"I Don't Like Passing as a Straight Woman": Queer Negotiations of Identity and Social Group Membership[1]

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For decades, sociological theory has documented how our lives are simultaneously produced through and against normative structures of sex, gender, and sexuality. These normative structures are often believed to operate along presumably "natural," biological, and essentialized binaries of male/female, man/woman, and heterosexual/homosexual. However, as the lives and experiences of transgender people and their families become increasingly socially visible, these normative structuring binaries are called into stark question as they fail to adequately articulate and encompass these social actors' identities and social group memberships. Utilizing in-depth interviews with 50 women from the United States, Canada, and Australia, who detail 61 unique relationships with transgender men, this study considers how the experiences of these queer social actors hold the potential to rattle the very foundations upon which normative binaries rest, highlighting the increasingly blurry intersections, tensions, and overlaps between sex, gender, and sexual orientation in the 21st century. This work also considers the potential for these normative disruptions to engender opportunities for social collaboration, solidarity, and transformation.

Social recognition and affirmation of gay and lesbian identities and rights have increased alongside claims advancing the biological etiology of sexual orientation. Despite broader social acknowledgment of gender and sexual

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diversity, transgender individuals and their significant others remain relatively unrecognized in both mainstream and academic discourse and are often subsumed under the limited theoretical frame of social "passing" when they do appear. Building a sociological critique against overly simplified biological frameworks for understanding complex gender and sexual identities, I analyze in-depth interviews with nontransgender women partners of transgender men. The personal identifications and experiences of this group of "queer" social actors are proposed as sociopolitically distinguishable from those of other more commonly recognized sexual minority groups. Data reveal the interactive social processes that often determine "rightful" social inclusion and exclusion across gender and sexual identity categories as well as their capacities to generate and limit possibilities for social movements and political solidarity.

While sociologists are making considerable progress in including lesbians and gay men as subjects in sociological empirical investigation, other "queer" social actors (such as transgender people and their partners) remain relatively absent.[2] As Biblarz and Savci (2010, p. 489) note, for example, "academic research on transgender people and their family relationships is almost nonexistent." Sociological writing on queerness, to date, primarily reflects ongoing intellectual debates regarding the interface between queer and sociological theory, with queer theory and politics often understood as emerging against identity-based politics. As queer theory and politics emerge as a site of consideration and debate in sociology, however, the processes by which social actors come to assume subject identities as queer remain relatively undertheorized and understudied. Indeed, "queer" seems to have stalled at the theoretical or conceptual level in sociology prior

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[2] Notable exceptions include Devor (1997), Namaste (2000), Vidal-Ortiz (2002), Shapiro (2004), Hines (2006), Schilt and Westbrook (2009), Sanger (2010), Ward (2010), and Westbrook and Schilt (2014).

to the actual introduction of the queer empirical subject—more often invoked as a verb or adjective than a noun.

To begin to address this gap, the present study proposes cis women partners of trans men as queer social actors,[3] arguing that a more developed understanding of this understudied group may fruitfully extend sociological knowledge on contemporary sexual identity groups and communities.[4] The present work broadens the notion of "queer" as a politics established against identity, considering the ways in which "queer," as a relational subjectivity, usefully complicates our understanding of social identities and social group-based membership. In this way, the present study is a move toward theorizing particular queer social actors, identities, social embodiments, and families as embedded within intersecting normative and regulatory social systems, structures, and institutions.

An exploration of the identities and experiences of cis women partners of trans men also provokes consideration of the complex management processes involved in negotiating both individual identity and social group–based memberships. A critical aspect of these social processes is being seen or not seen, recognized or not recognized, as a rightful member of particular social identity groups with which one identifies. For trans men and their cis women partners, these meaningful social recognition processes often include (sometimes unintentional or even undesired) social "passing" with regard to gender and sexual orientation.

A problematic aspect of many of the sociological studies employing this notion of "passing" is their tendency to reinforce the presumed essentiality of sex and gender binaries by assuming that some social actors hold au-

[3] As Schilt and Westbrook, drawing from Serano (2007), note, "*Cis* is the Latin prefix for 'on the same side.' It complements *trans*, the prefix for 'across' or 'over' . . . to refer to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity" (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, p. 461). Use of the phrase "cis women" throughout this manuscript is intended to mark the identities of women in my sample, just as the identities of men who are their partners are also marked. To not do so, as rightfully noted by an *AJS* reviewer, "reproduces the 'otherness' of trans by not marking the unmarked category."

[4] The phrase "trans men" is used throughout for sake of consistency and simplicity. It should be noted, however, that gender identity labels and categories are often far from consistent or simple. The cis women in this sample identified their trans partners using various terms—transgender, transsexual, trans, female-to-male (ftm), man, boi, etc. The "trans men" referred to in this study are individuals who were assigned, by sex, as "female" at birth and whose gender identity does not directly correspond with this sex assignment or their sex categorization. Some trans men partners of the cis women I interviewed have pursued hormonal or surgical realignment surgeries to bring their bodies in closer alignment with their gender identities, while others have not. See table 2 for more information about the reported demographic characteristics of the transgender partners of the cis women interviewed for this study. For additional background information on the language, concepts, and terms related to transgender identity and experience, please see Wentling et al. (2008) and Pfeffer (2010).

thentic proprietary claims over particular social identity-group membership (e.g., only those categorized as "male" at birth can be "authentic" or "real" men), while others can stake only inauthentic or false claims. Indeed, it is only under such a framework that it makes sense that some individuals might be recognized as authentically (and therefore unremarkably) "belonging" as members, while others may only hope to "pass" into relatively inauthentic membership as wannabes. Notions of "passing," therefore, tend to be predicated upon assumptions of essentialized and naturalized group difference.

Paradoxically, social support for the equal rights of sexual minorities has been undoubtedly propelled by these mainstream and academic appeals to the immutable and biologic basis of group difference (Powell et al. 2010). Under such claims, lesbian and gay social actors should not be denied the same rights as heterosexuals given that their sexual orientation is driven not by choice but by biology via gestational uterine environment (Bogaert and Skorska 2011) or genetic difference (Hershberger 2001; Mustanski et al. 2005), along with a sequelae of somatic structures and phenotypic and behavioral traits that are said to be distinct from those of their heterosexually inclined peers (Swaab and Hofman 1990; LeVay 1991; Allen and Gorski 1992; Mustanski, Bailey, and Kaspar 2002; Rahman and Wilson 2003). While such claims were originally used to depathologize "homosexuality," today they are increasingly taken up by those who wish to further broaden political rights and acceptance for LGBTQ people.[5] Consider, for example, the recent hit song, "Born This Way," in which Lady Gaga calls for acceptance for all, no matter one's race, sexual orientation, or gender identity since "there ain't no other way, baby, I was born this way." In "Same Love," another LGBTQ rights pop anthem by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, Mary Lambert's chorus "I can't change even if I tried, even if I wanted to" set the stage as 33 couples (including some who were same sex) wed during the televised 2014 Grammy Awards.

Yet social science scholarship, demonstrating that average biologic and genetic intergroup differences tend to be smaller than average intragroup differences, suggests that equal rights discourses resting primarily upon biologically essentialist notions of group differences between "the sexes" and "the races" are both flawed and problematic (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Graves 2003; Brace 2005; Fine 2010; Jordan-Young 2011). Further, predicating equal rights on the establishment of biological difference between "the sexes" or "the races" may reify the social status quo and shift focus away from social and structural processes (i.e., sexism and racism) that (re)produce these

[5] The American Psychiatric Association stopped considering "homosexuality" a psychiatric illness in 1973 (see Bayer 1987).

inequalities.[6] For decades, social scientists have demonstrated the ways in which group distinctions and unequal distribution of social status and rights are largely established and maintained through social (rather than biological) processes (e.g., Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002; Renfrow 2004).

My purpose in this article is not to make broad claims resolutely negating potential biological origins or contributions to sex, gender, and sexuality. Rather, it is to propose two expressly sociological questions: (1) What is at stake when we foreclose opportunities for considering the myriad ways in which sex, gender, and sexual identities are formed in and through processes of social interaction? (2) In what ways might a focus on "passing" curtail opportunities to critically examine the efforts of those with normative social privilege to maintain and naturalize such privilege? For example, white racial anxieties about black people "passing"—both in the past and present—are generally understood as symptomatic of the desire to maintain white social privilege and a sense of inherent (supposedly biological) superiority (Harris 1993; Renfrow 2004). Might a similar lens for understanding social anxieties about gender "passing" and beliefs about the fixity and naturalness of sexual identities be both sociologically illuminating and increasingly necessary today?

I suggest here that it is time for sociology to push beyond both "passing" and "born this way" approaches to sex, gender, and sexuality to consider alternative frameworks for theorizing the experiences of social actors. In this article, I draw upon Connell's (2009) notion of "recognition" (in lieu of "passing") to argue that social rights, privileges, and group membership connected to categories of sex, gender, and sexuality depend largely upon social interpellation. More specifically, I will demonstrate how gender and sexual identities are interactional accomplishments that often reveal more about the workings of normative social privilege than they reveal about the social actors whose gender and sexual identities are being (mis)recognized. This study considers queer social actors' often strategic and pragmatic management of these (mis)recognition processes to gain access to particular social and material benefits of social group membership, offering theoretical and empirical insights on identity negotiations, and moments of "trouble" in these negotiations, across contested and regulated social categories and groups more broadly. As such, this work provides insights that actively respond to Irvine's (1994, p. 245) still-relevant call to sociologists nearly two decades earlier: "Sociological theory must . . . [place] social categories such as sexu-

[6] See Sheldon et al. (2007) for a discussion of the ways in which belief in a biological etiology for homosexuality may not be associated with social gains for gay men and lesbians.

ality and race in the foreground in the context of power and difference." Finally, this work proposes a sociological queer analytic framework that compels solidarity-based approaches to social movement organizing around identity-based rights.

TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF QUEER SOCIAL ACTORS AND IDENTITIES: EXTENDING THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

Emerging as a late 20th-century outgrowth of poststructuralist thought, a central analytic across much queer theory is its critique of notions of normativity, deviance, and stable/coherent identities. The interface between queer theory and sociology has been slow to develop.[7] Michael Warner, one of the key figures in the development and popularization of academic queer theory, describes social science disciplines' reticence to adopt queer theoretical frames as paradoxical given that "the analysis of normativity . . . should have become central" to such disciplines (2012, p. 8). Epstein (1994, p. 197) writes that displacement of sexual minorities to the periphery rather than the center of social inquiry has had critical limiting effects on the discipline of sociology and that "the challenge that queer theory poses to sociological investigation is precisely in the strong claim that no facet of social life is fully comprehensible without an examination of how sexual meanings intersect with it."[8]

Sociological scholarship on queerness has been, in large part, devoted to assisting sociology in (1) tracing the historical roots of, (2) considering the influence of, (3) assessing the commensurability of sociological theory with, and (4) catching up with queer politics or the "queer turn" in the humanities (see Duggan 1992; Epstein 1994; Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994; Stein and Plummer 1994; Green 2002, 2007; Plummer 2003; Gamson and Moon 2004; Valocchi 2005; Moon 2008). The 1994 publication of a six-article symposium entitled "Queer Theory/Sociology" in *Sociological Theory* was groundbreaking. It marked the first time that a mainstream peer-reviewed journal in so-

[7] Epstein (1994) offers the provocative claim that much queer theory is rooted in and dependent upon sociological theoretical precedents, particularly across the areas of symbolic interactionism and labeling theory. These critiques are later echoed by Dunn (1997) and Green (2007), who highlight the particular theoretical and empirical contributions of pragmatists, symbolic interactionists, and ethnomethodologists to the development of poststructuralist and queer theory produced by scholars such as Judith Butler. As Green (2007, pp. 26–27) writes: "With regard to gender and sexuality . . . sociology has been doing a kind of queer theory long before the first queer theorist set pen to paper."

[8] As Sedgwick writes (1990, p. 1) in a foundational text of queer theory, *Epistemology of the Closet*: "An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition."

ciology offered a collection of scholarship focusing explicitly on the interface between queer theory and sociology,[9] an interface Epstein (1994, p. 188) describes as steeped within mutual "suspicion" and "misrecognition."[10]

Seidman (1994) argues that one of queer theory's central and most defining contributions is the way in which it challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about the existence of a relatively stable homosexual subject and identity. Queer theory and politics embraced (rather than attempted to reconcile) the messiness and fluidity of sexual acts, boundaries, and identities. Indeed, queer politics galvanized those who shared a burgeoning sense of disenfranchisement from (and reaction against) mainstream lesbian and gay politics of "normalization," generating expressly oppositional politics informed by postmodern and deconstructionist theorizing (Seidman 2001; Bernstein 2005). What is much less clear from histories and descriptions of the emergence of queer politics and humanistic queer theory, however, are the timeline and processes by which social actors came to assume individual subject identities as "queer."

While Seidman (1994, p. 173) acknowledges that some factions within queer theory espouse anti-subject/identity politics, he argues that one of the most useful contributions of queer theory to sociological analysis is not that subjecthood and identity are meaningless but, rather, that they are "multiple, unstable, and regulatory . . . permanently open and contestable as to [their] meaning and political role." Epstein (1994, p. 197) echoes this sentiment: "The point . . . is not to stop studying identity formation, or even to abandon all forms of identity politics, but rather to maintain identity and differences in productive tension, and to rely on notions of identity and identity politics for their strategic utility while remaining vigilant against reification."[11]

Sociological analyses of queer identities and identity-formation processes also hold the potential to push beyond radical deconstructionism. As Plummer (2003, p. 521) writes: "When I read some of the wilder textual analyses of the queer theorists or hear of the fragmenting sexual identities championed by the postmodernists . . . I have a gnawing feeling that they are very much removed from the ordinary lived experiences of sexuality that most people encounter across the world in their daily lives." In a similar critique, Green (2002, p. 522) writes: "Queer theory constructs an undersocialized 'queer'

[9] And, at the time of this writing, it is the sole instance of a mainstream peer-reviewed journal of sociology engaging substantively with this theoretical frame.

[10] It was also a symposium that was not without critique, some of which was more memorable for its vituperative and dismissive tone than its engagement with the substantive content of the work of the authors (e.g., Oakes 1995).

[11] Green (2007, p. 27) sharply disagrees with these assessments, however, arguing that queer theory and sociology are largely irreconcilable as "queer theory is uniquely committed to the dissolution of the subject."

subject with little connection to the empirical world and the sociohistorical forces that shape sexual practice and identity." Despite academic squabbles over the (ir)reconcilability of queer theory and sociology, the emergence and proliferation of queer self-identified social subjects, particularly within transgender communities, remains unequivocal. As such, a more critical focus on queer social actors' identities and identity-formation processes is both necessary and long overdue in sociology.

Identities as Social Process: Sociological Queer Analysis

So exactly where and who are sociology's queer empirical social actors and subjects? Their relative absence makes some conceptual sense in the context of the epistemological foundations of queer theory.[12] Yet Stein (1997) notes that existing classificatory systems of sexual identity, reflecting binary sex and gender categorizations of "heterosexual," "homosexual," and "bisexual" are remarkably inadequate when describing people's experiences. Despite this inadequacy, it seems that queer empirical subjects have been neglected (or perhaps abandoned) in sociology despite their continuing and often insistent presence as a self-identified and vocal social group. For example, Green (2002, p. 537) calls for a "post-queer study of sexuality" without explicit consideration of queer self-identified social actors.[13] As sociologists, rather than ignoring or sidelining critical social analyses of queer social subjects, we might query: What are some of the meaningful social and political processes that regulate queer social actors' membership within, or passage through, various identity and social-membership groups? How might sociologists contribute to a project that expands beyond the textual to consider the everyday lives of queer social actors?

Valocchi (2005, p. 766) offers one possible pathway for sociology, defining "sociological queer analysis" as that which blends "a queer sensibility about the performative nature of identity with a sociological sensibility about how these performances are constrained, hierarchical, and rooted in social inequality."[14] As such, one of the primary goals of the pre-

[12] The foundations are often rooted in challenging and deconstructing subjectivity and identity itself (Seidman 1994; Gamson 2000; Green 2002; Green 2007).

[13] Ghaziani (2011) proposes that we are also in a "post-gay" era of collective identity construction, yet his analysis provokes consideration of whether cultural minimization of difference and focus on sameness indicates increasing social acceptance and inclusion of diversity (as well as increasing equality) or a glossing over (and dismissal of) existing inequalities and imposition of normative social ideals.

[14] Judith Butler's (1990) theorization of "gender performativity" draws from Foucault's ([1976] 1990) theorizing around power, repression, and generativity. According to Butler (1990), being a "man" or a "woman" (or "male" or "female") is not a fixed, biological, or immutable human characteristic but, rather, is (re)produced through a system of

sent work is to develop an expressly sociological queer analysis that focuses upon fissures and moments of trouble in culture and identity, articulating the social processes through which individuals come to embrace and resist subject identities as "queer" even as these identities are (mis)recognized by social others. The discipline of sociology is perhaps uniquely well positioned to seriously consider the daily lives of queer social actors and to begin to theorize the processes through which these lives and identities are constituted, (mis)recognized, resisted, and embraced. Namaste (1994) urges sociologists to consider the social constructedness of genders and sexualities and the ways in which some are normalized (or left unmarked, as nonqueer), as well as how all social actors negotiate various identities and subject positions (and limits to these identities and subject positions).

Employing a sociological queer analysis across a broad range of sociological subdisciplines—not only those connected to sex, gender, and sexuality—holds the analytic potential to provide greater insight into the ways in which we are all performing and cocreating identities. Indeed, a sociological queer analysis has overlapping conceptual aims—which include analyses of various normative and normalizing social "centers" and structures—with critical race studies, postmodernism, and cultural studies (Irvine 1994). While queer sociological analyses are often explicitly focused around the areas of gender and sexuality, they certainly hold analytic power that extends far beyond these realms as well. As Rupp (2006, p. 56) notes: "Knowing how identities are created, institutions established, communities built, and movements mobilized, we learn from the margins what the center looks like."

Relatively recent contributions to such a project in sociology are Pascoe's (2007) discussion of how young (mostly white) heterosexual men deploy a "fag discourse" to police and reproduce hegemonic masculinity and Schilt and Westbrook's (2009) engagement with (1) the social processes through which gender "normals"[15] work diligently to maintain heteronormativity within workplaces that include transgender members and (2) cul-

power and social relations. While these operations of power may compel social relations that (re)produce the normative as ideal, and discipline deviations from normative ideals, these same repressive forces ultimately suggest and generate the potential for disobedience and alternate social relations—producing "gender trouble."

[15] "Normals" is the term Harold Garfinkel (1967) first used to describe cisgender persons. The concept of "heteronormativity," coined by Michael Warner (1991), has been described as "the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements" (Ingraham 1994, p. 204). It has also been cast as "shorthand for the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously ordering everyday existence" (Jackson 2006, p. 108). For more extended consideration of the links between transgender families and heteronormativity, see Pfeffer (2012).

tural discourses and belief systems that cast transgender people as deceptive—and thus culpable—victims of the sometimes deadly violence perpetrated against them, primarily by cis men. Westbrook and Schilt (2014) also propose the notion of "determining gender" to consider the shifting roles of chromosomes, genitals, and identity as people, policy, and law work to decide who gets to "count" as a man or a woman within gender-segregated social spaces.

We might also consider Moore's (2009, 2011) work on black lesbian stepfamilies a critical example of sociological queer analysis. Moore's work challenges a taken-for-granted assumption within feminist sociological studies of the family: that egalitarian division of household labor and child care is desirable and perhaps ideal. Through careful examination of the everyday family arrangements and particular sociohistorical context of a sample of lower-income black lesbian stepfamilies, Moore proposes that assuming greater responsibility over household labor is associated with greater authority across the areas of financial control and child-rearing practices, each of which translates to greater relative power within the structure of the relationships and families she examines. These sociological queer analyses have a common thread: their grounded focus on understudied groups and topics in ways that usefully uncover (and sometimes upend) taken-for-granted social norms and assumptions about how the world works—even those proposed within the discipline of sociology itself.

Queer social actors, like everyone else, lead lives simultaneously produced through and against normative structures of sex, gender, and sexuality. These normative structuring forces of sex, gender, and sexuality operate primarily along presumably "natural," biological, and essentialized binaries of male/female, man/woman, and heterosexual/homosexual. The lives and experiences of cis women partners of trans men, however, call these normative structuring binaries into even greater question in their failure to adequately articulate and encapsulate these queer social actors' identities and social group memberships. The experiences of queer social actors, therefore, hold the potential to rattle the very foundations upon which normative binaries rest, highlighting the increasingly blurry intersections, tensions, and overlaps between sex, gender, and sexual orientation in the 21st century (Pfeffer 2012).

