt especially painful for him out of his longing for "normalcy".

One butch identified participant reported that it feels fine for her to pass as a man but that it feels particularly humiliating to be referred to as a "lady":

Of course I'm sort of an odd duck out there... um I think people see me as butch. I mean, I get a whole range of different things. People call me she/he all the time... its when I get called a lady is what freaks me out. You know when I am at a restaurant and waitress I really like will say "okay ladies" and I'm like "oh no, no lady here!"

On Tomboyhood

Nearly every participant reported that they had been tomboys as children. One participant said that she had not necessarily been a tomboy because she had not been very "mischievous" described that her favorite past time as a child had been taking apart and putting back together her bicycle. "My favorite thing to do when I was young was to take apart my bicycle and put it back together, you know do things like that."

"I would play with all the boys". Tomboyhood was described by some participants as heavily athletic and often included rejecting "girl play". One participant described the period of time before adolescence began as her tomboy era:

> I was very much so a tomboy when I was young. My whole family is very athletic... my older sister and I were both tomboys and played with the boys all the time. We were both pretty good sized for our age and I was particularly feisty I got in lots of fights with boys 'cause I was big and strong and god at sports, better than the boys usually in the lower grades until about 6th grade then it all sort of changed then...

One participant spoke directly to the sense of self-confidence she associated with her tomboy identity. "I also, to be candid, I was very competent at all kinds of things, athletically and also physical skills, I loved doing nontraditional kinds of things, I could never stand girl play." Participants referred to having a certain confidence— often times expressed as a certain physical prowess or adeptness—that they felt was key to their tomboy identity:

> Partly because I am tall, just my physical presence, tall, thin, flat-chested, strong in my body, I was a tomboy and I excelled in sports, there were no sports for women, but I would play with all the boys and I would be the second pick of the best player, my brother being the first. We were never on the same team and we were competitive in that way.

Tomboy identity, for many participants seemed to orient around physical mastery for many participants. "I was very much a tomboy. I learned how to shoot a gun at the age of five."

"I was always the daddy". For two participants, tomboyhood had more to do with actual "cross sex identification" than with athleticism. One participant reported: "When we

played house I was always the daddy (laughs) and i don't think I ever played mommy except alone-- when I forced myself to play with dolls." Another participant similarly said:

> Oh yeah, like when I was kid growing up I was a total tomboy and you know my mom … she'd walk into the room and go "oh what a good little girl" and id say "no I'm the dad" or you know she'd say "what a nice little mommy" and I'd go "no, I'm the dad!" You know I totally identified as boy…

This identification with boyhood was not always welcome by participants' parents. One participant described choosing to get her hair cut short for the first time:

> One time my mother said 'go over to her regular hairdresser and get your haircut' and so when I got in there the hairdresser said "well, what do ya want?" and I said "well I want it all taken off". I must have been about 7. And she took it all off. And when I came back my mother watched me walking through, down this alley way and from the kitchen window she screamed. And she called it a "pixie" and I can't even stand to say the word myself. (Laughs) That is not what it was! it was a butch cut! But I loved it. …It was really difficult for me to be myself.

Parents' resistance to their child's gender expression was a common theme among participants—especially once participants entered adolescence.

"**It was a fight as I got older**". Seven of the participants described an age (between the ages 11 and 14) when their gender expression became a problem for their parents or classmates. One participant remembered a time when passers by questioned if she was a boy or a girl. This participant marked this event as a turning point for her relationship with her mother:

By the time I was 13 I was 5'8", which is as tall as my father and that's what I wanted to be and that's what I am. My mother and I were walking down the main street in my hometown and passing by two teenagers and one said to the other "psst is that a boy or a girl?" and obviously sort of loud enough that we could hear it, I mean I heard it and… that was it. And then when I got home my mother sat me down and started screaming at me… So this started to be pretty tight in my family. She said, "Did you hear what those kids said? If you were a boy or a girl?" I just went dead; I just started numbing out a lot from then on. That something (about who I was) was really wrong and it was an issue with my parents, my mother.

Blue jeans emerged as a common symbol of tomboyhood. This participant describes early adolescence as a moment in which her parents found it inappropriate for her to wear blue jeans:

The clothes represented my freedom so then it became a power struggle about clothes with my family. They took my blue jeans away when I was 14 and my blue jeans meant being able to be free and active and outside because when I had to wear peddle pushers it was more like "don't get dirty".

Another participant described her early disinterest in wearing dresses and the distance this caused in her relationship with her parents:

It was a fight as I got older... it became more and more of a fight to keep me in a dress... I remember one time my father and I had just... an all out screaming battle because we were heading off to some family get together, nothing major, and he insisted that I wear a

dress and I of course wanted to wear pants and I didn't speak to him for I think three months.

One participant described that she continued to feel a strain on her relationship with her mother, far past adolescence around the issue of her gender. "Even on her death bed, I was apologizing to her for... I wasn't sorry for me being who I am, but I was sorry that she didn't have that little girl that she wanted."

Certain participants described trying to conform to gender norms to please their parents. Others attributed their shift away from tomboyhood to a more conventional femininity to hormonal changes that occur in adolescence while others felt they adopted conventional femininity because they just "didn't see anything alternative".

One participant explained experiencing a hormonal shift, while also expressing exasperation at what she saw a very limited opportunities for alternative gender expressions:

When I was about 12 I think the female hormones kicked in and I gave up the fighting stuff and started wearing a bra and carrying a purse, and all that ridiculous stuff, and you know girls still had to wear dresses to school in those days. How much can you be nonconforming if you're made to wear a damn dress?

Another participant reported that she didn't know that anything but conventional heterosexuality was an option, so attempted to conform to heterosexual and gender norms:

I didn't know any gay people... I knew people threw names around called people faggot and stuff but I barely knew what that was. So I was thinking that I was interested in boys. Though it didn't go that entire well... it was usually more of a competitive thing. They

were all a little intimidated by me. Because I was still very strong and athletic. I tried to

kind of conform, but it was a little awkward.

Another participant echoes that conforming felt like the only option: "I didn't see any thing

alternative so I became female… More … 'oh you know this is what girls do'"

"Green on Thursdays". Two participants who grew up thousands of miles apart

remembered a school-aged, student-enforced rule that if you wore the color green on Thursdays

it was indication that you were "queer". One participant felt that, upon entering adolescence, she

had to keep secret the feeling that she was inhabiting the "wrong body" and saw to it that she

never wore green on Thursdays as to not raise "suspicion":

 I never felt like I was in the right body, so everything was, or many things were forced

… and to not let anyone know even though I didn't know what was going on for me but

not to let anyone know that something was wrong… and I do remember green on

Thursday meant you were queer or something like that and I made sure I never wore

whatever color it was, I think it was green, but I made sure never to wear green that day

and to have absolutely no suspicion placed on me.

