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Trans Men: Precarious Manhood and the Paradox of Hegemonic Masculinity

by

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Abstract

This thesis utilizes existing literature on gender essentialism, gender socialization, precarious manhood theory, and transphobic discrimination in order to examine the ways in which transgender men conceptualize their internal male identity and respond to threats like discrimination and violence. Transgender men have an essential male identity that does not depend on their sense of masculinity and develops during childhood while they are living in a body considered biologically female. Their experience of early gender socialization allows them to understand masculinity and femininity as concepts that exist in different levels within us all, and does not rely on hegemonic masculine ideals like anti-femininity and aggression. In fact, transgender men are very critical of hegemonic masculinity due to their early gender socializations. Paradoxically, these men also act in ways that conform to hegemonic masculinity as a method of protection against threats of transphobia and homophobia. These findings can aid healthcare professionals in their work with trans men to promote more inclusive and informed care. Transgender men's separation of manhood and masculinity also has interesting implications for masculinity studies and the precarious nature of manhood for cisgender men.

Trans Men: Precarious Manhood and the Paradox of Hegemonic Masculinity

Introduction:

The transgender (trans) community is an under researched and underrepresented group of people that have complex identities. Trans persons have a gender identity that does not match with their birth sex (GLAAD, 2011), which means that there are multiple different identities that fall under the transgender umbrella. A majority of the previous research on the transgender community has attempted to examine the entire group, which often means combining the perspectives of those with vastly different experiences and backgrounds. While grouping transgender identities together in research can have its benefits, an unintended consequence is that some niche identity experiences within the trans community are overlooked. Transgender men, sometimes referred to as FTM's (female to male) were born in a biologically female body but have an internal male identity (GLAAD, 2011). These men are particularly underrepresented in trans identity literature and in masculinity studies (Haak, 2014; Seamont, 2018; Vetger, 2013).

Most research on gender and masculinity has been conducted through a cisnormative and binary lens that assumes a person is either male or female, and identifies with a gender that matches their birth sex. This assumption has led to the stigmatization and medicalization of any identities that do not fit that mold (Gardiner, 2013), and we can clearly see this in the way that gender deviance is punished in our society (Miller & Grollman, 2015; West & Zimmerman, 1978). Boys are criticized for acting in an *effeminate* way if they cry, girls are discouraged from engaging in activities that are *manly*, and while times are surely changing (Vandello & Bosson, 2013), binary gender norms still play a huge role in our society. It has also contributed to a lack of

research on transgender identities, particularly in regard to the masculinity of transgender men (Haak, 2014; Seamont, 2018). Trans men have a unique perspective of masculinity as it relates to maleness (Green, 2005; Vetger, 2013), which I believe can have interesting and helpful implications for masculinity studies and cisgender (cis) men in particular. Since masculinity studies has been largely focused on the experiences of cis men, considering the experiences of trans men might provide some valuable insight into the true nature of manhood and what it means to have a male identity.

Present Aims

In this thesis I use the concepts of gender essentialism, gender socialization, hegemonic masculinity, and precarious manhood theory in order to explain the complex conceptualizations that FTM men have in regard to their male identity, sense of masculinity, and interactive gender performance. In my literature research I found that trans men have an intrinsic sense of male identity that aligns with some newer gender essentialist theories (Rubin, 2003; Vidal-Ortiz, 2005), while also identifying the importance of their early gender socialization as “girls” in developing their sense of “trans” masculinity (Haak, 2014) as separate from traditional hegemonic masculinity (Green, 2005; Lorber, 1994; Seamont, 2018). This separation of male identity and masculinity that trans men identify within themselves can have helpful implications for the future of masculinity studies and precarious manhood theory in particular. Trans men commonly engage in methods of physical transition and masculine gender performances in an attempt to (1) align their internal sense of maleness with their external physical features/body, and (2) to portray their internal identity to others by “doing” gender in a way that others can recognize as male (Van de Grift et al., 2016; Vetger 2013; Levitt &

Ippolito, 2014ab). Transphobic discrimination against those who are recognizable as gender nonconforming is rampant (Miller & Grollman, 2015). According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey or NTDS, sixty-three percent of trans people in the US reported experiencing a serious instance of discrimination due to their transgender identity: this included but was not limited to job loss, eviction, verbal, physical, and sexual assault (Grant et al., 2011). In response to threats of discrimination, trans men conform to hegemonic masculinity as a method of self-protection (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014ab; Vetger, 2013). I have found that paradoxically, trans men conform to hegemonic masculinity as a way to protect themselves against violence while continuing to criticize and reject it. This information has important implications for professionals that work with transgender men, and their unique perspectives of masculinity and maleness may be beneficial for future directions of masculinity studies.

Methods

In my search for literature I first used the Portland State University (PSU) library website search engine, and searched exclusively for peer-reviewed articles. I used keywords like “masculinity” and “hegemonic masculinity”, but quickly discovered the clear lack of literature on transgender identities. I then searched words like “trans” and “transgender”, but found only a small amount of literature focused on trans men. I changed my keywords to include “trans men”, “trans FTM”, “FTM”, and “Trans Masculinity” so that I could see studies exclusively relating to transgender men and trans masculinity. I found other literature reviews (Gardiner, 2013; Stotzer, 2009) that I could go through the citations of in order to find more relevant articles. I also ended up using Google Scholar with similar keywords and found a thesis and dissertation (Haak, 2014; Seamont, 2018), both on transgender masculinity, that

were exceptionally helpful in the development of my own thesis. Most of the literature I discuss was found by going through the citations of the articles on the PSU library website. Additionally, after this paper was first reviewed, I obtained two more references from my advisor, Dr. Eric Mankowski (Schilt, 2006; Vandello & Bosson, 2013).