Theorizing Social "(Mis)recognition" Rather Than "Passing"

The incoherence of these normative binaries becomes clearer through focus on interactional processes by which social actors are granted insider/outsider social status. When individuals refer to someone "passing" as a man or "passing" as a woman, the social meaning making that is taking

place lies at the thorny intersections of sex and gender categorization, expression, attribution, and identity (for further discussion of these and other concepts, language, and terminology related to transgender identity and experience, see Wentling et al. [2008], Pfeffer [2010]). Studies of "passing," and the social accomplishments of sex and gender, have a long, revered, and contentious history in sociology, particularly among symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists (see Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1976; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987; Denzin 1990; Rogers 1992; Zimmerman 1992). "Passing" carries the assumption that certain individuals somehow naturally embody particular identities to which others can stake only inauthentic membership claims. In a sense, some individuals are understood as rightful "owners" of membership to particular social identity groups—most notably, those groups holding disproportionate social power and authority (Harris 1993; Calavita 2000).

The concept of passing also relies on juxtaposed notions of conscious, intentional, deceptive "dupers" and presumably natural, authentic, deceived "dupes" (Serano 2007). Nevertheless, "passing" is often held as the gold standard of "successful" transsexualism—particularly by medical establishments; as such, "passing" is often conceptualized as emblematic of normativity or a desire to *be* normative (as reviewed by Connell [2009]). Analyses of "passing" in racial and class contexts (see Harris 1993; Calavita 2000; Kennedy 2002; Ong 2005), however, adopt a more nuanced lens that views "passing" as a potentially pragmatic (though fraught) interactional strategy for accessing and attaining regulated social, material, and legal resources, and consider the personal, interpersonal, and sociopolitical effects and consequences that the use of such strategies may involve.

While "passing" may grant reprieve from the social stigma and potential danger of ambiguous gender expression, as well as access to social and material resources granted only to particular group members, this access and these reprieves are often tenuous, context specific, and revocable. Trans men who most always "pass" in ordinary social situations may live in fear about the consequences of being involved in a serious accident during which the removal of clothing (or, in some cases, the accessing of identification records indicating legal sex or gender status) would seriously impair their ability to be unambiguously recognized in accordance with their gender identity. Employing a sociological queer analysis, the concept of "passing" may be further illuminated by focusing on those ordinarily granted "natural" and unquestioned status within particular identity categories. Elson (2004, p. 172), for example, presents a compelling exploration into cis women's experience of identity posthysterectomy and whether or not those who undergo this surgical procedure are still considered (and consider themselves) "women" or not—reaching the equivocal conclusion of yes,

no, maybe. As such, Elson (2004) probes and destabilizes the supposedly "natural" and essential links between biology, gender identity, and social perceptions of which bodies rightfully constitute "woman."

Connell (2009) usefully troubles the notion of "passing" to consider how "recognition" may be a more precise conceptual framework for thinking about the juxtapositions between one's body, subjective identity, social group memberships, and social appraisals of all of these. Accordingly, we would do better to supplant our biologically essentialist notions of "passing" with a more sociological notion of "recognition." By doing so, we might come to consider and recognize that trans people's efforts to "pass" occur not when living in accordance with their subjective gender identities, but as they attempt to live within gender identities normatively corresponding to their sex assignment or sex categorization (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 133).[16] In other words, many trans men do, indeed, "pass" for much of their lives—as girls or as women. They often report struggling, within bodies and social identities that do not feel like "home," until these efforts become untenable and they take further steps to bring their bodies and social embodiments in line with their gender identity.

As this study will show, sexual identity is also a relationally formed construct, depending upon a constellation of dynamic, shifting, socially informed understandings that individuals hold about themselves and others. As Vidal-Ortiz (2002, p. 192) writes: "One interactional way in which gender and sexuality collide is as people interpret each others' attractions based on their gender presentations or expressions." Sexuality is about more than personal identities, autonomous desires, and sexual object choice alone. Rather, we "do sexuality"; our sexualities are interpellated every day, arising from social others' (mis)recognition of the ways in which we see and understand ourselves and our partners. I argue that we must further extend Connell's notion of "recognition" to attend not only to the ways in which we may come to see individuals in accordance with how they see themselves but also to the ways in which making any attribution of identity is part of the process of bringing identities into social being. In other words, by focusing on how we recognize and misrecognize others' self-identities, we come to better understand these identities not as individual and predetermined fixed entities, but as dynamic social processes.

These identity-focused social interpellation and (mis)recognition processes carry social and material consequences that structure opportunities, challenges, social memberships, and life possibilities. This study will dem-

[16] "Sex assignment" refers to the assignment of a person, at birth, to "male" or "female" based on bodily signifiers such as presence of a penis or vagina. "Sex categorization" refers to the everyday, iterative placement of a person into social categories such as "girl," "woman," "boy," or "man."

onstrate some of the ways in which gender and sexual orientation are fluid beyond our own volition by outlining strategies deployed by queer social actors to strategically manage these (mis)recognition processes and to gain access to particular social and material benefits of social group membership. Through extension of Connell's (2009) "recognition" framework, and developing a sociological queer analytic framework, this study will reveal both the relationality and pragmatism often involved in processes of queer self-identification, social group membership, and social (mis)recognition. Importantly, this study will highlight what is at stake in social (mis)recognition processes not only for queer social actors but also for everyone. These insights should be of empirical and theoretical interest not only to scholars of gender and sexuality but also to those who study symbolic interaction, postmodernism, race and ethnicity, identity, culture, community, families, and social movements.

STUDY DESIGN, SAMPLE, AND ANALYSIS

Participant Recruitment and Sample

This work represents the largest and most comprehensive study conducted, to date, with cis women partners of trans men (for additional information about the size and growth of this emergent social group, see Pfeffer [2010]). Research participants were recruited using online and paper-flyer postings targeting the significant others, friends, families, and allies of trans men. Most study participants were recruited via Internet-facilitated social network ("snowball") sampling, the primary method of purposeful sampling when targeting sexual minorities and their partners (Patton 1990; Mustanski 2001; Shapiro 2004; Rosser et al. 2007). I also enlisted key informants across the United States and Canada to distribute materials to potential participants in their local regions.

I conducted interviews with 50 cis women partners of trans men for this study. Participants discussed their experiences in 61 individual relationships with trans men (several participants reported multiple relationships with trans men). Participants resided across 13 states in the United States, three Canadian provinces, and one Australian state, expanding existing work on sex and gender minorities that focuses almost exclusively on one or two states, with large urban centers, in the United States. This sample consists of participants from most of the U.S. geographic regions with the highest reported proportions of trans men (see Rosser et al. 2007), including two much underresearched regions with regard to studies of sex and gender minorities—the midwestern United States and Canada. The most frequent sexual orientation self-identification label, used by 50% of participants in this sample, was "queer." Participants' trans partners (according to par-

ticipant reports) were also most likely to identify as "queer" (48%), with "heterosexual" as second most common (33%). When asked to describe how they would define or label their relationship(s) with their trans partner(s), study participants described their relationships as "queer" 65% of the time among those providing information for this question.

Despite aiming for racial and age diversity, only variation on age was successfully achieved. Interviewees' ages ranged from 18 to 51 years, with an average of 29 years, and, on average, cis women's trans partners were slightly younger. Participants largely self-identified as white. When considering the race/ethnicity of the trans partners of participants, the sample begins to reflect somewhat greater racial/ethnic variation, with 18% identified as "multiracial." Participants and their partners were highly educated (with 24% and 11%, respectively, holding postgraduate degrees) yet reported household incomes that were quite low among participants providing these data. Trans men partners of participants were at various stages of sex or gender transition—with most being just a bit over two years into the process. Most were taking testosterone, a considerable minority had had "top" surgery, while a very slim minority had had "bottom" surgery of any kind (see tables 1–3 for demographic characteristics of participants and their relationships and table 2 notes for descriptions of procedures). Likely due in large part to the powerful masculinizing effects of testosterone, according to evidence provided in the accounts of cis women in the sample, the majority of their trans men partners were "always or almost always" perceived in social contexts as male (these accounts will be discussed further in the section on findings).

Interviews

I developed the interview protocol in accordance with scholarship theorizing gender and gendered identities as social accomplishments arising from iterative, interactive practices (Goffman 1976, 1977; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987) and with sociological research highlighting the importance of attending to the processes through which individuals make sense and meaning of their own (often contradictory) experiences within shifting and embedded social contexts and relationships (Garfinkel 1967). One research goal was to develop a deeper understanding for how participants construct their social worlds through everyday actions and interactions, an approach that may be particularly useful in the context of studying trans lives and families (Schütz 1967; Rubin 1998).

I conducted interviews with participants either face to face ($n = 11$) or by telephone ($n = 39$). Content analyses revealed no substantive differences observed in emotional expression or depth of information shared across the two types of interview contexts. All interviews were digitally audio re-

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participant Sample

Participants (50)
Geographic residence:
United States (37):
California (9), Michigan (7), Ohio (4), Massachusetts (3), New York (3), Florida (2), New Mexico (2), Washington (2), Colorado (1), Illinois (1), Indiana (1), Maine (1), Tennessee (1)
Canada (12):
Ontario (10), British Columbia (1), Nova Scotia (1)
Australia (1):
New South Wales (1)
Sex and gender identity:
"Female" (50)
"Femme" (14), gender transgressive/masculine (1)
Age:
Mean = 29 years
Range = 18–51 years
Race/ethnicity:
White (45), multiracial (3), black (1), Latina (1)
Sexual orientation:
"Queer" (25), "lesbian" or "dyke" (11), "bisexual" (7), "bisexual/queer" (2), "heterosexual" (2), "pansexual/omnisexual" (1), "undefined"/"unsure" (2)
Educational attainment:
Some high school (1), high school diploma/GED (1), some college (17), B.A. (16), master's (10), doctorate (2), refusal/no data (3)
Household income (at time of interview):
<$25,000/year (11), $25,000–$50,000/year (12), $50,000–$75,000/year (3), $75,000–$100,000/year (1), >$100,000/year (2), refusal/no data (21)
Parental status:
Never parented/served as a guardian (44)
Previous experience with parenting/guardianship (4)
Currently parenting/guardian to children at home (2)
44% of participants without parenting experience reported intentions or plans to parent a child in the future

Note.—All demographic characteristics reported herein are based on sample participants' self-reports. Numbers of participants are in parentheses.

corded and lasted from 47 to 150 minutes, averaging 103 minutes each. Participants were compensated $20 per interview. During the interview, I asked participants to expand on what they might only suggest or briefly mention to elicit "thick description" (see Geertz 1973; Ponterotto 2006) of their experiences and perspectives. I encouraged participants, when offering seemingly contradictory responses, to reflect upon (and speak about) these contradictions or tensions in greater depth.

