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Transgender friendship experiences: Benefits and barriers of friendships across gender identity and sexual orientation

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Abstract

The present research explores benefits and barriers of friendships for transgender individuals. Participants included 536 individuals who self-identified as transgender or gender variant. Participants completed an online survey asking about friendship experiences with transgender, cisgender, sexual minority, and heterosexual friends. Using a feminist intersectional theoretical framework, content analysis attended to the benefits and barriers to friendship and highlighted patterns of responses by allowing for comparisons across friends' gender identity and sexual orientation. Unique friendship barriers and benefits were found across normative (cisgender/heterosexual) and non-normative (transgender/sexual minority) dimensions of identities. In addition, friendship experiences with transgender and sexual minority friends displayed unique similarities and differences. In our analyses we emphasize the usefulness of a feminist intersectional approach in investigating transgender friendship experience.

Keywords

Cisgender, friendship, gender identity, heterosexual, intersectional theory, normative, sexual orientation, sexual minority, transgender

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The present research investigates the benefits and barriers of friendships for transgender individuals and provides a unique contribution to the friendship literature by considering friendship from a transgender lens. In addition to providing an in-depth exploration of how friends' gender identity and sexual orientation impact transgender individuals' perception of friendship, this research can also serve as a model for understanding the negotiation of transgender identities within a social context outside of the traditional psycho-medical literature that serves to problematize transgender experience.

Few studies have focused on understanding transgender friendship experience. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) friendship research which largely emphasizes sexual minority experience, however, provides a useful initial framework from which to conceptualize the social context of transgender friendship experience.

LGBT friendship research: Framing transgender friendship experiences

LGBT friendship research has largely focused on understanding friendships that form between individuals within the larger LGBT community. Friendships are considered to have increased importance for gender and sexual minorities as friendship is emphasized during times of social change and is particularly salient for individuals when their identity is at odds with social norms (Weeks, 1995). LGBT friendship is often characterized as providing a unique type of familial support (Hines, 2007; Nardi, 1992; Weinstock, 2000) where friendships function as "families of choice" (Weston, 1991) and serve to buffer gender and sexual minorities from social isolation or rejection associated with homophobia and transphobia.

Friendships are often characterized as social networks that comprise both general LGBT (Esterberg, 1997; Tillman-Healy, 2001) and transgender (Hines, 2007) communities. Connection to the larger LGBT community is one way that individuals can positively experience their transgender identity (Riggle et al., 2011). As part of a larger interview study on transgender identity and relationships Hines (2007) stresses the significance of friendships between transgender individuals. In particular, transgender friends offer support, have similar experiences, and share knowledge with one another. While providing support and having similar experiences are regarded as characteristics of friendship in general (Duck, 1991; Rawlings, 1992), Hines' (2007) participants described these benefits primarily in relation to decisions and experiences surrounding transitioning and/or in ways that are specific to transgender experience. Transgender friends were also seen as providing needed counseling that was unavailable from the traditional health care system. Hines' (2007) research provides a beginning point for conceptualizing transgender friendship and highlights the ways that friendship experience is shaped by minority status and inequalities. Benefits of friendships with other transgender individuals were largely seen as filling in the gaps of support and services not otherwise provided by traditional family, friends, and institutions.

Although her work provides a focus on transgender experience, Hines (2007) did not address barriers to friendships with transgender individuals or explore friendship experiences with friends across different identities. Additional research is necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of transgender friendship experiences. Although the LGBT friendship literature has focused most directly on sexual minority friendships, it has often assumed a similar context for understanding transgender experience. It will be important, therefore, to understand how transgender friendships are both similar to and different from sexual minority friendships.

