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## **Article**

### **Trans Men and Friendships: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

While research focusing on friendships of sexual minority individuals has increased over the last two decades, studies of transgender persons' friendships have been largely absent. Yet, within mainstream literature it has been demonstrated that friendships are central both to identity formation and as support in terms of psychological need and distress. Given that trans people face important identity challenges and may well be disenfranchised within society the role of friendships warrants study. Research which has occurred has largely focussed on trans women, yet trans men face particular issues in terms of their relationships with lesbian women and being positioned as joining patriarchy. This study explored this gap in the literature and used Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore friendship and gender identity. Dominant discourses identified included 'friends as family', 'romance' and discursive practices of 'disowning male privilege', 'effeminate heterosexual male' and 'gender fluidity' which counter hegemonic (trans) male re-positioning within friendships. The results indicate that trans men elevate the status of friends to those of other culturally dominant relationships (e.g. family or sexual partner). Furthermore, their friendships, in particular friendships with lesbian women, can become complex platforms from which to contest privilege and power

associated with their (trans) masculinities. Conceptual and research implications are discussed.

### **Keywords**

gender identity, transgender, friendship, masculinity, discourse analysis

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### **Introduction**

Sociological perspectives of friendship have traditionally considered how social structures and contexts influence forms and practices of friendship, paying particular attention to factors such as class, gender and regionality, but more recently acknowledging the historical and cultural specificity of our understandings of friendship (Pahl, 2006; Adams and Allan, 1998). Current Western privileged ideas point towards friendships being of increasing importance as sites of intimacy or care and qualities such as egalitarianism, reciprocity and subversion being salient (Pahl, 2006; Dreher 2009; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Within psychology, understanding the purposes of friendships, how they are formed, and maintained is important given that friendships have been shown to be central to individual well-being and that they provide a buffer to

psychological distress (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). Furthermore, friendship networks have been identified as an important framework around which individual identity development occurs (Poulin and Chan, 2010). As such friendships may be important for transgender<sup>1</sup> individuals, given their perceived identity transformation, in addition to the psychological challenges they may face due to their minority grouping. Although friendship research on sexual minority groups has increased over the last twenty years (e.g. Nardi and Sherrod, 1994; Weinstock, 1998; Shepperd et al., 2010), little is known about transgender people's friendships and the experiences of trans men are particularly absent in the literature (Cromwell, 1999). Understanding more about how such friendships change and develop in relation to the changing gender identity of trans men will enrich our conceptualisation and understanding of the nature of friendships in addition to identifying ways of strengthening support mechanisms for these individuals.

### **Sexual minority friendships**

Psychological research on friendship has been criticised for its hetero-normative bias (e.g. Rose, 2000), and a growing body of research on sexual minority friendships suggests that friendship patterns differ from those of heterosexual people, and also among sexual minority groups. One focus has been on demarcations between friendships and other intimate relationships, indicating that demarcations between friendships and sexual or family relationships tend to be more fluid and complex than in heterosexual identified people (Peplau and Fingerhut, 2007). A frequently reported notion within lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) communities is the concept of 'family of choice', which has been adapted to describe strong ties within LGB friendships extending beyond families of

origin (Weeks et al., 2001). Weinstock (1998) argues that ‘family of choice’ operate as alternative families for often rejecting family relationships.

When it comes to sexual relationships, sexual contact is usually defined as a distinct feature of heterosexual partner relationships, whereas friendships tend to be understood as non-sexual relationships prioritising intimacy and self-disclosure, equality being a distinct attribute (Rose, 2000; Fehr, 1996). However, studies with lesbian and gay participants challenge this understanding. Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) suggest these demarcations are artificial and argue friendships *are* love relationships. This is supported by research which indicates that lesbian and gay individuals have a greater tendency to stay friends with ex-partners (Solomon et al., 2004). In addition, studies suggest lesbian women are more likely to define their current or ex-partner as their best friends, and gay men were more likely to have had sexual contact with close friends (Weinstock, 2004; Nardi and Sherrod, 1994).

### **Transgender individuals and friendships**

Despite this increase of friendship research within sexual minority populations, research findings about the friendships of transgender individuals are still scarce. So far the importance of friendships in transgender people’s lives has mainly transpired through research of other subject areas, where qualitative studies exploring transgender identity formation and disclosure have indicated friends are crucial during those times. This research has also seen a tendency to investigate MtF rather than FtM experiences, which is argued by Rubin (2003) to be a consequence of the initial demographic invisibility of FtM and then the historical ‘category confusion’ resulting from early feminist-lesbian

debates. As a consequence there remains a gender imbalance of focus even within this small area of research.