Interviews covered six major content areas: (1) gender and sexual identities of self and partner, (2) experiences with a trans partner's gender transition, (3) friends and family support and strain, (4) community and social support and strain, (5) relationship form and structure, and (6) language and the body. Specific questions relevant to the present study include: How

TABLE 2
Demographic Characteristics of Participant Sample's Transgender Partners

Transgender Partners of Participants (61)
Sex and gender identity:
Female (60), intersex (1)
"Man" (36), "trans" or "genderqueer" (25)
Age:
Mean = 27 years
Range = 13–60 years[a]
Race/ethnicity:
White (46), multiracial (11), Asian (1), black (1), Native American (1), "unsure" or "unknown" (1)
Sexual orientation:
"Queer" (29), "heterosexual" (20), "heterosexual but bi-curious" (5), "bisexual" (5), "gay" (1), "undefined"/"unsure" (1)
Education:
Some high school (2), high school diploma/GED (6), some college (19), B.A. (19), master's (6), doctorate (1), refusal/no data (8)
Transition status:
Takes testosterone (42)
Wants to take testosterone (14)
Had "top surgery"[b] (23)
Wants "top surgery"[b] (36)
Had "bottom surgery"[c] (5)
Wants "bottom surgery"[c] (21)
Average time elapsed since beginning transition = just over 2 years
Social perception of gender:
Reported frequency a trans partner is perceived, socially, as male:
Almost always/always (38)
Frequently (6)
Occasionally (10)
Rarely/never (6)
Refusal/no data (1)

Note.—All demographic characteristics reported herein are based on sample participants' self-reports. Numbers of participants are in parentheses.

[a] The lower number reflects a younger participant reporting on a past relationship.

[b] Includes bilateral radical mastectomy or reduction mammaplasty with or without chest-wall recontouring.

[c] Includes hysterectomy, oopherectomy, salpingectomy, metoidioplasty, scrotoplasty, or phalloplasty.

often is your partner perceived as male when the two of you are out socially? How do people usually perceive you and your partner when you're out together? (How) has your sexual identity shifted at all since being with your partner (or, if applicable, as your partner transitioned)? What, if any, are your connections to/involvement with the LGBTQ community?

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist for whom I provided training to recognize particular terms, language, and expressions

TABLE 3
Demographic Characteristics of Participant Sample's Relationships

Relationships with Transgender Partners (61)
Relationships and relationship status:
Partnered with a trans man at the point of interview (42)
Not partnered with a trans man at the point of interview (8)
Median elapsed time since relationship's end = 3.8 years
Number of reported relationships with a trans man:
One (40), two (9), three (1)
Relationship duration:
Mean = 2.2 years
Range = 3 months–11 years
Cohabitation:
Cohabitated during relationship (38)
Mean duration of cohabitation = 1.5 years
Did not cohabit during relationship (23)
Marital status:
Legally recognized "opposite-sex" marriage (4)[a]
Engaged to legally marry as an "opposite-sex" couple (4)[b]
Legally recognized same-sex marriage (1)[c]
Relationship "type" or "label":
Participants' reports of relationship "type" with trans partner:
"Queer" (30)
"Heterosexual" or "straight" (11)
"Undefined" (2)
"Queer-straight" (2)
"Bisexual" (1)
"Lesbian" (0)
Refusal/no data (15)

Note.—All demographic characteristics reported herein are based on sample participants' self-reports. Numbers of participants are in parentheses.

[a] All in the United States.

[b] Three in the United States and one in Canada.

[c] In Canada.

common to trans communities. Subsequent to transcription, I reviewed each narrative transcript for accuracy and fidelity to audio recordings. I imported all narratives into a qualitative data analysis software program, which assisted with the digital organization of large quantities of qualitative data (in this study, approximately 2,000 single-spaced pages of interview text).

I employed inductive and deductive coding techniques, informed by grounded theory methods, to distill emergent themes, patterns, and trends (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006). I read through all transcripts, creating "memos" for each, containing observations about the interview participants and their narratives, as well as notes about strong or compelling emergent themes and potential links to

existing theory and literature. I conducted thematic coding across all interview narratives. Narratives were also coded for approximately 30 demographic variables connected to the participant, trans partner(s), and relationship(s). As discussed more extensively in other published work connected to this project (see Pfeffer 2010), my analytic approach toward narrative data from participants is to understand them as accounts, a type of sociolinguistic product formed simultaneously from social experience, perception, and knowledge of expectations (see Scott and Lyman 1968; Heritage 1984; Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch 1990). These accounts are produced by individuals who understand that what they say may be up for potential interpretation and judgment. Concerns that one's statements may be evaluated by social others, and reflect poorly upon oneself or others, surely shape the accounts that participants ultimately provide (Scott and Lyman 1968). As such, I approach the narrative data provided by participants not as incontrovertible fact, but as accounts, constructed stories that each of us offer many times over the course of each day and that offer gateways into participants' perceptions, beliefs, and assertions about themselves, their relationships, and the world (Harvey et al. 1990).

Initially, I analyzed interviews through an open-coding process to discern emergent themes (Charmaz 2006). Approximately 200 themes and subthemes emerged through this process. The next stage of analysis involved more focused coding that resulted in a distillation of themes through a process known as axial coding (Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Axial coding resulted in a final coding scheme of approximately 50 major themes with various subthemes. These coding strategies allowed me to identify and juxtapose data providing confirming and disconfirming evidence for themes. Wherever possible, I categorized broader themes into more precise conceptual themes, generating nuanced subtypes. A brief sampling of major coding themes and subcategories relevant to the analysis of accounts in the present study include: frequency of partner's being perceived as male; feelings about being perceived as heterosexual (positive, negative, mixed); queer invisibility; social acceptance; dangers of partner not being perceived as male; and losing social/sexual communities. To discern differences in experiences across participants, multiple data matrix analyses (axial coding) were run, allowing me to sort excerpts on coded themes by various participant attributes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: DOING GENDER AND SEXUALITY THROUGH (MIS)RECOGNITION PROCESSES

Just as trans men have their own transition experiences to manage on multiple levels, so, too, do their cis women partners (see Nyamora 2004; Pfeffer 2008; Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Ward 2010). Study participants relayed, in great detail, the various struggles they experienced as

they sought to maintain, transform, understand, proclaim, and refute various personal and social identities in the context of their lives. The following sections present narrative data, using pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality, illustrating the ways in which queer social actors negotiate intersecting and sometimes conflicting social identities, relationships, politics, and social groups. These narratives prompt consideration of the ways in which gender and sexual identity are interactive social accomplishments involving boundary negotiations and (mis)recognition processes that carry tangible personal and social consequences.

Language and Social "Reading"

"Queer" as a distinct social identity category.—Cis women partners of trans men frequently wondered aloud, when I asked them about their own shifting and contingent sexual identities in relation to their trans partners, "What does that make me?" Martha (25 years, Massachusetts) described the challenge of personally struggling with issues connected to identity in the context of her relationship with her trans partner:

> I thought of myself as a dyke and then now I'm with someone who identifies as a man and I'm thinking—how do I identify now? I'm not a lesbian. . . . I'm not really perceived as queer by many other people right now. And it really messed with me for awhile—what am I? Who am I? Not that I didn't know who I was, but what identity should I give to people? A lot of times I'd try to adopt my identity as my own and it doesn't matter what other people think. But it's hard not to judge myself by other people's judgments.

Having difficulty figuring out how to self-identify was described often by participants in my sample as not only an internal struggle, but one that emerges from various social and cultural imperatives and in social interactions with others. As Tiffany (20 years, Massachusetts) told me, "People are wondering what your sexuality is. . . . I get asked on surveys and things like that and I really don't know what to put."

Another participant, Linda (22 years, Sydney, Australia), explicitly rejected the social imperative to identify her relationship with her partner using particular identity labels: "All these people would go, 'Oh, what does that make you now?' And I would say, 'Happy and in love. That's all.' I didn't see why anything else has to matter." Current and former lesbian-identified respondents reported facing particular challenges in terms of identity and social/community membership and the attributions others made about their personal motivations, desires, and emotional health. As Polly (40 years, New York) noted: "If you're a lesbian, everybody works so hard to accept it. They accept it, then you fuck them up by being with a trans guy. And then they're like, 'Okay, next she's going to go to men.' That it's just this form of evolution . . . and you're just graduating in this progressive

chain of eventually getting to the pinnacle of the 'real' man. I sort of feel like people see it as this progressive growth into being fully, Freudianly, 'correctly' socialized to heterosexuality." Cis women partners of trans men described facing persistent challenges in actively negotiating their own (and their partner's) shifting identities across a variety of personal, interpersonal, and social contexts. One of the ways in which this negotiation manifested for many participants was through language and determining how they would self-identify, with regard to sexuality, in the context of their unique relationships.

Just over half of the cis women participants in this study self-identified their sexual orientation as "queer" at the point of interview and about 65% described their relationship with their trans partner as "queer." According to these cis women's accounts, over 60% of their trans men partners were perceived as men in social spaces "always" or "almost always." When in public together, therefore, many cis women in this sample reported being frequently (mis)recognized as part of a heterosexual couple. Verbal evidence participants provided in their accounts of these social encounters included social others using the words "sir," "bro," "boyfriend," "husband," "dad," and "father," as well as pronouns such as "he" and "him" when referring to participants' trans partners, and use of words/pronouns such as "Miss," "Mrs.," "Ms.," "ma'am," "girl," "girlfriend," "wife," "mom," "mother," "she," and "her" when referring to the participants themselves. Several participants also described instances in which clerks "corrected" sex designators from "female/f" to "male/m" on their trans partner's paperwork or in computer records systems, remarking about how there must have been an "error in the system," upon seeing the man in front of them. This was an important example of the way in which being misrecognized (according to medical or legal systems, which serve as gatekeepers for sex marker designation changes on personal identification documents) and recognized (in accordance with one's gender identity) may go hand in hand, providing or preventing access to regulated social and material institutions (such as a marriage license).