The other participant who remembered rules around wearing "green on Thursdays" also

remembered resonating with the word "queer" even though she, too, never wore green on

Thursdays:

When I was 11 there was something going around that said "you're queer if you wear

green on Thursdays" and its so funny to read out in a book years and years later... how it

crosses around the world I don't know ... you knew it was derogatory, you knew it would

be smarter to not wear green on Thursdays, but I also knew that word was for me.

Female Masculinity

    Work. Participants shared their thoughts on how their genders were perceived in work environments. Two participants worked in nursing; one providing direct services and the other taught in nursing schools. Because nursing is a field that has for decades been considered the domain of women, neither of them described passing while at work due to the general assumption that nurses are female, but both described having their gender presentations considered by others to be "too aggressive". One of these participants reflected on the frequent conflation of nurses' assertiveness with them a lesbian orientation. "I remember reading a piece in a nursing journal about nurses being vulnerable to being called lesbian because of being strong or aggressive or assertive women."

    Both participants reported feeling judged for being "too aggressive". One said: "In my professional life I tend to get all the negative labels for women, you know like "too aggressive", "too outspoken", all the stuff that people call women who are doing what they're supposed to do in the world."

    The other participant described her reputation as "intimidating" both in professional and social spheres. "As director of this school based health center and they called me Sergeant Martha, and that's because I have a high expectation and I'm very like "this is what's going to happen folks" and I'm very take charge. So intimidation is one... I intimidate people. a really good friend of mine said "you used to walk around the neighborhood and intimidate me." I've learned to take up my space."

    Four participants worked in the trades. One worked as a plumber, one as a carpenter, one as a small electronics repairperson, and one as a contractor. One participant remembered when

help wanted ads in the newspaper were divided into "male" and "female" sections and describes finding all her jobs in the "male help wanted" section:

> I've had lots of different kinds of jobs, but most of the jobs I've had would have been found in the "male help wanted" ads before they were "de-sexigated". I was the first woman in a trade school in 1971 for radio and TV mechanics and repair, and it didn't feel too good to get work... I'd call on the phone and say "I want to get that job" and they'd say, "Where did your husband go to school?" You go for the interview and then they throw your application in the garbage. I did a couple of jobs ... I did a little bit of clerical jobs. But I had a strong feeling all the way since I was younger that I couldn't do the women's jobs because I couldn't behave and dress the way that was expected of me.

One participant, when asked what she loved about her work said: "I love the macho-ness in carpentry" suggesting that because construction work is the domain of males, and, in particular, the domain of masculine males, a "macho" or exaggerated performance of masculinity is commonly displayed. Three of the four participants who work in the trades work for themselves and each described the "freedom" associated with being able to be the boss:

> I've always liked having a very high level of freedom, I've hardly worked for anybody, I've almost always worked for myself my entire life, 'cause I can do what I want, and if I hire someone I'm the boss, and that worked well for me... I don't really like having someone else being the boss 'cause a lot of times I didn't think their judgment was that good or they were that smart or abusive or… why put up with that if you can manage yourself and run your own business, then you don't have to... I didn't have to do that, I didn't have to have a family with kids, so I feel like I basically got away with something!

One participant was retired from a career in academia. This participant described how her athleticism and aggressiveness helped her feel at more equal footing with the males in her department:

The way I got established with the men in department was by playing tennis with them. Suddenly I was in, I was a different person, I could hold my own at the net, and I didn't cry and suddenly they could see me. It was very odd and amusing. Competing. And the guy, ugh he was such a sexist, who was head of the department, said, "well the trouble with women in academia is that they just don't know how to play team sports." That was his whole analogy; because we weren't raised on team sports we had no idea how to give and take. We exchanged lots of pretty fast volleys at the net, the two of us. He spared me nothing, I assure you.

Most participants reported that their assertiveness and ability at their work, while sometimes judged or disliked by coworkers and bosses, were boons for them.

Style and dress. Participants commented on the ways that clothes have played a part in their gender expression. One participant remembered early days of her going to lesbian bars in New York City and how the dress code of these bars made an impression on her:

When I first went to the bars in NY ... I think the first thing that I did, well my jeans always had fly-fronts, but my slacks didn't. I made sure I got rid of all my slacks that didn't have fly fronts! Then I finally started buying guys slacks! There was a law in New York back then where you had to have at least 3 articles of women's clothing. And that was never a problem; I was never into wearing jockey shorts.

This participant also remembered feeling that as a younger bar-goer, she had to earn her reputation as a young gender nonconforming lesbian. She recalled looking up to the older butch women at the bar:

> The first time I went to a women's bar, when I look back on it its so funny because I was 22-ish and there were all these older women there that were probably 30 (laughs) and um everybody smoked and I had a Zippo and I was running around and I was and anytime some woman would take a cigarette out you know I was right there with the Zippo!

Lighting older butches cigarettes was this participant's way of trying to fit in and pay respect to her "elders" at her first lesbian bar.

Returning to wearing men's clothing as adults after trying to conform to gendered norms as young adults was a big part of many participants' feeling comfortable in their genders. One participant reflected on her love for blue jeans that went against her mother's wishes for her to appear more stereotypically feminine. "I just cannot put on a certain kind of clothes, even though I might like them or think that it would be fun to do. It just doesn't feel right. I've always worn blue jeans, much to my mothers chagrin, she thought I should be wearing dresses and stuff like that."

One participant explained how the embodiment of her nonconforming gender, through androgynous dress, for instance, has helped her feel more comfortable in her own skin:

> As gender nonconforming I've gained being who I am, I guess having myself. The more that I have found comfort in who I am and allow myself to look that way, the more I am me (laughs), I've gained myself. Clothing is a big thing, where gender is concerned. Its not that I defy gender norms all together, but I do buy men's clothing.

Buying and wearing men's clothing is one way this participant embodies her gender.

For some participants, embodying a more androgynous or masculine gender presentation was not always comfortable—even in adulthood. This participant described how her gender presentation has shifted as she has grown more comfortable in certain iterations of gender nonconformity, and less in others:

> Because of my height… being 6 foot gave me power, gave me visibility, gave me a sense of "is that a man or is that a woman". And you know I've had to learn to like it. Initially it was not comfortable. Sticking out was not a place that I was comfortable in. and then always having to dampen my energy, you know my physical prowess, my intellectual prowess, my assertiveness around how I see the world and what I think should be going on. You know, that's not what you're supposed to be doing. I would think 'soften, soften, soften', so that I could feel that I was accepted and part of... so the biggest thing was about clothes. I could never find women's clothes that fit, so I would have to get men's department and there was a sense of embarrassment and yet there was a sense of "I like that".

