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# Experiences of intimacy and gender non-conformity in assigned female at birth (AFAB) same-sex partnerships

Denise E. Goitia

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to address the question: In what ways, if any, does non-conforming gender expression shape the lived experience of emotional and sexual intimacy of partners assigned female at birth same-sex romantic relationships? Healthy relationships are found to contribute to overall positive health outcomes and general satisfaction with life and sexual and emotional intimacy are necessary precursors for establishing healthy and satisfying relationships. Twelve assigned female at birth (AFAB) individuals in same-sex relationships participated. Six identified as gender non-conforming (GNC) and six were partnered with individuals who identified as gender non-conforming. Four major themes were uncovered. First, these findings revealed that the more gender fluid their partner is, the more comfortable the GNC partner was to express their own gender fluidity. Second, although the harmful effects of unsupportive or traumatic incidences in the lives of GNC people and their partners were present, supportive family, communities and allyship were protective factors for these participants. Third, emotional intimacy was negatively affected by daily stressors, personal traumas, and insecurities, but is was strengthened by confidence in the relationship and negotiating and balancing differences. Finally, although a combination of external factors, interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics affected sexual intimacy, validating and acknowledging a GNC partner's gender during sex was necessary for sexual intimacy for both partner groups.

**EXPERIENCES OF INTIMACY AND GENDER NON-CONFORMITY IN ASSIGNED FEMALE AT  
BIRTH (AFAB) SAME-SEX PARTNERSHIPS**

A project based upon an independent investigation  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Masters of Social Work.

Denise Goitia  
Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, MA 01063

2016

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*"If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time...But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." --Lila Watson*

I am grateful to all the lives, spirits, and minds that made this work possible. For my family, and especially my mom who prayed for me and held the vision that I would reach the finish line.

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And finally, for the victims, survivors, and the loved ones of the Orlando shooting (June, 2016); may this tragedy inspire us to keep protecting and cultivating the beauty and diversity of the human heart and spirit.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to address the following question: In what ways, if any, does non-conforming gender expression shape the lived experience of emotional and sexual intimacy in same-sex female romantic relationships? Both sexual and emotional intimacy are necessary for establishing healthy and satisfying relationships which are found to contribute to overall positive health outcomes and general satisfaction with life. Because same-sex relationships and gender non-conforming individuals challenge traditional gender norms, it is vital for clinicians supporting same-sex female relationships to understand how non-binary gender roles and gender expression effect intimacy.

A review of the literature same-sex female relationships reveals significant gaps in understanding intimacy, both sexual and emotional, particularly with regards to gender non-conforming partnerships (Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005; Umberson, Thomeer, & Lodge, 2015). Most research on relationship intimacy privileges the experiences of heterosexual couples and compares findings about gay and lesbian couples to findings on heterosexual couples (Matthews, et al., 2003; Umberson, et al., 2015). This is problematic because relationship dynamics in heterosexual relationships are examined through a gendered lens primarily focusing on the differences between men and women, when same-sex partnerships often challenge commonly researched gender norms. While some relationship dynamics apply to all romantic relationship types, there are unique needs and factors to consider in same-sex relationships. Furthermore, it is important to continue to study how same-sex female relationships have changed in response to increased acceptance of same-sex partnerships.

Matthews, et al. (2003) argue for the importance of understanding relationship dynamics in lesbian couples for the provision of appropriate and effective mental health resources and services. Research on minority stress (Meyer, 2003) has established that oppression, bigotry, and prejudice generate both psychological and physical stressors that negatively impact the health and well-being of those with minority status. Same-sex partners are already susceptible to minority stress and relationships comprised of gender nonconforming partners may be additionally vulnerable to the impact of minority stress. While clinicians must understand not only must the influence of gender differences in same-sex relationships, they must also consider the ways in which marginalization due to gender variant presentation impacts intimacy and relationship quality in same sex relationships.

### **Definitions**

For the purposes of this study the distinction is made between “sex”—an anatomical and biological description--and “gender”—a cultural construct (Herdt, 1994; Unger & Crawford, 1993). Gender encompasses one’s psychology and sense of self (gender identity) as well as a communication or performance of gender that includes how one acts, dresses, and behaves (gender expression). This study focuses on individuals who are assigned-female at birth (AFAB) and who are sexually attracted to other AFAB partners who may also have a gender non-conforming gender expression. Throughout this paper I will attempt to use the phrase “same-sex female partners” or “partnerships” to be inclusive of the variety of ways individuals with same-sex attractions may identify. Some of these identities include: gay, lesbian, dyke, pansexual, bisexual and queer.

I will use the term gender non-conforming to include a variety of non-binary gender identities that encompass other terms such as: butch, tomboy, androgynous, two-spirit, gender-

queer, gender-fluid, or gender non-binary. Finally, many gender non-conforming individuals may experience a complicated relationship to the sex they were assigned at birth, and may reject terms like “woman” and “female,” therefore the term AFAB will be used to indicate the biological designation, and the term cis-gendered female will be used to identify those whose biological sex also matches the current cultural norms of female gender expression.

Webster’s Dictionary defines intimacy, from the Latin *intimus*, as pertaining to the innermost character of a thing; fundamental; essential; most private or personal. In the literature it is commonly understood as mutual closeness between partners (Umberson et al., 2015; Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, Gangamma, 2014). Emotional intimacy will be defined as the ability to feel emotionally “close” to a partner, that is the ability to experience and express empathy, understanding and vulnerability within a romantic relationship. Sexual intimacy will be defined as any form of sensuous activity between two people including a range of expression, from physical affection to genital touch that builds a sense of closeness between two people. Because intimacy is defined as what is most private and what is most essential, it is possible to conjecture that the emotional and sexual needs for intimacy of gender non-conforming individuals may be different than what has previously been researched for both same-sex and heterosexual relationships.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

In order to better understand the need for research on intimacy within gender non-conforming individuals in same-sex female relationships, I will review four distinct areas of literature. First, I will explain what gender non-conforming means and contextualize it within the history of women's social and political movements. Second, I will review the literature on same-sex female couples and highlight the findings from American Couples Study, one of the most influential studies of American romantic relationships. Third, I will broadly discuss intimacy and the importance of intimacy in establishing healthy romantic relationships, for both same-sex and heterosexual relationships. Finally, I will define and discuss the social and psychological implications of sexual minority stress on same-sex relationships, focusing on how gender non-conforming individuals and their partners may experience higher risks of harassment and discrimination, thereby establishing a rationale for the present research.

#### **Understanding Gender Non-Conformity in a Historical Context**

Queer theorist Judith Butler (1990) conceptualized gender as an act or performance rather than as essential to one's nature, and further describes it as "the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes" (Butler, 2004, p. 42). Conceptualizing gender as performance instead of essential challenges the notion of inherent "male-ness" and "female-ness." Because Butler's (1990, 2004) work challenges binary gender (masculine/feminine), gender becomes inclusive of a number of different components, including biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. For example

those assigned female at birth (AFAB) may now also describe themselves as “butch,” “femme,” “gender queer,” “transmasculine,” “non-binary,” or “tomboy.”

Butler’s redefinition of gender not only impacts an individuals’ self-identification, but also changes the way in which couples identify. For example, in a same-sex relationship, both partners may be assigned female at birth, but they may not both share the same gender identity or gender expression, making one partner (or both) gender non-conforming. In these instances, instead of gender reflecting either masculinity or femininity, a non-conforming gender identity or expression allows the individual to express what is “genuine, comfortable, and sincere” within a certain social and cultural context (Sennott, 2010, p. 103). As gender non-conformity is more common among lesbians than heterosexual women, many same-sex female relationships can be understood as defying heterosexual gender norms (Reiger, Linsenmeier, Bailey & Gygax, 2008).

**Gender non-conformity in social and political movements.** The emergence of non-binary and gender non-conforming gender identities is a fairly recent cultural shift. In her historical and theoretical research on lesbian sexuality, Faderman (1991) notes that Butch and femme identities first emerged in the 1940’s and 1950s in the United States post-World War II. In reaction to second wave feminism in the 1960’s and 1970s, lesbians began performing gender more androgynously as an act of resistance and to critique societal norms of masculinity and femininity (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). Lesbianism as a political movement became less about same-sex attraction and desire and more an opportunity to challenge gender oppression (Faderman, 1991).

Faderman (1991) writes that as a result of the political movements of second wave feminists and lesbian activists in the 1960s and 1970’s, lesbian desire became predicated on “sameness,” highlighting “genderlessness” and the absence of power differences based on gender

(Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). While lesbian feminists originally pursued “androgyny” as an act of resistance, the trend continued after the height of lesbian feminism. Faderman (1991) writes that lesbian gender expression in the 80s was more androgynous, leaning towards more masculine than feminine expression. Presenting oneself too feminine or too masculine was seen as reinforcing patriarchal gender norms (Faderman, 1991).

More recently, as self-identified transgender individuals have become more visible, vocal, and more socially accepted, the conversation about gender has become further nuanced. Butler (2004) writes that transgender is not a “third gender” but rather a “mode of passage between genders...not reducible to the normative insistence on one or two” (p. 43). While for some a trans-identity has required physical medical, and surgical changes, increasingly it has become more akin to Butler’s understanding—not an either/or, but a transgressive space between. In this way, gender non-conformity demands recognition of the continuum of “sex” and “gender” (Sennott, 2010).

### **Research on Gender in Same-Sex Female Couples**

To better describe and understand the effects of gender roles on same-sex relationships, Eldridge & Gilbert (1990) argued for the development of new relationship models. Although the research in this area is generally scarce, in recent years it has burgeoned to explore how gender expressions affect mental health and authenticity in lesbian relationships particularly by focusing on butch-femme relationships and gender performance (Levitt & Horne, 2002; Levitt & Heistand, 2005; Levitt, Puckett, & Ippolito, 2012). Early research in this area saw butch-femme relationships as imitations of heterosexual relationships, and assumed similar relationship dynamics (Faderman, 1991; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). However, butch and femme expression was foundational to the development and understanding of non-binary queer gender identities.

Radical feminist and gender queer theoretician Feinberg (1996) suggests that these identities may be seen as transcending and radicalizing gender roles. Rather than replicating the dynamic in a heterosexual relationship, butch-femme relationships have unique dynamics (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005).

In their research on butch-femme couples, Levitt & Hiestand (2005) found that femininity was not equated with passivity in flirtation and courting rituals. While attraction and beauty in heterosexual females is often described as being for the male gaze, Levitt & Hiestand (2005) found that “femmes” were perceived as “sexy” because they both commanded the gaze of the butches they were trying to attract while also being the objects of their gaze. The butch gaze was described as a combination of admiration and desire (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005).

By commanding attention and attempting to consciously arouse desire in other females, femmes challenged notions of heterosexual femininity (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). While butches, or masculine of center partners were seen as initiators of dating and sexual activity, it was often up to femmes to first signal their interest and inspire desire through acts of “feminine sexuality and strength” (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005, p. 43). Because butch sexual performance was often focused on pleasing their partner first, and sometimes exclusively, butch-femme relational dynamics were seen to invert traditional heterosexual courting practices (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005).

While Levitt & Hiestand’s (2005) research makes an important contribution to the field of mental health, they write very little about other types gender non-conforming or non-binary identities. For example, later research from Levitt et al., (2012) includes identity categories for “nontraditional gender” and “traditional gender” in addition to butch and femme identities, but focuses more specifically on the experiences of butch-identified women (p.153). Since many

individuals are increasingly identifying as gender non-conforming or gender queer, there is an increasing need to explore beyond the categories of butch and femme to understand how gender functions in same-sex relationships.

Non-normative gender expression is often perceived as a greater aberration than one's sexual preference. Bepko & Johnson (2000) write, "The dichotomization of gender creates specific stresses for gay and lesbian couples. Any violations of gender and sexual norms may unleash a sense of shame, anxiety, and devaluing of the self" (p. 410). Pressures to conform to cultural gender expectations are high, and violating these expectations has a great psychological impact on the individuals who dare to live outside these expectations. Thus, gender is one of the significant *differences* that is important to acknowledge when studying and researching same-sex female partnerships.

One of the primary oversights in research on same-sex partnerships is in distinguishing the differences between biological sex and the multiplicity of gender identities often expressed in LGBTQ communities. It is difficult to find statistics of the number of "gender non-conforming" lesbians and bisexuals, but U.S. studies have shown that both homosexual adults and youth tend to be more gender non-conforming in behaviors, feelings and interests (Reiger, et al., 2008). LGBTQ communities have been at the forefront of challenging gender binaries and challenging traditional gender dynamics (Carrington, 1999).

**The American Couples Study.** In 1983, in response to rising divorce rates and an observation that the institution of marriage seemed "fragile and in flux," Schwartz and Blumstein conducted a pioneering study on American couples, surveying 12,000 couples and interviewing 300 in depth. These researchers succeeded in representing a diversity of relationship types, including heterosexual, gay and lesbian. Of interest here, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983)

reported on the ways lesbian couples are both similar to and different from heterosexual couples. Generally, they discovered there are no differences in the needs and predictors of positive relationship outcomes between heterosexual and same-sex relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). This research has been confirmed in subsequent comparative research between same-sex and heterosexual partnerships (Matthews et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2005; Holmberg & Blair, 2009). However, the study also identified important differences in relationship dynamics in same-sex female partnerships. For example, the study found that in heterosexual and same-sex male partnerships money determines the power balance between couples; however, this was not true for same-sex female relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). Although Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) postulate that lesbian couples may recognize the unfair power that having more money conveys, and may resist this model of control and domination. However, Blumstein and Schwartz do not explain or discuss the ways in which power is balanced in lesbian relationships. Rather, they described lesbians as more “relationship-centered” than other couples, possibly because of their assumption that same-sex female partners adhere to feminine gender roles and express their gender in similar ways, thus having more similar needs for and values of intimacy. Unfortunately, these assumptions were never followed up by empirical research.

The American Couples Study was rich and informative for its time; however, it has been almost 30 years since this original investigation. Since then, there have been many changes within the American lesbian community, as well as in the cultural acceptance at large, both in terms of acceptance as well as in attitudes and understanding of gender. This shift is important to consider, as gender-nonconforming individuals and their partners may have unique relationship dynamics that are not reflective of previous research situated within the gender binary and same-sex relationships.

While there is a growing population of non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals, recent research continues to examine same-sex female partnerships from a binary perspective. For example, when “gender roles” are studied in same-sex relationships it is mostly in comparison to women in heterosexual relationships as opposed to exploring gender roles in same-sex relationship itself (Matthews, et al., 2003; Umberson, et al., 2015). More problematic, however, is that even when gender is considered, researchers often assume that because both partners are women, their gendered behaviors, self-expression and intimacy needs will be similar to one another’s (Umberson et al., 2015). Similar to the American Couples Study, this assumption has led researchers to draw conclusions about lesbian couples and their intimate lives by ignoring the influence of gender differences in same-sex relationships (Spitalnick & McNair, 2005).

However, research exists that stresses the importance of considering gender within same-sex female relationships (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Levitt & Heistand, 2002; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005). In his research on “sex-role self-concepts” in same-sex relationships, Kurdek & Schmitt (1986) writes about the importance of understanding sex-roles—such as masculine, feminine, undifferentiated, and androgynous—in same-sex relationships when appraising relationship quality. Akin to this, Spitalnick & McNair (2005) write about “sex-roles,” which they define as “behaviors and characteristics that are culturally associated with men and women and therefore are based on stereotypical norms of . . . masculinity and femininity” (p.46). They propose that when sex-roles don’t conform to normative standards of masculinity and femininity, sexual minority couples will most likely develop their own normative relationship dynamics (Spitalnick & McNair, 2005). In their comparison of heterosexual couples to same-sex couples, Spitalnick & McNair (2005) find that research suggests that heterosexual couples report more

“sex-role differentiated” behavior while homosexual partners reported more “sex-role undifferentiated” behavior. Spitalnick & McNair (2005) conclude that homosexual partners may experience less conflict with regards to gendered tasks such as household chores, child rearing, and financial responsibilities. Furthermore, in a comprehensive literature review, Kurdek (2005) found that compared to partners from married heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian couples are more egalitarian when distributing labor and more constructive in resolving conflict, despite having less family support. While Spitalnick & McNair (2005) acknowledge the possibility of a more expansive understanding of gender, and Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Kurdek, 2005) argues for a better understanding of gender roles in same-sex relationships, both arguments still lack a more nuanced understanding of gender beyond the dichotomy of cultural stereotypes of maleness and femaleness.

### **Intimacy and Healthy Relationships**

Since The American Couples study there has been a tremendous amount of research done on romantic and sexual relationships that focused on heterosexual couples. When same-sex couples are considered in this body of research, heterosexual relationships identified as the standard to which same-sex relationships are compared. (Matthews et al., 2003; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005; Umberson, et al., 2015). Researchers often find that all couples generally need similar things to be stable, and predictors of positive outcomes of relationships are similar regardless of sexual orientation (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 2005; Matthews, et al., 2003).

Healthy romantic relationships are believed to be one of the key factors in determining overall satisfaction with life (Myers, 1993). One key to healthy relationships is the level of intimacy present in the relationship (Umberson et al., 2015; Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day,



Gangamma, 2014). Two of the most important types of intimacy that have been studied in conjunction with romantic relationship are emotional and sexual intimacy (Umberson, et al., 2015). Emotional intimacy has been described as the “glue” of all relationships” (Gaia, 2002, p. 152), and high levels of sexual intimacy are correlated with higher relationship satisfaction (Leavitt & Willoughby, 2015).

Research on intimacy typically focuses on the gender differences between men and women in heterosexual relationships (Umberson et al., 2015; Yoo et al., 2014). For example, men place greater value on sexual intimacy and women place greater value on emotional intimacy (Yoo et. al, 2014). Studies have shown that women in heterosexual relationships require emotional intimacy in order to achieve sexual intimacy (Umberson, et al., 2015). In addition, women tend to score higher on intimacy measures, indicating that women practice intimate emotional expression to a greater degree than men and that women use “feminine” styles of expressing intimacy, such as talking and physical touch, while men engage in activities to build intimacy (Gaia, 2002). Women express their feelings more often than men (Simon & Nath, 2004), thus promoting communication and the sharing of emotion (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Thomeer, Umberson, & Purdovska, 2013).

Why do women and men purportedly endorse different intimacy styles? Some biological and evolutionary theories suggest that because women birth children and breast feed that they are more biologically predisposed to having greater intimacy skills (Gaia, 2002). Other theories such as role theory and social psychological models argue, for example, that men are socialized to avoid appearing vulnerable, whereas vulnerability is acceptable in women (Gaia, 2002). In other words, women may be socialized to create and seek intimacy that allows for the expression of vulnerability, while men may avoid this.

**Emotional intimacy in same-sex relationships.** Research on same-sex female partnerships often identifies three characteristics of same-sex female relationships: (a) high emotional “fusion” or minimal emotional boundaries (Krestan & Bepko, 1990; Ackbar & Senn, 2010; Umberson et al., 2015), (b) high degrees of egalitarianism (Richards, Jonathon, & Kim, 2015), and (c) valuing emotional intimacy over sexual intimacy, as evidenced by fewer reports of sexual activity than in heterosexual and gay male relationships (Iansenza, 2002; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005; Umberson et al., 2015). Intimacy research on same-sex partnerships has focused primarily on emotional intimacy, since prior research has established that women, in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships, value emotional intimacy over sexual intimacy or require emotional intimacy to experience sexual intimacy (Eldrige & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 2006; Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2002; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

Umberson et al.’s (2015) research on boundaries and intimacy in same-sex and heterosexual relationships attempts to challenge essentialist notions of gender by examining traditional beliefs about gender and intimacy and by comparing the experiences of heterosexual partners to same-sex partners. Their research finds that women, regardless of sexual preference, do more work to promote intimacy by minimizing emotional boundaries in partnerships, encouraging communication, and sharing feelings. However, their research finds that while heterosexual women express greater dissatisfaction with their partners for not being able to engage in emotional intimacy, same-sex females often report the stress of engaging in significant amounts of emotional work because both partners tend to highly value emotional intimacy.