Studies within the MtF literature indicate that friendships play an important role for support and affirmation of the desired gender identity. Gagne and her colleagues interviewed 65 MtF transgender people about their gender experiences throughout their lives (Gagne et al., 1997; Gagne and Tewksbury, 1998). They found that interaction with others fulfils affirmative functions in the attainment of a new authentic gender identity; kinship networks, support groups and families of choice being crucial. Additionally, a cross-sectional study (Nuttbrook et al., 2009) involving 500 MtF individuals explored gender affirmation within different kinds of relationships (parents, siblings, long-term sexual partners, friends, fellow students or co-workers) throughout life. The main findings in relation to friendships indicate that transgender people are most likely to disclose their gender identity to friends and sexual partners. Additionally, friends are more likely to react to participants in their preferred gender identity (desired gender role casting) than sexual partners or family members. The authors conclude gender role casting may be more easily achieved in friendships than in family relationships (Nuttbrook et al., 2009).

Within the limited FtM literature it is indicated that friendships can help FtMs differentiate their gender identity from other identities available. Lee (2001) compared FtM's with lesbian women's stories of identity, because many FtMs identify as lesbian women at some point. The study indicates that lesbian friendships are particularly important, because they can help FtMs define who they are *not*. Lee (2001) uses the term 'othering' to describe the process of an identity being recognised and defined by being

‘other’, befitting to philosophical notions for the need of the ‘other’ to define the ‘self’ (e.g. De Beauvoir, 1949/1972).

In addition to being affirming and supportive, friendships can also be a source of threat for transgender people. Johnson’s (2007a) interviews with seven MtF and seven FtM individuals indicate that close relationships can be experienced as disavowal of transitioning. This is particularly key to trans people who separate their acquired gender identity from their past identity by positioning themselves as a ‘new person’. In these accounts, some transgender participants discontinue their social relationships, because non-recognition of their acquired gender identity may lead to a fragmented sense of self (Johnson, 2007a). Similarly, support and rejection were also experienced by participants of a US study (Alegria, 2010). The researcher interviewed 17 MtF and their natal female partners. Qualitative analysis of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews revealed that social networks were one of the main beneficial factors that helped participants to manage disclosure and transition. The author also reported that the lesbian community was very welcoming to MtF participants, because they transitioned to same-sex couple status. In contrast, previous reports have indicated that some trans men and their female partners have experienced rejection by lesbian networks (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler, 2009).

### **Aims of the present study**

A paucity of research has been identified relating to transgender people’s friendships which is especially significant given the centrality of such relationships for support and identity formation for a group who are frequently disenfranchised and undergoing challenges to their identity. Additionally, as male and female, gay and

lesbian friendships have been found to differ it may be expected that the experience of trans men to trans women may also differ. Since research on trans men is particularly under-represented, the study focused on this group and aims to provide a richer understanding of transgender people's friendships, especially in relationship to the formation of a trans identity. Foucauldian discourse analysis was deemed the most appropriate qualitative method, since the epistemological position being taken is that gender is socially constructed and sculpted within hierarchies of power. The study aims to understand how trans men construct and manage their change of gender identity in relation to the reciprocal roles they hold with friends and what discourses underpin these relationships.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

A research design was employed which aimed to be sensitive to the trans community as previous research has historically been dominated by a pathologising stance, and consultation with trans communities indicates they support non-pathologising and qualitative research (Staunton et al., 2009). Consequently, the design was qualitative in nature and used a creative methodological approach. The value of creative methods within research has received increasing attention over the last ten years and aims to take a stance which is empowering and acknowledges participants' creative and reflective skills (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006; Barker, 2010). Drawing of friendship system maps was used so participants could generate discourses of identities and relationships in non-rehearsed ways by having a novel way of engaging with their stories. This approach lent



itself to open up narratives and counter Plummer's (1995) concern about storytelling of sexual identities and behaviours frequently being well-rehearsed and following similar fundamental elements.

### **Epistemological position**

This study employed a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach to analyse the social constructions of friendship and gender. A social constructionist epistemological position was taken in relation to both friendships and gender identity as both topics are 'fluid'; their understanding being a product of a system of meaning related to time, place and subject positions. As the friendship networks of trans men are relatively unexplored it is important to see how 'non rehearsed' discourses are drawn upon to describe these relationships, revealing how they are positioned within these unique circumstances, compared and contrasted with more known friendship trajectories. Within Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) language is constitutive, constructive of psychological experience and linked to social practices (Burr, 2003). Discourses are situated within particular social, historical or cultural conditions and ideologies (Parker, 1992) and make available subject positions, which allow individuals' ways of being, feeling and seeing to be described (Willig, 2001). From a Foucauldian perspective these subject positions produce, re-enact and legitimise certain power relationships (Foucault, 1977), whereby hegemonic discourses have the function of legitimising and benefiting existing institutions, systems or practices such as the medical system, religion or family (Allen, 2003). Over time these dominant discourses become seen as 'truth' and 'common sense' (Burr, 2003), unless they are resisted through other counter practices, strategies and

discourses, such as creating subversive confusion by adding to the proliferation of gender identities resulting in 'gender trouble' as termed by Butler (1990).

FDA was used as the appropriate theory and methodology to enable analysis of discursive productions of friendships and gender beyond accepted, grand narratives of 'truth'. Thus, discursive productions of friendships could be explored in terms of their implications for selfhood, power relations and dominant social practices.