This participant's experience as a tall, androgynous, assertive woman was that, unless she "softened" her energy, she did not feel accepted or a part of mainstream society.

Violence and Discrimination

"They think you're going to hell". Three participants had been raised in very Christian households and families. Each spoke about how the homophobia of the church, which was linked to the endorsement and enforcement of gender norms, had affected them. One participant felt that the negative attention she received from religious community members growing up was more a reaction to her nonconforming gender than anything else:

Homophobia was in the literature we had to read in high school. A sense that you're an abomination... I did experience people being sort of disgusted with me because even in public... I think of it more because of my gender.

One participant spoke of the continuous work she must do to lessen feelings of shame around her gender and sexuality. "There was always an internal layer of shame. Because of the fundamentalism and the Midwestern upbringing, it was deeply rooted in me, it took a long time for me to sort that out. You know it's still not easy..."

At the encouragement of a former partner who had, herself, become fervently religious, one participant had at one point in adulthood decided to try going to church:

It was really weird going to a church! Talk about judgment! That was the worst place of all to go as a lesbian (laughs) because they think you're going to hell and stuff! (Laughs) It was horrible. So I got out of that a basically have never gone to any churches since then except maybe once or twice. Just for the hell of it. I'm not into it any more... but that... it was ridiculous... how bad it was...

This participant described how painful it was to have had to be in the closet while at church and reported that the shame she and her partner ended up feeling around their lesbianism and their relationship had destroyed their connection.

"Here I was … where no one was out". One participant shared her experiences of coming out as a lesbian in Texas in the 1970s only to find that the lesbians in her community were all closeted:

Once I realized I was I was a lesbian, which was an easy realization (laughing) to come to, it was like the most wonderful thing in the world and here I was in this time and place

and culture where no one was out, so all of my friends were very closeted lesbians… I
came to realize after about the first 2 or 3 years where I was with my first lover, I couldn't
live that way … The first 3 women I was with couldn't stay with me once they realized
that being with me was more dangerous to them than anything else. They were afraid of
just being identified as a lesbian.

Another participant described how normal it was for young lesbians to not out themselves
to their families and straight communities, even if others presumed they were gay:

I mean it was weird and you did really feel that you had to hide it and that you wouldn't
admit it to your parents or anybody really... it was just like they were trying to figure it
out and whispering and pointing... just anybody would... but you know I was just kind of
oblivious because I didn't care that much, I've always been kind of rebellious... I was like
"fuck them! You don't like it, tough! I don't care I'm going to do it anyway" I was really
in their face about it, and luckily I never got beat up or anything... 'Cause I know women
that got beat up, raped... a lot of bad things happened to lesbians... but I was lucky.

This participant adopted a "rebellious" attitude towards pressures that she conform, even in the
face of threats of violence.

"I'm always the token dyke". Participants commented on feeling outside of or apart
from straight and gender normative community. One participant reported:

Where there are a lot of heterosexual or males... I'm always the token dyke... I have some
affinity with these old male friends, but its like, who do I become, do I try to appease
them? Who am I really? How vulnerable can I be? What do they project onto me that isn't
mine?

While another shared similarly:

> There are not that many lesbians around necessarily. You end up with your co-workers being straight, and you're hanging out with straight people most of the time, except for when you're at home if your in a relationship-- but then that's one person, its not like you have a whole crowd of gay people to hang around with... Being the different one in the group… The gay one… The lesbians. And you know, I have a fair amount of straight friends, you just get together with people you share your ideas with... and with them I'm the gay one... There's the dyke!

Another member reflected on attending a rock concert as a young adult after coming out as gay and working to reconnect with a community of friends she had been out of touch with briefly:

> I remember when I first came out it was weird, I went to a rock festival and I wasn't connected with those people anymore, I felt like a stranger and that I was in this completely different culture now, like I couldn't participate in the ways I had before. So in a way, it was if I had really lost something, because even though I didn't fit in real well, like I was in, in the accepted heterosexual world around music and then I was just not in anymore. And it was kind of weird. It was from inside me. I just couldn't do that anymore, I wasn't the same person anymore so I just had to let it go.

This participant noted that it was from "inside" her that she felt this shift; as if something in her just could not do what it took to be a part of her old group of friends.

On vigilance. Many participants shared their experiences of needing to stay vigilant in public spaces. Some participants expressed feeling very confident, as if they would be able to handle an attack if it came, and that it might. One said:

> I walk with confidence and move around. I'm not really terrible afraid. I mean, yes, we're all cautious and there is a safety issue, but I know that I am ready just attack anybody that might want to attack me... maybe not to my well being but still, I know I carry that kind of sense around with me.

Others addressed the ways in which females are socialized to know that they are not necessarily safe. One participant explained that passing as a man had eased her sense of herself as a target for violence:

> One time… someone referred to me as a guy, but not in an assaulting way. I felt good about it, that I could pass. Part of it was... I think it was 2 fold. One part was I was a kid and it felt like "yeah!" (I have achieved a certain level of masculinity!) And another part of it was a safety thing... because as a woman, as a girl, the message was always "you're not safe".

Other participants talked of needing to stay vigilant when in public to stay alert to the real threats of violence straight men could pose towards them as gender nonconforming females. One participant said:

> I had to be careful, I had to be careful... because you didn't know whether you were going to get beat up or not. So walking, whether it was alone or in a group, always being aware that something could happen... So, always on edge.

On violence. One participant reflected on her experiences being a victim of violent attacks from strangers in public:

> I got a lot of "if you're going to act like a man, I'm going to treat you like a man." and I got hit in the Castro once. I was walking out of the theater and there were two guys with their wives and one guy said "there's one, right now" and I had just been seeing a movie and I was in the Castro so I was feeling like "whoohoo! I love this!" you know just being in my life and this guy came right up to me and took a swing at me and I remember looking at his wife and the other woman thinking: How they could handle it? Why didn't they stop it? Who are they as women? But some gay dudes came to my rescue. I also got really nailed once, my lip split all the way up to my nose, this was in San Francisco in '77 and some guy just... I had my arm around my girlfriend and he just... I didn't even see it coming and his fist was about as big as my... I don't know... my shoulder to my elbow, it just seemed huge, and it just nailed me. But I got back at him, but you know I never really wanted to hit somebody or hut somebody but I have wanted to protect myself on numerous occasions.