Past research has suggested that lesbians and gay men form the majority of their friendships with same-sex individuals who also identify with the LGBT community (Galupo, 2007a, 2009). These within community friendships are seen as having unique benefits as they may provide a sense of shared experience, an avenue for processing minority status, and an opportunity for experiencing equity not easily achieved in other friendships where sexual orientation and or sex differences require negotiation (Berger, 1982; Nardi, 1999; Stanley, 1996). Having same orientation friends has also been related to psychological adjustment (Berger, 1982). While lesbians and gay men may find a unique type of support through same-orientation friendships, bisexual women and men may be less likely to do so as they are less likely to have a friend with the same (bisexual) identity as themselves (Galupo, 2007a).

Research on sexual minority friendships with individuals in the LGBT community has largely focused on the benefits of such friendships while research that examines friendships between LGBT and heterosexual individuals has primarily considered the barriers to friendship development. Initial research on the topic suggested that lesbian and gay male friendships outside the LGBT community are tenuously constructed around a number of barriers. Barriers include the stigma of having a sexual minority friend, sexual tension, and reduced comfort in disclosing personal information especially as it relates to sexual minority experience (O'Boyle and Thomas, 1996; Price, 1999). Although bisexual individuals are more likely to have cross-orientation friendships with heterosexual individuals (Galupo, 2007a), these friendships exist at the cost of bisexual identity where issues related to bisexual identity are less likely to be acknowledged within the friendship (Galupo et al., 2004; Galupo, 2007b).

Benefits of friendships outside the LGBT community have also been considered. For example, sexual minority women report that through their friendships with heterosexual women they gain an understanding that acceptance from heterosexuals is possible, gain an objective perspective in their lives, are able to break down stereotypes, and experience increased closeness and trust within the friendship accompanying sexual orientation disclosure (Galupo and St. John, 2001). Muraco (2006) discusses ways in which friendships with heterosexual individuals can function as "intentional families" for both sexual minority and heterosexual friends.

Although gender identity has not been systematically addressed in the LGBT friendship research, aspects of the past literature may prove relevant for

understanding transgender friendship experiences. Inherent in the way the literature approaches LGBT friendship is with an acknowledgement and understanding of the power and inequalities that exist across sexual orientation identity. Using a similar approach, the consideration of friendship for transgender individuals both within and outside the LGBT community will likely yield an understanding of the ways power and inequality operate around gender identity. Additionally, LGBT friendship research has considered the friendships of sexual minorities by examining patterns across sexual orientation, sex, and race (Galupo, 2007a, 2009). However, this research has neglected to extend to gender identity either by considering how sexual minority friendships are experienced across gender identity, or by considering the friendships of individuals who identify as transgender. Importantly, there has not been an acknowledgement within the LGBT friendship literature that some sexual minority individuals may also identify as transgender, and vice versa.

Feminist intersectional theory: Researching transgender experience and friendship

Feminist intersectional theory emphasizes the importance of examining relationships among social identities as intersecting categories of oppression and inequality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Hooks, 1984; McCall, 2005). This theoretical framework originally critiqued both gender- and race-based research for failing to acknowledge individuals living at the intersections of the two. Initially focused on race, class, and gender, more recent conceptualizations are inclusive of sexual orientation, specifically addressing the role of homophobia and heterosexism in the lives of women and racial minorities (Anzaldúa, 1990; King, 1990; Trujillo, 1991).

Recently intersectional theory has been extended to understand transgender experience (Futty, 2010; Hines, 2010b; Monro and Richardson, 2010; Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010) and this literature can inform an intersectional approach to researching transgender friendship experience. Central to the inclusion of transgender within an intersectional framework is an acknowledgment of dimensions of inequality and power that surround cultural meanings of gender and gender identity. Viewing gender identity within intersectional theory shifts the focus from the “unnatural” and “abnormal” conceptualizations of transgender that are traditionally highlighted by psycho-medical perspectives, while making visible and subjective non-transgender identities. Recent use of the terms cisgender to refer to non-transgender experience emphasizes this focus (Futty, 2010). Understanding gender identity across transgender/cisgender experience, then, allows a comparative dimension which invites exploration of cisgender experience. It also allows a discussion of cisgender privilege in ways that are analogous to other systems of privilege (Serano, 2007).