Minimizing emotional boundaries to promote intimacy is seen by some researchers and mental health clinicians as problematic and is often labeled as “fusion,” when partners become so emotionally bonded that the relationship subsumes the individual identities of one or both the

partners, resulting in a loss of individuality (Ackbar & Senn, 2010). More so, Krestan & Bepko (1990) suggest that fusion may result in negative outcomes, including withdrawal from sexual activity, depression, anxiety, and relationship violence. However, Ackbar & Senn's (2010) work seeks to distinguish between high levels of healthy emotional closeness in same-sex female relationships and fusion; they found that intense emotional closeness in same-sex female relationships can promote health and relationship satisfaction, as behaviors such as sharing friends, social activities, and material possessions are no different than the sharing of resources and networks in heterosexual couples. Specifically, Ackbar & Senn (2010) suggest that clinical models based on male-centered relational models do not accommodate for the needs of gender minorities.

Challenging previous research on intimacy in same-sex couples, Mackey, O'Brien, & Mackey (1997) argue in a longitudinal qualitative study of gay and lesbian couples that lesbian partnerships are not negatively affected by fusion, blurred boundaries, and merging of identities (Mackey, et al., 1997). Their research instead finds that differentiation was valued as much as connection, and that a balance of the two was important (Mackey, et al., 1997). Same-sex female couples in the study described higher levels of emotional connection initially, which declined during harder times, but which was later re-established (Mackey, et al., 1997). Couple's therapy research identifies differentiation as important for negotiating conflict. Negotiating conflict is considered another significant part of maintaining and building both emotional and sexual intimacy (Solomon, et al., 2005). Beals, Impett, and Peplau (2002) also challenge previous research on same-sex female couples in their work on commitment and relationship longevity in lesbian partnerships. They find that lesbian partners effectively balance between autonomy and restriction and they challenge the notion that lesbian relationships are inherently fused (Beals et

al., 2002). Their research instead reveals that a balance between autonomy and restriction is considered vital in long-term lesbian relationships (Beals et al., 2002). Their work also makes note of the impact of conflict on relationships, finding that low conflict and low frustration are most congruent with longevity and satisfaction.

While conflict is inevitable in all relationships, studies find that same-sex couples do not have the same kinds of conflict as heterosexual couples and that they may not negotiate conflict in the same ways. In a study on socio-emotional relations in same-sex couples, Richards, Jonathon, & Kim (2015) found that same-sex couples have a higher level on mutual attunement and egalitarianism in their romantic relationships, and this finding supports several other studies on same-sex couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Carrington, 1999). However, the research findings are often based on the assumption that having the same-sex as your partner results in less conflict. The experience of gender non-conforming partners, or the acknowledgment of gender differences in female partnerships, is absent from the studies discussed above, and thus must be considered to get a clearer perspective on understanding gender and gender dynamics in intimate relationships.

Levitt & Hiestand's (2005) research begins to identify gendered dynamics in same-sex relationships by examining butch-femme partnerships. For example, they found in their qualitative research that participants articulated differences in care-giving styles. Femmes tended to give more emotional care, while butches gave more physical care (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). This difference in care-giving styles carried over into sexual intimacy as well. While care-giving may still appear as a gendered act, this research illustrates the subtle and important differences that may emerge when different gender expressions are considered.

**Sexual intimacy in same-sex female relationships.** While significantly more empirical research is needed to understand sexual intimacy in same-sex female relationships, the two most consistently repeated findings reinforce negative stereotypes about female same-sex relationships. These include: (a) same-sex female partners have less sex than other types of couples over time (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Lever, 1995; Solomon et al., 2005), and (b) same-sex partners value emotional intimacy over sexual intimacy (Spitalnick & McNair, 2005).

The American Couples Study found that lesbians had less frequent sex than both gay male couples and heterosexual couples after two years of partnership. The study was the first to address the phenomena now known as “lesbian bed death” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). They also found that lesbians are more satisfied with their relationship the more oral sex they had, but that for the “majority” of lesbians, “lingering social taboos prevent their enjoyment of oral sex” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 239). While these findings may be outdated, this research echoes the work of Levitt & Heiland (2005), which found that internalized homophobia and gender bias can negatively affect sexual intimacy and expression, especially in the case of the more gender non-conforming partner. Mackey et al., (1997) and Iasenza’s (2002) research challenges the stereotypes of “lesbian bed death,” finding that patterns of declining sexual encounters are common amongst all relationship types, not just between same-sex female partners.

Since The American Couples study, there has been little research to further explore sexual intimacy between AFAB partners. In one of the few studies to explore “lesbian” sexuality, it was found that participants engaged in less sexual activity after two years of partnership than did homosexual males and heterosexual partners (Lever, 1995). The reasons for this are not well understood, but some theories suggest that reductions in sexual desire and activity may be due in

part to one of three possibilities: (a) internalized homophobia, (b) gender norms that socialize women to be less sexually assertive, or (c) high levels of fusion, (Brown, 2003; Nichols, 1995; Spitalnick, 2005).

Mackey et al. (1997) found that other reasons for declines in sexual activity included aging and physical limitations, child-rearing, previous sexual trauma, and repressive childhood experiences. In particular, physical affection was consistent over time and that a decline in sexual activity did not have a negative impact on relationship satisfaction in same-sex female couples. In addition, Mackey et al. (1997) found that emotional intimacy became more important to couples as sexual activity declined.

Other researchers have theorized that sexual activity declines in same-sex female partnerships because there is a lack of someone socialized to initiate sex (Peplau, et al., 2002; Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). Research on butch-femme partnerships has begun to explore this and contradicts the argument that same-sex partners lack an initiator. Levitt et al.'s (2004) work finds that butch-identified partners in butch-femme relationships are often considered the initiators of sexual activity (Levitt & Heistand, 2005). However, while butches may be seen to be in a traditionally masculine role, over time femmes became more sexually assertive (Levitt & Heistand, 2005). Also, butches were often more focused on pleasing their partners than in receiving, which challenges heteronormative ideas of sex (Levitt & Heistand, 2005). Because sex acts were often a time of vulnerability for butches where they might be forced to confront their "femaleness," femmes were expected to be aware and sensitive to this (Levitt & Heistand, 2005). Levitt & Heistand (2005) found that femme women repeatedly described the importance of talking about boundaries, comfort levels, and needs during sex.

In their article on clinical work with gay and lesbian couples, Spitalnick & McNair (2005) reference Downey & Freidman (1996), stating that lesbians value emotional intimacy as an integral aspect of sexual intimacy (p.45). Research suggests that same-sex female couples may spend more time on romance than on genital sex, but it is also true that Western societies define “real” sex as requiring genital activity (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). Some researchers have found that same-sex female partners engage in other forms of physical affection, such as cuddling and hand-holding, than heterosexual and gay male couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kolodny, Masters & Johnson, 1979,).

However, because other forms of physical intimacy are not considered to be “real sex” from a heteronormative perspective, researchers have reported that same-sex female relationships are less sexual. Iasenza’s (2002) work challenges those findings, arguing that how lesbians engage in sexual activity may simply be different. Iasenza (2002) quotes the Kolodny, Masters, & Johnson (1979) study which found that heterosexual partners focused more on genital contact and orgasm, while lesbian sex was considered a more full body experience of kissing, hugging, touching, and holding before genital contact was made. She also challenges the findings that lesbian-identified women themselves have also reported having “less sex” than they would like (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Solomon, et al., 2005), arguing that those findings may reflect respondents’ own internalization of homophobia and internalized heteronormative definitions of sexual acts, as well as bias implicit in research (Iasenza, 2002).

Once again, the majority of the studies discussed above do not consider the experiences of gender non-conforming partners or consider how differently gendered individuals might express and experience sexual intimacy in the context of a relationships with someone of the same-sex. For example, very little is known about whether partners who identify as more

masculine or more feminine fall into stereotypical gender roles, or whether same-sex female partners defy conventional gender roles during sexual intimacy.

### **Gender Nonconformity and Sexual Minority Stress**

There is some research that acknowledges the differences between same-sex relationships and heterosexual relationships. This literature suggests that same-sex relationships are less stable than heterosexual relationships (Andersson, Noack, Seirstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 2005). For example, in a longitudinal study of U.S. couples, Kurdek (2004) found that over 12 years, 24% of same-sex female couples ended their relationships compared to 15% of heterosexual couples. Similarly, same-sex married couples in Norway and Sweden divorced at higher rates than heterosexual married couples (Andersson, et al., 2006). Kurdek (2004) theorizes that gay and lesbian couples may be less stable than married heterosexual couples because of lack of familial and societal support systems rather than problems with intimacy. Moreover, depression symptoms were possibly compounded by minority stress, minority status, and poor social supports (Khaddouma, Norona, & Whitton, 2015). High stress and lack of support were highly correlated with relationship break-ups in same-sex couples (Khaddouma et al., 2015). This was especially true for AFAB individuals, as they experience compounded levels of minority stress due to their marginalized status as women (Khaddouma et al., 2015).

The concept of “minority stress” was originally developed by racial and ethnic theorists and was applied to sexual minority groups by social psychologist Meyer (2003). Sexual minority stress refers to chronic levels of stress faced by members of stigmatized minority groups (in this case gays, lesbians, and bisexuals), resulting in poor physical and mental health outcomes



(Meyer, 2003). Sexual minority stress has also been found to negatively correlate with relationship satisfaction and quality in same-sex couples (Meyer, 2003).

Similar to Meyer, Brown's (2003) research finds that sexual minorities experience what she calls "normative traumas." She argues that over time normative traumas may cumulatively result in more severe diagnoses of PTSD, especially when combined with other types of single incident traumas. An example of a normative trauma is the process of "coming out" both to oneself and to others that describes, as a "shattering of beliefs and expectations" (Brown, 2003, p. 57). She goes on to explore further the ways in which LGB individuals experience normative traumas on a daily basis when interacting with family, community, and society at large (Brown, 2003). Expressing a non-conforming gender identity as well as having a minority sexual orientation may compound the impacts of "normative traumas" and the minority stress described by Brown (2003) and Meyer (2003).

Many gender non-conforming individuals with same-sex attractions experience a significant amount of harassment and bullying in their childhood, resulting in a cumulative exposure to minority stress (Frost, 2013; Khaddouma et al., 2015; Levitt, Puckett, Ipolito, and Horne, 2012; Meyer, 2003). Gender non-conforming individuals are often assumed to be homosexual because their physical appearance is not easily hidden, and often gender expression and sexuality are conflated. In their quantitative research of over a thousand sexual minority women, Levitt and colleagues (2012) researched the correlation of sexual minority stress and gender identity and expression. They found that butch-identified and non-traditionally gender-identified individuals experienced greater incidences of violence, harassment, and discrimination than femme-identified and traditionally-gendered individuals; however, they did not have poorer mental health issues than femmes or traditionally-gendered individuals (Levitt, et al., 2012).

They theorize that because butch-identified individuals reported higher levels of identity as a sexual minority and a greater connection to sexual minority communities and LGB supports butches were more psychologically resilient (Levitt, et al., 2012).

Levitt et al. (2012) research links visibility as a sexual minority to an increased sense of belonging in a sub-culture and to increased use of community supports. While the study finds that those with a more atypical gender presentation do not suffer proportionally higher levels of poor mental health, this is predicated on the individual's sense of belonging in a sexual minority groups (Levitt, et al., 2012). Some gender non-conforming individuals may identify as either a butch or a femme or may feel like their gender performance is not understood or accepted by "in-group members" in LGB communities; thus, they may be more susceptible to the effects of minority stress over their lifetime. This research provides important insight into resiliency factors for individuals, but it does not discuss how gender identity and expression and minority stress might affect a relationship.

Totenhagen, Butler, & Ridley (2011) used interdependence theory to find that couples were able to buffer the impact of daily stressors if they felt "close" to their partners. Interdependence theory considers how what happens to one individual impacts the other. Their research revealed that while feeling "close" and being able to turn to a partner for support when under stress increased relationships satisfaction for one partner, it did not increase relationship satisfaction for the other partner. Because of the lack of family and societal support of many LGB couples, the clinical implications for supporting same-sex couples include helping partners develop and utilize community supports to process stress (Totenhagen et. al, 2011). This is particularly interesting when considering same-sex partnerships where one partner is gender non-

conforming. The burden on the gender normative partner may be heavier as that partner supports their partner who is regularly buffeted by challenges to their gender identity.

Frost (2013) conducted a study on intimacy and stigma using narrative analysis from 99 participants. The study identified strategies used by LGB couples to cope with stigma. Frost's review of the literature on minority stress acknowledges the complex social and interpersonal dynamics that contribute to minority stress and how this stress in turn has negative outcomes on intimacy in same-sex relationships. However, Frost (2013) also cites a study by Peplau & Fingerhut (2007) that found that same-sex couples reported experiencing relationship satisfaction equivalent to heterosexual couples. Frost's (2013) research found negative impacts of minority stress on relationship health, but also found that for some couples, stigma was framed as both a "generative experience" and "an opportunity to for redefinition." Couples that spoke of stigma in one of these ways were able to transform the effects of stigma into motivation to pursue certain goals both personally and interpersonally. For some, stigma motivated them to become active in political campaigns for LBGT rights, and in other cases, where couples' marriages were not legally recognized, the couples pursued goals of buying a home and adopting children, thereby building in intimacy and commitment and creating what Frost (2013) described as opportunities for "relational commitment and public recognition (p. 59). Frost's work highlights the need for continuing to explore how intimacy and interpersonal relationship are both protective factors that foster resilience for sexual and gender minorities.

### **Conclusion and Summary of Research**

Research on lesbians and same-sex relationships both reflected a lack of acknowledgment of gender differences in lesbian couples and also argued that they were not different from heterosexual couples. Many researchers' efforts to defend the sameness between heterosexual

and homosexual couples were pursued as a political strategy to advocate for the rights of same-sex couples and portray gay couples as “no different” than heterosexual couples. However, as Dominguez (2012) points out, “To argue that lesbians and gays deserve equal rights because we are like heterosexuals... is to concede the ground to those who would argue that differences are deficits that render us unworthy of equal human rights” (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004, p.183 cited in in Dominguez, 2012, p. 499). Due to a lack of mirroring in the larger society and within families, lesbians and queer women are often in need of additional support to find examples of healthy, stable, and fulfilling same-sex or queer relationships (Bjork, 2004; Gutherie, 2006).

Researchers have considered the way that gender impacts many aspects of heterosexual relationships, from labor to power, sex, and relationship satisfaction. Consequently, same-sex relationships have been studied from a similar perspective, focusing on the ways that relationship dynamics in same-sex relationships are similar to or different from heterosexual relationships where partners have different gender roles, identities, and socialization patterns. However, because of a limited view of gender, gender differences in same-sex partners have not been acknowledged until very recently. Same-sex female relationships, particularly those with gender non-conforming partners, are greatly impacted by societal expectations of gender norms and are therefore more vulnerable than cis-gendered people in heterosexual relationships to challenges that could impact their romantic relationships. Strong intimacy—both emotional and sexual—is vital to healthy relationships, and gender non-conforming partners may experience intimacy and their need for intimacy in unique ways, that is different than what is currently understood about both heterosexual couples and same-sex couples. Low differentiation in “sex-role” identification and performance has been cited as one of the primary clinical problems therapists should consider when working with same-sex female partnerships. Because researchers conflate “sex”

and “gender” and because researchers have found that females typically require higher levels of emotional intimacy in order to experience fulfilling sexual intimacy, the needs of same-sex females cannot be adequately addressed without considering the effect of gender and gender expression.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a deeper understanding of the unique dynamics of same sex-female relationships by considering the experiences of gender non-conforming women and their partners. Specifically, this study focuses on emotional and sexual intimacy in same-sex partnerships where at least one of the partners has non-conforming gender expression. First, I will explain the design of the study, including the sampling method. Next, I will review the recruitment methods, the inclusion criteria, and the demographics of the sample. Finally, I will discuss the collection methods, the ethics and safeguards, and the data analysis methods.

#### **Research Design**

To gain insight into the research question, in what ways, if any, does non-conforming gender expression shape the lived experience of emotional and sexual intimacy of partners assigned female at birth same-sex romantic relationships, I conducted a qualitative study of Twelve individuals all assigned female at birth. Six identified as gender non-conforming, and six were partnered with individuals who identified as gender non-conforming. A qualitative study allowed the understudied and marginalized voices of gender non-conforming individuals and their partners to speak about their lives in an open and flexible manner (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition, it allowed previously unexplored cultural nuances to emerge (Creswell, 2015). In particular, I chose an inductive approach that allowed the lived experiences of participants to generate new insights into this minimally researched social group (Steinberg, 2015). Moreover, since research on intimacy mostly focuses on heterosexual couples, or has used heterosexual relationships as the standard comparison group, an exploratory approach such as this one allowed

for greater flexibility and more depth through the use of participant narratives (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Specifically, I employed a semi-structured interview guide when interviewing my participants (See Appendix A for Interview Guide). There were two main benefits to using this approach. First, the study design allowed for a more in-depth exploration by focusing on narrative experiences and opening a space for participants to reveal areas that need further research (Steinberg, 2015). Second, participants increased their own understanding of themselves and how their gender expression has impacted their relationships in the process of telling their own stories (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This was a common benefit found within the mental health literature, that to share one's story with a compassionate and non-judgmental listener can be profoundly supportive and healing (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). However, there are two important limitations to consider as well. First, interviews were not anonymous, and the participants may have been less likely to be honest or reveal more vulnerable information. To reduce this impact, all interviews were conducted by phone, rather than in-person, so the participant would feel more protected since they did not have to actually see the researcher. Second, there was the possibility that participants had not previously considered the impact of their gender expression on their relationships, and this realization may have created possible stress. To decrease the likelihood of this occurring, I met with a licensed sex and couple's therapist, whose practice serves gender non-conforming individuals and their partners to review my interview questions. Based on her suggestions, I included questions that explored both the benefits and the challenges of gender non-conformity in intimate partnerships. In addition to the semi-structured interview, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to locate their gender identity and gender expression on a non-binary scale (see Appendix B for

Initial Questionnaire). This scale was useful for demonstrating to the participants that gender is not fixed and that gender expression may look and *be* different for different individuals. However, it is important to note that one limitation of the scale is that it does not allow for fluidity of gender since it requires participants to locate themselves on a static scale. Participants were allowed to choose not to define their gender, as well. Finally, to ensure the safety of all participants, approval for the research study was granted by Smith School for Social Work Human Subjects Review board prior to beginning recruitment (See Appendix C for HSR Approval Letter).

**Sampling method.** I used snowball sampling, a technique where a member of an identified group is contacted to recruit other members of the same social group, such that when each of those members identifies potential respondents the sample “snowballs” (Engel & Schutt, 2013; Steinberg, 2015). I used snowball sampling because it is the most useful method to gain access to a small interconnected, but hard to reach population (Engel & Schutt, 2013). The main benefit of this approach is that that it allows for access to an otherwise difficult to reach subgroup. The main limitation of this approach is that the study is non-generalizable or transferable since the sample is considered a non-random sample (Engle & Schutt, 2013). To combat this limitation I used three primary methods of recruitment.

**Recruitment procedures.** I recruited participants in following ways: (1) by contacting faculty and professionals in the community who work with LGBT population (See Appendix D for Recruitment Email to Community Organizations and Providers), (2) through social media (See Appendix E for Recruitment Flyer) and (3) by emailing community organizations that serve queer and lesbian communities (See Appendix D for Recruitment Email to Community Organizations and Providers). Recruitment materials listed the requirements for participation.



Providers were encouraged to send the recruitment materials to people that they knew of who fit the criteria. Potential participants were asked to contact me directly via phone or email if interested.

I used these three strategies to help target samples that would meet my inclusion criteria. For example, I reached out to professionals working with lesbian and queer woman, and to community organizations who serve these populations to recruit participants that may have had some personal insight into how their own gender expression may have impacted their lives and their relationship resulting in more nuanced responses. The intention was to help improve the validity of the study. I also utilized social media to attract a younger demographic which would also provide information about the emerging issues that are newly arising as culture shifts to more inclusion of same-sex relationships

This three-tiered recruitment method had limitations as well. First, my recruitment approach may have excluded certain populations who do not access the resources and practitioners that I connected with. There may be bias for geographic reasons as well as socioeconomic factors. For example, the study may be biased towards those who have the time to complete an hour long interview as well as those who are active in on social media or participate and/or seek services from community organizations and practitioners. However, because this study by design is exploratory, the themes and conclusions that emerge may be further tested and explored for generalizability in the future. In the meantime, this research provides insight into a specific population and provides a foundation for future investigation.

## **Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria For Participation**

There were five participant inclusion/exclusion criteria for this study.