Many of the participants described themselves as pacifists or "against violence" while also describing feeling the need to be able to protect themselves against violence in whatever ways they could.

"The responses and reactions and stuff". Participants described noticing that as they embraced their masculine gender identities, people's treatment of them in public changed. One participant described feeling less than human in public:

To be human! That's what that abomination concept is all about... you can't be (human)... I mean I've had experiences where I go into a store or restaurant and treated like I'm not there... the experience of being in public.... the responses and reactions and stuff...

Another participant described noticing a big difference in the way she was treated once she began shaving her head:

 I just got treated so RADICALLY different as soon as I shaved my head, like people... it was in Canada and it was fairly conservative and people would like lock the doors on their car... and like... and before everybody was super like...I can talk easily to anybody and all of a sudden I'm shunned and it was really an eye opener... for all kinds of things like how do men relate to each other and how do others treat you when you look different you know... So, huge difference, huge difference

This participant described both beginning to be treated like a man as well as noticing other females' fear reactions towards her, as well as noticing that she began to feel "shunned" by others on public.

On stress. Participants reflected on the toll the threats of or actual violence, the vigilance and the feeling a part have taken on them emotionally. One participant talked about being the recipient of so much negative attention that it is sometimes hard to deflect it and not take it personally. She said: "I go so much of it. One minute you can just go "eh, bite me!" and the next moment, it does have its side effects." She also reflected on feeling isolated due to her age, gender expression, and sexual orientation. "I have a really full loving life, but I am also really isolated. So there is a little tad of sadness in there too. I think that the stress plays really heavy on me."

Participants mostly shared ways that they were resilient in the face of life stressors because of their gender nonconformativity and sexual orientation. One participant reflected on this, however, and reported that it is impossible to be resilient all the time:

You know, the thing is-- walking with strength and courage and integrity all at the same time is a hero factor and it would be nice to be that way all the time, but its very difficult and its very stressful.

Coping and Resilience

"Everything changed when we went into that bar". Six of the eight participants reported that their first experience going to a lesbian bar was formative for them and provided them the sense that there were others like them with regards to gender presentation and sexual orientation. One Participant shared her experience attending a bar called "Honey's" for the first time and feeling immediately "at home":

Somehow I found out about a women's bar. I went by myself and it was called Honey's and I just looked around... I had gotten an address, but there was no sign and no lights, and I went in and thought I'd just sit at the bar and kind of see what I saw. I decided I would order a beer, but I didn't have my driver's license so I couldn't even order a beer. (laughs) There were women dancing with each other and I did have the experience that I knew how they dressed... mostly there were wearing white jeans and had a haircut called a shag. I knew that there was another kind of culture and I felt at home. That day is what I consider coming out.

This participant explained that she felt "at home" not only watch women dance with each other, but because of the ways they dressed and how familiar it felt.

One participant describes having an evening to herself (with her husband in class late) and charted this as the moment she walked her first lesbian bar. She described this moment as what "sealed" her lesbian identity for her. She divorced her husband months later. She reported: "I worked with a lesbian... had a lesbian coworker and got her... she and her girlfriend to take me to one of the women's bars in Greenwich Village. And that was it. That sealed it."

Another participant came out as "butch" within butch/femme bar culture. She described the first bar she frequented and how it offered her language around her gender:

I think I started to use the word butch when I started going to Santa Barbara. I think I was probably going down there before I was even 21. That's where I came out. There was a bar called the Odyssey. It was a butch femme bar. Pretty much working class.

This participant continued by describing the second bar she found and frequented, in which the owner was very butch:

I came up to San Francisco in my 55 Chevy pickup. I was about 22 or 23. I thought I had just landed in heaven because I found Scott's Pit. Scott's Pit was this butch-femme bar pretty much lesbian bar and the owner was really butch and really alcoholic. She's since now passed from alcoholism.

One of the ways participant's described coping (and seeing their peers cope) with the rampant homophobia and gender conformity of earlier eras was by drinking alcohol. One participant said: "It seems to me that when I was coming out in the early days there was a lot more alcoholism." Participants described bars as safe places where gender nonconforming people could embody their nonconformity through dress and affect without much fear and with mirroring from others.

One participant, who herself became an alcoholic in her early years of being out, described the spiritual aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous as one way she learned to cope in a more healthy way:

Alcoholism is a disease of isolation and I was already in a place of isolation just because of... my sexuality. How I made it alive and how I made it emotionally was that when I found AA there was a spiritual factor to it that helped bring me through a lot of this to give me more strength and courage.

"Strength in numbers!". Political movements (second-wave feminism, gay liberation, anti-war, and anti-imperialism movements), feminist books and women's music, the liberalism of the Bay Area, and finding friendships and community were mentioned as being huge sources of strength for participants. Many participants described living in the Bay Area as crucial to their sense of well-being. One participant described San Francisco and the movements she encountered there as offering her a real sense of freedom:

Things were changing. There was no real support when I came out... all the movements were inspirational. You had places that felt and were safer. When I got to San Francisco it felt so free... and it's never stopped feeling that way.

Another participant described living in the Bay Area as simply "better" for gender nonconforming lesbians:

Then of course I ended up in the Bay Area for most of my life and that's not by chance... because it's better here... (talks about first coming to Bay Area…) They see you, and they see dykes all over the place. What's one more dyke! It's not a big deal! Strength in numbers! (laughs)

Another participant described feeling that she can "fit in" better in the Bay Area because there is more gender diversity. "Its like I couldn't fit in with men or with women. And gratefully, with the times changing and having moved to this Bay Area, which has really broad tolerance, I have a lot more options."

Participants reported that feminist and lesbian literature provided the sense that there were others who felt similarly, as well as offering up new, more radical ways for women of that era to conceive of themselves. Reading Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Daly, Radcliff Hall, Patricia Highsmith, and lesbian pulp fiction (to name just some of what participants sited) were noted as particularly inspirational to participants. One participant recalled the first semi-positive portrayal of lesbianism in written form that she encountered:

> I don't know when *the Price of Salt* came out but it was one of the first lesbian novels that I can remember that had a positive ending... and I don't know how it got passed the censors, because all of the pulp fiction companies had a thing that it had to end badly... you know somebody died or committed suicide, or went back to their husband or something.

Many participants described finding a voice or increased confidence through being a part of community that supported their identity. For one participant, the women's community provided her the space to do so:

> I learned through the women's community, how to find a voice and express it and be okay. The permission to take on my talents, my voice, my gifts and really utilize them. It was self-acceptance and self-knowing and self-development. a confidence, and community and support and a sense of belonging...