Researching transgender experiences within an intersectional framework is ideal for a number of reasons. It potentially allows for: (1) a comparative approach across transgender and cisgender identities; (2) a disaggregation of sexual and gender minority experience, as not all transgender individuals are comfortable

being considered within the larger LGBT community (Fassinger and Arseneau, 2007); (3) a systematic comparison across sexual orientation and gender identity which can serve to highlight the similarities and differences in the way the two operate. Attending to differences is important as the two are often conflated in the research literature (Hines, 2010a). Attending to similarities allows for an understanding of how gender and sexual minorities operate as non-normative identities, and is particularly highlighted when making comparisons across normative (cisgender/heterosexual) and non-normative (transgender/sexual minority) identities; and (4) an understanding of how experiences differ among individuals who identify as transgender. This is important as not all transgender individuals see their experiences as similar to others who identify under the transgender umbrella (Monro and Richardson, 2010).

Studying friendship, in particular, provides additional application of intersectional theory as a means for interrogating transgender experience. Because intersectional theory provides a lens for considering institutionalized inequalities as they relate to social interactions (Zinn and Dill, 2000) and because expression and negotiation of identities vary across social context (Galupo, 2011), friendship provides an ideal location from which to explore intersections of identity between two or more individuals. In particular, past research has focused on friendships that exist across social categories (cross-race, cross-orientation, cross-gender) as an avenue for exploring intersectionality (Galupo, 2009; Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013; Muraco, 2006, 2012). A similar approach could be usefully applied for understanding transgender individuals' experience of friendship as it shifts in relation to friends' sexual orientation and gender identity.

Statement of the problem

The present research explores transgender friendship experience in the United States. Based on participant responses to open-ended questions, we focus our analysis on understanding transgender friendship with transgender, cisgender, sexual minority, and heterosexual individuals. We explore the benefits and barriers to transgender friendship across gender identity and sexual orientation of the friend.

Utilizing an intersectional methodology the present research allows for comparisons of transgender friendship experiences across friends' gender identity (transgender and cisgender) and sexual orientation (sexual minority and heterosexual). The use of friends' gender identity and sexual orientation as analytical categories in this research is not meant to suggest that these groupings are immutable or absolute. Adopting categories for the purpose of grouping and analysis is done provisionally as a means for uncovering patterns across transgender social perception and experience. The way analytic categories are defined for this research is consistent with an intersectional framework that makes inequality a central component where comparisons can be made across normative (cisgender/heterosexual) and non-normative (transgender/sexual minority) dimensions of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Method

Participants and recruitment procedure

Participants included 536 individuals who self-identified as transgender or gender variant. With regard to gender identity participants self-identified as 40.4% male, 33.5% female, 16.3% gender nonconforming, 7.2% bigender, and 2.6% did not identify. With regard to sexual orientation identity, participants self-identified as 35.1% queer/pansexual/fluid, 19.2% heterosexual, 19.2% lesbian/gay, 19.0% bisexual, and 7.5% questioning. In addition, 78.1% of the participants were identified as part of a larger LGBT community.

Participants represented all regions of the United States, residing in 46 states and Washington DC. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 73 ($M=36.69$, $SD=14.52$). There was some diversity in the sample where 16.4% participants identified as racial minorities, specifically: 1.1% Native American; 1.5% Asian/Asian American; 2.6% Hispanic; 4.0% African American/Black; 7.2% other/bi-racial; and 83.6% Caucasian/White. With regard to social economic status, participants self-identified as 32.6% working class; 42.3% middle class; 22.1% upper-middle class; and 3.0% upper class. In terms of educational background, 1.0% had some high school education; 6.0% had a high school diploma; 9.0% had completed vocational school; 33.9% had some college education; 30.0% had earned a bachelor's degree; and 20.1% had an advanced college degree.