**Assigned female at birth.** Participants recruited for this study were all “assigned female at birth” (AFAB) and in romantic partnerships with another AFAB individual where one partner in the relationship identified as gender non-conforming. Twelve individuals were recruited, six who identified as gender non-conforming, and six cis-gendered females who were partnered with individuals who identified as gender non-conforming. The study also excluded individuals who were born biologically male, but currently identify as female. While this exclusion criteria may seem controversial, the intention was to focus on individuals who has been raised and socialized as females but then challenged societal norms of femininity. The impact of these exclusion criteria will be explored in the discussion section of this paper.

**Self-identification of female gender.** Gender non-conforming participants were recruited based on self-identification—those who self-identified as having gender non-conforming gender expression or identity. However, for the purpose of this study the operational definition of gender non-conforming expression is: behaving and appearing in ways that are considered atypical for one’s gender (Kinsey Confidential, 2011). Those with gender non-conforming expression included those who identified as butch, androgynous, gender-queer, two-spirit, gender non-binary, or gender non-conforming, trans, or transmasculine, masculine of center but not male.

**Age.** All participants were between the ages of 25 and 50 to reflect a group that was potentially more socio-culturally homogenous. Because of the tremendous social changes that have occurred in the LBGT world, I presumed that women older than 50 and younger than 25 would have significantly different experiences of their gender expression and their relationships.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** Individuals with a diagnosis of PTSD due to their gender non-conforming expression or identity were also excluded from the study in order to protect them from possibly being emotionally triggered by the interview.

**Length of romantic relationship.** The partners in the study had been together a year or longer or were cohabitating for a minimum of three months at the time of this study. The goal of these criteria was to recruit couples that were relatively stable and had time to establish patterns of sexual and emotional intimacy. While studies do not find that cohabitation is necessarily positively correlated with long-term relationship satisfaction in married heterosexual couples (Kulik & Havusha-Morgenstern, 2011), other studies report correlation between high levels of commitment to a relationship and higher levels of intimacy and satisfaction (Birnle-Porter & Hunt, 2015). Furthermore, it allows for distinction between couples that may be struggling due to issues stemming from a partner's gender identity versus new couples that are not compatible for other reasons such as insecure attachments or other issues not related to gender performance and expression.

### **Participating Sample**

The demographic information presented in this section was collected from an initial questionnaire given to all participants (See Appendix B). Participants were able to select multiple labels to identify their gender and were given space to write in any terms not listed. The question of participant race and ethnicity was also open-ended to allow for flexible responses. All participants ranged in age between 25 and 40, though one respondent declined to answer the question. All participants were AFAB, though two participants also identified that "Biological Sex" on the spectrum as between "female and intersex." All participants identified their sexual orientation as "Attracted to women," "Bisexual/Queer," or between "Men and Bisexual/Queer"

on the questionnaire spectrum. Because the questionnaire made a distinction between sex and gender, the responses varied especially for the cis-female<sup>1</sup> partners. Of the four participants who identified as “female” they also identified as “femme,” “woman,” “queer,” and “fluid.” One of the six cis-female partners stated she did not claim a gender identity. Of the six gender non-conforming partners, only three actually used the term “gender non-conforming” for themselves. Three participants identified as “butch,” and of those two also identified as either “female,” or “femme.” Two participants used the term “androgynous,” two used the term “two-spirit,” two used the term “gender-queer.” One participant identified as “non-binary,” and another as “trans.”

All participants stated that they had been with their partners a year or longer. Three couples (both partners) participated in the study, and the remainder of participants represented only half of the dyad. The length of the relationships ranged from one year to seventeen years. Six of the participants were married, and five of the participants had children either from another relationship or from the current one.

Racially and ethnically, the participants were mostly white-identified and/or of European descent. Nine of the participants identified as “White,” “Caucasian,” “White/Caucasian,” or “of European descent.” One participant identified as “White” and “Jewish,” one participant as “Mixed” “Latino and “White,” one as “Latino.” The sample was geographically diverse with four of the participants from the Midwest, six from the West coast, and two from the East coast.

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<sup>1</sup> This was not the term used by all of these participants, but is being used in this paper as shorthand for those who did not claim a “gender non-conforming” identity, though, in many ways their gender identifications and expression do challenge norms of femininity.

## **Ethics and Safeguards**

**Risks of participation.** Risks and benefits of participation were clearly outlined in the Informed Consent (See Appendix F). In particular, as mentioned earlier, to qualify for the study and by signing the consent form, participants confirmed they did not have a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder related to their gender-nonconforming identity. All participants were provided a referral sheet for community and national resources based on their geographic location (See Appendices G-I). To protect the well-being of the client during the interview, the researcher considered the possibility that individuals may have become distressed speaking about unprocessed feelings regarding their gender identity, gender expression, or their romantic relationship(s). Special consideration was taken to develop the interview questions, as mentioned previously. The interviewer, as a mental health clinician in training, was aware of signs of discomfort or distress. Special attention was paid to verbal cues, pauses and silences during the interview to watch for signs of distress. At the start of every interview, participants were reminded of their agency to stop the interview or to decline answering questions that felt uncomfortable.

**Benefits of participation.** Participants will be given an opportunity to tell their story and, perhaps, gain some insight into important aspects of their relationships and gender identities. Participants may gain satisfaction knowing that their story may potentially contribute to increasing awareness and understanding of the needs and challenges for same-sex female couples so that mental health care providers may better serve this population.

**Precautions to safeguard confidentiality.** The study was a confidential study in which the names and identifying characteristics of the participants were changed or obscured to avoid identification. Even when participants were quoted in the final research report, they were de-

identified. To protect the confidentiality of study participants, I used pseudonyms and numerical codes to identify the participants in the transcription and analysis process. During the transcription process all identifying information was removed. For privacy purposes, all demographic data was only used for coding purposes and for making connections with emerging themes in the narratives, and was presented in aggregate. Interviews were conducted privately over the phone. The researcher was the only person with access to the interview data and transcription notes, except in the case where a transcriber was used, and then that person signed a confidentiality agreement.

The key for the identifying numerical codes were kept separately from the audio recordings, and the audio recordings collected during the interviews were immediately transferred and stored on a password protected laptop. The audio recordings were erased from the audio recording device once the audio file had been transferred to the computer. After each interview, the recording was transcribed verbatim from the audio recording, and all interviews were de-identified during transcription, including the removal of identifying information for the participant or the participant's partner.

All research materials including recordings transcriptions, audio files, consent forms and analyses were transferred and stored on a secure password protected laptop computer for the next three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. Any email, and email contacts I received in the recruitment process were deleted from my email contacts upon completion of study to ensure participant's privacy.

**Human subjects review board.** The Human Subjects Review Board of Smith College School for Social Work approved the recruitment strategies, research methods and study design

of this study (See Appendix C for HSR Approval Letter). I followed all the approved ethical safeguards and procedures.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

Recruitment materials requested that participants who were interested in the study contact the researcher directly via phone or email if interested. Once participants contacted me, they were sent a consent form (Appendix F) and the questionnaire (Appendix B). The consent form listed all the requirements to participate and required a signature from the participant, both agreeing that they met the participation requirements and that they consented to the study. Participants were asked to read the consent form requirements before scheduling the interview to ensure they were eligible. Then, interviews were scheduled at a time convenient time for both the participant and the researcher. Participants were asked to return their signed consent forms and questionnaires by email. To facilitate the process for phone interviews, participants were able to electronically sign consent forms by typing their names on their forms and returning them as PDFs. All interviews took place over the phone using a semi-structured, in-depth interview guide (See Appendix A). The interviews were audio recorded for the purposes of transcription. All interviews took place between January 2016 and April 2016 and lasted between 45 minutes to one hour.

At the start of each interview, I reviewed the confidentiality policy and the consent form with participants, reminding them that they could refuse to answer any question, stop the interview at any time, or withdraw their interview before April 10, 2016. Secondly, I informed the participant that the interviews would last approximately one hour, and confirmed that the participant consented to being recorded during the interview. I also informed the participant that I would be taking notes on our conversation. Next, I read the participant the definition of

emotional and sexual intimacy that would be used in the study to help the participant understand what was meant by the questions asked in the interview. Finally, I began recording the phone interviews using the TapeACall app on my personal password protected cell phone to record the conversation.

As it was important to create a comfortable, open, and non-judgmental atmosphere, I used a friendly and warm tone of voice and personal affect during each interview, as well as my interview guide, to ask the participant pertinent questions. I also affirmed and validated the participant responses. In some cases, I asked follow-up or clarifying questions of the participant, consistent with a semi-structured interview approach (Engel & Schutt, 2013). If a participant appeared uncomfortable or confused about a question, I asked the participant if they needed clarification, or if they felt comfortable proceeding with the interview. I validated participant responses and normalized difficult feelings or challenging topics. Additionally, I attempted to type notes on the responses during interviews to facilitate the transcription process.

Once the interview ended, the participant was thanked. The interview was completed and the audio was transferred from the recording device onto a password-protected computer. At that time, the audio file was deleted from the phone. The recordings were then transcribed by the researcher, a paid transcriber, or a transcribing service called Rev.com. Transcribers signed a confidentiality agreement (See Appendix J) or provided a confidentiality statement as part of their service. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. Any notes taken, during the interviews were included in the final transcription.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

To analyze the data generated in the interviews for this study, I followed the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, I used an open coding and inductive thematic



analysis because this type of analysis is flexible and useful for understanding larger themes in data sets. This approach allows for thick descriptions, and both social and psychological interpretations of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was important for this type of study because little research has been done on this population, particularly in the fields of social work and psychology. Furthermore, because this is an exploratory study and the analysis is data driven, rather than based on pre-determined codes from previous theoretical work or previous research, an open coding method is most effective (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Eventually this analysis may form the basis of a grounded theory approach, in which theory develops out of the conceptualization of data rather than by testing a pre-existing hypothesis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

To develop a coding process, I used Saldaña's (2009) approach. To begin, I read the transcriptions and wrote notes on initial observations of significant descriptive themes in the interview text, and drafted a preliminary codebook (Saldaña, 2009). I returned to the literature to help define terms and to further develop codes (Saldaña, 2009). I drafted a separate codebook for each of the partner groups, one for gender non-conforming individuals and the other for their partners who identified as cis-gendered. Using inductive coding, I looked for patterns in the interview content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I systematically reviewed all participants' responses to each of the question looking for similarities and patterns within each question (Saldaña, 2009). Next, I attempted to group similar interview content across the interviews. While initial codes and themes were developed by reading each question, in the final analysis interviews were coded across the interview as a whole instead of across the individual questions. For example, participants often commented on how emotional and sexual intimacy was expressed or impacted by gender throughout the interview, not solely when asked directly about it. Each time that the

interviews were re-read, the codebook was adjusted to reflect more precise codes and themes (Saldaña, 2009).

The demographic information collected at the start of each interview was converted into an Excel spreadsheet and considered in aggregate in order to determine the generalizability of the data, as well as to make interpretations of any responses that did not fit in the larger coding patterns. This information was used previously in this section to describe the sample populations and will be further explored in the Discussion section of this paper.

There are two major limitations to the data analytic approach. First, themes may be unconvincing if they are not accurately representative of the entire data set, for example if a few data points are used to make a generalization about the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because the sample is a non-random sample, I will need to be careful when generalizing themes to persons outside of the particular data set. Second, without a theoretical framework, a thematic analysis may be limited in interpretive power to a mere description of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However since there is limited previous research on the intimate lives of this population, this data-driven analysis will hopefully generate themes and theories for further research.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

*“But I think it's harder sometimes to be gender non-conforming and not, you know, not really grasp on to male or female and to live life in that kind of in between place.” (GNC partner, Participant 5, lines 520-522).*

*“Be really, really gentle with each other and really, really fierce with the rest of the world... practice talking about everything, just talk about absolutely everything, even if it's scary.” (PO Participant 011, lines 338-340)*

This chapter will present the findings from a qualitative analysis of interviews with twelve individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) in a same-sex romantic relationship. Six of the individuals identified as gender non-conforming and six identified as the partner of a gender non-conforming person. The interview questions were designed to gather information about how the individuals understood their own gender and that of their partner as well as to illicit information about the emotional and sexual intimacy in their partnerships. All interviews were completed by phone since participants lived in number of different cities across the U.S.

The gender non-conforming partners in this study will be referred to as GNC (for “gender non-conforming”). To respect the diverse ways in which their partner’s identified, the partners of the gender non-conforming individuals will be referred to as PO (for “partners of”). The interviews with PO participants were analyzed separately, as were the interviews with the GNC partner. A separate codebook was used for each group. While many codes and themes were similar, there were slightly different codes and themes that emerged from the two groups. As this research is about couples, the findings will explore how the data “talks” to each other across the two groups.

The findings below follow the flow of the interview guide. The findings are organized by six major themes. Within each theme, the results are divided by what gender non-conforming (GNC) participants said, and then what their partner's (PO) said. First, I will present how participants create their gender identity through language, and second, how they understand their partner's gender identity. Third, I will discuss how couples cope with gender-based discrimination and homophobia. Next, I discuss the importance of allyship for GNC individuals and their partners. Finally, I will present the findings on emotional and sexual intimacy between GNC individuals and their partners.

### **Theme 1: Creating Ourselves Through Language: Non-Conforming Gender Identities**

#### **Require Specialized Language**

*“The act of creation takes a lot of work and there’s a reason for that, if you’ll forgive me, but religiously, God rested on the seventh day because it was tiring shit! And if the whole world was created because God spoke it into being, which is how our tradition talks about the act of creation. It came through words, then the act of creating ourselves that comes through language also must be important for both parts of a relationship.”* (Participant 4, lines 707-711)

**GNC Participants.** Gender Non-Conforming (GNC) participants were asked to discuss how they came to identify with the specific gender identities they listed on the initial questionnaire. GNC participants expressed the following concepts: 1.) *Language helps to create gender identity, and 2.) Authenticity is an act of resistance to gender expectations.*

***Language helps to create gender identity.*** GNC participants spoke about how they came to use the words they use to define their gender identity. They expressed frustration with the limitations of language and often found available labels confining and limiting. These limitations often motivated individuals to choose or create names and labels to talk about gender, both their own and that of others. In most cases, the participants felt that a label of “woman,” or words associated with femininity did not accurately describe them. It was not until they heard a certain

word or phrase that they were better able to describe and understand their gender. One participant said,

“I was a tomboy my whole childhood and identified that way. Then as I got in the queer community I understood, more over the last 15 years or so, about labels such as ‘gender non-conforming’ and ‘gender fluid’ and ‘two-spirit’ from Native American ways of looking things. All of that resonated really, like, ‘Oh, that's exactly what-, who I am.’ Its kind of how I came to it, having that stuff out there and then I could grab it and say, ‘Yeah, I am like that.’” (Participant 8, line 9-13)

This participant needed to have different identities reflected back to them that were closer approximations to their gender identity than the labels that were previously available to them.

*Authenticity is an act of resistance to gender expectations.* In other circumstances, participants noted that despite exposure to more inclusive or expansive labels, those did not accurately describe them either. One participant described the ways they created a new term for their gender-identity, “femme-but.” They also spoke about the way they understand the term “trans.” This passage also illustrates how this participant’s quest for authentic gender expression thwarted commonly understood gender expectations of masculinity and femininity both in heterosexual and queer communities.

‘Trans’ and ‘gender queer’ wasn’t a vocabulary word I knew. I just kind of sat with this weird feeling, and I guess soon after I came to college I learned that ‘trans’ can look really different for a lot of people, and I started to identify as ‘trans.’ But I still was very rigid about it. It was a main focus of mine to pass as male and be very outwardly butch appearing. And that started to feel restricting in it’s own way as well. And I think that over the last five or six years, I have just really explored different gender expressions and how it feels to be in the world, and accepted the fact that I will never pass as not as a cis-woman. Um, and that my gender identity is something that people who are close to me know and understand but that is not something that people can see in the world, I guess. Um, but I just started identifying as a “femme-but” in the last year. And I think that’s probably like, my favorite word or words to use. So...and I think also that being in a really solid relationship where I felt like I could play with that and it was ok really opened me up to be able to express more femininity in the world... Now I think of trans as anyone who doesn’t identify with the sex assigned at birth. So trans for me includes ‘gender queer’ and ‘gender fluid’, ‘androgynous,’ any of those words, just pretty much not ‘cis’.” (Participant 9, lines 7-34)

In addition to finding appropriate language to describe their gender identity, this participant illustrates the ways in which attempting to express their gender more authentically and accurately transgresses gender norms for both men and women. This act of self-expression becomes also an act of resistance to conform to certain gender expectations. This participant also acknowledges the struggle to outwardly or physically communicate their gender identity through their dress and presentation. Without hormones or surgeries to change their appearance, they are often mis-read as a “cis-woman.” External misperception by others is often what motivates many gender non-conforming folks to alter their appearance, to attempt to match their gender presentation with societal expectations for a more accurate read of their gender. However, gender non-conforming individuals “queer” or complicate gender performance by challenging gender norms. For this participant, passing as “male” or “butch” does not accurately capture the range of their gender. With the support of a safe romantic relationship in which to explore and “play” with gender, this participant is more able to express femininity as well as masculinity, and thus more accurately represent their nuanced gender identity.

### **PO Participants.**

*Being with My Partner helped me explore gender labels.* In contrast, when PO participants were asked the same questions how they came to identify the way they do, PO participants also spoke about their gender identity and expression being more complex than norms of femininity allowed. However, they often reported less internal conflict between how they thought of themselves and how they were perceived by others. Using strategic and creative language to self-define and identify was also important to PO respondents, as was authentic gender expression. However, one factor unique to PO respondents was that they often responded affirmatively when asked if their partner’s gender expression or identity affected the way they

thought of their own. “Taking up space” to understand and express the complexities of their own gender was important to PO respondents as well.

Unlike the GNC participants, PO respondents often reported growing up with a more traditional experience of their gender identity, but four PO participants acknowledged that they have come to see that their gender identities are more complex and fluid because of their relationships with their GNC partners.

“I think a lot of it has been like since being in my current relationship with my current partner, which is not quite two and a half years. I think we’ve just had so many conversations about gender and I feel really free to express my gender in a huge variety of ways and it just feels so good and so natural that it has helped me really embrace that part of myself as being a really multi-faceted person. (line 15-19)...[Before this current relationship] I didn’t feel a lot of freedom to explore my expression and my identity and I also felt kind of a responsibility, like, ‘I don’t feel like I am trans. Or I don’t feel like I am gender queer.’ So I have a responsibility to just like own up to being cis-gendered. Like try extra hard to make space for people who aren’t cis-gendered. And feeling like I couldn’t take up space for myself, because I have more privilege or something. So its been kind of nice. I still want to own up to that privilege, but sometimes give myself more space, and be like, ‘Actually, my identity is a little more complex than just saying that I am cis-gendered.’” (Participant 11, lines 328-335)

Exposure to a person with a sophisticated analysis of gender norms and expectations allowed for this participant to question the ways in which gender expectations were also placed on her.

Through the course of her relationship she was able to explore news ways to express herself beyond the confines of norms of femininity with which she was raised.

***Taking Up Space.*** Many PO participants acknowledged that their GNC partners thought about gender frequently, and while being in a relationship with a GNC person, PO participants were exposed to a process of gender identity development. One participant stated, “From speaking with other folks who are cis-identified who have partners who aren’t, there’s nothing like watching a partner transition or have a non-cis identity to make you re-assess your own gender” (Participant 4, line 69-71). Several (n = 3) PO participants identified as “femme,” both

as a term to express their gender identity, but also as a term to express their same-sex attraction.

In addition to claiming the identity of “femme” or “female,” two PO respondents also claimed more nuanced gender identities. One participant stated:

I also don't identify as a gender. I just opt out of that whole system. Yeah. Like, I have a sex, and I believe that my sex is real. And people see that I have a sexed body and they call me a woman. Gender is something else entirely, to me... Well, I see gender as, you know, as many second-wave feminists, a social construct. So, you know, masculinity and femininity, which essentially are sex-based stereotypes. So I was gendered because I was born female, and so to a certain extent that was a social process. So some of those things I was socialized to live through, be, express myself through, and some of them I was socialized to and I might have rejected them. So some parts of femininity I accept, some parts I reject, and gender I consider to be that social world. (Participant 12, line 16-30)

Another PO participant described her identity as “gender fluid” and “female,” and explained, “I accept in the world the identity of being cis-gendered, but for me personally, I feel like my gender is not so binary and not so easily categorized.” (Participant 11, line 2-3). This same participant spoke to the ways in which her partnership with a GNC person has helped her expand her conceptualization of her own gender, and has encouraged her to “take up more space” when thinking about her gender identity. Feeling free to “take up space” with their own exploration of gender was mentioned by a number of other PO participants as well.