Literature Review

Defining Concepts

Sex and gender are colloquially used as interchangeable terms, but scholars that study gender and sexuality have identified some key differences that I find relevant to use here. Sex refers to a biological categorization (Vetger, 2013) based on physical attributes (genitalia) and chromosomes, while gender is more of a social category that we as a society use to draw distinctions among our population and categorize certain behaviors as either masculine or feminine (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Sex and gender is not the same thing, but in Western society a gender identification that matches your birth sex would be considered normative. When a person is assigned a sex at birth it is assumed that they will grow up and feel completely comfortable with that identification. This assumption is cisnormative because it does not include any alternative explanation for someone with an identity that is does not match that assigned sex. Any differing identification, then, would be and has been considered *abnormal*. Anyone who does not identify with a gender that matches their birth sex would fit this classification. For example, a person that was assigned female at birth but who identifies and lives his life as a man would be a challenge to that cisnormative binary, as well as someone who does not identify with any binary gender classification.

Transgender is a popular umbrella term that describes anyone that does not identify with their birth sex (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014b). The term *transsexual* used to refer to those who had begun to transition medically with the use of hormones or surgeries, but its use as a label has lost some popularity due to its origins in the medical and psychoanalytic fields (Haak, 2014; Moleiro, 2015). It is still used as a descriptor among some who have medically/surgically transitioned but it is certainly less popular as an identity term (GLAAD, 2011). For the purposes of this paper I will be referring to transsexual and transgender persons with the abbreviation trans, as that is commonly used shorthand of transgender (Haak, 2014). The term “cisgender” or “cis” is used to refer to people whose gender identity and birth sex assignment match with each other (GLAAD, 2011). Trans men are born in biologically female bodies, and have a gender identity that aligns more with men than with women. In some literature trans men are discussed alongside other female born cross-dressers, tomboys, or ‘butch’ lesbians (Halberstam, 1998), but for the purposes of this thesis I will be examining those who have a clear male identity despite being born and socialized in a female body.

Gender Essentialism

Trans men have a sense of detachment between their birth sex and gender identity, and describe being “born in the wrong body” (Gardiner, 2013; Halberstam, 1998), which they often attempt to “fix” through medical interventions and a shifting gender presentation. I hesitate to use language like “fix” or “cure” due to the prevalence of older literature pathologizing the “transsexual experience” (Chiland, 2003) and utilizing psychoanalytical theories that attempted to find a “cure” for trans people (Gardiner, 2013). This point of view has its roots in gender essentialism, or the belief that

men and women have “innate traits” that can be used to distinguish between them (Haak, 2014). This essentialist perspective is supported and maintained through the use of dichotomous gender classifications (woman/female and man/male) that reinforce the gender binary and cisnormative perspectives that label gender deviance as an indication of mental illness (Gottzén & Straube, 2016). Through this essentialist viewpoint, men are masculine because they are male and women are feminine because they are female; these “innate traits” differ due to inherent biological differences (Haak, 2014).

Scholars like Henry Rubin (2003) and Sandoval Vidal-Ortiz (2005) have maintained that despite its transphobic roots, gender essentialism is the best theory to use when describing trans identities. The consistent finding that trans men are “betrayed by their bodies” (Rubin, 2003) alludes to a view of gender that is fundamentally essentialist. Moving away from the traditional form of gender essentialism that pathologizes trans people as having a mental illness (Chiland, 2003), Rubin (2003) and Vidal-Ortiz (2005) use first hand accounts by trans men to explain that essentialist ideas of gender are often crucial to the formation of a trans identity. Their interviewees describe a clear internal male identity as well as expectations from society to look and behave in a way that fits into the pre-existing gender binary. While trans men may have essentialist ideas about their male identity, they do not exist in a vacuum and are still subjected to societies ideas about gender binary and norms. It would be inaccurate to claim that trans men are only influenced by essentialist ideas rooted in biology when their sex classification resulted in them being socialized as girls (Seamont, 2018).

Gender Socialization

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender emerges through interactions and various social situations. From birth, we are organized into a certain sex category that then determines what gender norms will be placed upon us. We “do” gender everyday with every interaction (Butler, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In Western society our notions of sex and gender continue to exist in a binary system of two recognized genders and sex categories (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Lorber, 2011), despite the growing number of researchers advocating for more diverse classifications (Butler, 1988; Haak, 2014). Even though sex and gender are fundamentally different concepts, in a cis and heteronormative society it is assumed that a child’s gender will match their sex, so children are socialized differently depending on those assigned sex categories (Schilt, 2006). While children are born with a sex category attached to them based on biological characteristics, they do not come gendered and “have to be taught to be masculine or feminine” (Lorber, 1994). This idea that gender is taught and learned through early interactions is referred to as gender socialization (Lorber, 1994).

Trans Voices: Literature about Trans Men

Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2005) interviewed George, a 50-year-old “white, heterosexual, man” that has been totally medically and socially transitioned for over a decade. George did not identify himself as transgender or transsexual, instead he considered “transsexualism” to be “transitional” and “not a permanent stage” (pg. 202). George was comfortable with the term man because he considered himself to have been a man “all along” (pg. 203). Not all trans men are comfortable with this label, however. Some trans men, including some of those interviewed by Vidal-Ortiz (2005) have been

hesitant to use the term “man” as a personal descriptor because they associate it with negative and unhealthy aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Seamont, 2018).