Initial recruitment announcements were posted on transgender listservs and online message boards with a link to the online survey. Some of these resources were specific to local communities and others had a national reach. In addition, some targeted specific transgender communities (FTM or genderqueer) while others were general. Some participants passed the survey along to additional transgender social networks.

Measures

Data analysis focused on participants' free response answers to four open ended questions. Questions were presented in the order that follows: (1) what are the unique benefits and barriers to having friends who also identify as transgender? (2) What are the unique benefits and barriers to having friends who identify as cisgender (non-transgender)? (3) What are the unique benefits and barriers to having friends who identify as sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, etc. as it relates to sexual orientation)? and (4) What are the unique benefits and barriers to having friends who identify as heterosexual?

Prior to answering the four research questions, participants answered basic demographic information about themselves and their close friends. Although responses to these questions are not included in the present analysis these preliminary questions did orient participants to thinking about their own close friendship networks and, as evidenced by some of their responses, these friends were often used as reference points in responding to the research questions. It was also evident

that participants did not always have friends in each of the different categories and their answers reflected the barriers to such friendships.

The present research, framed from an intersectional perspective, is particularly suited to qualitative analysis aimed to elucidate the multidimensional and intersecting influences in understanding social experience and lived realities in the context of friendship. Both content analysis and chi square analysis based on presence of codes were simultaneously aimed toward uncovering personal (micro) and cultural (macro) meanings of transgender friendship. Qualitative analysis and coding of the data attended to the meanings of friendship experiences. These meanings were given depth and context via chi square analyses which highlighted patterns of experiences by allowing for comparisons across friends' identities.

Coding and content analysis. Using an inductive coding method we sought to define unique benefits and barriers to transgender friendship across friends' gender identity and sexual orientation. Initially members of the research team (all six authors) read participant responses to each of the four questions and generated overall coding categories that were independent of the questions. Participant responses were read and discussed several times before the coding themes were agreed upon by members of the research team yielding 19 initial codes for benefits and 19 initial codes for barriers. Each participant response was coded separately by two research team members. Data were coded in a binary (1 = present; 0 = not present) manner, with each participants' response coded across 19 benefits and 19 barriers for each of the 4 questions yielding a total of 152 data points per participant (79,952 total data points for 526 participants; 19,988 data points for each of the 4 research questions). With regard to inter-rater reliability, the proportion of coding agreement was calculated independently for each of the codes and ranged between 66% and 92% agreement. Discrepancies were resolved via discussion across the coding pair, with input from the entire research team.

Because of the large sample size and because we are conducting a comparative analysis across responses to four separate questions, we take two approaches in our intersectional analysis. We both describe the experiences of the participants thematically and use statistical analysis to consider patterns in the data. Chi square tests for independence were conducted to examine frequencies of codes across friends' identity. Based on thematic content that emerged from the qualitative analysis it was clear that there was an overarching pattern in the way transgender participants viewed friendships with individuals who had normative (cisgender/heterosexual) versus non-normative (transgender/sexual minority) identities. This pattern informed our decision to conduct our initial chi square analyses to examine similarities and differences in benefits and barriers across normative (cisgender/heterosexual) and non-normative (transgender/sexual minority) dimensions. For this analysis, each participants' coded response was included for both cisgender/heterosexual and transgender/sexual minority questions such that a total of 1052 responses were used to compare across normative and non-normative categories, respectively.

Results and discussion

Although participants were asked to describe unique friendship benefits and barriers with individuals of different identities, many of their responses resonated with the way friendship has been described in the general friendship literature. General features of friendships include *having someone to talk to*, *emotional support*, *acceptance*, and *shared experiences* (Duck, 1991; Rawlings, 1992). Participants described their friendships similarly but usually transgender specific experience was central to their definitions of support, acceptance, and experiences. For example, instead of *having someone to talk to*, a benefit expressed by transgender participants was *can talk about transgender issues*. Articulation of friendship benefits and barriers made it clear that transgender identity was salient to how participants were defining “experiences.”