“...thinking about my own gender and my own body in language that I use when talking with queer and trans and gender non-conforming folks in my life has really given me a lot more space. So it's really much more of a question. How do I identify my own gender? I think I wrote on my form that I identify as a—what did I say—a queer femme zaftig, or maybe in a different order? And I think the—what I've been really sitting with these days is the femme part of my identity, that it's always been—you know, being in dresses and valuing care-work and—um—and just, like, things that are traditionally femme on the surface level have been part of my life. But really, honestly, in the past couple of weeks, I've been really intensely thinking about what's reductive about vanity and what's reductive about focusing on yourself and what's—what's powerful about running at the most—the tenderest part of gender expression. So I've been mostly reading what other powerful femmes say about themselves and that's been so, so healing, in terms of thinking, “Oh, maybe through my femme-ness I can actually be liberated in how I engage with my body and how I engage with taking up space and how it shifts what my care-work looks like,” in that I don't do it because I have to but that I do it because it brings me closer to other people and to God. (Participant 4, line 29-43)



As a result of questioning gender norms and expectations, this participant examined her gender more deeply to express her truest authenticity, and even her divinity in a fuller way. By participating in communities and conversations that consider gender as a constriction, PO respondents considered the ways they participate in, reinforce, and challenge gender norms. By allowing their partners the space to explore their gender identities, PO respondents also took up space to consider themselves.

*“Playing” with Language, “Playing” with Gender.* While PO participants were more likely to think about their gender as a result of partnering with a GNC individual, GNC partners also reported that being in their current partnership allowed them increased freedom and safety to explore and express their gender in a more expansive way. This was often because the GNC respondent often described their current partner as more gender-fluid than previous partners in their values, identity, and expression. The GNC’s partner was consequently more able to join their partner in challenging societal gender expectations.

I think overall I feel more like myself than I ever have. I feel the most comfortable in my body than I ever have... I'm more confident. I like ... I don't know. In terms of my intimacy, I like that with my partner, she totally gets it. She likes my body. I like my body. I'm half/half. I will never change my bottom parts<sup>2</sup>. I like that just as it is. I always respond to things I was thinking about when I was considering surgery for so many years. To me, that would blow my mind. So much awesomeness. I would be both. That's exactly ... That's how I think I see myself. She totally gets that. She likes both my upper and my bottom part of my body. Everything. I don't know. I feel really good overall. (Participant 10, line 575-584)

Interestingly, both GNC partners and PO respondents (n = 6), also used the term “play” when talking about their own and their partner’s gender, or referenced a playful or lighthearted approach to exploring language and gender in their partnership. Gender was not performed

rather, but “played” with, as was the language of gender identity. Participants spoke about playing with words, clothes, and sexual dynamics to express gender in new and different ways.

“For me, my gender expression is super fluid. I get to play with that a lot and that's just who I am. I think that play with her (*my partner*) she validates that, like she sees that full spectrum and acknowledges that in many ways. I can't think of specific stuff. It's really easy, and it's actually more easy with her than any partner I've had. That's cool, too...I don't like to feel like I'm extremely butch, for instance. There's like a place where, for me, that the play, the gender thing is ... I'm just like a human being that expresses some of the masculine pretty fluidly all the time. That gender expression is really comfortable for me.” (Participant 8, lines 129-133 and lines 140-142)

This participant highlights the uniqueness of her current relationship with respect to gender fluidity. As a GNC person, she does not perceive gender as a rigid category to inhabit, but that her gender identity can dance between two energies. Her gender manifests as a dynamic and creative process uniquely expressed with in one individual.

While the PO participant below does not actively use the word “play,” when asked to describe her current partner, she references both the struggle her partner experiences to find representative language, but also the empowered and playful way they shape language together. While simultaneously acknowledging the frustration and limits of language, she also describes the process as both “political and “fun” and speaks with a sense of levity and creativity.

We got married in June. We use ‘partner’ and ‘wife’ interchangeably but it’s fun to have a word that’s so expressly political, to deploy it at fun times. And what is—she mostly hates all language. And says that she’s, like, she uses ‘trans’ as an umbrella item but it doesn’t really describe her, but when talking to anyone else who’s not family, it’s easiest just to say that. She also has, like, interesting analysis around the idea of masculine-of-center and what it means for her to be gender non-conforming but ‘defined female at birth’, and the idea of being masculine-of-center as rejecting femininity. So she’s hella femme-positive while also being like, ‘Don’t you dare put me in a dress.’ So—um—I would probably say, like, gender non-conforming, queer, masculine-of-center. Also very sweet, not necessarily how she talks about herself at first, but we sometimes refer to her as *boyishe*...And *ishe* is a—similar to the way *zaftig* [Yiddish term for “a curvy woman”]

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<sup>2</sup> While this participant did not identify as “male” he used masculine pronouns to make it easier for others who struggled to use “they” and “them” He reported having “top surgery” because he “did not identify with his breasts.”

plays out for me, *ishe* [in Yiddish] is a—it's 'kind of like.' So '*boyishe*', she's kind of like a boy. And so—and that's sort of one of the sweet ways that she describes herself. (Participant 4, line 115-130)

Once again this passage illustrates that the struggle to find appropriate and descriptive language can also lead to creative and dynamic ways of self-identifying and naming, and consequently developing a better understanding of one gender identity when there is little external reflection and validation. The significance of terms like “play,” “playfulness,” and “fun” also may be seen as speaking to the way that GNC's conceive of their identity, as something dynamic, fluid, ever-changing, creative and exploratory.

## **Theme 2: My Partner's Gender Expression Challenges and Reinforces Gender Stereotypes**

Participants were asked to describe their partners as well as to describe behaviors or qualities that were perceived as gender non-conforming or gender normative. Originally this question sought to explore how accurate or inaccurate perception of a partner's gender identity might affect intimacy. However, what emerged were the important ways in which gender is expressed and communicated to the external world. Both GNC participants and PO participants generally described their partner's physical appearance as well as beloved personal qualities like humor, caring, or personal interests. When describing their partner's gender presentation, participants typically commented on their partner's clothing choices, physical appearance, and the couple's division of labor in the home. Clothing in particular was frequently described as a big indicator of gender identity and expression. GNC participants, in particular, cited clothing as an important signifier of gender, both their own and for others. Participants described their partner's clothing using terms like “masculine”, “androgynous,” or “girlie,” and “feminine.” Casual wear and suits were described as masculine or androgynous clothing, while dresses and skirts were described as feminine.

## **GNC Participants.**

*Labeling my partner's gender is uncomfortable.* The two codes that will be referenced in this section are “labeling my partner’s gender is uncomfortable” and “my partner balances masculinity and femininity.” When describing their female partners, the majority of GNC participants commented on their own discomfort with naming or labeling their partner’s way of dressing or behaving as feminine or masculine. However, they were also more likely to talk about their partner’s way of dressing as stereotypically “feminine.” GNC participants expressed concern that by labeling their partner’s clothing and behavior as feminine, that it might express “ignorance” or reinforce problematic gender stereotypes. GNC participants commented on the ways that their partners may present more femininely, but challenge gender norms in other ways, either through their professional work, or through their interpersonal relationships. For example, several GNC partners noted that while their partners presented very femininely, their willingness to engage in conflict or display acts of physical strength were described as more masculine and challenged an overly simplified description of their partner as exclusively “feminine.” This exchange below between interviewer and participant illustrates the both the impulse to describe their partner in stereotypically feminine ways, which also portraying the conflict in doing so.

*Interviewer:* If you would, please describe your current partner?

*Participant:* Um, well she’s definitely very female, you know. And wears female clothing and stuff like that. Sometimes she can be a little more relaxed. Hoodies, sweatshirts, stuff like that, you know. But she’s more girl. I wouldn’t quite call her out right femme, you know, because she’s not into all the makeup, you know. I mean, she does wear makeup but its not overly done, you know? But she’s definitely on the outside very feminine. But um, she’s got a very tough interior. Very strong minded and that kind of stuff.

*Interviewer:* And what would you say are some of her behaviors that you would describe as gendered or more feminine or female?

*Participant:* You know, women’s clothing, makeup. You know into girlier type things, I guess.

*Interviewer:* What would be an example of that?

*Participant:* Like, you know, she would get manicure and a pedicure. Or she does wear makeup and she does dress up when we go out, you know. Dresses and that kind of stuff. Its

really heard to kind of explain, though, because she looks obviously very girly, but, she's not...and maybe I sound ignorant saying this, but she's not, she doesn't come across, like very...She's very strong and she'll bust a cap in someone, no problem. But on the outside she's very in touch with being feminine and looks good. And keeps up her appearance in a very feminine way...It's weird like, cause, we're kind of opposite. I look more guyish on the outside, but I am a big pile of mush on the inside, where she's feminine on the outside, but on the inside she's not gonna put up with anyone's shit, she doesn't care what anyone thinks. She's very strong-minded, She's very out there. And, I guess in a way, for lack of a, because this is probably setting us back 50 years, inside she's kind of more the dominant one, "man-type," take charge kind of a person. (Participant 2, lines 22-56)

As stated previously, despite the self-critique of using gender stereotypes, GNC participants often found it difficult not to employ them to describe both their partner and their dynamic with their partner.

*My partner balances masculinity and femininity.* The GNC partners were more likely to state that they valued their partner's ability to also express gender less rigidly and more fluidly. GNC participants cited this as an important quality that contributed to a sense of safety, acceptance, and stability in the relationship. Often the GNC partner remarked that dating someone with a more complex gender expression was described as a unique experience compared to their past relationships. The same participant referenced above also stated the following:

*Interviewer:* And would you say she is typical of who you have dated in the past?

*Participant:* Um, no not at all. Nope. Not in the slightest. I've either dated very, very girly, feminine inside outside or just very rugged, rough looking people outside, inside. Well, actually, there's only one person I dated like that, but. Um, no. She's completely different than anyone I have ever dated. (Participant 2, lines 70-75)

Once again this participant articulates the complexity and complementarity of the gender play between the two partners. Other participants also echoed that they experienced their current relationship as unique because of their partner's ability to hold the complexity of both their own

gender and that of the GNC person. In the passage below, another participant also echoes the feelings expressed above that their partners gender fluidity is helpful in expressing their own.

“Yeah, although I do think that my partner is the last... a person who identifies as a cis-woman but is like, least comfortable with that if that makes sense? Well, she has, like, her identity is ‘cis’ she is definitely like the most, she queers, she queers that more than anyone else I have been with... (lines 172-176) I think that there’s definitely that point of relating about our bodies and getting to a place where you can like, love yourself, but not necessarily all parts of yourself. And I think that having her have a different relationships with some of her gendered body parts makes us relate in a way where I feel like she can understand what I am saying a bit more. Um, and just like, can understand why things can feel so bad when it doesn’t seem like big deals to other people.” (Participant 9, lines 199-205)

The use of the words “queers” to describe how the partner expresses her gender is meant to describe a way that the partner does not conform to gender norms and expectations, but challenges them instead. This participant finds it comforting and connecting to have a partner that can understand the challenged of gender non-conformity, of have a complicated relationships to the body parts that are gendered female, and also to being misinterpreted and misread by others who make assumptions about gender identity based on appearances.

***Clothing challenges gender stereotypes: “I really like pink.”*** As previously discussed naming and self-defining is an important source of power and identification for gender non-conforming individuals and their partners. But self-identifying is sometimes not enough to express a gender identity that challenges conventions. GNC participants and their partners also spoke about how appearance was an important communicator of gender. Unlike gender identity that can be communicated with words, gender expression requires a dialectic between the seer and the seen. Both GNC participants and PO participants spoke about the power of clothing to reinforce and challenge gender expectations. Deciding how to dress and be seen in the world was an ongoing struggle for gender non-conforming individuals that felt that they straddled the divide between femininity and masculinity.

The following passage illustrates one participant's experience of her partner's struggle with gender expression and the resilient and resourceful way they navigated the process.

Speaking about the experience of her GNC partner, this participant shared:

“...A lot of their behaviors play with gender a lot. And prior to our relationship, at different points in their life, they have tried on different levels to pass as male in the world. And that is not something I have experienced with them, because that was less of a concern or less of interest to them by the time that we me. But I think that is something that I hold just as something that I think about them and how they present in the world, just knowing their background and their history with like really playing with gender in ways that are really visible to other people in the world. And I think as part of that they have spent a lot of time being attentive to and observing expectations placed on different genders in the world. And like all the little nuances. Like they will bring these things up often in conversation talking about clothing and style, or choosing what to wear. Its like if you are male in the world you don't do that. Or if you are a female, you don't do that. So they are just like, very aware of all those things that create gender in the world. Which is cool to me...not that those things exist, but that I have someone that I am able to notice, and evaluate and analyze those things around. And I feel like a huge way that they play with gender is through their style and their clothing and the way they choose to present their body that looks a lot of things and its not the same and they've tried different things and they have different elements to their style...For example, I think it really started this winter, actually. They decided that, they were like, “You know, I really like pink. Pink is one of my favorite colors, and I didn't allow myself to wear pink for so many years.” Because they didn't feel it was appropriate for someone who was transmasculine, or whatever, however they identified it at the time. So recently, they've been really like, embracing that and they wear a lot of clothes that are pink and a lot of things that we really bright floral prints and things that make them feel really good, and that's been really confusing to some people who, like, know that their gender identity is non-conforming, particularly my family. My family will be like, “Wait, I don't understand.” I have conversation with my mom. She'll be like, “I don't get it.” Why they dress really feminine, but doesn't identify as a girl. So its like a thing to deal with in the world. And they will play around with, in lots of outfits that they wear, they will play around with different amounts...in any outfit that they wear, there are like different elements that are sometimes really butch or sometimes really femme. And they just, they just play with it. And really, are in a place right now, to wear things that they feel really good about. But it doesn't mean that they don't think about it constantly. A gender nonconforming person in the world has to think about those things. Its not really an option not to. (Participant 11, lines 39-72)

This passage describes both an internal and an external struggle to be authentic and to also be understood as gender non-conforming by others. This example also illustrates the ways in which gender expression becomes a political act of resistance against gender expectations.

Simultaneously, GNC individuals are under great pressure to pick a gender category, if they reject conventional femininity, then they are expected to perform masculinity. However, GNC participants reported concerns about losing connection to their femininity if only expressing masculinity.

### **PO Participants.**

*My partner expresses gender with clothing.* Similarly, to GNC participants, PO participants also referenced the significance of clothing to communicate gender identity and acknowledged their GNC partner's vigilance about the premium society places on aesthetics to communicate masculinity in those assigned female at birth. PO participants also spoke about their GNC partner's gender expression in terms of communication style and roles during sexual intimacy, these codes will also be analyzed below. The following passage illustrates the way that some PO participants see their partner expressing gender through clothing.

*Participant:* I think that she's very highly aware of gender, too. She talks about being butch a lot and talks about ... It's often expressed in insecurities. If she's butch enough because she doesn't really know much about working with wood or anything like that. Also, then freaking out every time we have to go somewhere where she has to dress up because she'll wear a tie and a men's dress shirt, but they don't really fit her body because her body is not a man's body. Or, freaking out when she was having to go through job interviews and just recently had a change of jobs where she was going to a more formal environment. Definitely the dress and the clothes are the biggest part. She does most of the driving, but because I don't like driving. She's really protective in a certain way. I don't know, I think that's mostly what I can think of... They go both ways because there's insecurity about comparing herself to her other butch friends and feeling like she doesn't fit into the "butch box" as much as she wishes that she does. She wants to be seen as tougher and stronger, and good at fixing things and DIY and all that stuff. Her insecurities on the other side are a lot bigger about how she's perceived in the world and feeling hyper-conscious of what the job interview panel is thinking of her when she walks in wearing a man's dress shirt to a state job interview, when all the women in the room are wearing skirts and makeup. She does get called sir sometimes. Mostly she she thinks it's funny and it doesn't bother her, but I think sometimes it does bother her when she's in a situation where she feels like she's trying to fit in. It comes up a lot with my family, like family events, that require... like a wedding, or bar mitzvah, or whatever where we're supposed to wear more formal clothes and she's the only gender non-conforming person in the room. She feels like she really sticks out. She couldn't pull off even wearing a



woman's blouse or anything. She couldn't pull off shopping in the women's section...I just don't think she could ever wear anything and feel comfortable. As uncomfortable as she feels wearing a man's shirt that's too big for her, I think she would feel a lot less comfortable wearing a woman's blouse, even if it was something that was not that feminine. Women's clothes just have a certain cut. (Participant 7, lines 36-78).

This passage highlights several things, for one the struggle for GNC individuals to find ways to dress that honor their gender identity and authentic expression, as well as the difficulty inherent in the fashion industry, or society at large, that do not accommodate the needs of GNC females.

Also this passage speaks to the ways that even within queer and lesbian communities, there are gender norms and expectations. The GNC individual may struggle to be seen as masculine of center, if they do not also express behaviors that are conceived of as more masculine, like manual labor and physical ability. Once again, despite real attempts to transcend gender, GNC individuals and those who love them struggle to get beyond the culturally created boxes of gender.

***My partner defies gender norms: Communication style and division of labor.*** While PO participants acknowledged that their GNC partners conformed to gendered expectations of masculinity through dress, they also balanced this with discussion of the ways in which GNC individuals expressed more “feminine” qualities. Often partners spoke about dividing household labor in ways that contradicted expectations about masculine and feminine labor. Couples were more likely to divide labor in terms of preference, ability, or convenience. Communication style was also discussed as either conforming or challenging gender stereotypes. Individuals that were labeled “more rational,” “more direct,” “more confrontational,” or “less conflict avoidant” were labeled as more “masculine” in their communication style. In this sample of individuals, it was frequently the PO participant that was labeled as “masculine” in her communication style, and the GNC partner was labeled as having a more “feminine” style of communication. This was not

always the case, and was more likely a reflection of personal style more than exclusively a characteristic of being gender non-conforming.

***My partner upholds gender norms: Sexual roles.*** When PO participants talked about the more “masculine” qualities of their partners, three out of six PO respondents and three out of six GNC respondents spoke to the fact that initiating sexual acts or taking a more controlling or dominant role during sex was considered a masculine quality. Like communication style, roles during sex were unique to individuals and a matter of personal preference and sex drive. It was also common, that while the GNC partner may have been labeled as the initiator of sex, they did not feel the need to be dominant or “top” throughout the entire sex act. To contrast, two PO participants stated that they had higher sex drives than their GNC partners, and one PO participant did not mention gender roles as a part of sexual intimacy. The three GNC participants that did not identify as initiators of sex still referenced the importance of gender play or acknowledgement of gender during sex, but not in terms of “topping” and “bottoming” or in terms of initiation and receptivity.

### **Theme 3: Coping with Discrimination Outside the Relationship Because of Gender Non-Conformity**

*“People who live any part of their life as outwardly queer or inwardly queer experience a lot of hard stuff from the world that’s traumatizing.” (Participant 11, lines 286-289)*

All the participants in the study spoke about experiencing some type of discrimination, such as homophobia or gender-based bias. In most cases, the GNC partner was the target of the discrimination. Discrimination occurred amongst family members, friends, and with strangers. When participants faced homophobia and gender bias within their families, it was often due to the family member’s lack of understanding or seeing the GNC partner as both confused and confusing. This was particularly true if the GNC partner appeared dressed or appeared to be

more feminine, but preferred androgynous or masculine pronouns. One participant quoted their mother who said, “If she’s not a girl, what is she?” (Participant 11, lines 82-3). This time of response and interaction generated stress, and sometimes feelings described as “depression” within the partnership for both partners, especially if the PO participant’s family was the source of discrimination. Participants cited conservative, religious, and elder family members as the most unreceptive family members to GNC partners or to the same-sex relationship. Despite the importance of supportive community, participants also spoke about conflicts and micro-aggressions with friends or community members that did not understand the GNC partners’ choices for their gender identity and expression. In some cases, several participants ( $n = 3$ ) also expressed eventual acceptance and even support from immediate family members. Two couples ( $n = 4$ ) spoke about the methods for achieving a greater level of success in mainstream society. One couple ( $n = 2$ ) spoke about her partnership as more socially acceptable because one was more masculine presenting while the other was more feminine presenting. Another couple ( $n = 2$ ) spoke about achieving heteronormative and middle-class success as a way to achieve acceptance.