Dietert and Dentice (2013) studied trans men’s early childhood experience through interviews and found that all of them reported pressure “from family and peers” to “fit into” the “female gender category” (pg. 33). Early gender socializations encourage boys to be “hard, aggressive, and masculine”, and in contrast, girls to be “soft, passive, and feminine” (pg. 39). The trans men in this study reported that because they were born in female bodies they were expected to act in feminine ways (e.g. wearing dresses), and discouraged when they acted in ways that were not aligned with feminine traits (pg. 40). These early reinforcements of a masculine/feminine gender binary system influence how trans men understand their masculinity as different to cis men who were socialized as boys. This is the central focus of Morgan Seamont’s (2018) graduate thesis.

Seamont (2018) attempted to understand how their early socialization as girls influenced their perspectives of masculinity in trans men. She developed a model of “transgender positionality” that takes into account the early gender socializations of trans men as “females”, as well as their current interactions as men (pg. 49). In her research, trans men have identified “trans” masculinity as separate from hegemonic masculinity (pg. 51). This notion builds off of Vidal-Ortiz’s work, where he mentioned that some trans men hesitate to call themselves men for the same reason (2005). Many trans men are rejecting identification with hegemonic masculinity due to its toxicity and misogynistic roots (Seamont, 2018, pg. 52). They have experienced living as “one gender and then another” (pg. 51), which enables them to develop a perspective of masculinity that differs from cisgender men.

Some trans men are also able to clearly see gender inequality in their experiences and interactions in the workplace. Kristin Schilt (2006) interviewed transgender men about their career environment experiences and found that the experience of being socially regarded as women in the workplace prior to coming out gave these men a perspective of masculinity that is intimately connected to sexism and gender inequality. Schilt used Patricia Hill Collin's (1986) concept of an "outsider-within" perspective to explain that trans men have intimate knowledge about gender inequality from their pre-transition interactions while also gaining benefits and knowledge about the dominant group because of their current identity as men. In the study, Schilt (2006) found that some trans men reported gaining more authority, credibility, and opportunities at work after their transition. Interestingly, factors like "the age of transition, appearance, and type of occupation" (pg. 474) all influenced whether or not they reported obtaining benefits after transition. Trans men who transitioned earlier in life, worked in jobs that were not stereotypically "blue-collar" careers, and those who physically looked more gender neutral did not report gleaning the same type of benefits (pg. 474). This ability to clearly see the differences in their treatment pre vs. post transition make trans men much more likely to understand manhood and masculinity as intimately connected to gender inequality. This is part of what motivates many of them to reject or at least be critical of masculinity and the label of *man*.

Trans Masculinity: Better Men?

The argument that trans masculinity reflects a rejection of the hegemonic ideal is useful in explaining the differences between cis and trans people's perspectives of their own manhood. Some scholars have argued that trans men, because they are born and socialized in biologically female bodies, make "better" men (Gardiner, 2013; Halberstam,

1998). This is to say that trans men have a different and healthier relationship to their sense of masculinity than cis men, who are heavily influenced in their youth by expectations of hegemonic masculinity and precarious manhood theory. One of the best examples of this, provided by Seamont (2018) in her interviews with a trans man named Scout, is the claim that trans masculinity is the “carrying through of those feminine places” that are learned as a child “being socialized as a woman”. Scout classified his experience of masculinity as “gentler”, and including more “physical affection and sensitivity” than cis men (pg. 54).

While I hesitate to use the phrase *better*, because it can lead to some sense of competition, I do acknowledge that trans men have a deeper and often more personal understanding of concepts like gender inequality from their time being socially treated and perceived as women (Schilt, 2006). FTM’s are able to clearly see manhood as a power structure that helps maintain dominance over women in nearly all aspects of society (Gardiner, 2013; Seamont, 2018). It is their rejection of the “behaviors and attitudes” that encourage hyper masculinity and patriarchy (Seamont, 2018) that result in some theorists claiming trans men make *better* men.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Before moving on to more in-depth discussions of trans identity and trans masculinity, it is necessary to define what exactly hegemonic masculinity is. According to masculinity researchers Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity is the embodiment of the most “honored way of being a man”. This masculinity type is not the most common but it is popularly regarded as an ideal: all other men “position themselves in relation to it” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This means that even though the hegemonic

masculine ideal is not realistically attainable for most men, they still behave in ways that conform to these norms. These behaviors include the suppression of any emotion that is not angry or aggressive and encouraging competition, dominance, success, and power (Brannon, 1976; Mankowski & Maton, 2010). Anti-femininity and homophobic attitudes “form the core” of what it means to be traditionally masculine, meaning that hegemonic masculinity encourages men and boys to distance themselves from anything that is associated with women and femininity (Brannon, 1976; Mankowski & Maton, 2010). A strict adherence to these norms has been shown to have incredibly negative impacts on men’s health (Mahalik et al., 2007; Mankowski & Maton, 2010) and is associated with an increase in risky behaviors like “aggression and financial risk” as well as elevated levels of anxiety and stress (Vandello & Bosson, 2013).

Precarious Manhood Theory

Joseph Vandello and Jennifer K Bosson’s (2013) synthesis of the literature on precarious manhood theory, and how it encourages gender threat among men, is particularly relevant in this discussion about hegemonic masculinity. Manhood is often regarded as an achieved status that is difficult to obtain (“hard won”) and simultaneously precarious to hold (“easily lost”) (pg. 103). When surveying young, largely white, middle class men, participants reported the transition from boyhood to manhood to be largely attributed to social rather than biological factors (pg. 103). They also surveyed the same population by asking participants to “interpret the meaning” of the phrase “I used to be a man [woman]. Now I am no longer a man [woman].” (pg. 103) (This statement was not meant to refer to trans persons). Men attributed social causes like “job loss” to the above statement about lost manhood, while lost womanhood was much harder to define and

often attributed to physical factors like “growing old” (pg. 103). Manhood then, is determined by how traditionally masculine someone acts in social situations, more so than womanhood, which is considered to be determined more by biological factors out of their control.