For another participant, finding friends who act as an advocate in her defense and take on some of the work it requires for her to navigate the binary-structured world as gender nonconforming has been important:

I have really good friends that just kind of pave the way... like last year we went to Vegas for my 60th and we were going to the spa and I'm female I'm not going to, you know... go into the men's... I'm going to be going in with my friends and my friend Nancy is like paving the way for me so I don't have to do so much work and that to me is huge. And my friend Sylvia is like always 'what are you talking about? You just called her 'him'??" when I have my allies, they're huge. They're really strong and big and ... and they're people that get it and like it. And like ... its great. Its like you don't have to work… its like (sighs in relief) finally! But other than that it's... its work. Kind of constant.

"I am always ready for some kind of humor". Using humor and charm, both as defenses and as tools for relating to those who might be judgmental of participants' gender presentation, emerged as a prominent theme. One participant described having a comfort in herself that was communicated to others through her use of humor. She reported that by using humor and exhibiting acceptance of her self, others tended to accept her. "I think I get a lot of acceptance from others because I have such a strong level of acceptance for myself so I think I just exude that, you know? I walk in and I am always ready for some kind of humor"

One participant described using humor when communicating around her gender to foster an environment of acceptance. She describes that the process of "outing" herself as a gender nonconforming female to someone willing to listen and respond gives her a sense of "power":

I get power when I out myself. And it just gets better. And the more time you do it, the more power you get. And then you kind of find the way... humor is always my way... I

make it funny. Like I mostly, when I'm telling somebody, I'll make it so its like "isn't it weird?? The whole thing is so weird!!!" and I'll give them that. I'll let them, I will look at it from their perspective and I'll say "yeah its really weird" like but its true... and people are really sympathetic when you give that to them, you know like "yeah its odd but you know its just the way it is, I'm sorry" or whatever and make jokes about it. I don't know. I find that it's so effective. And I don't want to alienate people, I don't want people to go away mad or hateful or anything.

Many participants, throughout their interviews, laughed or joked when discussing something that could also be interpreted as painful, rather than funny. One participant, in a moment of feeling exuberant around her gender and sexual identity, exclaimed: "That's how I feel! It's all good! And if the rest of the work doesn't like it, well screw them! (laughs)" Another participant, describing moments she confronts discrimination, reported that she generally "ignores" the negative attention she is receiving, only to tell about it later as a funny story to friends. She reported: "When I say that I think I ignore them, I just take them as something, as having a funny story to tell later because its a story to tell about how bad things can be in the world but it doesn't really... penetrate." This participant described using humor as a defense from letting the negative attention she receives "penetrate" her or affect her in any deep way.

 When asked how one participant dealt with discrimination, she replied:

I've always relied on charm to overcome some of this. Seduction you could call it, manipulation you could call it. Being well informed and articulate helps... all that. How you compensate, skills to deal with a lot of the homophobia... whether its conscious or not... most people aren't conscious of it. I'm thankful for those queer skills…

For this participant, "queer skills" include an ability to project a certain confidence, regardless of the situation.

"I need a voice in this". One participant shared how much having room to talk about her gender identity with those who don't understand it has been an important part of her fostering a sense of power. She described that being socialized as female includes being trained to communicate well:

> Being socialized female you're used to talking about stuff, you know. And so its like I have that...I mean that's the beauty of being female... I mean I talked to my kid and I talk to kids now that are in my life and its like... things don't just get blown off

This participant shared an experience of facing a difficult situation in which she needed to "find a voice" in order to not feel silenced:

> I was in the women's bathroom 'cause I as like I don't know, I just go in the women's bathroom and she came in and she literally screamed and ran out the door and I was like... it just pissed me off... I just sat in my tent all night going "If you want to be traveling and you don't want to see anything different you just ought to.... just stay home!!" You know it really pissed me off, so the next morning, it was like "I need a voice in this" so I went over and said "I'm sorry I scared you but I am female and maybe you made a mistake..."

This participant spoke to one of the ways she copes with living as a gender nonconforming person by assuming others will like her, while also anticipating their rejection:

> I just assume people are going to like me. I just assume that. And then its like... when I say oh no I'm female and they go silent on me it just like... it takes away my voice...

when the silence comes ... and then they stop talking... that is the worst for me... ask me a question or go "Wow! Really?" Or something but when they just go red and silent it's really awkward... sometimes I just... I used to just let 'em sit in it... for a while and just go (participant sits with arms crossed).

"I can handle my life". Participants spoke to feeling confident, capable, and tough. Many spoke to some sense of having an innate confidence or belief in self that made their lives as gender nonconforming possible. And while that inner confidence seemed crucial to most participants, one participant commented that it couldn't only be inner strength that made resisting gender norms possible. "I think there is something inside of the individual that makes it possible for them to resist in some way. (But) there has to be some affirmation of their resisting, somewhere, you can't just do it on your own."

Still, many participants spoke to a sense of themselves as truly capable. One reported:

Well I feel that I'm an extremely capable person and that I don't need men, although I've hired men and stuff, but you know all by my self I can handle my life, I've got enough skills, I'm intelligent and have an ability to relate... It works for me. I feel like a fairly powerful person, most of the time.

Another said: "I have always had a fairly strong sense of myself. And a fairly even disposition, so I don't get thrown easily and I don't go off in directions and I don't hold grudges." One participant, responding to a question about how she copes with feeling discriminated against said: "I can't say that I've ever been intimidated, I mean I recognize that that is what some of this (discrimination, etc...) was intended to do, but it just doesn't make sense to me."

While the majority of participants considered this toughness necessary and a boon, some felt that, while it was a good tool, there needed to be moments when it wasn't in play. One participant reported:

I can be tough. So, I'm probably called bull dyke... you know, not to my face... I feel like 'bring it on!' Over time I've learned to use it to my advantage. And there are times when I try to soften and push it away... because I don't want (the toughness) there.

She continued by offering the suggestion that sometimes softening ones exterior in the face of discrimination or violence can shift the dynamic for the better and impact the world in positive ways one can't even anticipate:

The world has shifted in my lifetime. I would like to think for the better but I think underneath there's still tremendous fear and judgment (even though) they may be more outwardly accepting of me, my family for example. What I've learned is that when I'm really grounded in myself and as I've learned self-acceptance and self-love, then it doesn't matter what the external environment is. Well in terms of safety, yes. Using discernment for safety purposes. When you project a knowing it goes a long way, even for the biggest badass. Can we go to that place within us of "this (attacking) person is a person with a heart" and sometimes you can't but if you can, you don't know the ripple effect it might have.