Every relationship I have been in except for the one where we looked at dressed the same, I have dated a lot of women where the dad was not down with it, the parents weren’t down with it. But they saw that I am a good provider, and I got the respect. But with her mom, she’s starting to get a little better about it, but I think that she...I think the more successful we become, the more we do. It’s more motivating to prove that we are...a power couple. Guess what? A woman don’t need a man to be successful, to have a nice car, a nice house, and nice things. Two women together, working together, working hard can do those things. So I think in a way its just more motivating to me in a sense. I am gonna keep proving you wrong, woman. (Participant 2, lines 200-215)

While discrimination from family members was painful and disheartening, as in this case, it could bring couples together, encourage a sense of bonding to one another as sympathetic and

supportive against a less supportive world, and increase intimacy with one another if and when problems were shared and communicated.

Another participant spoke about her concerns for her GNC partner's safety, especially when they were considering surgeries or taking hormones to appear more masculine. She feared that by presenting as more masculine she would be at greater risk for discrimination, while her GNC partner felt that perceived as a man she would actually be safer given cultural male privilege. Two sets of couples ( $n = 4$ ) named public restrooms as a particularly stressful and confrontational space for their GNC partners. The PO participants in those two couples accompanied their GNC partners to the restroom for support and solidarity when their right to enter the female bathroom was questioned. When explaining how she validated her partner's gender expression one participant shared this experience:

“Um, actually it happens a lot when people look at her and try to figure out if she is a guy or a girl, it really bothers me. It bothers me a lot. So I have vocalized myself to complete strangers, kind of like checking, like, “Why are you looking at her like that.” And, it doesn't bother her as much. She kind of gets embarrassed when I do stuff like that. But there have been times like when, I have to go to the bathroom with her when we are in public and she has to go to a bathroom because she's had people comment like, “I thought I was in the women's bathroom.” Well, you are. You know? Or, “Why is there a guy in there.” It's amazing to me the ignorance of some people and I understand how she appears, but she obviously, she's not small-chested. She's got big boobs! So it's not like you can't see them. I mean the ignorance of some people really surprises me. And I have never had to experience that until being in a relationship with her.” (Participant 1, lines 137-146)

### **Community Influence.**

*“There's a reason that we have queer community and it's because we need to continually reflect ourselves back to each other to prove that we're real. It has pitfalls but that's how any community survives, like, 'I see you.'”* (Participant 4, lines 734-736)

Some participants ( $n = 4$ ) commented on the ignorance of friends and extended community in reference to gender nonconformity. Participants spoke about these experiences in

a number of different ways, as being harmful to simply being annoying, baffling or astonishing. Some participants spoke about losing friendships when the friend was not able to respect requests for non-female pronouns, or were unable to understand a GNC person's choice to have top surgery, for example. In such cases, receiving affirmation, support, and or having their partners correct mis-gendering was expressed as vital to building trust and intimacy in the relationship.

In addition to receiving support from their partners, several GNC respondents ( $n = 4$ ) also spoke about the influence of queer or lesbian community on the process of coming out and developing their identities as gender non-conforming. Nearly all participants also named queer and gender non-conforming community as important for dealing with oppression and discrimination and promoting a positive sense of self and identity. For example, one participant writes about her experience with butch-identified community.

I definitely know in the last nineteen years maybe since that happened [coming out], or eighteen since that happened [coming out], I definitely have had friendships and kinships with other butch women who've been like, 'Hey, butch, how you doing?' That's cool. I mean, I don't know how much I need to be affirmed by other butches. I definitely feel like I don't ... In a way, I care and in a way, I really don't ... The opposite of care. It's nice to just feel like part of a club or to have a nickname or something. I'm not really sure what it is about that, if it's just friendship or if it really feels like some kind of boost to have a more masculine woman acknowledge my gender. I don't know. It's probably a little bit of both. (Participant 6, 543-551)

This participant expresses that she does not need others to acknowledge her identity, she has also benefitted from the experience of having a community and experiencing a sense of belonging.

Another GNC participant speaks more comprehensively about the positive benefits of community support in her life.

You know when you get older it's like oh there's a lot more social pressure to conform I think and I think having community that is supportive makes that so much easier you know to say hey I don't have to conform you know to what the general public thinks I

should conform to and you know I can be and say and do whatever I want and having the support of a community in which a community that is I think it's key. You know having a partner and a community is really ideal when you are a gender nonconforming person and it's probably a lot harder for people to evolve in situations that aren't supportive obviously. I've definitely I give credit to my friends and family for sure. (Participant 5, lines 424-431)

While, for many respondents living in cities with large queer communities or participation in queer community was seen as beneficial to their identity development, a couple of participants described was in which queer communities were limiting, “rigid,” or even and “transphobic.” Having access to lesbian community alone was not sufficient. Study participants also required community that was savvy about gender non-conformity and gender politics for trans-identified people. In the example below, the participant describes the way that even within queer communities there are expectations about gender roles within partnerships.

Yeah. Oh, I know what I was going to say. The one thing that is different or is a challenge, was a challenge I think more before is that there is this societal thing or more in the queer community that at least that I'm in that there is a place where a lot of times people want there to be a hetero-normative way of being even within the queer community. There is a place where I liked that idea that ... I mean I guess it was challenge but I also liked it that people didn't know, couldn't quite get it like why. It's like, "Oh, you 2 boys are together," or something. There's some, it wasn't prejudice really but just like it seems to me people are a little more comfortable with somebody presenting more masculine and somebody more feminine. Because it's just what they know of, maybe in extent that's how their family was...or something. In that way it gets challenging for me presently because I don't want to be put in a box that way. I don't think I am all the time but ... Anyway, I don't know if that makes sense. It's just something that comes up for me. It's not in my relationship. It's more about how people perceive my relationship. It's a challenge. (Participant 8, lines 222-235)

#### **Theme 4: Being a Good Partner Means Being a Good Ally**

*“A gender non-conforming person has to think about those things. Its not an option not to”*  
(Participant 11, line 73).

Generally, PO participants expressed complex and nuanced ways of understanding their partner’s gender identity and expressed awareness of their “privilege” as cis-gendered

individuals. Some PO participants acknowledged their attempts to defend or stand-up for their GNC partners in the face of discrimination, while also recognizing that they sometimes were unaware that a microaggression has occurred. The two major codes for this theme include: “Confronting others is being a good ally” and “I love my partner, not just their gender.” Validation of the GNC partner’s gender identity was also part of being a good ally, but will be considered as a separate category.

**Confronting others is being a good ally.** As mentioned above, confronting others about discrimination, gender-bias, or problematic assumptions were cited by both GNC partners and PO participants as part of good allyship for GNC individuals. Confrontations were complicated for both PO respondents and GNC respondents depending on whether they were conflict avoidant or not. If the PO respondent was less comfortable with conflict and confrontation, then their partner expressed feeling disappointed or betrayed by their partner. Furthermore, in some cases where the GNC person was less confrontational than their cis-partner, navigating public confrontation was perceived as uncomfortable at times for the GNC partner. PO respondents also admitted that while they attempted to be vigilant of harassment, bias, and discrimination towards their partners, occasionally the PO respondent sometimes missed these incidences.

“Christmas shopping two years ago when we were going in there for things and the girls behind us, there was a group of teenage girls behind us staring at her and kind of snickering, and I made a comment. I said, “Look, babe, it’s the first time they have ever seen lesbians.” And let it go at that. And I mean, they all flushed and stopped talking and stopped laughing and actually walked away. And I did embarrass her to do that, but that’s my no filter thing. It bothers the crap out of me that people do that to her. Well...She finds it funny. But at the time when it happens she’s embarrassed. And I don’t mean to ever embarrass her. But I almost mean to embarrass the other people. To make them realize, ok, everyone does not have to look like how you want them to look...but there have been times when I didn’t notice. Never invalidated, but there have been times when I have wanted to say things and she’s told me not to. So I don’t because she asked me not to. It depends on the situation or the place or how we are feeling. There’s a lot of times where I don’t notice things and she’ll pick up on it, but she’ll be like, “No, its ok, don’t worry about it. Don’t worry about it. And you know, it... I try not speak out and

embarrass her if I know for a fact that they are just glancing and trying to figure out if she is a guy or a girl, and then they move on. But it's more like if when they are deliberately staring or making comments. You know, that when I let it, that's when it gets to me, you know. (Participant 1, lines 151-171)

This participant illustrates ways in which both she and her partner are harassed because of misogyny and homophobia, her impulse to confront others to defend her partner, as well as the way different conflict styles in a relationship can potentially create added conflict or stress if one partner is uncomfortable with the level of conflict or negative attention from such interactions. On the other hand, some GNC participants felt that this level of conflict was expected of their partner to show their commitment to the relationship and respect for the struggles of GNC individuals.

**I love my partner, not just their gender.** Most PO participants ( $n = 5$ ) spoke about being more attracted to masculinity than femininity in sexual partners. However, many also critiqued what was referred to as “fetishizing masculinity” which they saw as common in queer and lesbian communities. For these participants ( $n = 3$ ), it was important to assert that while they were attracted to masculinity or androgyny that loved their partner beyond their gender identity or gender expression. These responses also spoke to GNC partner's concerns that their partners would not find them attractive if their gender presentation changed. In the passage below, the participant affirms that while she finds her partner choice of clothing and style attractive, it is not the performance of masculinity that is compelling, but rather the fact that her partner “looks sharp” that is to say that she is confident, and puts care into the way that she presents herself.

“ I don't think of it because of how she is. I think she is sexy as she is. I love how she dresses. She makes herself look sharp every day. Its not because she dresses like a guy or dresses like a girl or if she wears my t-shirts or something like that. Its just who she is to me. I don't put that divide there.” (Participant 1, lines 191-194)



In the examples above, PO respondents find myriad ways to be good allies to their partners that feel both authentic to their personalities and also meaningful to their partners. The passages below highlight other ways in which PO respondents expressed their allyship with the challenges faced by their GNC partners.

**Allyship is also about validating my partner's gender identity.** Validation of the GNC's gender identity was perceived as essential to relationship stability, emotional and sexual intimacy, and being a good ally, themes that will be discussed later. PO respondents spoke about the ways in which they validated their partner's gender by challenging assumptions and confronting bias as mentioned above, through appropriate use of language to refer to gendered aspects of identity ( $n = 4$ ), and supporting their partner's gender expression and choice of clothing ( $n = 6$ ). GNC participants often spoke about the experience of feeling like their gender was most validated during sex ( $n = 5$ ). Acknowledging the fluidity of their partner's gender was also cited by both GNC partners ( $n = 6$ ) and PO participants ( $n = 6$ ) as an important way of validating their GNC partner's gender. Since the importance of clothing has been extensively covered above, this section will focus on validation of gender through language, during sex, and by acknowledging gender fluidity.

***I am not 'Beautiful': Using appropriately gendered language to validate my partner's attractiveness is important.*** Using appropriate, i.e. gender neutral or non-feminine, language to describe their partner's attractiveness, as well as using correct pronouns was cited by four of the six PO participants as being important to the validation of their GNC partner's gender expression. In the passage below, one GNC partner speaks about her preference for non-feminine compliments to describe her attractiveness.

“Well, except for ... Actually, it's so silly but she, used to call me 'beautiful' or 'pretty' and I was like, 'No, I'm not. I'm not like that.' That was totally weird but it's, because all

of it is words that's more used for women and, that, I was not into it. Even though there's totally nothing to it. “ (Participant 8, lines 182-185)

While this participant minimizes the significance of her reaction to the words “beautiful” and “pretty,” what she articulates was also expressed by other individuals in the study. PO participants spoke about the importance of using words such as “handsome” or “dapper” to refer to their partners. One PO participant shared her experience with referring to her partner’s attractiveness and the need to validate both her partner’s masculinity and femininity.

“Sometimes if I think she's looking really good, I'll be like, ‘I think you look really pretty and handsome.’ Like I have to be really careful in a cute way. I try to be careful about the words that I use because, again, I know that she feels both and I don't want to over-masculinize her by using words that I would use with a man, but I also don't want to over-feminize her because that doesn't feel right either” (Participant 3, lines 187-191).

PO participants were very cautious to use language that appropriately reflected the gender expression and identity of their partner. Because GNC individuals are frequently misgendered or their genders are misunderstood by dominant culture, appropriate use of language within the context of a romantic relationship is necessary for building intimacy and creating safety for GNC individuals and their partners.

*Addressing my GNC partner’s insecurities about gender is an important part of validating them in an intimate context.* Both groups of participants spoke about the GNC partner’s concern that their gender expression and performance was not sufficiently attractive to their current partner. In some cases this was particularly true when GNC partner’s wanted to express a greater degree of femininity. But was also true if the partner felt they were not expressing a sufficient amount of masculinity. In this sample set, the PO participant’s attraction to men or masculinity was often cited as the source of the GNC partner’s concern.

Simultaneously, GNC partners also expressed that they did not always feel that they fulfilled queer expectations of masculine gender performance, for example that they did not fit in as a

“butch,” or because of a decision to take testosterone or have a surgery, that they would not be able to express more feminine aspects of their identity. In these cases, it was beneficial to the relationship that a PO was able to express her own gender fluidity or a more bisexual and/or pansexual orientation. This supports the finding that the PO’s gender fluidity helped create safety for the GNC participant to express their complex gender.

The passage below was shared by one of the GNC participants illustrating the internal struggle to balance masculine and feminine energies and still feel like their partner would continue to find them attractive.

“Yeah, there was a point kind of before I started being more femininely presented, where I was still dressing traditionally butch, and I just like I totally withdrew from her and we were like living together. And I wasn’t very busy and she was kind of busy. So I just I tried to make myself seem like I was actually busier. And I was just like, ‘I just need a lot of space right now.’ And I couldn’t, I couldn’t talk about it and I definitely had some fears because I hadn’t talked to her about it that she like me because I presented as butch and that if I started wearing women’s clothes or just dressing and presenting differently that she wouldn’t be attracted to me anymore. It was like so scary to me that I was afraid of the truth. Like, ‘What is she is going to leave me because I am femme?’ So I just couldn’t talk about it...And it just took me being like, ‘I am totally freaking out about this.’ And her being like, ‘Oh my gosh, don’t worry about that.’ To be like, ‘Oh, ok. Ok. I just have to worry about the rest of the world now’”. (Participant 9, lines 211-226)

This participant’s anxiety about their changing gender identity and their fear of not being able to express their femininity resulted in a temporary loss of connection and impacted the emotional intimacy within the partnership. However, because this individual was able to receive validation and acceptance for all aspects of their gender, they were able to regain a sense of closeness and intimacy.

In another example, a GNC participant appreciates her partner’s ability to find many genders attractive and finds comfort that despite possible future insecurities, that her partner would still see her as attractive.

“I think being with someone who likes a variety of genders and who ... I feel would like me if I suddenly went femme or suddenly went a lot butchier would still really like me and it wouldn't change her attraction to me feels nice. In that way, I feel like, ‘Who knows? The sky's the limit.’ Even though I have pretty much been the same gender for a long time. I don't swing very far from the center comfort zone.” (Participant 6, lines 561-565)

Interestingly, this participant's partner was also interviewed and spoke about the insecurity she witnessed with regards to gender presentation. While that PO participant communicated the consistency of her attractions to many people, including her partner, she also recognized the need to reinforce for her partner's gender identity as a category, was also attractive. While the GNC partner found her partner's attraction to men, threatening at times, it this attraction to both masculinity and femininity that made the attraction viable.

Like the need to express gender through aesthetics and appearance, gender expression during sex was spoken about in all GNC interviews, and most PO interviews as well. More specifically, being able to express masculine energy or being perceived as masculine during some part of the sex was important to several GNC participants ( $n = 5$ ). Both GNC participants and PO participants spoke about the importance of not presuming to know the GNC person's relationship to their body parts, including what they called their body parts during sex. In this regard, communication was stressed as essential to creating safety during sex acts. Body dysmorphia was referenced more during sex than in other aspects of the GNC person's life. GNC participants spoke about not feeling connected to their breasts in particular, and also longing for a male anatomy during sex. But GNC partners also expressed satisfaction with the ways in which their partners acknowledged and validated their gender during sex.

Anyhow, I think that I have definitely struggled with the fact that I am you know totally female bodied. Again, going back to the big boob thing, I've struggled with that a lot. Like I wish I didn't have them. I wish they were like super small or gone or whatever and that has been a real struggle for me, for sure...In my life. Especially growing into my gender identity in my community but it's a definite internal struggle and it's not

something that I talk about much. I do talk about it with my partner and she knows all about it but I think that it has you know definitely has taken me, it's put me off my game a few times you know as an emotional partner probably...I can say that you know our relationship and this may be another question, but our relationship is so supportive in the way of our gender identities that it's in this relationship that I've felt free enough to grow into you know really knowing who I am and where I ride shall I say on that spectrum. You know I think as a, again we've been together so long we've definitely grown into ourselves in our sexual intimacy. You know feeling more comfortable trying things and figuring out what's fun and good sexually and you know that's been a real benefit since there's no fear or like there's no judgment or you know, we're just both really open in that way. Emotionally, yeah it's a very beneficial in the way that it's life affirming you know that I can be who I want to be and still know that you know I'm supported and loved and that's the ultimate life benefit you know? (Participant 5, lines 340-359)

GNC participants cited many different ways in which they felt their gender was validated during sex, however, this participant elaborates on the ways that she has struggled with certain body parts, found ways to communicate this struggle with her partner, and over the course of their relationship she has experienced a deepening of both emotional and sexual connection that has allowed her more freedom sexually and as well as more freedom to deepen her understanding of herself. The support that this respondent speaks about was cited by all GNC partners in this study.

### **Themes About Intimacy**

The majority of the participants in this study spoke about the ways in which their current relationships were unlike any other prior romantic relationship. Participants spoke about the strength of their emotional compatibility and in most cases, their sexual compatibility. Whether or not they experienced significant conflict in their relationship, they all expressed commitment to the partnerships. Most of the PO participants ( $n = 5$ ) had not previously been in a long romantic relationship with another AFAB (assigned female at birth) person before their current relationship. Two PO participants had been previously married to cis-males but had some same-sex sexual encounters or brief relationships with same-sex partners, two PO respondents had

only dated cis-males previously, and two had not really had any serious relationships before their current partner. In this way, the PO participants perceived their current relationship as unique from their prior experiences. These respondents spoke about the following aspects of the relationship as unique: sexual compatibility, emotional connection or communication, and their own personal growth. For the GNC partner, they often identified their current relationship as unique for similar reasons as the PO participants (sexual compatibility, communication, and personal growth), but they also spoke about their partners as having less rigid ideas about gender and sexuality. Both partner groups referenced experiencing greater amounts of aspects emotional and sexual intimacy (communication and sexual compatibility) in their present relationship than in previous ones.

**Theme 5: Emotional intimacy.** Both GNC partners and PO participants were asked specifically about emotional intimacy in their current relationship. The findings below reflect both the answers to those interview questions as well as other references to emotional intimacy throughout the interview. Participants shared about obstacles and supports for emotional intimacy in their romantic relationships.

*Barriers to emotional intimacy for GNC participants.* Responses from GNC participants about barriers to emotional intimacy were broken into two categories: (1) How I feel about myself affects how close I feel to my partner, and (2.) My relationships with others affect how close I feel with my partner. Within the second category, responses were broken down further into (1) Interpersonal dynamics between partners and (2) Outside of the relationship, how interactions with others, family, friends and community, affected their ability to feel close to their partner.

***How I feel about myself affects how close I feel to my partner.*** GNC participants spoke about the ways in which a lack of confidence in their own attractiveness and gender presentation could negatively impact their ability to feel close to a partner. This finding also reflects the ways in which sexual intimacy, attraction, and desire can also have a negative impact on emotional intimacy.

I was with someone who was having some confusion about her sexual identity ... Just knowing that made me feel like, "Oh, my God. Why do I want to have sex with you?" Just this vulnerability that I think could have still been present even if I was feminine, but I just felt this ... "If you're thinking about men, then I just feel not attractive to you even if you're saying that I am attractive to you." (Participant 6, lines 435-439)

While this participant is not referring to her current partnership, this passage illustrates the potential for the ways that feeling insecure about her partner's level of attraction or desire for her impacts her ability to feel close.

