Chapter 70

Coming Out as Transgender or Transitioning Genders:
The Impact of Identity and Social Environments on Romantic Relationships and Family Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the transgender community has been gaining more awareness and visibility in research, the media, and sociocultural landscapes. Despite this, transgender individuals endure a vast range of personal problems that stem from larger social issues. This chapter will connect the psychological components of identity and the influences of social surroundings to the possible experiences of an individual who comes out as transgender or transitions genders. While many individuals may feel a strong sense of identity affirmation, the interpersonal relationships in his or her life may face a major transitional period as well. This is especially evident in romantic relationships and family dynamics. Outside social stressors or gender transitions could impact the romantic relationship quality and structure of transgender people. Likewise, with family dynamics, the level of family functioning could depend on whether the transgender family member is a parent or child. Conclusively, clinical implications and future directions towards building strong relationships will be explored.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States today, there are more than nine million adults that identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) (Gates, 2011). Within the LGBT population, nearly 1.5 million individuals identify as transgender (Coron, Scott, Stowell, & Landers, 2012). Due to social stigma, discrimination, and marginalization, many transgender individuals choose not to come out or publicly live their lives as transgender. However, in recent years, the transgender community and the issues that

transgender people endure have received more awareness and visibility in social, political, and cultural venues. For instance, President Barak Obama was the first President of the United States to say the word "transgender" in a speech while advocating for legislation to protect the rights of transgender people (Obedin-Maliver, 2015).

As a result, more transgender individuals have come out to their families, friends, and loved ones as well as publicly expressing their identities. If an individual does come out as transgender or transitions genders, he or she may experience transitions that go beyond gender. Both intrapersonal and interpersonal systems and relationships may be faced with change (Downing, 2013). Researchers have illustrated the differential structure of romantic relationships when one partner is transgender versus a heteronormative relationship, citing why and how particular stressors exist (Gamarel, Laurenceau, Reisner, Nemoto, & Operario, 2014; Iantaffi & Bockting, 2011). In the same vein, researchers have also presented the distinctions in family dynamics between a child coming out or transitioning (Wahlig, 2015) versus a parent coming out or transitioning (Veldorale-Griffin, 2014).

In addition to discussing the meanings and expressions of transgender identities, this chapter will explore how coming out as transgender or transitioning genders can affect the dynamics of romantic and familial relationships. The research and literature presented in this review do not only provide insight and understanding towards the transgender community, but also illustrate how the interpersonal relationships in a transgender individual's life could, despite its struggles, flourish and develop in a healthy direction.

What Does It Mean to Be Transgender?

Psychosocial Perspectives on Gender

It is not uncommon for masculinity and femininity to be viewed as two separate entities. Many people view sex and gender as synonymous. Socially, males are associated with masculinity while females are associated with femininity. However, some individuals may not see themselves as totally masculine or feminine, despite their biological sex. An individual may see him or herself as having both masculine and feminine qualities or falling somewhere in-between the two ends of the spectrum. Therefore, the meanings of sex and gender have transformed and have been understood differently over time (Bem, 1974).

Through examining psychological and sociological perspectives, there are clear distinctions between sex and gender. A person's *sex* is based on the biological presence of chromosomes, hormones, as well as the anatomical body parts and systems that are essential for reproduction. A person's *gender* reflects the perception of where an individual falls on the masculine-feminine scale or how an individual presents him or herself as male or female. In both psychological and sociological studies, findings have supported the notion that an individual can learn masculine or feminine behaviors based on their biological sex. Some sources of these teachings include cultures, families, religions, schools, and media. Thus, these agents of socialization shape and perpetuate gender roles. *Gender roles* refer to the actions and behaviors that individuals are expected to possess or adhere to, depending on whether they are biologically male or female. (Ferrante, 2011)

If a person is born as a particular biological sex, it is not guaranteed that he or she will identify with the social aspects of the gender that is associated with that particular sex. Thus, a person's *gender identity* reflects how the individual sees him or herself on the masculine-feminine scale or their self-identification as a male or a female. Since gender identity is one of the first elements of an individual's self-knowledge, it is considered an essential component of that individual's sense of self and personality. (Solomon, 2012)

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