Male gender threat, or “events that call manhood into question”, has been linked with increased anxiety and stress (Vandello & Bosson, 2013, pg. 104). Additionally, men who experienced gender threat were much more likely to then engage in more aggressive and financially risky behavior: in two experiments, men who were asked to braid hair and wear floral scented hand lotion were then more likely to punch a punching bag with greater force or place more expensive bets while gambling, when compared to groups of men who engaged in a “rope braiding” activity or who were asked to demonstrate the use of a power drill (pg. 105). Since anti-femininity is such a central feature of manhood/hegemonic masculinity, engaging in any activity or behavior that is considered stereotypically feminine puts men at risk of having their manhood lost (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) and being labeled as homosexual (Kimmel, 1987), which is a very real fear for many straight cisgender men. It is important to keep in mind that a strong identification with hegemonic masculinity resulting in precarious manhood is a cycle created and maintained by the very men who are suffering because of it. Boys are shamed from an early age for engaging in any effeminate behavior by other boys as well as the male role models in their lives, which then morphs into a fear of femininity and vulnerability because they do not want to have their *man card* lost. This encourages a self-destructive process of aggression, dominance, and risky behavior in an effort to *prove* their manliness to other men. The literature on precarious manhood theory and

hegemonic masculinity has, up until this point, only focused on the experiences of cis men (Brannon, 1976; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2007; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). I believe that the integration of trans men's perspectives might prove useful insight on how to begin dismantling the looming figure that is hegemonic masculinity and allow all men to begin to develop a healthier male identity that is not dependent on rigid gender expectations.

Internal Identity: Notions of Maleness and Masculinity

Studies centered on transgender men have all reported the existence of a separate internal male identity that is independent from gendered notions of masculinity and femininity (Green, 2005; Haak, 2014; Vetger, 2013). The trans men in Jamison Green's (2005) study indicated that maleness and masculinity were not the same thing, and that the "literature makes an assumption" (pg. 295) that the only bodies that express masculinity are male ones. This is obviously not the case for trans men, who experience feelings of maleness and masculinity even when they are being socialized as women in female bodies (Seamont, 2018). This internal feeling of maleness is present before any consumption of hormones or surgical interventions, and results in trans men identifying the concepts of "maleness" and "masculinity" as fundamentally different (Green, 2005, pg. 295). The trans men in Green's study reported understanding their masculinity through internal and external means: people told them they were "masculine", and they also "felt different from girls or women" (pg. 296).

Haak (2014) also argued that "maleness does not equal masculinity" (pg. 30). Her participants understood maleness as referring to "biology or sex" while masculinity had to do with "characteristics" that anyone could display: like "assertiveness, being

outgoing, and having confidence” (pg. 31). The most important takeaway from Haak (2014) is that while anyone can be masculine, maleness refers to the desire for traits that a male body possesses. Herein lies the key difference between maleness and masculinity that often gets ignored. Masculinity often is used interchangeably with maleness and manhood, but trans men identify them as representing two distinct things. Adding to the differentiation between the concepts of maleness and masculinity, Vanessa Vetger (2013) found that a strong identification with masculinity was not seen as crucial to participant’s gender identity. Participants in Vetger’s (2013) study identified that masculinity and femininity existed varying degrees within everyone. They felt as though they could “embrace their femininity” (pg. 101) without sacrificing their male identity, because their perception of maleness was not dependent on how masculine they considered themselves to be. This is a stark contrast to the anti-femininity attitudes that are prevalent in cis men (Kimmel, 1997).

This differentiation between maleness and masculinity can provide some insight into where gender essentialist and socialization theories overlap. The claim that children are born sexed but not gendered (Lorber, 2011) does not go against the essentialist theories that Rubin (2003) and Vidal-Ortiz (2005) have described; the presence of an internal sense of maleness in trans men would constitute a sex category classification (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Vetger (2013) provided a clear example of this essential male identity in Jack, an FTM participant that described “feeling like a man” (pg. 97) on the inside while having to deal with being perceived and recognized as female in every interaction. I am not here to argue whether or not trans men are truly males born into female bodies; I find those arguments dismissive of the numerous accounts of trans

men's personal experience with their identity. Instead I want to encourage the inclusion of trans experiences within the discourse of masculinity studies. The different conceptualizations of trans men's masculinity are understudied and can be an interesting addition to the literature.

The internal male identity that I have described in this section often leads to trans men becoming targets for discrimination and violence. Before coming out, FTM's describe being shamed for sitting in a "masculine" way, being called homophobic slurs, and being isolated from their peers due to gender deviant behavior (Haak, 2014; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014b; Seamont, 2018). After coming out, transgender people still face discriminatory interactions and violence at extremely high rates (Grant et al., 2011). While the entire trans community experiences transphobia, trans men have particularly interesting strategies of protection that rely on conformity to hegemonic masculinity, which I will discuss below.

Transphobic Discrimination

Transgender people in the United States are at a substantial risk for experiencing physical, sexual, and verbal harassment on the basis of their gender nonconformity (Grant et al., 2011; Stozer, 2009; Miller & Grollman, 2015). This discrimination happens at home (Stozer, 2009), in schools (Day et al., 2018), at work (Dispenza et al., 2012), and in healthcare settings (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Trans people report feeling unsafe in public due to their identity and exhibit a reluctance to report any incidents of harassment or violence to the police (Stozer, 2009).

Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) (Grant et al., 2011) is the largest comprehensive survey on experiences of

transgender and gender non-conforming discrimination. The data includes 6,456 valid responses from “all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands” (pg. 12). A majority of “sixty-three percent (63%)” of respondents reported at least one major instance of transphobic discrimination that would have a “major impact on ones quality of life” (pg. 10); this means instances of physical/sexual assault, bullying/harassment, eviction, homelessness, denial of medical services, loss of job, or incarceration.

In the Home

Family rejection is common for those who come out as trans, with forty percent (40%) of respondents in the NTDS reporting that their parents or other family members refuse to speak to them on the basis of their gender identity (pg. 94). Nineteen percent (19%) of all respondents and fifteen percent (15%) of FTM identified persons reported experiencing instances of domestic violence from family due to their gender identity (pg. 100). Altogether, fifty-seven (57%) of respondents faced some type of rejection from their family after coming out (pg. 101). Alarming, those who experienced violence in the home after coming out were associated with higher rates of attempted suicide, drug/alcohol abuse, HIV+ status, homelessness, incarceration, and engagement in “underground economy” or untaxed economic activity (pg. 102).

At School

According to the NTDS, out of 1,876 respondents that reported a trans identity while in K-12 schools, an overwhelming seventy-eight percent (78%) experienced harassment from students, teachers, or other staff (Grant et al., 2011, pg. 36). Splitting

this data up, seventy-six percent (76%) reported experiences of bullying, and thirty-five percent (35%) reported being physically assaulted by peers. Eighty-two percent (82%) of FTM respondents reported experiencing harassment and bullying from peers (pg. 37). When it comes to discrimination from teachers and staff, thirty-one percent (31%) of respondents reported bullying/harassment, five percent (5%) experienced physical assaults, and three percent (3%) experienced sexual assault (pg. 38). Fifteen percent (15%) of participants in the NTDS (including both k-12 and post high school education) dropped out of school due to harassment (pg. 40). Of those dropouts, nearly half experienced homelessness (pg. 44). Those who experienced harassment and assault were much more likely to attempt suicide and engage in risky behaviors like smoking and alcohol abuse (pg. 44-45). A study conducted by Jack K. Day and Colleagues (2018) also found that trans kids encounter hostile experiences at school at a much higher rate than their cis peers. They are more likely to report feeling unsafe, experience harassment and bullying, and have lower grades (Day et al., 2018). This finding is consistent with NTDS reports.

At Work

Transgender men in the workplace are subject to discrimination on the basis of their gender identity (Dispenza et al., 2012). These men have reported being fired, denied employment opportunities, and experiences of harassment on the basis of their transgender identity (pg. 76). They reported experiences of “microaggressions” that form into inappropriate lines of questioning about participants bodies and identity (pg. 72). Half of respondents in the NTDS reported experiencing harassment in the workplace, seven percent (7%) reported incidents of physical violence, and six percent (6%) reported

sexual assault (Grant et al., 2011, pg. 58-59). Forty-five percent (45%) of participants were called the wrong pronouns “repeatedly and on purpose”, and forty-one percent (41%) of trans people were subjected to inappropriate questions about their bodies and transition status (pg. 61).

We know from Schilt’s (2006) study that trans men who pass as cisgender in the workplace gain more authority and respect in their interactions. These benefits did not apply to all the men in her study, suggesting that there are stipulations to obtaining better workplace treatment. Trans men that were not white, short, not on hormones, or who looked young did not report a significant increase in respect or recognition after transitioning, and were often misgendered (pg. 484). This reinforces the idea that trans men who do not fit the hegemonic masculine ideal are not treated like other cis men. This exposes them to more instances of gender discrimination (as they are being perceived and treated similarly to their cis women coworkers) as well as transphobic and homophobic attitudes.

In Healthcare Settings

Healthcare spaces are also unsafe for a lot of trans people. According to the NTDS, nineteen percent (19%) of all respondents and twenty percent (20%) of transgender men had experiences with being completely denied medical services because of their trans identity (pg. 73). Twenty-eight percent (28%) of participants reported being verbally harassed in doctor’s offices, and two percent (2%) were physically attacked (pg. 74). Rodriguez and colleagues (2018) found that persons who were “recognized as transgender” perceived a higher rate of discrimination in healthcare. This suggests that

the ability to be recognized as trans or gender nonconforming serves as a “basis for discrimination” (pg. 981). Many trans people also reported healthcare providers being ignorant of trans issues and trans affirming care, which resulted in physicians refusing to treat some trans patients, or providing unhelpful care (Grant et al., 2011).

Gender Nonconformity as a Predictive Variable

This data from the NTDS and other various sources clearly demonstrate that discrimination against transgender people is present everywhere in our society and follows trans people through their lifetime. They are at a heightened risk for experiences of physical, sexual, and verbal assaults in every aspect of their life (Grant et al., 2011). A recurring finding in literature seems to be that gender nonconformity, or being “recognizable as transgender” (Rodriguez et al., 2018) increases experiences of transphobic discrimination (Miller & Grollman, 2015; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014a).

Miller and Grollman (2015) found a positive association between gender nonconformity and incidents of “major day-to-day discriminatory treatment” of trans people (pg. 826). Trans people who lived completely as their “desired gender” (pg. 826) and trans people who have medically transitioned reported the most frequent instances of transphobic discrimination. Trans people that conformed to gender norms had less experiences of transphobia than those who expressed their gender in non-conformative ways (pg. 827). This finding backs up claims by West and Zimmerman (1987), and Lorber (1994) that binary systems of gender punish those who do not conform. In a binary system there are right and wrong ways of “doing” gender (Miller & Grollman, 2015), which are challenged by the existence of trans and nonconforming identities.