***My relationships with others affect how close I feel with my partner.*** GNC participants named both struggles in their romantic relationships as well as difficulties in other relationships as potentially negative influences on their emotional intimacy. Interpersonal conflicts in the partnerships revolved around differences in communication style, conflict styles, and different needs for closeness and autonomy. Beyond the relationship, traumas and homophobia were named as external stressors that could be harmful to intimate connection within romantic relationships. The following passage speaks of a lack of family acceptance created a barrier for feeling open and close to her partner.

I mean, there's been times where I have gotten... cause her mom is still kind of weird about all this. We were at a family function and she brought pictures, wedding pictures of her [my current partner] and her [ex] husband to give to her daughter. And that kind of put me in a little slump for a few days where I just didn't want, it just got me down. It definitely did not put me in the mood to want to do anything for a few days. She [my partner] was just pissed as I was. It just really, really upset me, you know. It made me kind of depressed (Participant 2, lines 172-179).

This participant describes an experience of having her relationship with her partner invalidated by her mother-in-law. While her partner was also angered by the situation, the participant describes feeling depressed and unable to “do anything for a few days” impacting her ability to be connected and confident in her relationship. In the following passage the participant compares their present relationship to previous ones making note of previous imbalances between differences in needs for autonomy and independence.

I've always been cautious getting into relationships, because I feel very trapped in them, and I feel very controlled. I don't like that. It really makes me basically run the other way. With her, I don't feel that because she says the same thing about me. We're not ... When I started seeing her and we started having sex, and then it got to the point where I was like, "We're still seeing each other. Maybe I should just see what's going on here." Fast forward, I told her. I was straight up. I told her, "Hey, I don't want a girlfriend." She was like, "Why not?" She asked, "What is it about it that scares you?" I told her, I don't want to feel controlled...She's like, "I'm not trying to control you." From then on, we continued to see each other. I still don't feel like she's trying to control me. (Participant 10, lines 200-211)

This participant describes having higher needs for independence and autonomy than past partners. Their fear about being trapped and controlled prevented their ability stay in intimate relationships. Having a partner with more aligned needs for independence that also is able to reassure this participant allows them to maintain emotional intimacy.

***Barriers to emotional intimacy for PO participants.*** PO participants named both interpersonal and intra-personal factors as negatively affecting emotional intimacy. Specifically PO participants named factors external to the relationship like past traumas, and harassment and discrimination against their partner as having a harmful affect on their emotional intimacy. Within the relationship, they described a lack of attunement and their own personal character flaws as being barriers to closeness and intimacy with their partners.

***Within my relationship my own imperfections and misattunement are barriers to emotional intimacy.*** In the passage below, the participant acknowledges the ways in which her



personality type can create barriers to intimacy or create conflict in her interpersonal relationships.

I am very set in my ways, also, so, its, its, something I constantly...I'm like that way at work. I'm like that with my brothers and sisters, and I think I make it difficult for people to speak up because they either don't want to upset me or they don't want to piss me off. And I never intend to make people think that way, but that's just how I come off. And you know, I wish people would speak up a little more, because maybe I need to be put in my place every once in awhile (Participant 1, lines 87-92).

Through the process of increased self-awareness, this participant is able to notice how her patterns of communication might make it difficult to both meet her needs for communication from intimates, and also the ways in which she creates barriers to emotional intimacy. This participant later acknowledges that because of her own personal growth she has fewer of these problems in her current relationship.

In the next passage, another participant speaks about differing needs for closeness and autonomy that can create conflict in relationship, blocking a sense of connection with her partner.

I just wanted my own space and she projected into this whole, "We're not connecting as much. We're not as close." For me it was a very temporary thing...I wanted a little space, and we were both working really hard. That kind of pattern has happened other times, too...Sometimes I just feel like I need a little bit more personal space and she really likes to interact maybe a little more than I do. Sometimes we'll have little tiffs about that. Nothing she doesn't know, it's definitely something that we've talked about a lot. I think I'm a little more introverted (Participant 7, lines 170-187).

While this conflict is reported as a minor "tiff" this interaction illustrates the way in which differing needs for closeness can affect the perception of intimacy for both partners. In such an instance, neither partner gets her needs met. The partner that feels insecure fears distance from her partner, and the other partner feels frustrated that she cannot have the space she needs without it threatening the connection.

***My partner has been hurt by others, and it can limit emotional intimacy in our relationship.*** PO participants spoke about the ways in which traumas, mental health challenges and conflicts with others outside the context of their relationship can affect intimacy and create doubt and insecurity in the couple's attachment. The passage below reveals the impact of external factors in the relational dynamic.

There's very few times an issue where, you know, real conflict or real—and usually it's around his menstrual cycle...And so yeah, it's pretty intense. He's, like, angry and irritable and less tolerant around those times, and just more sensitive and insecure. He's got a good amount of insecurity that comes up. He's had a lot—dealt with a lot of both abuse and neglect, as a child. So—but I, you know, he sees my wounds. Our wounds—we have mutually—um—our wounding, for some reason, doesn't—we don't re-wound each other. We might trigger each other, but we're really able to heal our wounds through our relationship, rather than re-wound. So for the most part, I can kind of see that as it's happening. He can too, and so we don't get too charged or triggered by each other. We're able to get back and be supportive. That was a little bit hard (Participant 12, lines 268-279).

In this case, the participant states the ways in which past trauma and hormonal issues can contribute to increased conflict and struggle in a relationship. Another participant articulated a similar experience stating, "...so many things can cause trauma to a person in the world, and when those traumas meet each other it can be so scary and hard to deal with...(lines 343-346)." Understanding, commitment, and good conflict resolution skills are required to navigate negative impacts of external stressors on intimate relationships between sexual minority partners.

***Support for emotional intimacy for GNC participants.*** GNC responses to what was most supportive of emotional intimacy in their relationships included: (1) Feeling safe to be different than my partner, and (2) Having confidence in the stability of my relationship. To feel safe in their relationships, GNC participants reported needing to feel a balance between spending time with their partner, and spending time apart, as well as feeling their partner accepted them as they were. Feeling acceptance often revolved around gender identity and gender expression. GNC

participants spoke about successful partnerships as feeling complimentary ( $n = 3$ ) and as being a “good team.” To feel confident in the stability of their relationship GNC participants spoke about needing good sexual intimacy, trusting their partner’s commitment to them, and having a shared experience of overcoming challenges together.

***Feeling safe to be different than my partner.*** GNC participants frequently referenced the ways in which their partner balanced them or the ways in which their differences were complimentary. They also expressed feeling safe and accepted in their relationships, particularly in regards to their gender expression and identity.

I guess with my current partner, she holds this place of really celebrating ... What am I trying to say? I don't know how to ... I just know how I feel about it but ... The way that she is I think she really likes queer... different gender ... I think she really likes gender non-conformity and all the things I feel I kind of, like, feel really safe to talk about it with her. Also the big thing, too is that her kiddo is totally gender non-conforming but born a boy. It's hard for me to not include our whole family into that and [inaudible 00:43:27] her. What happens in my mind is yeah, and also because we now are all like using 'they' or pronouns and exploring what it means to really be gender fluid for that, for him. Then for me it's created like even more ... I think because I'm a teacher for him or for them, then it becomes I get to explore myself even more, talk about it more. My partner is super into talking about it. In that way it feels more celebrated in this relationship (Participant 8, lines 416-425).

This participant describes having difference celebrated in her relationship. Instead of experiencing difference as creating conflict, it becomes an opportunity for discussion, exploration and discovery. In this passage, the participant reflects on the ways in which her difference is even an example for her partner’s child. In this way, have differences celebrated helps build a sense of safety and allows for greater intimacy between partners.

***Having confidence in the stability of their relationship.*** GNC participants also articulated that they could trust that their partners were committed to the relationship. This was experienced and expressed in a number of different ways. Spending time together and the duration the partners had been together also communicated stability to GNC partners. GNC

participants named overcoming challenges and obstacles and a healthy sexual connection as evidence of confidence in their relationships. They used terms like “trust,” “commitment” and “stability” to describe happy partnerships. One GNC participant stated,

To be honest with you, I haven't really experienced much emotional intimacy until I got with my partner. I didn't really let anyone in. So I don't think its [my gender identity] ever been of benefit to me until I got with my partner And I a part of it is that other issues with myself that I never really let anyone in, never really cared to. And, so I really hadn't benefitted until I got with my current partner. She just kind of knocked those walls down and was really cool and wanted all of me. And just kept fighting for that until I finally was like, “Alright.” So I think its benefitted me in my current relationship...(Participant 2, lines 284-293)

This participant describes how her partner's commitment to her allowed her to build trust and intimacy, and eventually share more of herself than she had in any other prior relationship. The tenacity and consistency of her partner's interest in knowing her communicated commitment and stability to this respondent.

***Support for emotional intimacy for PO participants.*** Similar to GNC participants, PO participants also acknowledged the importance of negotiating and navigating differences to strengthen emotional intimacy, as well as appreciating the need to balance challenges with closeness with their partners and trusting they could depend on their partners. PO participant responses about emotional intimacy reflected the following findings: (1) Healthy struggle can benefit the relationship, and (2) Spending time together is enjoyable and balances struggles, and so does dependability.

***Healthy struggle can benefit the relationship.*** PO participants spoke about difference as being beneficial. They described finding balance between opposing needs, having healthy conflict, and used terms like “compatibility” and “good team” to refer to their partnerships. They also reported greater emotional intimacy when their partners supported their personal growth, and helped them overcome insecurities or self-doubts. In the passage below, this respondent

discusses the benefits of facing and overcoming challenges as strengthening her connection with her partner.

The thing that feels really important from our relationship is so many things can cause trauma to a person in the world and when those traumas meet each other it can be so scary and hard to deal with and I think that my partner had more trauma around gender and identity stuff and I had more trauma around shame and guilt and just like being able to take up space and being confident in the world and those things meeting was like, “Come on, World, how much can you fuck up a couple of people here, and the leave us to just deal with it.” But overall it makes our relationship so much more real and if we can get through those things, like, so strong. And I just look at people around me...I see so many relationships that are so limited and small and filled secrets or things that you just don’t talk to your partner about or something. And I just feel like my relationship, because of gender stuff, and because of identity stuff, and because of queerness, particularly, its really expansive and its really comprehensive. My relationship is my whole being. Its like all that stuff has to come to the forefront (Participant 11, lines 343-355)

By stating that her relationship is her whole being this respondent speaks about intimacy as a way to share all of herself with another person. By facing and overcoming struggle in her relationship she finds that she is more connected and freer to express herself fully in the context of the relationship. It is not the struggle alone that builds the connection, but deepening the connection as a result of the struggle.

*Spending time together is enjoyable and balances struggle, and so does dependability.*

To balance some of the healthy struggle described above, PO participants also reported spending time enjoying their partners and being able to depend on their relationship as important for mitigating challenging dynamics.

We hang out with each other all the time. Um, for the last five years we are pretty much inseparable. To be honest, its weird because people will tell us that we have like a crazy relationship and they are amazed we don’t get sick of each because we live together, we work together, we hang out together. But when we are not together, we’re always texting each other, just checking...not even checking in, just talking throughout the day. So its really unlike any relationship I’ve ever been in because we can talk about anything. We very, rarely fight. And when we do have arguments, it’s obviously over something stupid. But we get over it quickly because we just talk about it. And I have always been used to

yelling and screaming and fighting and walking away. But she doesn't let me do that, which is good (Participant 1, lines 45-54).

The high degree on closeness in this relationship is evidence of deep emotional connection and intimacy. She describes a partnership where she trusts that her partner will not walk away from a conflict, but will be committed to working through problems. This passage reflects the partnerships ability to withstand conflict because of the high degree of emotional intimacy that is built from spending time together that is experienced as enjoyable.

**Theme 6: Sexual intimacy.** The results of the research on sexual intimacy generally revealed that many factors outside of the sex act itself contributed to promoting or inhibiting sexual intimacy. Generally, past traumas, daily stress, and personal insecurities about gender and appearance negatively affected sexual intimacy for both partner groups. GNC participants spoke about what defined sexual intimacy for them, and also about needs for relationship stability, flexibility and self-acceptance to deepen sexual intimacy. In particular, having their partner's validate their gender identity during the sex act facilitated sexual intimacy. PO participants spoke about the importance of non-sexual intimacy such as emotional connection and physical affection to encourage sexual intimacy. During the sex act, PO participants spoke about desire, sexual compatibility, and high levels of attunement with their partner as supportive of sexual intimacy. For PO participants, being able to both self-express and honor self-expression in their partner is what created sexual intimacy.

***External factors, interpersonal dynamics and low self-acceptance are barriers to sexual intimacy for GNC participants.*** For GNC participants, sexual intimacy is affected by external factors such as the stresses of every day living and person-in-environment stressors like traumas, and mental health issues, like depression. Sexual intimacy was also negatively affected by a lack of self-acceptance and difficulty accepting differences in their partner's sexual needs. Not feeling

accepted and not having their gender identity respected during sex was named most frequently as negatively impacting sexual intimacy for GNC participants. Some participants stated that internal struggles about their body parts not aligning with how they wanted to be seen during sex, or how they wanted to feel during sex impacted their ability to feel close to their partner. Other participants spoke about the need to have their partners have flexibility to allow for their fluid gender identity and expression during the sexual encounter. One participant stated,

I would say make sure you're getting all of your sexual needs cared for even if maybe ... I don't know ... Sometimes I hear about people falling into really strict roles and I kind of just wonder, "Really? Do you really want to do that? Do you really only want to be a top or only want to be a bottom?" I don't know ... I had one partner who was a total pillow queen. I felt like at first that was really hot and then later, it was just a problem. I guess I would say to gender nonconforming women that if they're with someone who just only expects them to be a top and masculine in bed all the time, just look out for your own needs. (Participant 6, lines 578-587)

This passage describes the importance of having all aspects of their sexuality validated and respected during sex. Consistent with previous findings, GNC participants request flexibility to explore both masculine and feminine energies during sex.

***Daily stressors, partner's traumas and differing sexual needs are barriers to sexual intimacy for PO Participants.*** Like the GNC participants, PO participants also spoke about the external factors, stressors of daily living, past traumas, and mental health issues as negatively impacting their sexual intimacy. PO participants also stated that having a higher libido than their partner could negatively influence sexual intimacy. In addition to these similarities with GNC responses, PO participants also acknowledged that their partner's uncertainty, ambivalence, about how to express their gender during sex could have a negative affect on their sexual intimacy.

***External factors affect intimacy with my partner.*** Busy lives, daily stress and trauma were cited most frequently by PO participants as negatively affecting sexual intimacy. The

passage below outlines some examples of daily stressors that impacted the frequency of sexual interactions resulting in less sexual connection than both partners preferred.

There's been a couple of times throughout the past five years where we've had a drought. And I have been like, "Babe, have you ever heard of lesbian bed death? We don't want to get that." Because I didn't think that it was a real thing and I heard people talking about it and I looked it up and I was like, "That can't happen. It's never going to happen." And when I kinda get a little freaked out, when I think we are not doing it as often as we should, um, we both kind of realize there's a lot going on with us, or we're overly stressed or overly worked. Or there's just not a lot of time and by the time there is time we are both just exhausted and we want to go to sleep. We take a step back from that and reconnect with ourselves. Like, last week, or two weeks ago we were just talking about like, I feel like everything is wedding planning, work, school, kids, and its like a cycle everyday. And then trying to eat right and trying to exercise, I mean, it's just a lot. So we kind of lost a little bit of touch. (Participant 1, 312-323)

This participant voices anxieties about not having sex frequently due to common daily stressors and busy schedules. To balance the anxiety, this participant normalizes and accepts that there is nothing wrong with the sexual connection, for example, they are still attracted to one another and want to have sex, but have not made the time for it. Later this same participant stated,

But sexual intimacy is not just having sex. I like to come to bed every night and she puts her head on my shoulder to fall asleep. Or I will cuddle up next to her. Or even laying on the couch just watching t.v. together, and I will lay on her legs or something like that. I think, any connection, any physical connection to me with her has been intimacy. (Participant 1, lines 330-336)

This sentiment was expressed by many participants, that sexual intimacy was more than simply the act of having sex. This point will be revisited in the next section about what respondents found supportive for sexual intimacy.

*My partner has greater needs for security and attunement during sex.* Some participants noticed that wanting to have sex more frequently than their partners or wanting different things during sex could also negatively impact sexual intimacy. PO participants were very aware of their partner's need for validation and particular sexual roles during sex. Misattuning to their partners needs for certain dynamics during sex was found to potentially



negatively affect sexual. One participant spoke about the ways that she noticed her partner's needs for a particular sexual role dynamic was important for their sexual intimacy.

It matters to her who's considered the bottom and who's considered the top. That doesn't matter to me, but I think she's had some feelings that she should be the top. I don't feel like we've been stressed about that. I think she's had some moments of feeling like, am I good enough? Am I doing the right thing?...I think that's partly why I became more passive. At first, our first couple of years, I started to realize that when I initiated sex, she was less likely to ... She often would turn me down, whereas when she would initiate, I would usually be all for it. It became this pattern where she initiates. (Participant 7, lines 300-352)

This passage illustrates an example of how a PO participant may feel more flexible while her partner's needs are more specific. Initial misattunement to the fact that her partner wanted to initiate resulted in temporary disruption of the sexual intimacy.

***Sexual intimacy is more than just having sex for GNC participants.*** Interviews with GNC participants revealed that sexual intimacy was perceived as more than just the act of having sex, as was true generally for both partner groups. GNC partners also sought flexibility in gender roles during sex. To feel safe enough to explore these gender roles, GNC participants also needed positive self-perception and relationship stability.

***What is sexual intimacy?*** To define sexual intimacy, GNC participants spoke physical affection, communication, and emotional intimacy as contributing to sexual intimacy. One participant defined sexual intimacy in her relationship in the following way.

I would say, it would be, when we do have sex but we are very close to one another. A lot of kissing and a lot of touching, and that's kind of more of it, and obviously we do the other things, but that's like the biggest part of it to the point that it's more powerful than the actual act itself. So I would say, that more of the emotional part of it where we are kind of just letting everything go where we aren't thinking about anything but each other and we are into each other and we just really connect. We are just really connected and shutting out the rest of the world. (Participant 2, lines 348-356)

Connection, closeness, kissing, and touch created a deeper sense of sexual intimacy for this, and other GNC participants. The “other things” the participant mentions are in some ways minimized, or not the determining factors to create intimacy during sex.

***Sexual intimacy requires gender flexibility for GNC participants, and flexibility requires positive self-perception and relationship stability.*** To feel sexually intimate, GNC participants spoke about needing flexible sexual roles and dynamics, relationship stability, and a confident sense of self. This participant’s description of sexual intimacy incorporates the finding above, as well as illustrates the importance of communication, self-acceptance and confidence in their partnership.

“I think there’s always been this way, most of the time that I have had trouble with partners in the past when we are being sexually intimate, and they are touching my naked body and there’s just a way that she checks in verbally and non-verbally that makes me feel really respected about how my body should respond to things and, has actually made me more comfortable with more things about my body. And I think that, I am not sure there’s just an instance, its just a gradual way of us being intimate that has made me feel like I can really tell that she sees me in a way that I want people to.” (Participant 9, lines 110-117)

This participant sees this relationship as unique because of the confidence and trust that they have in their partner’s ability to “check in” during sex to assure their comfort and safety with the sex act. They describe the way that this communication facilitates an improved sense of self because their partner is able to “see” them or acknowledge their gender in the way that they hope to be seen.

***For PO participants sexual intimacy includes other types of intimacy as well.*** Like GNC participants, PO respondents also spoke about emotional intimacy, communication a sense of safety, and intimate non-sexual physical affection as what defined and created sexual intimacy.

***During sex, being able to self-express and honor expression in the other creates sexual intimacy.*** PO participants referenced aspects of their own self-expression, namely, sexual

compatibility, similar sex drives and desire for their partner as important to building sexual intimacy. Many PO participants had previously been in romantic relationships with men and realized that they were more sexually attracted to those assigned female at birth. They reported that their sexual connections with their current partners were better than in previous relationships. The sexual empowerment of being with someone they found desirable was vital for PO participant's sexual intimacy.