Nonverbal indicators that trans partners were being socially "read" as men or that the couple was being "read" as heterosexual included the check being consistently handed to one's trans partner at restaurants and other service establishments, other men giving a head "nod" when passing one's trans partner on the street, being smiled at by older persons when holding hands with one's trans partner in public,[17] and not being scrutinized when

[17] Some participants, who had been with the same partner prior to his transition, found this form of social exchange particularly salient as they noticed very different reactions from older persons when engaging in public hand-holding with the very same partner. Prior to transition, when their partner was reportedly "read" as female and the couple was "read" as lesbian, they recalled older individuals staring at them while not smiling, whispering, avoiding eye contact, and not returning smiles.

in sex-segregated public spaces (such as restrooms). In these instances, (mis)recognition processes often conferred social advantage, privilege, and mainstream acceptance. Yet being (mis)recognized as heterosexual was described as personally and socially problematic by many participants—particularly insofar as they feared being (mis)recognized as "heteronormative" by social others. Participants described their understandings of heteronormativity as fulfilling stereotypically gendered "roles" in their relationships, endorsing majoritarian politics, and not being seen as queer or politically radical.[18]

Self-identifying as "queer," among study participants, was described as a fraught (though sometimes powerfully political) solution to the inadequacy of other currently existing language choices for expressing sexual identity in the context of one's relationship with a trans partner:

> Before my ex-partner . . . I had been sort of actively claiming that I wasn't straight . . . and I was very comfortable telling people that. But I also come from a small town and the options there were very much "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual" or "straight." I didn't feel that any of those fit me. So I started saying to my friends and to whoever else, "Well, I'm not straight." But that's as far as it went . . . I hadn't had any other partners that would actually complicate that at that point. . . . But [once I met my trans ex partner], it just made sense for me to think about identifying as "queer" and that felt comfortable. (Sage, 21 years, Ontario)

Sage's narrative walks us through a process of queer identity consolidation. Sage considers sexual orientation self-identification labels in the context of her own life, coming to the conclusion that none of the existing labels accurately "fit." She first chooses a new identity category rooted in *dis*identification with an existing identity category ("not straight"). Later, a new relational context (partnering with a trans man) serves as the impetus for self-identifying in yet a new way—adopting an identity label ("queer") that was not part of the original range of self-identification choices of which she was aware or that were available to her.

Another participant, Rachel, echoed some of these same themes:

> I thought you could only pick "gay,' "straight' or "bi"; but I feel like "queer' is more accurate. Because I think "gay" implies one polarity and "straight' implies another and it doesn't include a gray area of people having a flexible self-identity. . . . So I felt like "queer' was a better identifier for me. Plus, I feel like "queer" carries with it a political component more than just like the middle-class gay people who are now, like, you see on TV and everything. "Queer" implies still active, still moving to make the world a safer and better place for people. (Rachel, 27 years, Ohio)

[18] Participants themselves used the term "roles" (e.g., "1950s housewife role") to describe the enactments of traditional wife/husband, and mother/father family dynamics as they understood them.

As this narrative illustrates, for some, choosing to self-identify as "queer" also serves as a conscious and intentional social indicator of a political stance that explicitly resists or rejects normativity in order to imagine a different or transformed social landscape. When asked what identifying as "queer" meant to her, Ani (21 years, Ohio) stated: "I needed a language for *not* being heteronormative." These experiences stand in stark contrast to calls for a "post-queer study of sexuality" (Green 2002, p. 537) in sociology or claims that the term "queer" exists primarily to symbolize a departure from sexual identity categories (Green 2002, 2007). Rather, these participants assert "queer" as one of the few (if not the only) sexual identity categories that does not overly constrain or threaten the relationships they have with their trans partners. Participants told me that self-identifying as "lesbian" in the social world carried the possibility of invalidating their trans partner's identity as a man.

It is possible to connect some of the identity and (mis)recognition struggles of these participants with those of bisexual-identified respondents from other sociological empirical work (Burrill 2001; Wolkomir 2009; Tabatabai and Linders 2011).[19] Specifically, women across each group described being (mis)recognized by social others in ways inconsonant with their own sexual self-identifications and in ways that often shifted based upon social assessments of their partner's gender identity in relation to their own. Empirical comparisons between this sample and earlier work on bisexual-identified cis women (Blumstein and Schwartz 1974, 1977, 1990; Richardson and Hart 1981; Ault 1996*a*, 1996*b*; Rust 2000) also attest to the fluidity and dynamic potential of sexual identifications. While many participants in my study reported moving from self-identifications as "lesbian" prior to a partner's transition (or partnering with a trans man) to self-identifications as "queer," women in these earlier studies often reported self-identification as lesbian when partnered with another woman and self-identification as heterosexual when partnered with a man, discussing the ways in which shifts in the sex of one's partner resulted in shifts of group membership, community, and sense of belonging. In other words, sexual identity was understood as largely situational and context/partner/community-dependent, rather than individual, inherent, or fixed and immutable.

One primary point of difference between these groups is that among the group of cis women partners of trans men I interviewed, identification as "bisexual" was reportedly an untenable choice for many as it could introduce identity and relationship insecurity through trans partners wondering whether participants were attracted to them as a man or as a woman. Fur-

[19] See also Pfeffer (2012) for further discussion of the overlaps between this sample and those focusing on bisexual-identified cis women.

ther, very few of the participants in this study self-identified as "heterosexual" ($n = 2$), with most participants expressly rejecting such self-identification and discussing how much they valued their connection to (and membership within) LGBTQ communities.

"Queer" as an empty signifier.—Paradoxically, another dominant theme that emerged among participants who self-identified as "queer" was the sentiment that "queer" can become so all-encompassing, as a catchall identity, that it may be in peril of becoming an empty social category. Gamson (1995) describes this tendency as the "queer dilemma." While the lack of boundedness associated with "queer," as an identity, can make it particularly appealing to those for whom other categories feel overly restrictive or inappropriate, for others this very unboundedness can feel quite confining:

> I could say I'm queer but I also am not so sure I want to signal that identity either because I feel sometimes queerness is a little irresponsible because it's just so overused that it becomes sort of meaningless. I don't even know what people [are] trying to indicate to me when they say that. So I don't know if I feel comfortable saying it. . . . I think my sexual identity doesn't have a particular proclivity or erotic choice that has anything to do with a pre-existing terminology. . . . So I feel like in my life I slide myself into the term that worked mostly to make other people understand me—not necessarily because I feel like it really is an adequate description of who I am. (Polly, 40 years, New York)

For Polly, therefore, "queer" serves as a social identity category in which she reluctantly places herself for the purposes of becoming socially intelligible to others rather than from a sense of its personal resonance. Polly's narrative thus highlights the critical importance and paradox of social recognition with regard to queer identities. Polly adopts a label that makes her socially recognizable and interpretable to social others. This label, however, fails to fully encapsulate or accurately describe the specificity of her particular partner choices and desires.

Amber (19 years, Ontario) offered another example of the limitations of "queer" as an identity signifier: "'Queer' is such a vague term. If you say you're queer then people will often just assume that, if you're a girl, then you're a lesbian. . . . But I date men so I don't want to . . . be just kind of lost in the queer umbrella. If you're going to look at me and want to know what box I go in, put me in the right one." For Amber, then, "queer" is a category that renders her attractions to cis men invisible. Rather than being overly all-encompassing, she finds it overly restrictive and exclusionary in the context of her own attractions and desires. Both Polly and Amber articulate the paradoxically constraining power of a seemingly "umbrella" identity category such as "queer." Some of these struggles, once again, echo those of expressly bisexual-identified women who often report being (mis)re-

cognized as heterosexual when partnered with men and as lesbian when partnered with a woman, rendering their bisexual self-identifications invisible (Burrill 2001; Wolkomir 2009; Tabatabai and Linders 2011).

Cis women and their trans partners must often work to (re)define their identities—as individuals and in relationship to one another—in ways that both challenge and extend existing linguistic and social categories. Furthermore, the rising visibility and media presence of partnerships between cis women and trans men, particularly via the medium of the Internet, contributes to the emergence of queer cultural communities through which language and support may be continuously developed, challenged, and shared (see Shapiro 2004). The Internet emergence of a new linguistic identity term, "queer-straight" (which two participants in this study used to describe their relationship with their trans partner), may be one way in which sociolinguistic innovation is developing out of existing frustrations over lack of specificity and meaning with "queer."

In addition to negotiating language and identity-classificatory systems, study participants reported marked and sometimes painful discrepancies between how they see and understand themselves and how they are seen and understood (or not) by others in their social communities and contexts. Two themes that frequently emerged for cis women partners of trans men were actually flip sides of the same "(mis)recognition coin"—being (mis)recognized (or "passing") as unremarkably straight in both queer and nonqueer social spaces and becoming invisibly queer (i.e., no longer being recognized as a rightful member of the queer community) within queer social spaces. Clearly, (mis)recognition—or being "seen" and "not seen"—by various communities is a powerful social process that critically informs, validates, and invalidates personal identities and group memberships. The following sections detail these flip sides of this same coin of social group (mis)recognition and membership processes as well as describe how the cis women in this study negotiated these processes.

Identity and Social Norm Resisting and Affiliating

"I don't want to be a housewife!"—Participants often spoke explicitly about not wanting to fall into relational patterns with their partner that might be interpreted as normative. Some cis women voiced this intention directly to their trans partner—as in the case of Emma (22 years, Ontario), who spoke of a conversation during which she reportedly told him: "I am a feminist and I don't want to be a housewife. . . . That's not who I am and that's not who you're going to be in a relationship with." Some cis women and their trans partners shared in the desire to reject and resist normativity. According to Sage (21 years, Ontario): "It sort of is a little disturbing to both of us—as individuals and together—to think that we might fall into

sort of a heterosexuality, a heteronormative pattern. Being queer, interacting as queer, presenting as queer, and being queer in the world is something that's really important to both of us." In a similar vein, Belinda (24 years, Ontario) explained: "We both say that it's a queer relationship. Neither of us are interested in passing as a straight couple or having people believe that we're a straight couple."

Recall that the majority of cis women's accounts include discussion of being (mis)recognized as heterosexual by social others. As such, these cis women's vocal and instrumental resistance to being socially (mis)recognized as anything but "queer" offers possibilities for destabilizing normativity insofar as it challenges social others' notions of what a "heterosexual couple" is like. Further, it reveals the ways in which participants position themselves explicitly against habituated, iterative enactments of normativity—which they explicitly counterpose to feminist and queer identities. Of course, their resistance may be limited given that opportunities to correct the social (mis)recognition of others do not always readily present themselves, may be unsuccessful, may be resisted by one's partner, or may be unsafe in certain social contexts. Similar to McFarland's (2004) analysis of resistance as a "social drama," I interpret resistance in the lives of cis women partners of trans men as structurally embedded relational processes that are both transformative and fraught—pushing against and disrupting the contours of normativity from within powerful interlocking social systems that push back and resist in dynamic response (see Pfeffer 2012).