### **Participants and recruitment**

Interviews were conducted with seven trans men residing in the United Kingdom (UK). 'Trans' was conceptualised as part of gender identity, experience or history and was irrespective of medical intervention. Ethical approval was obtained from a University ethical committee, and participants were recruited through online forums (e.g. [criticalsexology.org.uk](http://criticalsexology.org.uk)), trans community groups (e.g. [genderedintelligence.co.uk](http://genderedintelligence.co.uk)) and subsequent snowballing. Of the interested participants, two dropped out prior to interview and further participants were recruited through snowballing. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews. The seven participants ranged in age from 22 to 53 years, and six of the participants identified as lesbian at least once in their lives. In terms of ethnicity, three participants self-identified as White-British, one as Jewish, one as Mizrahi Jewish, one as White and one as White-British/White-Welsh. Participants' work and educational backgrounds included administrator, Phd researcher, academic tutor, health and safety manager, graphic designer, youth justice worker and artist. To uphold anonymity no specific further demographics of individual participants are presented.

### **Procedure**

Participants were interviewed and asked to tell stories of their friendships and gender identities by drawing system maps of their most significant friendships. Initially, participants self-identified stages of their gender identity across a timeline. They then drew symbols of their friends during these stages and were asked semi-structured questions about their relations with friends at each stage of gender identification. The semi-structured interview questions were developed in consultation with a member of the trans men community and then piloted. The questions focused on the dynamic relationship between friendship and gender identity across participants' lives. Particular attention was paid to changes of friendships in terms of gender identity.

The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and then analysed following Willig's (2001) six stages of FDA. The accounts were read repeatedly whereby the focus was on 'friendship' and 'gender identity' as discursive objects. All implicit and explicit references to these discursive objects were systematically identified. Ideas and themes related to the research question were noted in the margins of the transcripts, and the relevant discursive objects were searched for variability and consistency within and across transcripts (Willig, 2001). The discursive constructions were then located within wider discourses and attention was paid to how 'friendship' and 'gender identity' were conversed in relation to change and how these discourses positioned participants (e.g. how others and self were placed). The discourses identified were explored in terms of subjectivity, namely what can be felt and experienced by participants, on a micro and macro-level. They were then analysed for their implications for practices and power in wider society.

In consonance with the social constructionist epistemology of this research, the analysis in this study is one possible way of reading and interpreting the data. The importance of reflexivity is acknowledged and the researchers, who identify as lesbian and gay, but not trans, were attentive to how their perspectives might impact on both the collection and interpretation of the data. Consultation at the outset of the study was sought with trans men, especially around development of the interview, and all researchers have experience personally and/or professionally with this community. Given the possibility of both similarities and differences between the gay and the trans experience, and the identities of the researchers compared to the participants occurring, alternative readings offered by co-researchers were discussed, and in some instances interpretations were adapted accordingly. Participants were also sent a draft of the results and invited to comment. The comments received were with regard to preferences about the usage of pronouns.

Likewise the findings and their interpretation must also be seen within the cultural and historical context of the United Kingdom early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in relation to existing literature, especially given the decision to collect rich data, but from a small number of participants. Positioning these findings in this way allows the reader to delimit their generalisability and coherence within existing narratives.

## **Findings**

This section presents findings of dominant discourses and relates them to wider published literature. We analyse how trans men discursively construct friendships in relation to family, considering implications for status and membership, then examine

qualities of friendships specifically with regards to romance and intimacy. Challenges within friendships at times of disclosure and ‘transition’ will be explored, in particular with reference to lesbian friendships and the ramifications about being re-positioned as (trans) men. Lastly, we consider how such challenges are negotiated discursively, focusing on discursive practices such as ‘disowning male privilege’, ‘effeminate heterosexual male’ and ‘gender fluidity’. In the excerpts names have been changed to protect confidentiality and the pronouns used reflect participants’ preferences.

### **Friends as family**

Participants commonly constructed ‘friends as family’, which allowed them to ascribe status to their friendships and create subject positions which enabled an expression of emotional ties and intimacy usually exclusive to culturally dominant conceptions of families. Like Frances, who is in his twenties and identifies as male, most participants refer to reciprocity and longevity as qualities which provide access to membership of ‘friends as family’. As acknowledged in the opening sentence (line: 158) ‘family’ is positioned as a privileged nomenclature, access to which is earned through demonstration of defined qualities, not naturalist discourses of family emphasising birth right or blood ties.

#### *Extract 1 (158-171)*

Frances: I’ve got what other people would consider friends who are family to me, um, and those people, I know that I can count on them and they can count on me and, um, they might have, er, some odd quirks but er, even if I wouldn’t want to live with them I can put up with that in ... in short term situations or, um, on a day to day not living together thing. (158-162) [...] there’s an expectation that it’s going to last for much longer (170-171)

Although it is not clear who ‘other people’ are, perhaps his internalised norm, he constructs the status of friendships as lying in the eye of the beholder. In his account, ‘other people’ construct friendships in a hierarchically subordinate position to family relationships, and he resists this relegation of friendships by constructing ‘friends as family’, thus elevating their status (as seen by others) to that of family relations.