Unique benefits and barriers differed across normative and non-normative experiences

Because our focus is on documenting unique friendship experiences across friends’ identities, we focus this “Results” section on findings for the 16 benefits and 10 barriers for which different patterns emerged. This analysis revealed unique benefits and barriers to friendship for both normative (cisgender and heterosexual) and non-normative (transgender and sexual minority) dimensions of identity. For completeness, three benefits and two barriers for which no differences emerged are included in Tables 1 and 2. Seven barriers are not included because although there were no patterns of differences across the groups, they were mentioned less than 1% of the time for all four friendship types. Chi square analyses were conducted for each of the initial benefits and barriers in order to investigate patterns across normative (cisgender and heterosexual) and non-normative (transgender and sexual minority) identities.

Unique benefits and barriers to friendships with cisgender and heterosexual individuals

Eight benefits and six barriers were significantly more likely to be expressed in reference to cisgender and heterosexual (normative) friends when compared to transgender and sexual minority (non-normative) friends. Unique benefits included: (1) helps me feel “normal”; (2) transgender/sexuality issues do not dominate conversation and friendship; (3) validation more powerful from someone with normative identity; (4) more opportunity for friendship due to larger population; (5) emotionally stable; (6) helps me present as identified gender (“pass”); (7) offers more diverse perspectives and interactions; and (8) opportunity to educate about transgender experience (see Table 1).

Friendship benefits with cisgender and heterosexual individuals centered on validation and privileges associated with normative experience. One participant noted that a benefit of having cisgender friends was “I don’t stand out in public and have

Table 1. Unique friendship benefits across gender identity and sexual orientation of friend.

Benefits significantly more likely for friendships with transgender (TG) and sexual minority (SM) individuals	%				χ^2
	Normative		Non-normative		
	CG	HS	TG	SM	
Understanding non-normative experience	2.2	2.0	36.4	33.6	382.3
Knowledgeable on issues of gender, sex, privilege	1.1	<1	9.3	6.2	59.9
Shared experiences	1.7	1.5	30.8*	22.6	278.1
Can talk about transgender issues	1.3	1.1	23.7*	3.2	117.9
Offers support via mentoring and shared resources	6.9	5.5	21.4*	4.5	27.8
Comfortable being myself	2.4	1.9	9.3*	4.8	29.8
Shared community: "Family" and belonging	1.7	1.3	6.0	11.2**	56.3
Non-judgmental/open-minded	1.5	3.7	3.5	7.1**	10.3
Benefits significantly more likely for friendships with cisgender (CG) and heterosexual (HS) friends	%				χ^2
	Normative		Non-normative		
	CG	HS	TG	SM	
Helps me feel "Normal"?	11.1	13.4	<1	<1	117.5
Transgender/sexuality issues do not dominate conversation and friendship	7.8	4.8	<1	<1	51.4
Validation more powerful from someone with normative identity	5.2	1.3	<1	<1	22.9
More opportunity for friendship due to larger population	3.7	<1	0	<1	22.2
Emotionally stable	2.4	1.3	<1	0	17.4
Helps me present as identified gender ("Pass")	8.8	2.4	2.2*	0	33.1
Offers more diverse perspectives and interactions	8.8	10.4	<1	7.1**	27.5
	11.4	4.3	0	4.3**	36.6

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Benefits that do not differ across normative (CG/HS) and non-normative (TG/SM) dimensions	%				χ^2
	Normative		Non-normative		
	CG	HS	TG	SM	
Accepting	8.2	3.9	3.5	8.4**	NS
Affirmative use of language in reference to identity	1.3	<1	2.1*	<1	NS
Opportunity for dating/sexual partners	<1	<1	0	1.7**	NS

Note: All reported chi-squares are significant at the 0.001 level unless designated NS.

*Planned comparison ($p < 0.01$): theme significantly more frequent for TG (vs. SM) friends.