Axial coding of the data revealed that cis women participants more often judged themselves to more strongly reject or resist normative practices and politics than their trans partners, particularly when they self-identified as "queer." This finding might be expected when we consider that being recognized by others as male is often socially accomplished through relational enactments of normative or hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). In other words, trans men (like cis men) often gain social recognition of their gender identity as men when engaging in stereotypical social behaviors associated with "being a man" (see Connell 1987; Brown 2009; Pfeffer 2010; Ward 2010). While there was no difference in self-reports of enacting traditional versus nontraditional gender performances in relationships across age or sexual identity of participants, younger cis women (those under 35 years of age) more frequently worried that their relationships would be (mis)recognized as heterosexual than older cis women (those 35 years of age and older). These patterns likely reflect the influence of Third Wave feminist and queer politics in the lives of cis women under 35 years of age in this sample (see Pfeffer 2010).

"We're just another straight couple with an extra set of tits!"—Despite the fact that participants most frequently identified themselves (and their relationships) as "queer" and distanced themselves and their relationships

from characterization as "heteronormative," a vocal minority made statements that could be interpreted as reflective of heteronormativity. These statements ranged from the seemingly blatant—such as that from Lily (26 years, Florida), which opens this section—to those couched in the feminist poststructuralist language of gender performativity (see Butler 1990, 1993). Axial coding of the data revealed that cis women ages 35 and older reported desires for heteronormativity more often than those younger than 35 years of age. Those cis women who reported that their trans partners were perceived socially as male "always" or "almost always" were most likely to report performing traditional enactments of gender in their relationships and to report that their trans partner embraced normativity. Cis women were also more likely to report performing traditional enactments of gender in their relationships when their partners transitioned over the course of the relationship and were trans identified when the relationship began (as opposed to those whose relationship began as lesbian or those who were with partners who had already completed most of their transition by the time the relationship began).

When Ellia (24 years, New Mexico) was asked how she would describe the type of relationship that she has with her partner, she responded: "We're just a straight couple. He's my fiancé, we're getting married, we're just a straight couple." While Ellia's description is laden with unremarkable, normative descriptors (e.g., "straight," "he," "fiancé," "married," "straight," "couple"), her invocation of the phrase, "We're *just* [my emphasis] a straight couple," twice, may be interpreted as awareness that, without defending the normativity of her partnership, her relationship may be quite unlikely to be understood by others as "just a straight couple." Margaret (29 years, Massachusetts) offered another perspective on distancing her family from counternormativity: "One of the first conversations we ever had was about kids, how many we wanted, and what the time frame was and we aligned completely . . . Sometimes, when you're *super* radical, you get to *not* be radical! And I want our kids to have one set of parents with one last name." Margaret's conceptualization is an interesting and provocative one—it suggests that privately held queer identities (which may be socially invisible or hidden, particularly in the context of family life) remain socially radical. Furthermore, it suggests that, based on this internally held queer identity, it is possible (and perhaps even acceptable) to access certain privileges and normative institutions that do not challenge or erode the "queerness" of these privately held queer identities. Margaret acknowledges and resists normative understandings of family as she casts herself in the part of "*super* radical" and relays the negotiations and deliberations in which she and her partner have engaged with regard to having and naming children. This vision of a possible future that Margaret envisions allows her to transform normative ("*not* radical")

practices of having and naming children into a "*super* radical" enterprise of queer family building.

Cis women participants also articulated their experiences enacting what some may interpret as habituated and stereotypically gendered relational structures in ways they explicitly linked to conscious gender performativity and normative resistance (Pfeffer 2012). According to Rachel (27 years, Ohio): "I think he had this fantasy . . . which I don't think exists for anybody anymore. But, in his head, part of becoming a man was becoming a *Leave It to Beaver* dad—like coming home and mom has dinner on the table and whatever else is happening. But it turns out he cleans house more than I do and he cooks more than I do. So I think, at this point, our relationship is undefinable by present terms; so I would just say, 'queer.' It's just different. It's different than anything available." Eliza (24 years, Nova Scotia) offered another example that paralleled Rachel's but also explicitly considered the importance of others' social perceptions of her relationship structure:

> We're both very sort of intrigued by 50s décor and roles and all that sort of stuff. . . . I will take on the role of housewife and, a lot of the time, it's this tongue-in-cheek sort of thing. He'll be like, "Get me a beer!" and I'll put on an apron and run off into the other room, "Here ya go, dear!" It's very sort of playful. Again, it's the performance of gender instead of *really* taking it all that seriously. But, at the same time . . . the kitchen is *my* kitchen and all this sort of stuff that's very gendered. . . . Sometimes I'm concerned that other people might not quite get it and that they might think that we're really espousing these very traditional roles. . . . I don't want to be the passive wife. . . . I'd much rather be the tough wife.

For these participants, performing normativity is a reportedly conscious dynamic that holds the potential to be simultaneously nostalgic, flexible, ironic, and difficult to define. Cis women and their trans men partners clearly engage in dynamic, relational processes that produce and validate enactments of gender in ways that may be simultaneously normative and counternormative, despite the commonly voiced concern to not be (mis)recognized as traditional or unremarkably heterosexual (for more on this, see Brown [2009]; Ward [2010]; Pfeffer [2010], [2012]).

A sociological queer analysis might also usefully trouble assertions that those in relationships with trans people must have relationships that are somehow more transgressive or counternormative than other types of relationships. As Kessler and McKenna (2003) note, the prefix "trans" in "transgender" does not necessarily refer to the "transcendence" or "transformation" of gender or gender normativity, and to assume that it does is to minimize decades of sociological work testifying to the rigidity and recalcitrance of the socially structuring gender binary in our society. These assertions also fail to consider the ways in which identity choices are socially

embedded, strategic, and constrained. From a queer sociological analytic perspective, we might approach questions about whether the relationships between cis women and trans men reflect a radical subversion of cultural normativity or merely mirror and repackage cultural normativity with some degree of critical suspicion. Such questions implicitly suggest that the onus of responsibility for radically reconfiguring gendered power relations ultimately lies with a numerical and marginalized social minority. Indeed, we might usefully redirect such questions toward whether or not relationships between cis women and cis men—the numerical majority in our culture—currently reflect radical subversion of cultural normativity. Doing so reminds us of the powerful structuring forces of inequality for all social actors and also points to potentially fruitful alliances between social actors working toward equality aims. Building these communities of political and social alliance and resistance was described as an area of particular struggle for the cis women in this study.

Community Belonging, Vanishing, and Outcasting

"A normal, boring couple" and "I definitely don't miss being scared".—Brown (2009) describes "sexual identity renegotiation" as a central challenge faced by cis women partners of trans men. When providing accounts of their experiences in social spaces, cis women sometimes discussed how being (mis)recognized as unremarkably heterosexual was a social phenomenon highly desired by one's trans partner, while their own feelings remained more ambivalent or even conflicted. As Frieda (28 years, Ontario) discussed:

> [My partner] definitely was into the whole idea of us passing as a straight couple, so nothing queer really fit into our everyday lives or relationship because his main priority was passing as a man and that I should look like a woman so we can pass as a straight couple and he can blend in. So he encouraged me to look more feminine and to have my hair long and things like that . . . [but] I wanted to shave my head and . . . pierce things and . . . do things that normal, boring, feminine, straight women didn't usually do and they didn't fit in with what he wanted. . . . I kind of felt guilty or selfish if I tried to dress the way that I wanted. . . . When we were going out together, I tried to look as feminine and as boring as I could so we could pass as a normal, boring couple.

Frieda's narrative speaks to the way in which her partner's accomplishment of recognition as a man depends, at least in part, on social others' recognition of her as normatively feminine. This makes sense if we consider that the accomplishment of social recognition as a "normal" man depends, centrally, upon being perceived by others as not a woman and not gay (Connell 1987). In other words, social recognition of Frieda's partner as a man is facilitated

through social assumptions linking manhood and heteronormativity. This assumed connection to heteronormativity was both troubling and strange to many participants—particularly those for whom social recognition as lesbian and counternormative had become a critical aspect of their sense of self.

Polly (40 years, New York) discussed challenges connected to reinterpreting her own identity, the social perceptions of others, and social group memberships:

> I think I'm still trying to sort out what it means *not* to be a lesbian. There is a nice *recognition* [author's emphasis] when you're walking down the street with your girlfriend and you're holding hands and see another lesbian and they see you as a lesbian and it's like you feel like you're all in the same club. So I miss that. . . . I just sort of feel like this level of boringness. I guess I have to say I definitely got off on the transgression of having men look at me and then kissing my girlfriend. And now it's like I have men look at me and then I kiss him and it's like, "Big whoop." . . . It's just not the same charge. So I think I miss that. I miss some of that transgressive sort of fucking with people's heteronormative assumptions and now I'm just like basically following the script and it feels a little weird. It's not quite as fun. [I miss] the performativity of being gay. . . . Sometimes it's scary and you don't do it. So I definitely don't miss being scared.

For both Frieda and Polly, social experiences wherein they believed their partner was recognized by others as a man elided their own queer visibility, creating the paradoxical situation of gaining access to heteronormative social privilege while simultaneously losing access to (or recognition by) sexual minority communities with which they strongly identify/identified. Furthermore, both describe "passing" or being (mis)recognized as heterosexual as "boring," highlighting the power of visibly queer social identities to provoke and dynamically elicit sexually charged, emotional responses based upon their connection to transgressiveness. Polly's concluding remark, alluding to the danger associated with public expressions of intimacy that are recognized as lesbian, highlights a pragmatic aspect of being (mis)recognized as heterosexual: reduced threat of physical and sexual violence directed toward those who are more visibly queer.