Furthermore, Frances’ account explains how qualities of reciprocity, such as being able to count on each other, and the expectation of a long-term relational investment, allow him to tolerate ‘odd quirks’ and no matter what ‘friends as family’ do, they remain entitled to benefits of long-lasting membership. This can also be seen in Daniel’s account.

*Extract 2* (217-223)

Daniel: [...] they’re somebody who has been around for a certain period of time or who you’ve had, like, such a close relationship with or whatever, they’re somebody who’s going to stick around and so you know to just kind of let that thing do its thing...

Interviewer: Yeah, oh right.

Daniel: ... and if they needed something or if you needed something, you know that you’d put that fact that you’re not quite sure how to be friends right now to one side and you’d still be family, if that makes any sense.

Here, the ‘friends as family’ discourse establishes participants’ mutual and lasting commitment, whereby challenges are not a threat to friendship. Another participant, Julian, provides more detail about the ups and downs that ‘friends as family’ can withstand.

*Extract 3* (266-270)

Julian: Um, friends for me, good friends are people who can, um, withstand an explosion or that we have a fight and, you know, or, you know, we get mad at each other or I get mad and they continue to put up with me or something. So, you know, for me friendship ... friends challenge each other as well.

Arguments and challenges are constructed as part of the relationship which can be worked through and are not grounds for exit from friendship. Participants in the ‘friends as family’ discourse do not need to be active participants to receive its benefits, as the family discourse overrides personal agency and can ‘do its thing’ (Daniel, line: 219). Like common portrayals of families, despite discord, friends continue to be ‘family’. Thus, for the trans participants of this study, positioning ‘friends as family’ becomes a powerful discursive strategy for relationship maintenance, and the ‘friends as family’ discourse counters suggestions that friendships only last as long as they are satisfying (Rose, 2000: 322).

One of the questions arising is why trans men position ‘friends as family’. Echoing previous research a discourse of ‘estrangement from families’ gives one account of why friends are discursively positioned as ‘family’.

*Extract 4* (117-123)

Anthony: Don’t know it’s always, especially because when I knew that I liked girls from very young, when I started high school and stuff, my mother said that I kind of cut myself off from her, I wasn’t talking to her, she’s a very strong Christian and I suppose I just didn’t feel that, that, I could talk her about it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Anthony: So, from leaving school and everything, my friends, in my twenties, my friends were my family more than my family.

Interviewer: Alright.

Anthony: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Anthony: That kind of happens in the gay world, you kind of, you know, you've got your family but then you've got your other family.

Anthony, who is in his/her forties and identifies as gender/queer/trans, describes estrangement to his/her family of origin through reference to his/her sexual minority status. Due to their shared sexual minority status, 'friends as family' are positioned as providing understanding, which s/he did not have at home in his/her twenties. However, for Anthony, this positioning is transitory and becomes a passed identity in his/her forties and s/he goes on to disavowal that a friendship can be based on sexuality alone.

*Extract 5 (154-166)*

Anthony: [...] I just kind of just kind of feel closer to my family and more respected by them and you know, but uh in the last ten years. My relationship with my mother has got better, I had a really good relationship with my father, kind of dealt with all the issues that I had with them in my twenties, you know, about being brought up and them not being terrific parents

Interviewer: Uhm

Anthony: and all that sort of

Interviewer: Uhm

Anthony: Uhm but not all my friends are gay, my best friend is straight I don't choose friends based on their sexuality, their colour or anything.



For Anthony, the ‘friends as family’ discourse becomes decentralised with age. His/her friendship boundaries are constructed as more dynamically linked to having other qualities which are now associated with his/her family having resolved earlier discord, and possessed by his friends regardless of any demographic characteristic.

Julian, who is in his fifties and uses fluid gender identifications such as gender/queer, trans or hermaphrodyke, also speaks about family estrangement. However, in contrast to Anthony, Julian’s ‘friends as family’ discourse is constructed as constant throughout the interview.

*Extract 6* (250-253)

Julian: [...] but for someone who’s lived outside of kind of the family embrace or expectations, friendship is more ... I’ve noticed that friendship is more important to me than it is to other people who maybe have stronger biological family ties. Um ...

At a later stage of the interview, when speaking about having experienced neglect by herm’s<sup>2</sup> family of origin, s/He explains:

*Extract 7* (1977-1978)

Julian: Friendship is an optional relationship for many people. For me it’s been survival.

In summary, within this discourse the centrality and the naturalistic view of ‘family’ is challenged, and whilst ‘family’ is placed above friends, relatives and friends only enter this category if they possess certain qualities such as reciprocity, longevity and tolerance. Hence, it is the symbolic nature of the word ‘family’ that holds privilege over a biological and naturalistic interpretation. It is recognised that ‘for survival’ this

position needs to be occupied, but depending upon the relationship with one's family of origin this 'real' family position can be held by either friends and/or family and can change over time. The re-definition of 'family' and its link to family estrangement is not unique to trans men and has been identified in other sexually disenfranchised groups (e.g. Weinstock, 1998) and so perhaps points to phenomena related to stigma, minority status and a need to seek affirmation through identification which may be common to a number of counter cultures.