This participant explained that while it continues to be necessary to be somewhat vigilant, the more self-acceptance and self-love she experiences, the less she feels the need to exhibit a tough, protective exterior.

Additionally, this participant wondered aloud about the potential for greater and more lasting cultural shifts through staying open and vulnerable in the face of danger and resisting attacking back and instead working to connect on a human-to-human level. This participant's musings mirrored other participants often well developed philosophies on the ways their gendered bodies interacted with environments shaped by the binary. Solomon's (2009) text as referenced in the literature review posited that "queer folks" are often philosophers as a matter of survival:

> Queer folks are natural… phenomenologists, since careful reading of our surroundings, of the physical and social circumstances through which we move, is often a matter of survival. There is the metaphysical mode of queer investigation: what am I that I am so unlike the other people around me? (p.227)

A further investigation around the experiences of "queer folks" who, on the one hand feel "so unlike" others and on the other hand develop "queer skills" to build human connections with those who are rejecting of their identities should be pursued.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Introduction

This qualitative study explored the experiences of eight, gender nonconforming females aged 59 and above with specific attention to the impact of the systematically imposed gender binary on their lives and psyches. Because of the dearth of literature on this subject, this research attempted to cover but the basic grounds of this area of study by working with a small number of participants and utilizing grounded constructivist methodology to guide this preliminary exploration. It would have been impossible to significantly fill the gaping hole in available literature on the experiences of gender nonconforming females and more research on this population is certainly needed.

Findings of this research focused on themes of participants' relationship to the gender binary, explored terms they use to describe their various genders, common experiences of tomboyhood as well as its demise, manifestations of female masculinity, perceived discrimination and experienced violence, ways participants coped with "minority stress", and their coping and resiliency. This research's most glaring finding is that gender nonconforming females, who struggle to negotiate what is experienced as an oppressive, culturally enforced gender binary, do exist.

The Gender Binary

The review of literature demonstrated the inadequacies of our cultural discourses (including social work discourse) that generally treat gender as something essential and thus

render gender nonconforming individuals impossible, implausible, or insignificant. Social work and social psychological literature has too often relied on essentialist notions of gender (assuming that ones gender is somehow innate and exhibits as one of two available categories) and has tended to overlook the ways in which the essentialist gender binary gets utilized as a regulatory force in the lives of actual people through acts of erasure, discrimination and violence. My research aimed to explore the experiences of people who are subject to the harshest edge of gender regulation and who live in environments that deny their very existence/potential to exist.

There is need for expanded discourse and an increase in literature that addresses the hegemonic and regulatory nature of the gender binary and its impact on gender nonconforming lives. This literature would, as Butler (2004) posited, recognize those who have long gone unrecognized. As quoted above, Butler (2004) writes: "…it is a question of developing within law, psychiatry, social and literary theory a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity we have been living for a long time" (p. 31).

Social work's utilization of the "oppression model", which McPhail (2004) understands as relying on essentialist binary categories, itself, ends up oppressing through its erasure of the existence of lived lives. As McPhail (2004) suggests, "(S)ocial work has largely adopted the oppression model in… research, practice, education, policy and advocacy work" and that "(T)hese essentialist constructions rely on the binary categorizations of male/female and heterosexuality/homosexuality" (p. 3). Not only are issues of intersectionality rendered impossible or unarticulatable, identities that exist outside of or along-side of the binary, such as the gender identities of participants in this research, remain invisible, untenable, obsolete.

For instance, when the participant in this research—who identifies as a butch, rather than as a woman, and is often read as male, who prefers the pronouns he and him to she and her, who

identifies with the term "dyke" but not "lesbian", and who deeply identifies as blue collar—

described getting punched in the face by a male stranger on the streets of San Francisco in the

1970s, did the violent male punch my participant because "she" appeared to be "homosexual"?

Doubtful. Likely his violence was in response to some sense that the culmination of my

participant's identity should be punished, killed off, erased. As Butler (2004) writes of violence

towards gender nonconforming people:

> …violence emerges precisely as the demand to undo that legibility, to question its
>
> possibility, to render it unreal and impossible in the face of its appearance to the
>
> contrary… to say, effectively, that this body, this challenge to an accepted version of the
>
> world is and shall be unthinkable. (p. 35)

Gender and Sexuality: Conflations and Identifications

The common conflation of gender nonconformativity and homosexuality is also a way

social discourses have avoided addressing the fact that gender norms are socially constructed

through perceiving what could be understood as phobia of gender nonconformativity instead as

homophobia. This conflation misses out on what crucial information the NEA's (2009) study

highlights; that ones gender nonconformity is more often the site for discrimination and violence

than is ones sexual orientation (p. vii). By staying within the bounds of "binary categorizations

of male/female and heterosexuality/homosexuality" (McPhail, 2004, p. 3), social work literature

avoids the difficult task of untangling the tightly-knit social discourses that construct gender as

binary and essential, and by doing so, misnames the societal fear of gender nonconformity

"homophobia" and thus misses out on its complexity.

Indeed, binary constructions of gender are so much so the norm that many of the

participants of this research, while identifying outside of the binary in some ways, described

themselves well within the bounds of the categories of "woman" and "lesbian". The nature of identity categories as inexact, changeable, and limiting became highlighted through the exploration into their identities.

When beginning this research, a call was put out for potential participants to respond if they were aged 60 or above, female, and gender nonconforming. Minimal examples of what this researcher meant by "gender nonconforming" were provided. The range of the identities of those who responded is of interest. Some participants felt that they fit squarely within the gender binary of man/woman. Their understanding of the term "gender nonconformity" seemed more akin to what I might call "gender role nonconformity"—in that it seemed that they understood themselves to be gender nonconforming by the mere fact that they hadn't followed the stereotypically traditional paths many women of their generation had. Participants' lesbianism and nontraditional career paths were considered to be evidence of gender nonconformativity. And indeed they are to a certain extent.

However, in the past two decades, theories of gender have shifted radically due to such seminal texts as Butler's (1990, 1999) *Gender Trouble,* which aims to disrupt essentialist notions of the gender binary and rewrite gender as something socially constructed and "performative". Butler's (1990, 1999) notion of gender as "performative" is in no way aiming to boil down the concept of gender into something expressed through the performance of gender roles through a certain acting out of gender. Butler refers to gender as "performance" as a deeper, unconscious, bodily performance. Butler (1990, 1999) writes:

> The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an

'internal' feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain

bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. (pp. xv-xvi)

I would suggest that in future research on gender nonconforming individuals, researchers

develop language around recruitment that conveys that by gender they mean the whole way we

embody and identify ourselves as gendered beings; gender as identity rather than as role.