Most cis women who reported being (mis)recognized as part of a heterosexual couple, by family, friends, or strangers, acknowledged the privilege that such (mis)recognition entails, while simultaneously expressing discomfort with this privilege and bemoaning the inevitable trade-off of losing social recognition as queer. Margaret (29 years, Massachusetts) stated: "I have mixed feelings about it. Sometimes I really like passing. There's a real social benefit to it; it makes it a lot easier." Veronica (21 years, New York) told me: "It makes me feel safe in the world," but she also commented on the flip side: "It makes me feel really invisible and that's something he and I both

deal with a lot. We don't like the invisibility factor. We're always looking for ways to be visible and to educate others. So maybe that's the only way because I don't really know how much we can walk down the street wearing shirts that say, 'We're not so straight!'" When Maya (30 years, California), who had just had a baby, was asked to discuss how she felt she and her partner are perceived by others, she responded: "It's annoying because we get such privilege everywhere we go. . . . My mother's like, 'Thank God!' And I provided her a grandchild, so I'm 'normal.' In some respects it's good and in other respects I wish *everyone* had that." Eliza (25 years, Nova Scotia), who is legally married to her trans partner, stated: "With family . . . there's a thing in the back of my head that wonders if it's so easy for them because now we're a 'straight couple.' It's almost less explaining for them to do in the future. Sometimes it's a mixed blessing." As Eliza reveals, family members' potential investments in processes of doing sexuality for their relatives further highlight sexuality as an interactive social accomplishment. These narratives also reveal a keenly developed consciousness of the way queer people experience the sometimes-marginalizing gaze of nonqueer people, poignantly highlighting the disjuncture between self-identification and social (mis)recognition.

"Another breeder couple invading".—Participants in this study also described the experience of losing access to (and social recognition within) queer communities as they became "invisibly queer."[20] Margaret (29 years, Massachusetts) said: "When I see lesbian couples with a baby, I smile at them and have this moment of like, 'What a cute couple with a baby.' And [my partner] and I have this experience together because, at one point, he had been externally identified by others as a lesbian. So we have this moment of, 'Oh, another queer couple with a baby!' But [lesbian couples] . . . don't see that we're having this moment of camaraderie like, 'Yay, you did it, we're going to do it!' They see us as like, 'Oh, those straight people are looking at us.'" Maya (30 years, California) offered a similar story: "We can go anywhere and not have people looking at us except when we're in [a gay neighborhood] and then it's like, 'Oh, another breeder couple invading.' And I just want to wear rainbow flags everywhere I go so I can prove that I belong in this community." Lilia (22 years, California) also articulated the not-uncommon experience of having her queer identity elided by others within the queer community: "My lesbian friends . . . [are] like, basically, 'Oh, so you turned straight.' . . . [But] I don't consider this a straight relationship since he's very queer. . . . I can see how it's straight in some context. But it's queer. His experiences of growing up as a woman

[20] See Brown (2009) for a discussion of similar experiences among another sample of cis women partners of trans men.

[are] what makes it queer." In each of these narratives, participants describe experiencing the elision of their queerness—disappearing into the background of queer communities within which they often previously found community and recognition as queer. Many cis women participants described being (mis)recognized as heterosexual as not only personally invalidating but as alienating from queer communities of social support and belonging. Once again, these experiences echo those of bisexual-identified women who often report being ostracized from lesbian communities when partnered with men and from heterosexual communities when partnered with women (Burrill 2001; Wolkomir 2009; Tabatabai and Linders 2011).

Cis women partners of trans men faced challenges of marginalization not only from social distancing, exclusion, and (mis)recognition by others within LGBTQ communities, but sometimes as a result of their trans partner's wish to disassociate from these communities to reinforce their own social recognition as a man. Belinda (24 years, Ontario) spoke about losing her connection to lesbian community when her partner disengaged from it:

> It was tough for me as someone who had just kind of come out as a lesbian. I remember wanting to do lesbian things and go to lesbian bars and that kind of stuff. And I remember a switch in him where he was like, "No, I'm a straight guy." And I think that was hard because there was this community that I was trying to get involved with that suddenly didn't work with his identity. . . . I didn't really know that there was the option of him saying, "I'm queer." I just figured that's what happened when someone became trans—you were a lesbian and now you're straight.

Belinda articulates the limited (and often limiting) nature of social models of identity in the context of transition. Belinda was unaware that there were other ways (than "straight male") for trans men in relationships with cis women to identify and that these different identifications (if embraced by her partner) might generate alternate possibilities for her own identity and membership to social communities. Narratives like Belinda's also highlight how the accomplishment of social recognition as a man often necessitates social distancing from LGBTQ communities and spaces.

"The People that I dated would make me visibly queer".—When considering the personal and social identities and group memberships of cis women partners of trans men, it is also important to consider the often temporal-relational and contingent aspects of these ways of being and belonging in the world. Susan (23 years, Tennessee) articulated two distinct dilemmas she faced as a formerly lesbian-identified cis woman and as the former partner of a trans man: "I lost my community. . . . You lose the lesbian community and you really don't get anything else. . . . And the partners' [of trans men] community—you're only a valid member of that as long as you're in your relationship, which has nothing to do with *you* and every-

thing to do with *him*." For Susan, carving out a space in the queer community along with other partners of trans men reflected both a contingent and tenuous subject position within such communities. Susan's experiences of being pushed out of lesbian community spaces upon partnering with a trans man was not uncommon. Rather than operating along explicit cut-and-dried practices of inclusion and exclusion, many cis women described more subtle social practices in which their rightful membership within lesbian community spaces was challenged or brought into question once they began relationships with trans men or once a previously lesbian-identified partner began to move away from that identity and transitioned to living as a trans man.

Ani (21 years, Ohio) discussed another challenge in her relationship with a partner who socially identified as a "man" rather than as a "transgender man": "It's a lot easier to be able to [say]: 'Yes, I'm queer, I'm dating a *trans man*,' as opposed to, 'Yes, I'm queer, I'm dating a *man*.' People won't ask you to justify yourself in the same way. . . . Your sexuality clearly relies on your partner." Ani's partner's gender identity and recognition by social others as a man meant that her own queer identity was frequently made invisible—rendering her unremarkably heterosexual in the eyes of social others, including queer social others.

Nearly 30% of the participant sample self-identified, unprompted, as "femme"—meaning that the actual composition of femme-identifying or feminine-appearing cis women in the sample is likely higher than 30%. Nyamora (2004) and Brown (2009) both describe the ways in which cis femme-identified women partners of trans men frequently experience a grieving process in connection to the perceived loss of their queer femme visibility. Further, many of the participants in my study discussed how others' recognition of their queerness often relies upon their connection to a partner who embodies female masculinity in a visible and culturally intelligible way. For example, Teresa (24 years, Maine) told me:

> I think as a femme. . . . I don't feel like I've ever been seen as queer when I've been by myself. I think so often in my history of dating people that the people that I dated would make me visibly queer. So it's really interesting when the person I'm dating makes me *invisible*. And so I don't gain any visibility as a lesbian or as someone who is queer when being out in public with [my trans partner] the way I would with past partners. So that's really, really hard. However, in a way it sort of feels almost liberating because now I and only I am responsible for my queer visibility. . . . I think that it's sexism, honestly, that femmes are seen as invisible beings when really we're radically queer in our own right and we're just never given that credit.

As Teresa articulates, femme-appearing/identifying cis women partnered with trans men, therefore, may face particular barriers with regard to be-

ing recognized as a member of the communities to which they belong and with which they identify (see also Nyamora 2004; Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Ward 2010).[21]

These narratives reveal the extent to which queer visibility remains culturally synonymous with social perceptions of female masculinity and male femininity (Hutson 2010), often rendering those who embody cis femininity within queer communities invisible as queer. These narratives also echo earlier writings on lesbian butch and femme genders as socially intelligible identities around which communities materialized and organized (cf., Ponse 1978; Krieger 1983; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Kennedy and Davis 1993). Queer invisibility was of particular concern and consideration to many of the femme-identified cis women I interviewed. This articulated invisibility serves as a marked empirical contrast to theorizing around femme identity (e.g., Hollibaugh 1997; Munt 1998; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003), which marks it as politically transgressive (and even "transgender") in its own right. Such fissures between personal experience and political potential further highlight the need to examine the processes by which gender and sexual identities are produced through social interaction.

"You're not really gay" and "Take your pants off and show me".—Participants spoke about the ways in which queer femininities may not only be rendered invisible within queer and nonqueer cultural spaces, but how they may also be explicitly devalued within some queer communities relative to queer androgynies and queer masculinities (Kennedy and Davis 1993; Cogan 1999; Levitt et al. 2003). As Belinda (24 years, Ontario) told me:

> Basically within the lesbian community I was like completely made fun of. I used to have people make fun of me for carrying a purse and looking "too girly" and, "Oh you're not *really* gay." Just those kinds of comments. So that was really hard for me when I was coming out because I just wanted to be taken seriously you know. . . . So my response to that [when I first came out] was to kind of change to become *less* feminine, change my body posturing and the way that I dress and cut off all my hair and that kind of stuff.

Narratives like Belinda's exemplified some queer cis women's experience of living in the liminal space of insider/outsider with regard to both queer and nonqueer communities.

Ward (2010) suggests that sidelining of the power and transgressive potential of femme identity among cis women partners of trans men may be an artifact of their primary social status within trans communities as allies and

[21] It must also be noted that the gender presentation of trans men is of critical importance here in others' constructions of the couple's sexual identity. Women who told me that their trans partner was often perceived as a gay man by social others were often misrecognized as "friends" rather than romantic partners. Some women described instances of their partner being hit on by other men in their presence.

supporters of their partners—one of the forms of "gender labor" in which they engage. Some of the strategies self-identified femme participants described for rendering their queer identities more recognizable included adopting unique and unconventional hairstyles and hair colors, wearing rainbow jewelry and other LGBTQ pride symbols, dressing in vintage clothing, and obtaining visible tattoos and piercings, embodying counternormative embodiment practices with the intention of visually signifying their queer identities (see also Pitts 2000). Participants' narratives revealed the impact of being rendered invisible or an outsider not only in terms of one's own queer identity and relationship but also in determining the parameters of in-group/out-group social membership itself.

While some trans men and their cis women partners described being (mis)recognized as heterosexual and becoming invisible as queer within LGBTQ communities, other participants reported that their partners were (mis)recognized as trans men or as cis women, rather than cis men, more often in gay and lesbian social spaces than in mainstream or non-LGBTQ social spaces. The tensions between these (mis)recognition processes carried striking social consequences. One set of trends that emerged in participants' accounts involved (1) explicit exclusion of trans people and their partners from primarily gay and lesbian social spaces and (2) intimidating and even violent interactions aimed toward "finding out" the "real" sex of those who are trans as they interact within primarily gay and lesbian social spaces. Seventeen (34%) participants described instances of being told by leaders of gay and lesbian organizations (or hearing through the grapevine) that their or their partner's presence was no longer welcome since their partner's transition. Martha (25 years, Massachusetts) described making reservations at a lesbian bed and breakfast only to be told that she and her partner were no longer welcome upon the innkeeper's learning of her partner's transition. Lynne (35 years, California) described the exclusion of trans men from the yearly "dyke march" in her town.