I have no expectations of how I experience my body and I can ask for anything I want. And we have really frank and honest conversations about sexuality and sex itself and what we both desire and what feels scary and what feels ok. I never thought that's something that would have been possible. It's so good and so healthy. I just never thought I could have such a great sex life because like, anyone else I was with it was weird, I feel so many expectations about how I am supposed to be reacting and what I am supposed to be liking, or whatever. So our whole sex life has been so phenomenal.  
(Participant 11, 319-324)

This participant states that communication and her ability to fully and freely express herself sexually is what makes for great sex. Technical and mechanical aspects of sex were not mentioned, rather permission to oneself and feeling accepted in that expression determined the quality of the sexual experience.

***High levels of attunement to my GNC partner's needs is important.*** Half of PO participants specifically spoke about the importance of checking in with their partner during sex about how they wanted to be touched, and how they should refer to their GNC partner's body parts. This was discussed as very important for validating and acknowledging their partner's gender non-conformity and building intimacy, both sexual and emotional. The passage below is consistent with what other PO participants shared about how they considered their partner's needs during sex.

I think communication is always so important in relationships and I think when one person has... Yeah, I think both people have unique gender and sexuality experiences, but particularly for somebody who's gender queer. If you're in a partnership with them, if you

don't know how they want to be touched, ask them. If you don't know how they refer to their body, ask. Otherwise you could feel all the time like you're violating the person or not seeing or acknowledging the person and that's a huge barrier to intimacy, right? (Participant 3, lines 497-503)

Similarly, other participants spoke about the importance of not making assumptions about what their partners liked, and also said it was important to continue to check in over time, since these needs and the GNC partner's gender identity might change and evolve. Honoring their partner's gender expression during sex was sometimes thought of reciprocally creating a generally positive atmosphere of gender exploration during sex for both partners. PO participants did not describe this as a barrier to sexual intimacy, but felt like it allowed for a more expansive space for their own gender expression. One participant described it was "freeing." (Participant 11, lines 319-325)

## **Conclusion**

These findings reveal that gender nonconforming individuals and their partners create and develop their gender identity and expression through language (self-identification and naming), and aesthetic choices. Couples report the importance of having a balance of masculine and feminine energies between them while having the freedom for each of their genders to evolve over time. Both partner groups express appreciation for the ways in which a stable and committed partnership has supported their gender exploration. These findings reveal that the more gender fluid their partner is, the more comfortable the GNC partner may be to express their own gender fluidity.

These findings show the harmful effects of unsupportive or traumatic incidences in the lives of GNC people and their partners. But also find that supportive friends and family can also be a protective factor for sexual and gender minorities. Gender validation and partner allyship were important qualities for PO participants to offer their GNC partners to build strong

emotional intimacy in the relationship. Emotional intimacy was negatively affected by daily stressors, personal traumas outside the relationship, and insecurities, but was strengthened by confidence in the relationship and a finding ways to negotiate and balance differences. Sexual intimacy was found to be more than simply having sex. A combination of external factors, interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics also affected sexual intimacy. Finally, validating and acknowledging a GNC partner's gender during sex was necessary for sexual intimacy for both partner groups.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

The objective of this research was to explore if differences in gender expression and gender identity in same-sex female couples affected experiences of emotional and sexual intimacy. Generally, the findings of this study challenge literature that assumes that when same-sex partners are both assigned “female” they express and experience intimacy similarly. While the findings of this study are consistent with Levitt & Heistand (2005) research on butch-femme relationships, this research also reveals that gender non-conforming individuals and their partners engage in some unique and specific strategies for building intimacy. Findings were also consistent with research on minority stress that reveals that discrimination has negative impacts on individual mental health, resulting in stressors in intimate relationships (Brown, 2003; Meyer, 2003). However, like the research on minority stress, participants reported that community and partner support served as protective factors for sexual minorities and minority gender groups (Brown, 2003; Meyer, 2003).

The discussion below is organized into three sections. First, I will provide a comparison of the key findings to previous research and literature. Second, I will address implications for social work, and how social workers might make use of these results in clinical practice and work with couples and families. Finally, I will present recommendations for future research on intimacy and relational dynamics in same-sex partnerships with gender non-conforming individuals assigned female at birth. The key findings the below are organized loosely to follow the themes named in the Findings section.

The eight key findings for this study included the following: (1) Gender is created and expressed through language, aesthetics, and sexual roles during sexual intimacy; (2) Mutual

support for exploring gender identity and expression; (3) Allyship and community support are protective factors against discrimination of gender and sexual minorities, and these protective factors promote intimacy in romantic partnerships; (4) Intimacy, both sexual and emotional, is negatively impacted by trauma, mental health challenges, and personal character flaws; (5) Intimacy and relationship stability was built by overcoming challenges and obstacles as a couple; (6) A balance between differentiation and time together was considered supportive of emotional intimacy; (7) To promote sexual intimacy, GNC partners required positive self-regard, relationship stability, and flexible gender roles during sex; and (8) To promote sexual intimacy, PO partners valued self-expression, for themselves and their partners, as well as high levels of attunement to their partner's need for flexible sexual roles.

### **Key Findings: Comparisons with Previous Research**

Interpersonal intimate relational dynamics in same-sex female relationships were explored through the lived experiences of gender non-conforming assigned female at birth (AFAB) individuals and their partners. This section compares the research findings to previous literature and is divided into the following subsections: gender self-expression; positive mutual influence; barriers to intimacy; protective factors; building blocks for intimacy; and conclusion.

**Theme 1: Gender self-expression.** The research findings revealed that participants understood and expressed gender through language (how they spoke about their gender, or not), through aesthetics (how they dressed and what they looked like), and sexual roles (who initiated or directed sexual acts).

**Theme 2: Language and aesthetics.** Participant discussion of appearance and use of language to create gender identity and to express gender was not surprising given previous feminist research on gender. Consistent with Butler's (1990) idea of gender as a performative

act, using appearance and language to express gender is confirmed in the literature that distinguishes between biological determinants of gender and cultural and societal creations of gender. GNC individuals and their partners are involved in co-creating complex and dynamic ways of conceptualizing and expressing gender and breaking out of the binary system critiqued by Butler (1990, 2004) and other feminist theorists (Feinberg, 1996). Because gender expression is a dynamic and constantly evolving process, the ways in which gender non-conforming individuals and their partners are shaping the conversations and realities of gender expression is not static. This active process of creating and recreating gender should continue to be researched as cultural perspectives on gender becomes more nuanced.

As gender minorities, GNC participants' focus on aesthetics and language reflects their greater level of attunement and concern about how their gender is perceived in society. Being aware of subtle cues about gender performance is more acute when gender identity and biological features are not congruent with cultural expectations of gender. GNC individuals *are* and *must be* more vigilant of differences in response to real and perceived lack of personal safety. PO participants spoke about how being with their GNC partners raised their own awareness about how gender is created, understood, and socially policed. They also gained greater awareness and sensitivity to the struggles of gender non-conforming individuals inspiring a motivation to become activists and allies for gender minorities. PO participants also began engaging in a deeper way around deconstructing culturally imposed ideas of gender that affected them personally as well.

**Theme 3: Sexual roles.** While GNC partners sought reciprocity in sexual acts, they were more likely to feel comfortable “topping,” initiating sex, or taking a more “masculine” role of dominance, control or penetration. This finding challenges research that suggests that same-sex



couples have less sex because there is no initiator (Peplau, et al., 2002; Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). The desire to express masculinity during sex was discussed in terms of a longing for male anatomy and a need to direct and initiate sexual acts to pleasure their partners. This parallels Levitt & Heistand's (2005) research on butch-femme relationships that reveals that the butch partner, while positioned as the initiator in sex, subverted traditional conceptualizations of masculinity because their primary focus was their partner's pleasure not their own (Levitt & Heistand, 2005). Also, consistent with Levitt & Heistand's (2005) research, GNC individuals were open to receiving sexually once trust, relationship stability, and acceptance of their non-conforming gender expression was well established, since the sex act itself was experienced as a vulnerable moment when GNC partners were forced to confront their biological "femaleness."

No research on same-sex relationships spoke about the experience of longing for male anatomy during the sex act. Participants in this study reported the experience of feeling like their body was incongruent with their gender identity during sex, at times, and reported this as having a negative impact on emotional and sexual intimacy. This phenomenon would be an important area for future research, especially for clinicians focused on sex and couple's therapy.

**Theme 4: Positive mutual influence.** GNC partners valued gender fluidity in their partner, and it helped them feel safer to explore and express their authentic gender expression. PO participants found that they were more comfortable exploring and expanding their own definitions of gender and grew personally in their understanding of gender as a result of being with a GNC partner. While this finding was not discussed in previous literature on same-sex relationships, and may be a unique quality in relationships with gender non-conforming individuals, it reflects Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson's (1998) research that establishes the importance of being able to influence your partner as a sign of a strong and healthy relationship.

Since the couples interviewed in this study were in stable, long-term relationships, this phenomenon that emerged in the findings is consistent with Gottman et al., (1998) research on successful partnerships.

**Theme 5: Barriers to intimacy.** The findings in this study reveal that the primary barriers to intimacy were related to traumas, discrimination, and mental health struggles like depression. Individual traumas were not explored deeply, but participants self-reported about experiences of discrimination and lack of support from family, friends, and strangers because of a non-conforming gender expression. Low self-esteem or internal identity conflicts were also reported to have a negative impact on intimacy. These findings were consistent with Levitt et al. (2012) research on sexual minority stress and gender identity and expression which found that butch-identified and non-traditionally gender-identified individuals experienced greater incidences of violence, harassment, and discrimination than femme-identified and traditionally-gendered individuals.

The findings in this study also support the work of several researchers that explore the negative impacts of marginalization and discrimination on same-sex relationships (Frost 2013; Kurdek, 2004; Khaddouma et al., 2015), sexual minority stress (Meyer, 2003), and normative trauma (Brown, 2003). These negative impacts have been found to result in lower rates of relationship satisfaction (Meyer, 2003). Gender non-conforming individuals may be at higher risk due to their additionally marginalized social status. Some researchers (Frost, 2013; Kurdek, 2004; Meyer, 2003) have theorized that increased social acceptance, and, specifically, the legalization of gay marriage would mitigate the effect of minority stress. But since gender non-conforming individuals face an additional level of discrimination, their relationships may still be at risk. The fact that couples in this study were generally happy and stable, and that their primary

barriers to intimacy revolved around the effects of minority stress reinforces the findings of other researchers (Brown, 2003; Kurdek, 2004; Meyer, 2003; Khaddouma et al., 2015), and further emphasizes the importance of continued research to support sexual minority couples.

**Theme 6: Protective factors.** To balance the negative effects of discrimination, participants spoke about the importance of strong partner allyship, and finding supportive community. These protective factors were consciously acknowledged, and valued by both GNC individuals, PO participants. The importance of alternative forms of support is consistent with the literature that finds that when LGB individuals lack familial or societal support, turning to supportive community can minimize the negative affects of minority stress (Frost, 201; Levitt, et al., 2012;), and also support relationship stability in same-sex partnerships (Totenhagen et. al, 2011).

**Allyship.** The literature on same-sex relationships does not discuss the notion of allyship that emerged in this study. This finding may need further exploration in future studies, and reveals how gender identity is experienced differently within same-sex relationships. Being an ally to their GNC partner was both an important identity for PO participants and was also foundational for intimacy in the relationships in this study. GNC participants also expressed the importance of their partner's allyship as necessary for establishing trust and safety. Totenberg et al.'s (2011) research explores interdependence theory to reveal that while being able to turn to a partner for support during stress increased relationship satisfaction for one partner (the one under stress), it did not increase relationship satisfaction for both partners (the support person). While the present study establishes the important role of allyship in gender non-conforming partnerships, more research is needed to understand how being an ally may be a source of resilience to mitigate normative traumas for the PO individuals, as well.

**Resilience.** While the negative effects of minority stress have been well-established, few researchers have explored resiliency in sexual minority partnerships (Brown, 2003; Meyer, 2003). The findings in this study reveal that partners spoke about overcoming conflict within the relationship, as well as overcoming the negative impacts of discrimination as helpful for building a stronger alliance between the partners. This is consistent with Frost's (2013) research that found that when couples framed stigma as a "generative experience" or "an opportunity to for redefinition," they were able to transform the effects of stigma into motivation to pursue certain goals both personally and interpersonally describing them as opportunities for "relational commitment and public recognition (p. 59). Frost's work highlights the need for continuing exploration of resiliency for sexual and gender minorities.

**Theme 7: Building blocks for intimacy.** Intimacy was understood to require a combination of factors that inextricably linked sexual and emotional intimacy. Participants identified emotional intimacy and non-sexual factors as important for sexual intimacy, and strong sexual connection as supportive of emotional intimacy. This finding challenges the previous research that AFAB individuals value emotional intimacy over sexual intimacy (Solomon et al., 2005; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005; Umberson et al, 2015), but supports literature that finds that AFAB individuals require emotional intimacy to experience sexual intimacy (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Impett et al., 2001; Kurdek, 2006; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007) and that AFAB individuals tend to engage in significant amounts of emotional work (Umberson et al., 2015).

While both PO and GNC partner's shared similar values on some aspects of sexual and emotional intimacy, gender non-conforming partners often had slightly different needs for sexual and emotional intimacy than their partners. These findings highlight the importance of

considering gender dynamics in same-sex partnerships, and consequently challenge and add to the previous literature on same-sex relationships.

### **Theme 8: Intimacy**

*Emotional intimacy.* While participants did speak about the importance of closeness, relationship stability, connection to their partner, and communication as important for creating emotional intimacy, they equally spoke about the importance of successfully navigating conflict, interpersonal differences, and independence and autonomy. GNC participants specifically spoke about the need to feel safe expressing their gender differences as vital to emotional intimacy, while PO participants spoke about successfully navigating conflict and struggle as helpful for building emotional intimacy. These two findings challenge previous literature that finds same-sex AFAB partnerships are more typically characterized by few emotional boundaries and high levels of fusion (Krestan & Bepko, 1990; Umberson et al., 2015). Instead the findings support the research that same-sex AFAB couples are skillful at navigating conflict (Mackey et al., 1997) and that committed, long-term same-sex AFAB partnerships are characterized by balancing autonomy and closeness (Beals et al., 2002). It is unclear from these findings whether gender non-conformity in same-sex AFAB partnerships results in higher levels of individuation than other same-sex female relationships. Future comparative research in this area may provide more insight.

*Sexual Intimacy.* GNC participants in this study spoke about the importance of non-sexual factors like physical affection, emotional intimacy, and communication as vital to their experience of sexual intimacy. These findings were consistent with research that found that lesbians value emotional intimacy as an integral aspect of sexual intimacy (Downey & Freidman, 1996; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005). However, GNC participants in the current study were more

likely to speak about sex as requiring other types of intimacy than their PO counterparts. Furthermore, GNC participants also spoke about the need for positive self-perception, relationship stability, and flexible sexual roles to promote the type of sexual connection they sought. These last three qualities, flexible sexual roles, relationship stability, and positive self-perception were important for GNC partners because they directly corrected the negative impact of minority stress caused by their gender-based discrimination. Previous research on same-sex AFAB couples theorizes that lower levels of sexual activity in lesbian relationships are due to internalized homophobia (Blumenstein & Schwartz, 1983; Levitt & Heistand, 2004). Once again, however, this was more frequently named as a problem for GNC partners than it was for PO participants, leading to the possible conclusion that GNC partners are more susceptible because of their gender expression and identity.

Conversely, PO participants spoke about the importance of expansive self-expression for themselves, while also making space for their partners to freely express their gender and voice sexual needs to create strong sexual intimacy. PO participants specifically named being highly attuned to their partner's need for validation and acknowledgement of their gender identity during sex as vital for sexual intimacy, as well. Little is found in the literature on this phenomenon, except in Levitt & Heistand's (2005) research on butch-femme relationships which found that femme women repeatedly described the importance of talking about boundaries, comfort levels, and needs during sex, and were expected to be aware and sensitive to butch vulnerabilities during sex. The dynamic between GNC individuals and their partners has not been previously researched, thus these findings add to the literature and call for a deeper exploration of such sexual dynamics.

**Conclusion.** This research reveals that there are subtle but important gender differences and lived experiences for gender non-conforming AFAB individuals. Some of the relationship dynamics in the partnerships in this study are consistent with more recent research on same-sex relationships that recognizes gender differences in same-sex couples and also recognizes unique factors that may differ from those in heterosexual relationships. This research also challenges stereotypes that same-sex AFAB couples tend towards fusion and merging and that emotional intimacy is valued over sexual intimacy.

Gender non-conforming individuals and their partners engage in a creative and dynamic process of developing and expressing gender. They encourage one another to challenge and push the boundaries of traditional gender roles in lieu of authentic expression, and they value difference and negotiation of conflict and challenge as opportunities for deeper intimate connection. Allyship is also vital to relationship stability for these couples. Fluidity and flexibility during sexual intimacy and interpersonally allows for ever-changing gender dynamics and the safety to explore this process. This research also highlights the impact of minority stress on intimacy in relationships with gender and sexual minorities while illuminating important strategies for resilience. Clearly more research is needed to better understand the intimate lives of gender non-conforming individuals and their partners for optimal provision of sex therapy and couple's therapy. However, this research makes important contributions to the literature particularly with regards to the resiliency strategies of allyship, community building, and positive mutual influence.

## **Implications for Social Work Practice**

While this sample of participants is small, and not fully representative of all gender non-conforming partnerships, many of the findings support contemporary research on sexual and gender minorities while making some important contributions to the literature. Yoo et al., (2014) write that problems with intimacy are one of the primary reasons couples enter therapy. Therefore, it is vital that clinicians better understand how differences in gender expression and identity may affect intimacy in same-sex relationships.

The findings in this study reveal that GNC partners express and experience their gender differently than some of their partners, and they are therefore more susceptible to the effects of normative traumas (Brown, 2003). The effect of these normative traumas cumulatively over time may contribute to more serious symptoms like PTSD (Brown, 2003), or in the case of this study, may impact a couples' ability to maintain and deepen intimacy. The couples in this study were able to navigate conflict to strengthen their relationships, and therefore some of their strategies may serve to support other couples that lack some of these relational skills. Clinicians may also need to consider the possibility of supporting the partner of a GNC individual as well as the GNC client since the partner may become susceptible to the impact of vicarious trauma from minority stress while dealing with her own minority stressors as a queer/lesbian person. Connecting with supportive community was discussed as a protective factor for couples in the study and this is supported by the literature as well. Clinicians may encourage isolated gender non-conforming individuals and their partners to seek supportive local community resources or to explore the potential to connect with supportive online communities.

Couples in this study also discussed the value of being able to express and explore their uniqueness. Individuation and individuality were highly valued qualities that generated a feeling



of freedom and spaciousness which participants felt built and supported intimacy over time. Furthermore, negotiating conflict and overcoming obstacles were also discussed as supportive for building intimacy. While some research suggests that same-sex female relationships tend towards merging and fusion, Gottman et al., (1998) research finds that same-sex couples are better able to safely navigate conflict. Clinicians might encourage gender non-conforming couples to develop skills to create safety around exploring differences and negotiating conflict. PO clients might be encouraged to build alliances with their partner through allyship and validation of their partner's gender fluidity. GNC partners might be encouraged to support their partners by holding space for the PO client to realize the ways in which her gender identity and expression may also not fit into normative gender expectations, or perhaps, that her gender expression can also be seen as an important and dynamic aspect of her identity. Clinicians may consider the positive effects of mutual influence as a possible resiliency strategy.

The attributes of flexibility and fluidity were particularly important for promoting sexual intimacy. Clinicians working with GNC couples might explore how to create safety and opportunities for increased flexibility and fluidity. With GNC clients, clinicians might consider exploring internalized gender bias, body dysmorphia, or mental tension around incongruencies between actual anatomy and perceived anatomy that might negatively impact sexual intimacy. Clinicians might explore ways to help GNC clients integrate their actual physiology with their perceived or longed for anatomy in such a way that honors their expression and identity. It may also be important for clinicians to support PO clients to ensure that there is spaciousness for their sexual needs and self-expression. PO clients may need to explore trust and safety concerns with the GNC partners around language to refer to their partner's gender and anatomy during sex. In particular, as stated by one study participant, this might look like,

...not making assumptions about what they would like, or how they would like me to call different parts of their body, or how they would like me to interact with them and just like, checking in a lot, and not gendering their body, and just appreciating it for what it is (Participant 11, lines 231-235).

This important skill of communication requires safety for both partners to be vulnerable, explore, and to make mistakes. Clinicians might delve into what concerns emerge for both partners when considering having such intimate conversations.