Gender Expression

Body & Performance

Trans men often undergo a physical transition in an attempt to align internal feelings of maleness with external gendered constructs of a masculine body (Van de Grift et al., 2016). They often report feeling uncomfortable with their secondary sex characteristics, particularly with their “hip and chest regions” (Van de Grift et al., 2016), and some seek to remedy this through the use of hormones and/or surgical interventions. While the trans men in Haak’s (2014) study did not consider any particular physical characteristics “necessary” in order to “be a man”, they all identified features that would make them feel “complete” (pg. 31). These features included things like facial hair, more muscle, and male genitalia (pg. 32). These physical features are often considered ideal for many trans men because they help align their internal male identity with their actual body. Additionally, Watt and Colleagues (2018) found that trans men with a more masculine (lower pitched) voice had higher rates of “life satisfaction, self-esteem... and less anxiety and depression” (pg. 968). This was attributed to congruence between the “gendered aspects of their voices” and their internal identity (pg. 968). Trans men physically transition in order to promote congruence between their internal identity and body, and to make their internal male identity clear in their everyday social interactions. Medical transition is not necessary for a transgender identity, but many trans people consider it personally necessary in order to develop a positive self-identification (Van de Grift et al., 2016).

While medical interventions are common for trans men, Van de Grift and colleagues (2016) concluded that socially transitioning beforehand proved to be more

impactful in body satisfaction. They found that “living in the social role” of ones “experienced gender” contributes to higher levels of body satisfaction (pg. 581) than just physical transition alone. The social roles being referred to here are the various gender norms and expectations placed on men and women in our society. For example, interviewees in Haak’s (2014) study identified that wearing clothes that were looser fitting and wearing their hair short were the most important methods of socially passing as male for FTM’s (pg. 33). Trans men want their internal male identity to be acknowledged and accepted in their social interactions, and this not only manifests itself through attempts of physical transition, but also through gendered performances of the body. Trans men are hyper aware of the behaviors of cis men (e.g. sitting with legs open, slouching, walking with less hip movement), and attempt to copy these behaviors in order to be gendered correctly in social situations (Vetger, 2013). These performances were found to balance between authentic self-identification and conformity to hegemonic masculine norms as a strategy of protection.

Masculine Compensatory Behavior as Protection

Trans men have been found in multiple studies (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014ab; Miller & Grollman, 2015) to engage in what Vetger (2014) described as “masculine compensatory behaviors”. These behaviors included intentionally deepening their voice, changing their way of walking (described as a “masculine gait”), and a rejection of femininity (pg. 101). Vetger’s (2014) study identified a higher prevalence of compensatory behaviors at the beginning of transition, before lessening as trans men became more comfortable with their masculine gender presentation. As they did, their compensatory behavior decreased because they no longer felt that they were in danger of

being mislabeled as women. Participants then reported that they did not consider their level of femininity to compromise their sense of masculinity (Vetger, 2013).

However, trans men do not just engage in these masculine compensatory behaviors at the beginning of their transition. In fact, they actively and consistently utilize them as a way to protect against homophobic and transphobic threats. As we know from NTDS (2011) data, transgender people are one of the groups most likely to experience discrimination and violence due to their gender identity. Gender nonconformity is a strong predictor of discriminatory experiences (Miller & Grollman, 2015), so trans men often conform to traditional masculine norms in order to align with societies gender expectations and prevent strangers from identifying them as transgender.

In their study on the identity development of transgender youth, Levitt and Ippolito (2014b) identified a clear fear of being identified as visibly gender non-conforming or trans in most of their participants. Being identified as trans had an isolating effect that encouraged both homophobic and transphobic discriminatory experiences. Homophobia was often “conflated” with gender nonconformity, causing participants to experience both (pg. 1738). This means that trans men who are visibly gender non-conforming are at risk for both homophobic and transphobic violence.

Levitt and Ippolito’s (2014a) study described the experience of trans people navigating these threats and stressors and identified the same use of masculine compensatory behaviors as a way to protect themselves from these threats. Participants described the utilization of constant behavior monitoring determined by their observations of social interactions involving cis men, in order to lessen the “possibility of

rejection or violence from others” (pg. 52). They identified gendered mannerisms and changed their behavior accordingly to align with those of cisgendered men, in an attempt to be perceived as cis and avoid subsequent discrimination. An important note that Levitt and Ippolito (2014a) included was that this regulatory ability did not mean trans people “internalized genderism”, but rather indicated that they were able to actively “manipulate gendered power dynamics” in order to protect themselves (pg. 52-53). Trans men’s ability to observe and regulate gendered behaviors does not tell us anything about their inherent internal male identity, but it does tell us that they are deeply aware of the privilege that comes with being perceived as cisgender and are able to regulate their gender expression in order to gain some of that privilege for themselves. This cisgender privilege allows trans men to avoid some of the violence, homophobic, and transphobic discrimination that comes with being visibly trans or gender-nonconforming (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014a; Miller & Grollman, 2015). It is a method of “survival” (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014a, pg. 52) that stems from previous discriminatory and violent experiences.