June (21 years, Ontario), Kendra (21 years, Ohio), and Samantha (20 years, Michigan) each relayed harrowing and eerily similar experiences their trans partner had in gay and lesbian bars. According to June: "He went out to a . . . lesbian bar . . . and they wanted him to prove that he was actually male. So there was a lot of, 'Take your pants off and show me,' type of thing. They followed him into the bathroom and it was about an hour of harassment like that." Samantha told me: "He was going to the bathroom . . . and he was waiting for the stalls and . . . this old lesbian got up in [his] face and was like, 'Go use the other bathroom, we need this one more than you do. . . .' And she got really up in his face about it and he was like, 'I'm trans. I have to sit to pee.' And she was like, 'No you're not. . . .' She actually ripped his shirt off to see." In the context of a gay bar, Kendra relayed the following description:

> He almost got beat up that night. . . . He went to the women's restroom because he wasn't fully male and he didn't want gay guys to find out that he didn't have a penis; so he chose to use the women's restroom that night. He was still fairly early into his transition and a guy followed him in there and watched him urinate and said, 'Take off that binder. I don't know why you want to be a guy. . . .' Later, the guy lunged across the dance floor at my partner and, luckily, one of our friends pushed him out of the way.

In each of these instances, trans men were held accountable for others' recognition of them as men—social processes that could have frightening and even dangerous consequences, even within communities that had formerly served as relatively safe havens from exclusion and discrimination.[22]

These narratives attest to the permeability and instability of membership and recognition within various identity-based communities. In a social context that continues to affirm fixed and naturalized binaries (male/female, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual) despite increasing evidence documenting the fluidity and diversity of sex, gender, and sexual identifications, we find herein evidence for these identities as interactive social accomplishments. Perhaps even more important, we are urged to reconsider just who should be held accountable when it comes to recognizing the sex, gender, and sexual identities of others.

CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES FOR SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND BROADER APPLICATION

In this study, I draw from Connell's (2009) notion of "recognition" to demonstrate the myriad ways in which we "do" not only gender, but sexuality as well, revealing sexual identities as interactional social accomplishments through which status, rights, and group membership may be stripped or conveyed. By challenging the essentialist notion that sexual identities are largely fixed and natural/biological, we are better poised to consider what is at stake when social actors recognize and misrecognize their peers' sexual self-identifications. The cis women I interviewed often vocally asserted their self-identification as queer. Yet in many instances, these cis women's accounts focused on being (mis)recognized by both queer and nonqueer social others as unremarkably heterosexual. Which of these accounts of their sexual identity is "true"? These findings prompt consideration of how the social effects of (mis)recognition processes (e.g., being able to access regulated social institutions and social membership within particular groups) are

[22] Of course it is important to consider that lesbian and gay communities, while often providing shelter from homophobia and heterosexism, still struggle with issues of inclusion and discrimination not only with regard to those who are trans or bisexual but with regard to racism, classism, ableism, and sizeism (to name just a few areas) as well.

powerfully structuring—perhaps even largely determinant—of social group membership.

This study is a step toward theorization of queer social (mis)recognition processes to consider how seeing and not seeing/recognizing and not recognizing one another's social identities and embodiments matters.[23] More specifically, this study outlines strategies deployed by queer social actors to strategically manage these (mis)recognition processes and to gain access to particular social and material benefits of social group membership. Extending Connell's (2009) "recognition" framework, this study highlights what is at stake in social (mis)recognition processes not only for queer social actors but also for everyone, as these processes reveal the ways in which access to regulated social groups and institutions is often mediated largely through interactional and perceptual social processes rather than static or essential aspects of individuals.

Namaste, writing about queerness and queer theory, states: "We cannot assert ourselves to be outside of heterosexuality, nor entirely inside, because each of these terms achieves its meaning in relation to the other. . . . We can think about the *how* of these boundaries . . . how they are created, regulated and contested" (1994, p. 224). This analysis offers further insight into that *how*—detailing the ways in which heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and queer identities and social identity group memberships overlap and are messily embraced, resisted, and (mis)recognized in the context of cis women's relationships with trans men. How might we make sense of the following narrative from a cis woman partner of a trans man that inspired the title for this article and was emblematic of many of the responses that I received? "I don't like passing as a straight woman. I would feel like I wasn't visible at times—and same with him, that he wasn't visible. . . . Both of our identities were very blurred; and that's a tough thing when so much of who we are is about other people perceiving us. . . . I like my queer identity and that's what I want people to see. So it was tough when I knew that wasn't being seen" (Martha, 25 years, Massachusetts). Much of the thrust of the mainstream lesbian and gay social movement over the past two decades has focused on protesting and bringing greater public awareness to discrimination against lesbians and gay men as

[23] Here, I nod to Judith Butler's (1993) germinal text, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* in which she revisits the social change potential of "gender performativity" by considering the social constructedness of sex and the material body. In this article, I work to provide a more empirically grounded consideration of the ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality are social processes than Butler's (in many ways problematic—see Namaste [2000]) textual reading of the documentary film *Paris Is Burning*. In other words, I argue here not only that social identities and their (mis)-recognition are sociologically important but also that it is sociologically useful to consider how embodiments and identities presumed natural or biological may be produced by and through social processes.

well as their exclusion from various social institutions and privileges, such as legally recognized marriage.[24]

In calling for expanded rights and inclusion, mainstream lesbian and gay social movements have largely centered upon crafting a politics of sameness and respectability that stands in stark contrast to the oppositional politics of activist groups of the late 1960s through the early 1990s—such as the Gay Liberation Front, ACT UP, and Queer Nation (Duggan 2002; Ward 2008). Further, many of these more recent efforts depend largely upon appeals to the biological/genetic etiology of sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g., Lady Gaga's aforementioned pop culture anthem, "Born This Way"). Couching demands for inclusion, equality, and freedom from discrimination within a framework of biological determinism consistently compels the following presumably rhetorical defense of these demands when they face social opposition: "In the context of historical and contemporary social discrimination and exclusion, why would anyone *choose* this?" Yet narratives and self-identifications like Martha's provide evidence against the counterfactual claim that no one would choose queerness if given such an option, just as they simultaneously recognize and explicitly value queer identities and queer cultures per se. They also reframe the issue of "choice" to consider that choosing to self-identify as queer is not synonymous with choosing social (mis)recognition, exclusion, and discrimination. In other words, many of the women I interviewed refused to be held accountable for other people's (mis)recognition of their or their partner's sex, gender, and sexual identities.

Rather, the cis women I interviewed often discussed their queer sexual politics as being deeply rooted in challenging existing social norms, speaking out against discrimination aimed toward those who transgress and advocating for greater social equality and inclusion regardless of gender or sexual identity. Many of the cis women I interviewed for this project, in their outspoken self-identifications as queer, fissure normative assumptions of both mainstream lesbian and gay and heterosexual cultures as they raise their hands in response to the now-familiar social refrain: "Who would *choose* this?" As such, these cis women's claims assert a queer identity that poses challenges—inside/out—to the logics of both mainstream lesbian and gay social movements as well as normative cultural ideology, despite the persistent social and structural challenges they face when doing so.[25] As Warner (1993, p. xxvi) writes, "The preference for 'queer' represents, among other

[24] For an overview of the public response to these efforts, see Stone (2012).

[25] See Fuss (1991) and Namaste (1994) for more on the inside/out dimensions of LGBTQ theory, politics, and identity; see Namaste (1994) for a vision for poststructuralist queer sociology. For a more extended discussion of cis women partner's expressions of agency and "normative resistance" in the context of limiting social structures and institutions, see Pfeffer (2012).

things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal."

Choosing queer self-identification and alliance as a form of normative resistance (see Pfeffer 2012) is not limited by the contours of one's own body in relation to those of one's partner(s). Normative social structures inscribe the parameters within which all social actors must live their daily lives. As such, all social actors desiring social change (perhaps especially those with normative privilege) are accountable for, and have a vested interest in, resisting and pushing against these parameters, as well as supporting others engaged in similar or parallel forms of resistance. Reframing and reorienting sociological analyses to the normative center, therefore, highlights the accountability and responsibility that those with relative privilege hold with regard to enacting social change, resisting stultifying normativity, and reconfiguring relationships of power. In doing so, we might further shift our inquiries to consider how and why anyone might develop and nurture their own and others' queer identities and relationships for the purposes of greater gender and sexual equality.

Connell (2009) argues that it is ultimately in the best interests of social others who are committed to gender equality to recognize the "belonging" of trans people within social identity groups corresponding to their gender identity. In this way, Connell urges a fundamental shift in how we approach studies of transgender social actors. Rather than focusing on transgender social actors' accomplishment of normative gender through "passing," sociologists might focus, instead, on the interactional processes whereby all social actors serve as arbiters of the gender order as they recognize or reject others as "belonging" to (or rightful members of) particular gender and sexual identity categories and groups. In essence, this reformulation usefully holds a mirror up to society. This mirror reflects back an image of statistical majorities who hold greatest social power in (re)producing and maintaining gender binaries and biologically essentialist notions of sex that translate to gender and sexual identity (mis)recognition processes. A central task, then, for sociological understanding of transgender identity and relationships pivots upon recognition of potential social solidarity between cis and trans social actors: "It requires us to think of social embodiment as an active, changing historical process, not as a matter of fixed categories for bodies" (Connell 2009, p. 108).

Sociological queer analyses may be considered extensions of the sociological imagination, working to approach the normative as "strange" in order to more clearly observe taken-for-granted assumptions that (re)produce normative social structures and their attendant forms of regulation and oppression. The work of challenging oppression requires, as Connell (2009, p. 109) notes, greater collective solidarity among social actors who inhabit—inci-

dentally or intentionally—various social identity groups: "To sociologists, the contestation of gender hierarchy is fundamentally a collective process; it is not likely to be understood as a matter of individual gestures or dissent. Contestation as a social struggle requires some base of solidarity, of mutual support." The importance of queer (mis)recognition processes lies, at least in part, in destabilizing notions of the presumed "naturalness" and fixed perpetuity of identities (such as sex, gender, sexuality, race, and class)—dogged belief in which reinforces and reproduces the hierarchical social order. The present analysis reveals some of the understudied ways in which the supposedly "natural" and stable links between sex, gender, and sexuality are under perpetual social challenge, flux, and maintenance. As this sociological queer analysis demonstrates, (mis)recognition processes hold the potential not only to constrain and render certain social actors (in)visible but also to more generously and broadly inscribe the parameters of identity and social group membership, even as they challenge the surety and boldness with which these very lines of demarcation are drawn.

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