On Tomboyhood

As diverse as participants were regarding their current gender identities, they had

surprisingly similar ways of describing their genders as children. The term "tomboy" was nearly

ubiquitous with only one participant reporting that she did not identify with the term. "Tomboy"

could thus be explored as a rather large and umbrella-like term for all childhood female gender

nonconformativity. What are the nuances within the term that differentiate one experience of

tomboyhood from another? As the literature suggested, is "extreme male identification" in

tomboyhood, in which a child is found "taking a boy's name or refusing girl clothing of any

type" predictive of future lesbian orientation (Hablerstam, 1998, p. 6)? Does social-scientific

literature suggest, as it seems it does, that there are gradations of "tomboyness"? Since what our

society considers "masculine behavior" will shift over time, is "masculinity" something that can

be measured, qualified, or understood outside of the cultural context within which it is being

perceived?

Similarly, nearly all participants expressed the experience of leaving their tomboy

childhoods and entering adolescence as somewhat traumatic. Participants felt some friction

between their conceptions of themselves and what was suddenly expected of them—with the

majority of participants feeling that had to conform to gender norms at that stage. For many

participants, there was struggle in this transition between themselves and parents, peers, or

school officials. This common experience across the range of participants' experiences points to the prevalence of gender regulation at the onset of adolescence. May participants described this transition into adolescence as a loss of "freedom".

As the literature indicated, tomboyhood is commonly supported as an identity (as opposed to male children's femininity) by society and by parents up to the end of latency (Carr, 2007, p. 439; Jalas, 2003, p. 1). As Halberstam (1998) describes, tomboyhood is often encouraged until "it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence. Teenage tomboyism presents a problem and tends to be subject to the most severe efforts to reorient" (p. 6). Participants in this research confirmed that, upon reaching adolescence, their tomboyish behaviors and desires became the site of contention within their families and schools. Two participants out of the eight not only identified that they had been tomboys during childhood but had, according to their recollection of how they felt as children, identified strongly with basic tropes of maleness (such as each described identifying as "Daddy" rather "Mommy" in play). These two participants happened to be the two participants who did not identify with the term "woman" at the time of the interview. While I find most theories of development that present early childhood gender identification as "evidence" for later gender identity (or sexual identity, as the literature showed) problematic, this detail did stand out.

However, taking these two participant's life experiences in full poses all sort of challenges to the oft far-too-tidy theories of development. For one of these two participants, for instance, there was extreme male-identification in childhood, then roughly thirty years of experiences living as a woman, a wife to a male partner, and as a mother to a son. After which a slow roughly fifteen-year period occurred in which varying shades of gender identity were donned and tried on for their fit. Now, as a person in her 60s, this participant feels "like a straight

man" named "Susan" and feels at home in a body and identity that defy the binary completely. As the literature suggests, there has been problematic theories that present a causal relationship between childhood "cross-sex identification" and adult homosexuality (as is expressed in the ICD-9). The oversimplification of identity constructs inherent to developmental theories that concern gender formation and sexual identification fail to notice the inexact, ever-changing, and unstable nature of identities.

Protective Factors and Coping

Two themes emerged which I had not at all anticipated. First, it had not occurred to me, prior to recruitment, that because my participants were all Bay Area residents, they have enjoyed (and have, for some, for the last 40 years) more comfort in being gender nonconforming (or being perceived as gay) in their environment than perhaps any other gender nonconforming people anywhere else in the world. The Bay Area is known for its general liberalism as well as being somewhat of a Mecca for queer and gender nonconforming people since the gay liberation movements of the late 1960s/erly 1970s. In my findings, the Bay Area's liberalism around lesbianism and gender nonconformativity shined through in statements like one participant's:

> Then of course I ended up in the Bay Area for most of my life and that's not by chance... because it's better here... They see you, and they see dykes all over the place. What's one more dyke! It's not a big deal! Strength in numbers! (laughs)

This participant's statement does not imply that there is zero discrimination in the Bay Area towards gender nonconforming and/or lesbian identified people, but rather that it is lessened by the sheer impact of increased numbers of those "othered" by mainstream society. "What's one more dyke" to someone who sees many a day? Further research on the experiences of gender nonconforming females would benefit from wider, if not national, recruitment.

With concern to the topic of my participant's experience of discrimination around their gender nonconformativity, I noticed many of the experiences shared were past experiences. While I think the Bay Area's liberalism is one factor in the paucity of more recent experiences of discrimination, and certainly in the Bay Area, if not in many urban centers, discrimination against the LGBT population has decreased over the past decades, I wondered whether my participants' whiteness and class status' effectively made them less of a target for discrimination. I also wondered about my participants age group and wondered whether those who read as older adults, if not senior, are left alone more so by the average passer by as is reflected in the quote by Kehoe (1988):

> … there seem to be fewer stereotypes of lesbians over 60 than there are for older homosexual males. Perhaps this is due to the greater invisibility of the women and to the fact that they are triply disregarded: as female, as aged, as deviant… (Kehoe, 1988, p. 64)

Further reading on the invisibility of elders in our country would benefit this study and other research going forward.

The second theme that emerged without any anticipation of it was the regular occurrence of participants laughing while talking about painful material and/or talking about using humor as a defense. Six out of the eight participants laughed frequently throughout their interviews and almost always in response to something that was not all together humorous. For instance, one participant described the harassment and discrimination she received while getting her PhD and how it informed her idea of herself as a feminist. "…(B)eing in Utah being a woman getting a PhD degree would turn anybody to being a feminist…(laughs)..." This example is one of hundreds of examples that can be pulled from the transcripts of the interviews conducted for this research.

Humor is a considered "mature" defense and is considered to enhance "overall functioning" through permitting "the overt expression of painful or socially unacceptable wishes and feelings without discomforting the individual who is being humorous" (Berzoff, et.al., 2008, p. 85). While I did perceive participants making light of painful material as appropriately defensive and, as all of my participants were relative strangers to me and thus were not necessarily going to show me utter vulnerability, I also wondered how much of my own presence as researcher played into their styles of delivery. For one, did I present the material as light and humorous, thus setting a certain tone for conversation or through inadvertently setting a boundary? Was I using humor as a defense as well? Additionally, because I, too, am white, gender nonconforming and female, did a sort of "bonding" occur during the interviews between myself (as researcher) and my participants that allowed for the assumption on both sides that we could "laugh" at something painful together? As if I was somehow on the inside of the somewhat painful joke? Perhaps, as one of my participants termed it in her statement "I'm thankful for those queer skills (of charm and articulateness)", both researcher and participant entered into the interview armed with "queer skills" of accommodation, both sides accustomed to using as the "queer skills" of charm and humor to translate our own experience so often to others.