### **Romance**

Two participants drew on a romantic friendship discourse when describing their close friendships. Najim, who is in his thirties and identifies as a man, illustrates this in the following way:

*Extract 8* (306-315)

Interviewer: What's ... how would ... how do you think, um, friends and lovers are different or similar?

Najim: Well, I think I'm different ...

Interviewer: Or the same?

Najim: ... from a lot of people I know because being polyfidelitous, um, I don't, you know, part of it is that I ... I have an emotional sort of almost romantic love, loving connection with most of my friends, even though I don't have any sexual or physical contact with them, um, and what I mean by that is, like, I'll send my friends care packages or, um, kind of be very huggy with them or make them a candlelight romantic dinner or something.

In his account, Najim positions himself as different from many people through identifying as polyfidelitous in terms of his intimate relationships. Speaking from a

position of difference, he then draws on a discourse of something aligned to romantic love to describe his emotional connections and practices with friends. Romantic discourse is pervasive within popular culture and typically linked to (heterosexual) love, marriage and monogamy in intimate sexual relationships (Willig, 2001), but Najim's account resonates more strongly with early alternative descriptions of romantic friendships such as those described by Faderman (2010) where the romance is particularised to friendships and de-sexualised. Adapting the romantic discourse is a way for Najim to perhaps position himself as an autonomous person, who self-determines practices of intimacy and care within friendships. This position is highlighted through his use of first person throughout most of his account and through introducing himself as different, and seemingly cognisant, of normative expectations at the beginning of the extract. His autonomous and knowing stance could therefore be interpreted as political resistance to the normative status associated with romantic relationships.

Julian also draws on a romantic discourse when speaking about some of herms' friendships.

*Extract 9* (1547-1550)

Julian: And again, that was kind of like also a romantic friendship in a sense but more to do with, you know, politics and ideas and feminism and because in a lot of my other friendships what I lack is, um, intellectual stimulation or academic stimulation.

(319-323)

Julian: [...] I've had experiences where I've had to break up with friends in a similar way, you know, and I've ... and I've called that or I've even said, "I have to break up with you." I

have passionate friendships. My friendships are very passionate. They are not sexual, if I called ... if they were sexual, I would call them something else.

Interviewer: Right.

Julian: But there's a lot of, um ... a lot of the same kind of imagery of being excited to be around someone, getting, you know ... having great conversations, sharing things, you know.

Julian's use of the romantic discourse emphasises herm's subjectivity; herm's feelings of platonic passion, excitement and desire of intellectual engagement and sharing with friends. The focus on emotionality fits with dominant notions of romance. For instance, Burns' (2000) research on heterosexual intimate relationships indicates that romantic love is linked to a discourse of emotion. However, like Najim, Julian's use of the romantic discourse excludes sexual intimacy. It is not clear if herm's construction of romantic friendships as 'not sexual' refers to practices or feelings, but s/He clearly redefines notions and practices of romance. Interestingly, Julian notes that s/He uses 'imagery', such as 'being excited by someone' or 'having to break up with someone', which are common to sexual relationships. Thus, the romantic discourse can serve legitimising and regulatory functions, thereby allowing regulation of access and exits of romantic friendships in similar ways as romantic sexual relationships.

Both Najim's and Julian's use of the romantic discourse and their adaptation of practices associated with it could be understood within the notion of 'normative creativity', a theory proposed by Brown in 1989. She suggested that lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals have fewer role models for relationship scripts and as a consequence become more creative in how they live their lives and relationships. Even though the theory of 'normative creativity' originally did not include trans people, it could be seen as

applicable to Najim's and Julian's constructions of romantic friendships, as both engage creatively with practices of friendship. Furthermore, the practices of intimacy, care and passion illustrated by the interviewees support Berlant's (2000: 554) view that non-normative subjectivities challenge the coupling of intimacy with the ideology of familialism<sup>3</sup> and also purposively fracture the binary of 'friends' versus 'lovers'.

### **(Trans) male re-positioning within friendships**

The re-positioning of male identities within friendships was constructed as particularly challenging when participants spoke about their lesbian friendships and being positioned within hegemonic readings of masculinity. Six of the participants described that they had been part of lesbian and feminist communities. Like the participants in Rubin's (2003) US ethnographic study when interviewees narrated stories of disclosure or 'transition', their friendships with lesbian women were discourses as being amongst the most strenuous, rejecting and challenging relationships during their emerging (trans) masculine identities. Daniel, who is in his twenties and identifies as a queer trans man, retells a conversation he had with one of his lesbian friends, Sophia, shortly after 'transitioning'.

