McCarthy, Thomas: Transmasculine Intimacy and Relationships

Research Proposal

I will attempt to explore how transmasculine (male-to-female/nonbinary/other identities) individuals navigate relationships and intimacy in a small, collegiate atmosphere that is geographically situated in a conservative county. I will explore how transmasculine individuals view and participate in sexual encounters, dating, romance, and similar activities. There has been quite a good deal of research and media attention on transfeminine individuals like Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Catlynn Jenner, but much less on transmasculine individuals. The academic literature, from my initial inquiry, has a similar trend, but there is still a reasonable base of research to consult. I will primarily be exploring this topic through in depth interview with 3-6 transmasculine individuals I know from my work with the Pride Alliance and in my own network. I will use the research as a jumping off point for my questions and framework while also still flexible enough to adapt my approach as lived experiences often do not neatly fit into even well crafted academic frameworks.

In this same line of thinking, the two categories are often viewed as limited and/or for the personal nature of the topic, I may have to make anonymous most/or all of the interviews for either or both of the previously mentioned reasons, but my research and film product can still be successful if this is the case.

Primary Research Questions:

Do you have difficulty finding partners?

Are your potential partners affirming towards your identity, and do these individuals further shape your gender identity?

In what ways does the geography and local community of the college affect your relationships?

Do you find that you can find partners at the local spots college students frequently use?

How does the healthcare system and the larger practices of Gender Reassignment Surgery, if at all, affect your relationships?

Scholarly Background

The category of trans/transgender is complex and not static. Most simply, to be trans is to be not cisgender, or in other words, not in alignment with the gender assigned to you at birth. The very existence of trans individuals challenges cultural norms regarding gender and sexuality. (Gardiner 2013:114; Gay is Rubin 1984:145/154; Theron and Collier 2013). For the latter, models of constructed sexuality (straight/gay/bisexual) become disrupted as biological sex markers such as genitalia or chromosomes are often delinked from gender identity, the gender a person aligns themselves with. Although as Matt and Danny theorized, this is not always the case. Furthermore, Judith Butler's work on the theory, which queer theorists have by-in-large adapted, that gender is something consciously constructed and performed rather than inherent or found in genitals is essential in understanding trans people. Some theorists even go as far as to question the validity of biological sex in the sense that many individuals, such as intersex people, from a biological perspective do not fit neatly into either category (Pollock and Er耶 2012:210; Halberstam 2005). In this same line of thinking, the two categories are often viewed as limited and constructed rather than fixed, and socially influenced rather than objective (Pollock and Er耶 2012:210). Even the language involving trans people, as Kate Nicoletti’s class ethnographic-project on trans-pronouns and respect determined , is complex and evolving, and often challenging to cultural and social norms. Thus, I suspected intimacy and relationships for couples with trans people would be similarly complicated, and for Matt and Danny, this was true sometimes but often was not.

Two main themes in the interview were language and identity, both, in this context, being constantly updated and reworked. Danny, as a transman, struggled to even verbalize his experience “before…16” because of the severe cultural apprehension to non-normative gender identities, an apprehension that is often met with violence (Rubin, 1984: 154; Valentine 2003:29). A key tool in identity for Danny was Facebook, which for him and others is a legitimate and significant extension of identity. Facebook is a critical social space in which people come out, work/rework gender and sexual identity, and potentially experience homophobia/transphobia (Rubin, Jennifer and McClelland 2014). For Danny, Facebook was the space in which gender was tested and performed, to see what works and what does not. The infrastructure of Facebook allows numerous customization options for gender and sexuality, and although this may seem inconsequential to some, the customization significantly affects the ways in which trans people construct their identities. For example, Danny was temporarily able to name himself as Daniel and his "dead-name," his name assigned to him at birth that he no longer identifies with. This process for Danny allowed a gradual coming out and mixing of an old identity with the new. This was authentic for Danny, as he explains, since he experienced a lot of confusion in the process of constructing his masculinity, unlike some trans individuals who always have a strong sense of this (Pollock and Er耶 2012:213). This is also to say that being trans means many different things rather than a fixed set of concepts, even if there is often a common experience among trans people.