Conclusion

One area of study that I did not get a chance to explore with participants due to the more focused nature of this research is around elder care, resources and the experiencing of aging for gender nonconforming and queer or lesbian identified females. While the interviews did touch upon participants' current medical, social, and economic realities, my findings in this area were minimal. There has been, gladly, increasing attention paid within the social science research field

to the needs of LGBTQQI elders, as the recent comprehensive study "LGBT Older Adults in Lon-term Care Facilities" shows (National Senior Citizens Law Center, 2011).

What my findings did indicate is that all of my participants experienced the gender binary (whether implemented through essentialist notions of gender itself or through limiting roles attributed to the constructions available) as limiting, regulating, erasing, silencing, and occasionally violent. It is my hope that this research opens up the possibility for further research on the experiences of gender nonconforming females.

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Appendix A

January 11, 2011

Samantha Miller

Dear Sam,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and they are fine. You did a very good job of cutting down the Consent. I hope you don't scare any of your elders away with the language of the flier, but that is up to you. The one thing I was left wondering about is the fact that the assumption in your recruitment and description is that no women who are gender non-conforming are straight. That really is not the case but I don't think any of them will show up in your sample. You don't list straight as one of your identities. Maybe that is another study. In any event, your materials are in excellent shape and we are glad to give final approval to your study.
Please note the following requirements:
Consent Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.
In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:
Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.
Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.
Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.
Good luck with your project. Please send us copies of permissions from any other organizations where you recruit.
Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jo Rees, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Dear Participant,

I am a Masters-level Social Work graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. To complete my degree, I am asked to undertake a research project that acts as my Masters Thesis. I have decided to focus my research on the experience for gender nonconforming females of living in a world that organizes itself around a gender binary (such as man/woman, male/female, masculine/feminine). I am interested in collecting personal experiences that shed light on the lived experiences of gender nonconforming individuals living in our society. Because there isn't much information out there about the experiences of gender nonconforming females, I will be using the interviews as data for my research. After the research project is complete, the findings may be used in presentation or for publication.

Your participation in this project will consist of being interviewed by me. The interview will be up to one hour-long and will be held in a quiet, private meeting room. I will be recording your interview on a digital recorder that I will keep safe and insure that your privacy and confidentiality is protected. Only my research advisor will have access to the transcriptions of our interview in full. All identifying data will be kept confidential.

If you agree, we will meet for a second hour-long interview in weeks following the first. This is so that if, after our first interview, you realize you have more to share, there is an opportunity to do so. At any point of the interviewing process, you have the right to withdraw your participation in the research project. Additionally, you can withdraw from the research project following the interview if before the date of March 15th, 2011. If you choose to withdraw, the recordings of the interview will be destroyed and I will not use them as data.

In the interview, I will be asking you how you identify yourself regarding your age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and gender identity/expression. Because much of the interview will be geared towards an exploration of your lived experience as gender nonconforming, it may bring up strong or uncomfortable emotions. Because of this, I will be providing you with a list of referral resources so that if need be, you can access someone to offer you support following the interview. I hope that this interview will prove to be a rewarding and meaningful experience for you, as it will serve to give voice to and empower gender nonconforming females in new ways. I also have hopes that this research will help those in the helping professions (therapists, case managers, nurses, doctors, etc…) in being better allies to you concerning your experience.

All participants in this study will participate voluntarily. Again, if at any time prior to April 1st, 2011 you wish to withdraw from the study, you are absolutely free to do so. All materials pertaining to you will be destroyed immediately should you choose to withdraw. If you have additional questions or wish to withdraw you may contact me, the researcher, at smmiller@smith.edu or (203) 641-7613. Should you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, I encourage you to call me at (203) 641-7613 or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Appendix C

Interview Guide

1. What is your age, race/ethnicity?
2. How do you identify yourself with regards to your socio-economic status? Your sexuality? Your gender? How has your gender been perceived by others? Your sexuality?
3. Tell me about how you came to understand yourself as _____ (the term the interviewee uses to identify their gender and/or their sexuality)? When was the first time you realized your gender did not conform to others' expectations of what they thought it "should" be?
4. How would you describe the person you were before being perceived as _____? How about afterward? If you were perceived as _____ since childhood, what was that like?
5. What, if at all, did you notice or experience differently at that point and onward?
6. (If so,) what was it like?
7. Who or what, if anyone or anything, has influenced your actions since coming out as or being perceived as _____? (Our culture? Strangers? Community members? Family members? Friends? Lovers?)
8. How would describe the person you have become as an adult?
9. What positive changes have occurred in your life since identifying or being perceived as _____?
10. What negative changes have occurred since then?
11. Who or what has been the most helpful to you since coming out or being perceived as _____? How has this person or thing been helpful?
12. Are there any specific experiences you can remember that encapsulate your experience as _____?
13. What advice would you now give to someone just coming into themselves as _____?
14. Is there anything that occurred to you during our talking that had never occurred to you before?
15. Is there anything you want to add so that I might understand your experience as _____ better?
16. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Questions influenced by and pulled from Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* London : Sage Publications Ltd.

Appendix D

ARE YOU 60+?
ARE YOU GENDER NONCONFORMING AND
FEMALE? (IS THE WAY YOU PREFER TO LOOK
COMMONLY CONSIDERED "UNLADYLIKE"
OR NOT "WOMANLY" OR EVEN MANNISH?
HAVE YOU EVER BEEN REFERRED TO AS "BUTCH"
OR "ANDROGYNOUS" BY PEOPLE IN YOUR
COMMUNITY OR BY STRANGERS?)

Were you a tomboy growing up? Have you ever been perceived as using the "wrong" bathroom or dressing room? Do you generally shop for or wear mens' clothes? Do you ever get called "Sir" by sales people?

As a Masters-level Social Work graduate student at
Smith College School for Social Work,
I am developing a research project which will
focus on the experiences of gender nonconforming females
who havec ome of age and continue to live in a society that
organizes itself around a gender binary (e.g. man/woman,
male/female, masculine/feminine) and
that leaves little room for gender expressions that exist
"outside" of these specific gender "boxes".
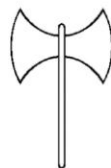
Because there isn't much information out there about
the experiences of women who are gender nonconforming,
I am interested in conducting confidential interviews
that illuminate this experience.

If you would be interested in sharing your story with me,
please email me, Sam Miller, at smmiller@smith.edu
or call (203)641-7613