*Extract 10* (1825-1835)

Daniel: She said, you know, "There are things that you can't do now that you could do before."  
Sophia is gay. [...] She knew that, like, in the past I'd been a bit of a player and she was like, "You can't dick people around in the way that you used to, because then you'll just be a dick." And I knew what she was saying and I completely agreed.

In his account, Daniel's friend is positioned as a moral barometer, who highlights to him that the same behaviour will derive different meaning dependent on gendered embodied subjectivities. Being within a minority, lesbian subject position is discourses as offering more freedom and less monitoring, judgement or criticism, whereas being male, and the seemingly privileged status associated with it, is discourses as needing to be managed in responsible ways and becomes the focus of scrutiny. The idea of managing masculinity responsibly also filters through in the following extract where Najim reflects on difficulties he experienced with lesbian friends once he started to live as a man.

*Extract 11* (1121-1127)

Najim: And it began very slowly, um, so ... I mean, I lost a lot of friends. I had a lot of lesbian friends ...

Interviewer: Right.

Najim: ... who said, "You know, you've betrayed me, you're a traitor. You're sort of going to the dark side. You're misogynistic. You're doing this because you have stereotypes about what a woman can be and all this crap," and so I really had to leave those environments and for ... for a while, I couldn't have any friends who were lesbian, just because it was too uncomfortable for me to sort of have to worry if they were thinking the same thing about me that all these other people had said.

Here, Najim describes how he was positioned as traitor, misogynistic and stereotypical in his views of women by his lesbian friends, which follows a wider discourse of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy of men being rejecting of women and marginalised forms of femininity (Connell, 2005). Najim distances himself from being

positioned in this way, but in this excerpt struggles to counter his positioning discursively. His strategy to manage this conflict was to withdraw from his lesbian friends.

A tendency of trans men being positioned as traitors towards the women's movement and joining patriarchy has been noted by writers such as Halberstam (1998) and the act of transitioning critiqued by Jeffreys (2003) as being an attack on lesbians. In reaction, Cromwell (1999) argues that feminist activists who position trans men in these ways do not acknowledge trans men's agency to redefine their bodies, genders or sexualities in their own idiosyncratic ways. However, what becomes clear from participants' accounts is the relational aspect of gender performance, and how presentations of the self are intricately intertwined with readings by others. The tension between individual agency attempting to re-define and expand gender identities and the pressure to conform to powerfully determined, limited categories in line with hegemonic discourses of masculinity is well illustrated.

Nathan also links the start of taking testosterone and coming out as trans to challenges and losses within his lesbian friendships.

*Extract 12* (2538-2557)

Nathan: [...] I don't like going out on the gay scene at all and it's not like I don't like gay people, at all, like I just don't kind of, I find myself feeling more and more distant from it.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Nathan: Which is something I kind of wanted to avoid, initially, and it was one of the reasons I'm just kind of not sure about starting hormones, I'm not sure about coming out, because I was like I don't really want to lose the lesbian community. But now I'm kind of losing it and I, it's fine.

Interviewer: Hmm, hmm.

Nathan: I don't know, like I thought I would be more upset about it, but I just don't feel a massive amount of loss, because the friends that I've got, like Jenny and Caroline, are part of the lesbian community, but they'll stay my friends. Like they're more my friends than they are lesbians.

Here Nathan makes a differentiation between losing his lesbian friends and losing the lesbian community, but can only do this by discursively relegating the sexual identity of Jenny and Caroline to a subordinated position and elevating other aspects associated with friendship. The loss of the community might be more tolerable as by transitioning he is, by his own agency, 'counting himself out' of continuing to belong to this group. Unlike his lesbian friends, it is possible that Najim no longer positions himself as 'other' to the norm following his 'transition' and therefore less in need of such a community. Previous research (e.g. Shepperd et al., 2010) indicates that being 'other' to the norm can be a strong foundation for friendships and through 'solidarity in difference' bonding occurs. For Najim as this difference changes so does his need to seek this affirmation and his reasons for remaining friends with Jenny and Caroline become based solely on the quality of the relationships.

These changes support Rubin's (2003) notion of a 'transsexual trajectory' with a gradual disidentification from women, especially lesbians. However, the sense of a wish to 'assimilate into the woodwork' (2003:178) i.e. merge into the mainstream of



masculinity and become invisible, is not so prominent in this sample. This may be a product of this sample of participants being educated in a time influenced more strongly by the diversity of queer politics and will be further explored in the subsequent discursive practices which describe a hegemonic male re-positioning.

### **Disowning male privilege**

Subject positions of dominance and male privilege were constructed as sources of tension in most of the participants' accounts when discoursing their (trans) masculine identities. Disowning male privilege was pervasive in many of the accounts. Given that interviewees are clearly invested in (trans) male gender positions, this may at initial glance seem counter-intuitive, and contradictory to Rubin's (2003:185) thesis that 'threatened men are threatening men'. Rubin (2003:185) argues that particularly for FtM transsexuals 'If their status as men is challenged, they will choose to appear as stereotypically male as possible and behave as the most "manly" of men'. However, whilst Julian briefly acknowledges a journey through embodied masculinity, these discourses more reflect the occupation of the 'Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum' described by Halberstam (1998) or 'queer identities' referred to by Johnson (2007b) resulting from active engagement in socially-transformative strategies influenced by queer politics and the personal attempts at prising apart the relationship between masculinity and maleness. The extracts below exemplify the tension between owning a male identity whilst rejecting male privilege.