Positionality

Before concluding, I find it necessary to identify how my personal identity and gender experience impacts the perspective that I take in this thesis. I came out to my family and friends as transgender when I was 15, and began socially and medically transitioning immediately after. Due to my identity I have always been interested in the conceptualizations that transgender men have about their maleness and masculinity. There is a clear lack of literature centered on the transgender experience, and even less studies about masculinity that included trans men. It was this noticeable gap and my personal interest that led me to this topic. My personal lived experience as a trans man can give me a type of insight on the topic

that cisgender scholars might lack. I have been consistently taking testosterone for nearly 7 years, and have undergone surgical procedures in order to promote congruency between my internal male identity and external body. I grew up being socialized as a female, and living in a body that I felt severely disconnected to. I resonated with studies like Green (2005), Haak (2014), and Seamont's (2018) that identified masculinity as separate from maleness, as the participants in their studies vocalized an internal feeling that I could never quite put into words.

I intimately understand the gender socializations that young trans men go through because I experienced the same thing as a child. I understand the raw and terrifying feelings that are caused from threats of discrimination, and I want to make it clear that trans men engage in masculine compensatory behaviors as a way to ensure their safety in social situations. It is one thing to read data from the NTDS, but it is another thing entirely to experience transphobia first hand. I do not believe that trans men are hypocritical for engaging in traditional masculine behaviors when they are attempting to protect themselves from very real threats. I think that this behavior demonstrates their resiliency in the face of a society that largely does not accept them.

Discussion

Transgender men have the unique experience of having a male identity while existing in a physical body that society assigns as female (Green, 2005; Vetger, 2013). This fundamental identity has been examined through gender essentialist viewpoints by scholars like Henry Rubin (2003) and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2005), while also being defined by these men as detached from feelings of their own masculinity (Green, 2005; Haak, 2014; Seamont, 2018; Vetger, 2013). This separation of manhood and masculinity

has been argued to stem from early gender socializations (Seamont, 2018). We are all assigned a sex at birth, and our society is so heavily reliant on the gender/sex binary that every child's sex is assumed to match the gender identity they will develop later in life. This is obviously not the case for transgender men, who experience early socializations as "girls", while developing an understanding of their own internal male identity and what that means to them. This difference in upbringing means that trans men were socialized without the toxic pressures of hegemonic masculinity that Mankowski and Maton (2011) synthesize. The gender socializations of trans men and their experience of living as a socially perceived "girl" gives them the ability to intimately understand gender as a social power structure (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014b). They can empathize more with people (Riggle et al., 2011), especially women, since they often have personal experience being on the receiving end of discrimination.

Implications for Cisgender Men

I believe that this review can have helpful implications for masculinity scholars because trans men have a sense of male identity that is not reliant on the rejection of femininity or toxic notions of masculinity. Cis boys are raised from a young age to idealize hegemonic masculinity: they are told to be aggressive, competitive, reject femininity, and bury their emotions (Mankowski & Maton, 2010) if they want to be considered a *real* man. Trans men are raised without those specific socializations and as a result do not internalize those hegemonic norms or treat them as an ideal state of maleness (Green, 2005; Vetger, 2013). I think that the identity of trans men is often stronger and more authentic than cis men because their internal sense of manhood is not dependent on how masculine they are. This adds to the literature that argues that trans

men “make better men” (Gardiner, 2013).

I do not want to promote more tension between cis and trans men, my goal here is rather to argue that cisgender men can develop a healthier relationship to their male identity by disconnecting maleness and masculinity. The theory that manhood is a precarious state (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) represents the idea that a man’s gender identity can be socially revoked if he fails to measure up to the gendered expectations placed on him, which is ironically similar to the trans experience. Trans men have their gender identity consistently questioned (Dietert & Dentice, 2013) while they develop said identity in a physical body that does not match what they feel like on the inside (Haak, 2014; Seamont, 2014; Vetger, 2013). In spite of this, they form a strong male identity (Green, 2005) that persists even in the face of these gender threats (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014ab). Trans men, because of the nature of their identity and body, have spent a great deal of time thinking about their gender, masculinity, and what it means to be a *man*. This results in an identity that remains largely unaffected by precarious manhood and hegemonic masculinity. Perhaps if cisgender men did not believe that their manhood was conditional, violence enacted on the basis of masculinity threat and the amount of health issues seen in men might be decreased. This is obviously not an easy fix, and my claims should not be taken at face value, but I believe that the perspectives of trans men can be utilized to help cis men create a male identity that is healthier and much more personally authentic for them. More specifically, trans men’s understanding that maleness and masculinity are separate entities might be particularly helpful for masculinity scholars that study precarious manhood in cisgender men (see Vandello & Bosson, 2013). I believe from my research that the separation of these conflated concepts might be helpful

in lessening the effects of precarious manhood.

Hegemonic Masculinity Paradox

The early gender socializations of trans men allow them to understand that being perceived as a cisgender male allots them privileges that they would have otherwise been unable to access as socially perceived women (Haak, 2014), or as gender non-conforming peoples (Miller & Grollman, 2015). This results in many FTM's rejecting hegemonic masculinity as a toxic ideal that encourages the subjugation of women through male dominance and anti-femininity (Seamont, 2018). We know that since trans men define manhood and masculinity as independent from one another (Green, 2005), they can behave in ways that challenge hegemonic masculinity without feeling like their identity as a man is being threatened. While trans men do reject hegemonic masculine norms, their existence in a society that consistently exposes them to threats of physical, sexual, and verbal harassment/violence causes them to develop strategies of protection. These protective strategies involve masculine compensatory behaviors (Vetger, 2013) that stem from the continuous behavior monitoring of cisgender men (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014a). These compensatory behaviors describe things like intentional deepening of the voice, sitting with legs spread, wearing baggy gender-neutral clothing, and having short hair (Haak, 2014). Trans men understand that being perceived as cis protects them from transphobic violence, and being perceived as hegemonically masculine protects them from homophobic violence. These two types of discrimination often overlap with one another (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014a), meaning that trans people are often at double the risk of violence since they can be perceived as multiple social minority groups. Conforming to hegemonic masculinity is one of the best methods to *pass* as a straight cisgender male

and avoid discriminatory violence being committed against them. Even in situations where trans men conform to hegemonic masculinity, their belief of it being a toxic ideal (that they want to personally reject) does not disappear.