In general, clinicians may find that there are limited resources in the literature to support work with GNC individuals and couples. They may be motivated and inspired to reach out to other clinicians working with these populations, to find more ways to support and advocate for their clients, and to insist upon more research on gender non-conformity or non-binary gender identity and expression.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This section includes the limitations and biases in the study as well as in the literature at large. This section will also include considerations of areas for future research.

**Limitations and biases.** The research question for this study was very broad and allowed for participants to narrate their lived experiences for themselves. However, due to the constraints of time and resources, a more focused research question might have allowed for more specific and concise findings. Language was the primary limiting factor in this study. Because gender non-conforming individuals have many different ways for identifying themselves and engaging with the project of creating and dismantling gender, it was challenging to find inclusive language that honored the diversity of names used by gender non-conforming individuals. Since some recruitment was done through social media, many individuals under the age of 25 were very vocal about their critique and disapproval of the language used in the recruitment flyer. While this study was limited to participants older than 25, inappropriate language could be a limiting

factor, and may have in fact introduced bias into this study. For example, participants typically fell along the lines of a cis-gendered partner with the GNC partner, and this may have skewed the data such that relationship dynamics may have appeared more similar to butch-femme dynamics.

Generalizability cannot be assumed given the small sample size of the study ( $N = 12$ ). An attempt was made to increase generalizability by interviewing individuals from different parts of the United States, but this was a self-selecting group and a snowball sample that may have introduced a level of bias, particularly in regards to educational and economic factors since recruitment was primarily conducted through social media and emails. Another limitation was the inability to speak to both partners in the dyad. While several couple sets were able to participate, this was not the case for all participants.

Many interesting findings emerged from the study; however, participants did not answer the questions regarding how gender non-conformity impacted sexual and emotional intimacy in a direct way. Rather, the entire interview was coded to look for themes about sexual and emotional intimacy since participants addressed these topics at various times during the interview. This may point to bias in the reliability and validity of the research questions. While the questions were designed collaboratively with a clinician working with GNC individuals and their partners, the interview was not tested before recruiting participants. A test of the interview might have provided insight into how to design the research questions to elicit they type of information relevant for the study. Since interviews were conducted individually, research questions regarding intimacy were designed with the comfort of the participants in mind. Consequently, there may have been clearer and more direct ways to get at data on emotional and sexual intimacy that would more comfortably be collected through a survey or open-ended questions.

Again, due to the limitations of time and resources, one individual, the researcher, coded all the data. To reduce bias, having other coders to check for consistency in the findings might have increased reliability of the research. Furthermore, follow-up questions during the interview and interpretation of the data were subject to the bias and subjectivity of this researcher given my own identity factors.

**Future studies.** There were many factors that constrained this research, in particular, time and resources were significant limiting factors. As has been repeatedly stated, more research on gender non-conformity is needed, in general, to understand this growing population. Researchers have also called for greater understanding of sexuality and sexual intimacy in same sex relationships (Iasenza, 2002; Levitt, 2012).

One of the limitations was the inability to interview both sets of the partnership. A future study with more resources might attempt to have both partners participate in order to get a more robust view of the relationship as a whole and to consider the way the couple dynamic affects intimacy. In particular, a longitudinal study of gender non-conforming individuals and their partners might provide more insight into what factors truly support intimacy to and to test the findings in this study. A longitudinal study could also examine which couples stayed together and why. Another test of these findings might be to produce a larger scale quantitative or mixed methods study. Such a study might ask more specific questions about sex and sexuality that were avoided in this study out of consideration for participant comfort.

Some participants in this study spoke about sex roles and longing for male anatomy during sex that as impacting intimacy, topics not previously discussed in the literature. Research to better understand GNC individuals and these experiences might support sex therapists and couples therapist to work with the unique sexual needs of GNC individuals. As mentioned above,

this study largely included GNC individuals with partners that did not identify as GNC. Future research might attempt to make comparisons or explore differential experiences of GNC partnerships in which both identify as GNC, or with transfeminine GNC individuals who are assigned male at birth. Finally, future studies might also consider the ways in which other identity factors such as culture, race, ethnicity, and class might result in different findings. Such research would be useful for making results more generalizable and more universal for clinical practice.

### **Conclusion**

Since non-conforming gender identity and expression is evolving more rapidly, particularly in younger generations, it will be important to continue to follow new trends and emerging conceptualizations of gender and how this in turn affects intimate relationships. Through the lens of minority stress, problems in intimate relationships can be seen as reflections of larger societal and institutional discrimination. Therapeutic work that supports couples and families is laying micro-level foundation to support macro-level social change.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

1. *For the gender non-conforming partner:* Tell me about how you came to identify as...?
2. Please describe your current partner. What are some of her behaviors that you would describe as gendered or gender non-conforming? Is she typical of who you have dated in the past?
3. Please describe your relationship with your current partner. What do you enjoy most about your partner? What is the most challenging about them?
4. *For the gender non-conforming partner:* As a gender-non-conforming person, tell me about an experience in your current relationship that felt validating or your gender identity. And one that felt invalidating? *For the other partner:* Tell me about an experience in your relationship when you felt you validated your partner's gender identity. And one where you felt you invalidated their gender identity? (This response may include a present or past partner.)
5. Have you ever been in a romantic relationship where your partner's gender identity or gender expression was more similar to your own? If so, compared to that previous relationship do you see any unique challenges to being in this present relationship? Any advantages? Can you provide specific examples?
6. Tell me a time when stress over your gender (or your partner's gender) identity interfered with emotional intimacy with your present partner or in a past relationship? How, if at all, did this experience shape you as a couple in general?

7. Tell me about a time when stress over your gender (or your partner's gender) identity interfered with sexual intimacy with your present partner or in a past relationship? How, if at all, did this experience shape you as a couple in general?
8. Have there been any benefits or exciting developments in your sexual intimacy/emotional intimacy because of your identity as gender non-conforming or because you are partnered with someone who identifies as gender non-conforming? Can you provide a specific example?
9. Has being with your current partner shifted how you think about your own gender identity or sexual orientation? If so, how?
10. Do you have any advice to share with new gender non-conforming couples?
11. Is there anything else I have not asked that you would like to tell me?

Appendix B

Initial Questionnaire

**Intimacy & Gender Non-conformity Background Questionnaire**

Interviewee # \_\_\_\_\_ Preferred pronouns: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

What term do you prefer to describe your gender identity? Please circle all that apply:

**Female   Femme   Butch   Androgynous   Two-Spirit   Gender Queer   Gender Non-Conforming**  
**Other term:** \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been with your partner? \_\_\_\_\_ Do you live with your partner? **Y or N**

Are you and your partner legally married? **Y or N** Domestic partners? **Y or N** Other?:

Do you have children with your current partner? **Y or N**

Do you have children from a previous relationship? Circle: **Y or N**

This scale is offered as a way to respect the idea that gender identity, gender expression, sex, and sexual orientation are all separate qualities. Please locate your own identities on these scales, as well as identifying how you believe your partner identifies.

Indicate the location of **your** identities by placing a vertical line on the continuum:

**Sex and Gender Spectrum:**

*Biological Sex (anatomy, chromosomes, hormones)*

Male \_\_\_\_\_ Intersex \_\_\_\_\_ Female

*Gender Identity (psychological, sense of self)*

Man \_\_\_\_\_ Gender queer/Bi-gender \_\_\_\_\_ Woman

*Gender Expression (communication of gender, how you act, dress, and behave)*

Masculine \_\_\_\_\_ Androgynous \_\_\_\_\_ Feminine

*Sexual Orientation*

Attracted to Men \_\_\_\_\_ Bisexual/Queer \_\_\_\_\_ Attracted to Women

Indicate the location of **your partner's** identities by placing a vertical line on the continuum:

**Sex and Gender Spectrum:**

*Biological Sex (anatomy, chromosomes, hormones)*

Male \_\_\_\_\_ Intersex \_\_\_\_\_ Female

*Gender Identity (psychological, sense of self)*

Man \_\_\_\_\_ Gender queer/Bi-gender \_\_\_\_\_ Woman

*Gender Expression (communication of gender, how you act, dress, and behave)*

Masculine \_\_\_\_\_ Androgynous \_\_\_\_\_ Feminine

*Sexual Orientation*

Attracted to Men \_\_\_\_\_ Bisexual/Queer \_\_\_\_\_ Attracted to Women

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## Appendix C

### HSR Approval Letter



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 3, 2016

Denise Goitia

Dear Denise,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**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.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Shannon Audley-Piotrowski, Research Advisor

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Email to Community Organizations and Providers

Dear XXXX:

My name is Denise Goitia and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting original research to fulfill a thesis requirement for my graduate program. This study, titled, Intimacy and Gender Non-Conformity in Same-Sex Female Relationships, will explore experiences of emotional and sexual intimacy in female same-sex relationships between gender non-conforming individuals and their partners. This study will contribute to the field better understand same-sex female relationships and how gender non-conformity affects intimacy in these partnerships. Participants may benefit by gaining new insights into an important aspect of their experience as a gender non-conforming individual in a same-sex relationship, or as the partner of a gender non-conforming individual. This research may also contribute to the provision of ethical and effective mental health care for same sex partnerships.

Participation in this study is confidential and voluntary.

Please post the attached flyer or forward it on to any individuals or couples who may qualify for this study.

Interested participants can contact me directly at [dgoitia@smith.edu](mailto:dgoitia@smith.edu).

**Participants in the study will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire and to participate in an hour-long interview in-person, by phone, or Skype that will be audio recorded.**

**To qualify for the study, participants must:**

- Be biologically assigned female at birth
- Self-identify as gender non-conforming, gender queer, or gender non-binary OR
- Be the partner of an individual that identifies as gender non-conforming gender queer, or gender non-binary and was assigned female at birth
- Be 25-50 years old
- Cohabitate with their partner 3 months or longer, or have been together for a year or longer
- Not have a PTSD diagnosis due to their gender identity/presentation

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the **Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC)**

Thank you for your support!

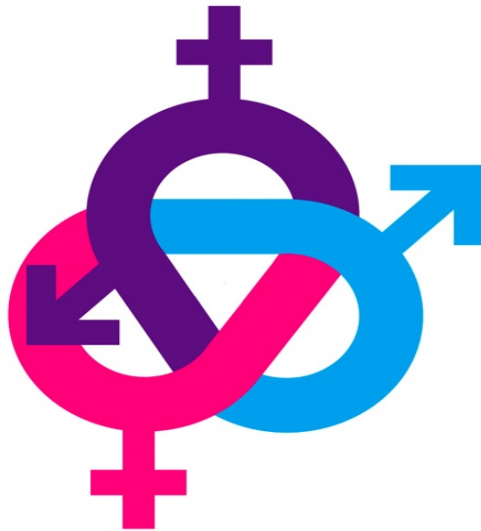
Sincerely,

Denise Goitia, MSW Trainee

## Appendix E

### Recruitment Flyer and Facebook Post

Are You A Gender Non-Conforming Female or Are You Partnered with A Gender Non-Conforming Female in a Committed Relationship?



Are you and your partner happy with your relationship? Do **you** or **your partner** identify as butch, androgynous, gender-queer, two-spirit gender non-conforming, or gender non-binary?

As a Masters-level Social Work graduate student at Smith College for Social Work, I am developing a research project that will focus on the intimate lives of gender non-conforming females and their female partners. I am conducting confidential interviews **with females 25-60, living together for at least 3 months, or in committed partnerships of a year or longer, and who do not have PTSD diagnosis due to a gender non-conforming identity**. Your partner does not have to participate for you to participate. Little is known about intimacy in same-sex female relationships and less is known about gender non-conforming females and their partners.

If you would like to share your story with me, contact me, Denise Goitia, at [dgoitia@smith.edu](mailto:dgoitia@smith.edu) or call (xxx)xxx-xxxx.

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the **Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC)**.

## Appendix F

### Consent Form for Individual Interview Participant



Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA

.....  
Title of Study: Intimacy and Gender Non-Conformity in Same-Sex Female Relationships  
Investigator(s): Denise Goitia, Smith College School for Social Work, xxx-xxx-xxxx  
.....

#### **Introduction**

- You are being asked to be in a research study of the experience of gender non-conforming women and their female partners.
- You were selected as a possible participant because:
  - You are an adult who identifies as gender non-conforming or you are in a relationship with another woman who identifies as gender non-conforming
  - You are between the ages of 25 and 60
  - You are assigned female at birth.
  - You and your female/gender non-conforming partner live together for 3 months or more, or you have been together a year or longer.
  - You do not have a PTSD diagnosis related to your gender non-conforming identity.

We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

#### **Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to learn about the experiences of emotional and sexual intimacy in female same-sex relationships where at least one partner identifies as gender non-conforming.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

#### **Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: interviewed individually by the researcher for one hour and fill out a demographic survey. The interview will be audio recorded.

#### **Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- The study has little foreseeable risk. However, it is possible that you may become stressed speaking about unprocessed feelings regarding your gender identity, gender expression, or your romantic relationship(s). However, you have the right to decline to answer any question, or even end the interview early for any reason.

- As part of your Informed Consent form, all participants will be given a resource referral list offering local resources in your community.

### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

- The benefits of participation may include new insights into an important aspect of your experience in a same-sex relationship as a gender non-conforming individual, or as the partner of a gender non-conforming individual.
- This study will also help inform clinical practitioners better understand same-sex female relationships and how gender non-conformity affects intimacy in these partnerships. This research contributes to the provision of ethical and effective mental health care for same sex partnerships.

### **Confidentiality**

- Your information will be kept confidential. The researcher will be the only person who will know about your participation and the records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. I will be the only one who will have access to the audio recording, with the exception of a potential transcriber, who will sign a confidentiality agreement. Recordings will be destroyed after the mandated three years. They will be permanently deleted from the recording device.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. I will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Payments/gift**

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any point during the interview, or you may choose to withdraw your interview. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 1, 2016. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis and final report.
- Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. Withdrawing from the study will not affect your relationship with the researcher of this study or with Smith College.

### **Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me at [dgoitia@smith.edu](mailto:dgoitia@smith.edu) or (xxx) xxx-xxxx. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

### **Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. You will also be given a list of referrals and access information if you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study

1.) I agree to be audio recorded for this interview.

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

2.) I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped.

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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.....

## Appendix G

### Resource List for Massachusetts

#### **Resource List for Massachusetts**

Professionals and National organizations that offer support for LGBT communities and gender non-conforming individuals and families.

#### **Resource in Massachusetts:**

#### **Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD)**

30 Winter Street, Suite 800, Boston

617-426-1350; [gladlaw@glad.org](mailto:gladlaw@glad.org)

[www.glad.org](http://www.glad.org)

Legal hotline for information and referrals related to HIV and LGBT legal issues:

800-455-GLAD, M-F 1:30-4:30 p.m.

#### **Northampton Sex Therapy Associates**

Offers individual, couples, and family therapy.

40 Main Street Florence, MA

(413) 587-0095

<http://www.northamptonsextherapy.com/>

#### **Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination**

436 Dwight Street, Suite 220, Springfield

413-739-2145; [www.mass.gov/mcad](http://www.mass.gov/mcad)

#### **Massachusetts Lesbian and Gay Bar Association**

Statewide professional association of LGBT lawyers and allies. <http://www.masslgbtqbar.org>

#### **UC Amherst's Stonewall Center**

Serves students in the 5 College System. Also provides online transgender resource guide and other important community resources.

<http://www.umass.edu/stonewall/>

Trans Resource guide: <http://www.umass.edu/stonewall/transresguide/>

#### **General National Resources:**

**Center for Gender Sanity:** [www.gendersanity.com](http://www.gendersanity.com)

**Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals:** [www.lgbtcampus.org](http://www.lgbtcampus.org)

**GLBT National Help Center :** [www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org](http://www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org)

**Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation:** [www.glaad.org](http://www.glaad.org)

**Gay and Lesbian Medical Association:** [www.glma.org](http://www.glma.org)

**Human Rights Campaign:** [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)

**Immigration Equality** : <http://immigrationequality.org>

**Lambda Legal**: [www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)

**Mautner Project of Whitman-Walker Health (support for LBT women addressing serious illness)** :  
[www.whitman-walker.org/mautnerproject](http://www.whitman-walker.org/mautnerproject)

**National Center for Lesbian Rights**: [www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org)

**National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs** : [www.avp.org](http://www.avp.org)

**National LGBTQ Task Force**: [www.thetaskforce.org](http://www.thetaskforce.org)

**Out and Equal Workplace Advocates**: [www.outandequal.org](http://www.outandequal.org)

**The Trevor Project**: [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

**Queer Today**: <http://queertoday.ning.com/>



## Appendix H

### Resources List for California

#### Resource List for California

Professionals and National organizations that offer support for LGBT communities and gender non-conforming individuals and families.

##### **Gender Health Center**

2020 29<sup>th</sup> St. Ste. 201

Sacramento, CA

(916) 455-2391

[www.thegenderhealthcenter.org](http://www.thegenderhealthcenter.org)

##### **Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center**

1625 N. Schrader Rd.

Los Angeles, CA

(323) 993-7400

[www.lalgbtcenter.org](http://www.lalgbtcenter.org)

##### **Lyon-Martin Women's Health Services, San Francisco**

1748 Market Street, Ste. 201

San Francisco, CA

415-565-7667

[www.lyon-martin.org](http://www.lyon-martin.org)

##### **Pacific Center for Human Growth**

2712 Telegraph Ave

Berkeley, CA

(510) 548-8283

[www.pacificcenter.org](http://www.pacificcenter.org)

##### **General National Resources:**

**Center for Gender Sanity:** [www.gendersanity.com](http://www.gendersanity.com)

**Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals:** [www.lgbtcampus.org](http://www.lgbtcampus.org)

**GLBT National Help Center :** [www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org](http://www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org)

**Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation:** [www.glaad.org](http://www.glaad.org)

**Gay and Lesbian Medical Association:** [www.glma.org](http://www.glma.org)

**Human Rights Campaign:** [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)

**Immigration Equality :** <http://immigrationequality.org>

**Lambda Legal:** [www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)

**Mautner Project of Whitman-Walker Health (support for LBT women addressing serious illness) :** [www.whitman-walker.org/mautnerproject](http://www.whitman-walker.org/mautnerproject)

**National Center for Lesbian Rights:** [www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org)

**National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs :** [www.avp.org](http://www.avp.org)

**National LGBTQ Task Force:** [www.thetaskforce.org](http://www.thetaskforce.org)

**Out and Equal Workplace Advocates:** [www.outandequal.org](http://www.outandequal.org)

**The Trevor Project:** [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

**Queer Today:** <http://queertoday.ning.com/>

## Appendix I

### National Resource List

#### **National Resource List**

Professionals and National organizations that offer support for LGBT communities and gender non-conforming individuals and families.

#### **General National Resources:**

**Center for Gender Sanity:** [www.gendersanity.com](http://www.gendersanity.com)

**Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals:** [www.lgbtcampus.org](http://www.lgbtcampus.org)

**GLBT National Help Center :** [www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org](http://www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org)

**Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation:** [www.glaad.org](http://www.glaad.org)

**Gay and Lesbian Medical Association:** [www.glma.org](http://www.glma.org)

**Human Rights Campaign:** [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)

**Immigration Equality :** <http://immigrationequality.org>

**Lambda Legal:** [www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)

**Mautner Project of Whitman-Walker Health (support for LBT women addressing serious illness) :**  
[www.whitman-walker.org/mautnerproject](http://www.whitman-walker.org/mautnerproject)

**National Center for Lesbian Rights:** [www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org)

**National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs :** [www.avp.org](http://www.avp.org)

**National LGBTQ Task Force:** [www.thetaskforce.org](http://www.thetaskforce.org)

**Out and Equal Workplace Advocates:** [www.outandequal.org](http://www.outandequal.org)

**The Trevor Project:** [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

**Queer Today:** <http://queertoday.ning.com/>

## Appendix J

### Assurance of Research Confidentiality Form 2015-2016

This research project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- Non SSW person(s) who will have access to this data for data analysis or research assistance/data collection purposes shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- This transcriptionist should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, *Denise Goitia*, shall be responsible for ensuring that the transcriptionist who works with the project is instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that s/he has signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

#### **PLEDGE**

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, - *Denise Goitia*- for this project. I understand that, according to Federal Regulations, violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of data analysis services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Signature, Transcriptionist

Date

Signature, *Denise Goitia*, Researcher

Date