*Extract 13* (618-629)

Julian: So, my ID ... I mean, I started passing as male, my ID ... I would say I probably had a more masculine identif... I had more investment in masculinity than I do now.

Interviewer: Right.

Julian: Now I'm trying to disown my ... my male privilege and my masculinity.

*Extract 14 (1835-1842)*

Daniel: Like, I think one of the biggest problems with starting to medically transition was the fact that people were seeing me as a person I didn't want to be seen as. People were seeing me as and treating me as and giving me the privileges of straight white dude and I wasn't happy with that, and like that's maybe one of the reasons why I'm so happy that ... that a lot of the time people don't know that I'm trans because I can get away with saying there are other ways for guys to be without that being tainted with ... and I'm like that because I'm trans, like, you know.

Julian's and Daniel's accounts reveal the construction of male identity as being shaped by other people's readings and categorisations of them, which again is quite different from Rubin's account (2003) where the agency for identity perception was very much presented as enacted largely by the trans person. In their eyes this male identity is seen as a privileged position and one they wish to resist, limiting and positioning them within dominant readings of masculinity. A paradox is alluded to where physically 'passing' as male, the desired identity, automatically brings with it the undesired identification with hegemonic male privilege. Male privilege is discourses as being intersected by other dimensions such as race and sexuality, with the heterosexual, white male being the most privileged. Both also suggest having some agency within this positioning and being able to orchestrate a move away from a stereotypical male position to that of more fluidity. Interestingly, as shown in Daniel's account, he perceives himself as having the power to regulate his identity only because he feels he can occupy the

power position of 'male' without challenge i.e. to be not identified as trans. This is an interesting position, both because it can be seen as playing with subverting subjectivities, but also accessing power privileges to do so, that are not available to all.

Participants used two particular embodied discursive strategies to resist patriarchal and hegemonic readings of their masculinities.

### **Effeminate heterosexual male**

*Extract 15* (1805-1809)

Daniel: ...the thing that fitted best was to move through the world as largely male as, you know, a really stupidly effeminate male, as a male that everyone thinks is gay ... thinks is gay until they see me with my girlfriend and then they just get confused but, you know, still as ... as a guy rather than as a girl.

In his account, Daniel chooses to perform an embodied discourse of effeminate male, which is read as gay. He thereby chooses to disown dominant male privilege, but seemingly reclaims a nuanced version of masculinity by the juxtaposition of heterosexuality evidenced by a girlfriend. He acknowledges a purposeful injection of confusion, reflecting perhaps an intentional wish to be subversive and cause 'gender trouble' (Butler, 1990) by introducing a 'reverse discourse' (Foucault, 1978) of effeminacy into a masculine positioning.

### **Gender fluidity**

*Extract 16* (61-67)

Anthony: I kind of, my approach is just to go whatever people perceive, because I have realised that it's actually, it doesn't matter. I mean, I know that I am gender queer and I'm comfortable with that, but it depends on everyone else on how they see you. They they, you know

Interviewer: Uhu

Anthony: and then I just, if they go 'he' or 'she' then I just go with it.

Interviewer: Uhm

Anthony: And...that's been my approach with my friends and others as well. Yeah. You know, fluid, it's...whatever they feel comfortable with.

Anthony's positioning is less self-deterministic. S/he chooses a fluid gender identity position which becomes determined by the other and thereby gives up agency. Behind this perhaps lies a recognition that our ability to manage how others read us is limited and rather than struggle and work at promotion of the desired image it is easier and more comfortable to be chameleon like and reflect what others project. This position offers a truce within the 'border wars' described by Halberstam (1998), offering both a disengagement but also liberal acceptance of multiple positioning and perhaps a rejection of engaging in the frustrating gender politics and fragmentation described by Johnson (2007b).

## **Discussion**

This study set out to add to the emerging 'Trans-Studies' with a particular focus on the position of friends in FtM transgender people's lives. The study suggests that several findings from LGB communities can be extended to trans men. These include

discourses of ‘friends as family’ and ‘romantic friendships’, which have been reported in LGB communities (Weeks et al. 2001; Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993). Like ‘family of choice’ in LGB networks the families spoken about in this study are not simply a replacement family for rejecting families of origin, but a complex and negotiated re-vision of what family means, with relatives and friends having to earn their place through the enactment of values such as tolerance, longevity and loyalty. Trans men’s centralising of friendships and elevating their status to family and romantic relationships can be understood as contesting dominant views on intimacy and care and echo the findings of Roseneil and Budgeon’s (2004) research on beyond ‘the family’ and care in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. They argue that practices of non-normative intimacies increasingly move beyond familial or sexual relationships, thereby challenging privileged, heteronormative positions of families and sexual relationships as key sites of intimacy and care, and this is especially the case for those living at the ‘cutting edge of social change’.