Herein lies the paradox that I have identified in my review of the literature. While trans men have the ability to understand masculinity in a healthier way than most cis men do by rejecting hegemonic masculinity, they also conform to it as a way to protect themselves from transphobic and homophobic violence. This implies that trans men are active participants in the ways that they *do* gender. The ability to shift their gender presentation without compromising their internal identity is a strategy of survival that protects them from discrimination, and can co-exist with their rejection of hegemonic masculinity. Trans men attempt to authentically represent their identity, but in certain situations the need to ensure that they remain safe from discrimination takes priority.

Implications for Healthcare Professionals

By understanding the interactive process of gender that trans men have and how it is influenced by threats of discrimination and violence, healthcare professionals (medical doctors, psychologists, counselors, and psychiatrists) that work with trans men can develop more affirmative treatments for their patients. Ignorance of trans people is one of the most commonly cited experiences in healthcare settings, and continues to bar many trans people from receiving informed and appropriate care (Grant et al., 2011, pg. 76). It is important for doctors to be knowledgeable of trans identities in order to lessen the hesitance that trans people feel toward seeking treatment. If trans people knew that their providers would be knowledgeable about their identity and that they would not have to teach them about it, we might see less trans people postponing their medical care (pg. 72)

due to fear or anxiety. Thankfully, knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community in medical settings is improving, with more information about how to implement trans and gender-nonconforming care becoming available to practitioners (Deutsch, 2016). The work I have done in this thesis is particularly helpful to professionals that work with transgender men, because it gives them insight into their conceptualizations of manhood and how their behaviors are influenced by hegemonic masculinity and transphobia.

Psychological professionals that work with trans men should be familiar with their sense of internal male identity, and how the very real threat of discrimination influences their gender expression. The paradox I have identified is useful for explaining the social influences of transphobic discrimination on transgender men's conceptualizations and performance of masculinity and manhood. Understanding that masculine compensatory behaviors do not reflect trans men's internal conceptualizations of manhood and masculinity is critical. If a mental health professional observes masculine compensatory behaviors in an FTM patient and has no prior knowledge of the fact that many trans men use them as a method of protection, they might falsely attribute these behaviors to a desire to conform to traditional masculinity. This would mean that professionals are ignoring the social discriminatory factor that drives these behaviors, and treating them like they are due to internal desires. In order to provide the best and most affirming care for trans men, professionals must understand the impact of discrimination on these men's behaviors and experiences. Trans men conform to hegemonic ideas of masculinity, but usually do not feel that it is representative of their own experience as a man. Healthcare professionals may find it helpful when working with the trans male community to identify this distinction, but also keep in mind that each trans person's

experience is subjective. Being aware of this subjectivity is important so that professionals do not treat the transgender, or even just the FTM community, as homogenous.

Limitations & Future Research Directions

A lot of the studies I have described above have low sample sizes and rely on personal accounts from those with largely White racial backgrounds (Dispenza et al., 2012; Green, 2005; Vetger, 2013). There is a lack of studies focusing on transgender men whose identities intersect with racial minorities, and the differing point of views that they can offer from said experience. The information in this thesis relied on the perspectives of trans men that had already begun some type of physical transition, so a possible avenue of exploration would be the masculinity of self-identified trans men that do not feel the need to undergo medical interventions. Like I mentioned previously in the “Implications for Cis Men” section, research on secure trans masculinity might offer ways to help cis men deconstruct their views of masculinity that rely on homophobia and anti-femininity. Research on transgender women is also lacking in the sense that trans femininity has not been researched in the same ways that trans masculinity has been. More research that focuses on the different identities within the trans umbrella is needed, rather than grouping each identity under the label of ‘trans’ in every study on gender deviance. This should help researchers better understand the nuances of gender, masculinity, and femininity.

Conclusion

In this review I have examined the literature surrounding transgender men and their conceptualizations of masculinity and essential maleness (Rubin, 2003; Vidal-Ortiz,

2005). The way that trans men understand their masculinity as inherently separate from their male identity (Green, 2005) differs from hegemonic cisgendered norms. Trans men go through early gender socializations as girls because of their assigned sex at birth (Dietert & Dentice, 2013), despite having said essential male identity. These socializations serve as the basis for why so many trans men reject hegemonic masculinity (Haak, 2014). Even though they consciously reject hegemonic masculinity, they still engage in masculine compensatory behaviors (Vetger, 2013) that conform to hegemonic ideals as a method of protection against transphobia/homophobia. These two opposing viewpoints exist together within trans men, and as a result they are constantly shifting their behaviors in order to balance their internal identity and external gender performance in order to form an identity that is authentic to them whilst still conforming to society's gender roles. Their conceptualization encourages the separation of masculinity and manhood, and may be helpful for researchers that study the negative effects of hegemonic masculinity in cis men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2007; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Research on trans men can also be helpful for the various healthcare professionals that interact with the community in order to encourage more informed and affirming treatment. It is my hope to encourage that more research centered on trans identities be conducted in the future in order to broaden our understanding of these underrepresented communities.

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