Facebook allowed Matt, who identifies as straight and had previously had little to no direct interaction with trans people or lgbt people, to visualize and see how Danny identified himself in terms of gender and with pronouns. Language is essential to respecting and affirming a trans person's gender identity, and the Facebook options allowed Matt to quickly internalize Danny's pronouns without issue. In footage cut from the interview, Danny even explained that Matt was one of Danny's best allies in helping socially establish the right language to use for Danny. Matt identifying as straight further complicates the relationship in many ways. Many trans relationships have to deal with individuals who specifically seek out trans people, often with negative consequences and assumptions, but this was not the case for Matt (Tompkins 2014:766-768). Matt, since he is dating a trans person, has to reconstruct his identity to satisfy his own need to reaffirm his straight identity, according to him. Against the dominant theory about gender from many queer theorists, Matt and Danny simultaneously accept Danny as masculine which also situating him as "biologically female." (This was an interesting aspect of the interview!) Furthermore, Matt does an interesting reading of Plato that ultimately affirms that masculine presentation is the only "real" way to have a preferred social interaction. Although this has sexist implications, it shows the fascinating ways in which trans identities cause renegotiations of norms and expectations about gender. From my own experience being heavily involved in the LGBT community, and my readings of the research, this is atypical. Most trans people require that people around them and their partners situate them firmly as their gender identity they are presenting rather than relying on biological markers. This negotiation for Matt and Danny affects both their gender identities and sexualities. Danny and Matt's relationship conforms to but also challenges assumptions even the literature makes about trans identity.
Reflection on Final Video:

The process of both creating the content of this film and editing it has been fluid. I think this position is appropriate in multiple ways. The topic itself -- trans identity -- requires a position of openness and flexibility to new ways of thinking and conceptualizing gender, even in ways you do not agree with. Rubin's ideal practice of "benign sexual variation" was essential in creating the space in which the interviewees felt space to express themselves (Rubin 1984: 150-153). Trans identity is often misunderstood or, oppressively, interpreted by non-trans people, so it then was essential in my project for me not to restrict the expression of Danny during the interview. Yet, I often had to restrain myself from offering different interpretations or unpacking elements of the way Matt and Danny together or separately constructed gender identity, often in ways that are problematic. For instance, Matt provides a somewhat misogynistic and sexist reading of Plato to assert that only masculine people can interact “without bullshit.” Overall, the intended message of the film was to examine how trans identity mingles with and affects relationships. I also wanted the film to "make sense" to people unfamiliar with the LGBT community, so questions and annotation on screen are designed to do this.

So, I needed to both make the space for Danny and Matt to not be “judged” while also having the room to respond to their claims. I generally took many interpretive and technical cues from Ruby's analysis and overview in "Researching with a Camera: The Anthropologist as Picture Taker." It is especially clear to me now that each choice, even minor, can significantly alter the way the film is received and interpreted. For example, Ruby cites that Foucault sees the body as a site of oppression in terms of gender and sexuality (Ruby 2001: 51). This is especially relevant to my project. Thus, my film favors interpretations and responses to cultural oppression rather than the "microanalytic" elements of a potential anthropological film (Ruby 2001: 51). In my own film, I elected to minimized the movement of the camera itself to emphasize the personal narratives. I also kept myself visually out of the film for the same reason, but my line of questioning and some responses are kept in the film to gesture towards a reflexive presentation of the film.

Both the editing of the film and the interviews themselves attempt to be both fluid and minimally invasive to the perspective of the couple. This is contradictory, but I wanted to keep both in mind in order to rightfully present Danny's lived experience as a trans person. At the same time, I could not help but to characterize the film title with Matt's quote which I think emphasized the uniqueness of the relationship in their own eyes as well as in my own interpretation. I also took inspiration from the non-traditional sequences Colored Girls like the portrait and the paint frame to craft the title sequence to set the stage for how Matt and Danny navigate and construct/reconstruct masculinities. The hyperbolic clip of body builders intentionally juxtaposes Matt's and Danny's differing ideas about what is and is not masculine, theirs being much more permissive. This film is ideal for the message I wanted to get across as well as maintaining respect for Danny and Matt.

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