As found by other researchers (e.g. Halberstam, 1998; Rubin, 2003 and Johnson, 2007) friendships with lesbian women in particular pose interesting and changing challenges. The descriptions of negative responses in this study supplement reports by Joslin-Roher and Wheeler’s (2009), where hostility from lesbian women towards FtMs and their partners was described. As this and previous studies have shown many trans men are previously part of lesbian communities and shifting their gender presentation and/or re-positioning of their (trans) male identity has implications requiring re-alignment on continua of sameness and difference, and a re-sorting of valued characteristics.

Unlike Rubin's (2003) trans men none of the participants in this study described their previous 'lesbian career' as a 'mistake' or 'detour', but their descriptions suggested acknowledgement of a more complex layering of discourses, showing reluctance to enter into binary concepts such as male/female, lesbian/heterosexual, but meanwhile having real life adjustments to make. Halberstam (2003) who cautioned strongly against trying to stabilize gendered/sexual terms might find re-assurance in this finding, but as Johnson (2007a) notes there is still a need, especially for those from disenfranchised groups, to seek role models and identification.

How the trans men and their friends negotiated their ways through these identities in the socially transforming 21<sup>st</sup> century was perhaps the most interesting of the discourses uncovered, especially with regard to the transition into embodied maleness/masculinity. The findings indicate that shifting of gender identity presentation involves complex negotiation of their identities, values and subjectivities within their friendships and is frequently further compromised by society's demands of trans men needing to fit into legitimised binary gender taxonomies.

The 'owning' and 'disowning of male privilege' is a tension which has been written about previously, but what is interesting in plotting the management of this tension especially for trans men, is its interrelatedness with the performativity of gender in time and place. The way the trans men in this study discussed their identity as men showed a clear understanding of gender as a portfolio of performative actions, as so well described by Butler (2004). Alongside this was a clear unwillingness to engage in the

heteronormative power structures privileging males' experience over female experience, and hence a need to explore and possibly expand the boundaries of being male. Previous narratives of the desires of trans people have been about 'fitting in'; this is not such a story and we must look to the political context to perhaps try and understand why we are now hearing more resistant and subverting positioning. Butler (2004) argues that self-determination in terms of bodies can only occur in the context of a society which permits this pursuit. It is plausible that in the micro-context of the interview, Butler's argument also applies to the interviewer-interviewee relationship. Given that the research interviewer identifies as a lesbian woman, and FDA acknowledges the researcher's part in co-constructing the interviews, the interviewer's sexual minority status could have unwittingly contributed, and in Butler's words 'given permission', to participants' drawing on the 'disowning male privilege' discourse. However, it is also plausible that with the rise of queer theory and the increasing acceptance of gender as a fluid and performative concept in contemporary society, the categorical borders so often referred to in this literature have become increasingly blurred and contested, permitting trans men even more options in terms of defining themselves and their relations to others.

That the trans men interviewed in this study were well educated and had clearly engaged with gender theory could arguably be seen as a limitation of the current study as the participants may not reflect trans men who position themselves more fixedly on the gender binary. Thus, it would be interesting to research if the discursive practice of 'disowning male privilege' also extends to other trans men.

Given the increased plurality of options available to trans men to express their identities, evidenced interestingly in this study by the range of pronouns participants preferred, it may be redundant to talk anymore of a ‘transsexual trajectory’. The performance of gender identity described here and in other studies suggests much more fluidity. In relation to friends this also hints that integral values attached to specific relationships may hold more importance than identification with the person through categorical characteristics as these in themselves become questioned. However, it might be questioned how a young person setting out to explore and affirm their gender identity might seek support and signposting, and whether the myriad of options seemingly open may add to any confusion and become a pressure of its own.

### **Conclusion**

Trans men construct friendships in creative and self-deterministic ways, using discourses which re-define family and romantic boundaries. While friendships are arenas which offer intimacy, care and support, especially in light of estrangement from families of origin, change in gender identity presentations can create tensions within trans men’s ideological positions and lesbian community links. Ideological positions of feminism and equality can conflict with negotiations and/or disavowal of (trans) masculinities and the privilege associated with it. Whilst such re-visioning and negotiations of relationships opens up many possibilities and potential freedoms of expressions, embarking upon a self-determined pathway for a young trans man may bring its own confusions and pressures requiring sensitive support.



## Notes

1. The term transgender is evolving, but is generally an umbrella term for people whose gender identifications or expressions fall outside the norm and differ to their biological sex assigned to them at birth (GIRES, 2009). The term allows for a multiplicity of social identities, performances and practices (Butler, 2004), which include transsexual, MtF (male-to-female), FtM (female-to-male), genderqueer, trans, intersexed, cross dressers amongst other gender variant identities (Lev, 2004).
2. 'Herm' is a gender neutral term combining 'her' and 'him'.
3. Familialism can be understood as a Western ideology which promotes family as an institution (Revillard, 2006).

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