**Planned comparison ($p < 0.01$): theme significantly more frequent for SM (vs. TG) friends.

‘normal’ friends who do ‘normal’ things.” Just being associated with and accepted by normative friends helped transgender individuals feel “normal,” “pass” more readily, “fit in,” “blend in” and even “melt more easily into society.” This association with larger culture can also translate into feeling more “safe” when out in public.

Friendships with cisgender and heterosexual individuals were seen as a way of being connected to mainstream society. This is illustrated in the following participant response: “These individuals are part of general society and association with them helps in acceptance and participation in society.” As one participant put it, “most people are not LGBT in the world, (and) you have to learn to work with them.” Normative friends were seen as living in the “real world” and served as a reminder that “there is life outside the T community” or, as another participant put it “the trans bubble.” Participants also recognized that “there are a whole lot more of them. Even in the ‘friendly’ cities, the trans community is very small. If I restricted my friendships there I’d have very few friends.”

For transgender participants, normative friends were “more emotionally stable” could be “your little voice when you start getting crazy” and were seen as “grounding.” Normative friends were viewed as uniquely able to teach “how to pass as male/female,” to “help navigate the way through a gender in which I was not raised” to “give advice on female issues as well as clothing, makeup, life situations” and to serve as a “role model.” One participant speaks to this:

“The benefits of a (cisgender heterosexual) male friend for me are similar to that of a role model. I admire how he embraces his masculinity, processes his anger and supports the women in his life. As I navigate the world as male, I ease into my new exciting and challenging situations using his choices and character as a guide.”

Often support from normative friends was seen as more validating than from a friend with a non-normative identity. One participant notes that the “approval/

appraisals of my appearance mean more than those of other trans people.” Sometimes these friendships were seen as more genuine because, as one participant put it, “I feel like we are friends because we like each other and not just because we are both trans.”

Participants did note that friendships with normative friends provided an opportunity for education and developing allies. This was seen as particularly important being that “cisgendered people are the ones who can help trans individuals the most because it’s best for others to hear from a side that supports, but isn’t a part of, the community directly.” Others valued the opportunity to educate because they were seen as the “expert” and normative friends would “accept what I say more easily because I am the only transperson they know.”

Transgender participants also spoke to six barriers unique to friendships with cisgender and heterosexual friends: (1) not knowledgeable on issues of gender, sex, and privilege; (2) insensitive use of language in reference to identity; (3) difficult to talk about transgender/sexuality issues; (4) fosters feelings of discomfort; (5) not understanding non-normative experience; and (6) fewer shared experiences (see Table 2). As much as friendship with normative friends served to provide ways to fit into mainstream society, the barriers centered on the ways that cisgender and heterosexual friends could not fully understand or relate to their minority experience.

“There is somethings that the most well intentioned friend cannot grasp when something about my gender is explained to them, either because I don’t have the words to explain it in a way that they get, or because fundamentally they will never “get it.”

Normative friends often were described as not able to “get it,” “not open to learning,” and as not knowing “the full me, and they don’t want to.” When talking about cisgender and heterosexual friends, feelings of discomfort were often centered on feeling “tokenized.”

“Some cisgender friends treated my transition process as this experiment they were eager to watch like I was the latest blockbuster film or a zoo animal. They also would try to tell me what they thought I should do like take pictures or youtube videos to document my transition or what names they thought I should choose when I changed to my preferred name. This was not cool and I distanced myself and ended some of these relationships.”

These findings reveal clear patterns in perception of friendship experience based on normative and non-normative dimensions of friends’ gender identity and sexual orientation. Questions were asked to focus participants on one aspect of their friends’ identity at a time; either based on gender identity (transgender/cisgender) or sexual orientation (sexual minority/heterosexual). However, because of the way normative identity is assumed unless otherwise linguistically signaled it was clear that the second identity was assumed normative. For example, the majority of answers provided by participants in response to sexual minority and heterosexual friends indicated that participants assumed a cisgender identity. In describing the benefit of having a heterosexual friend one participant responded “I don’t stand

Table 2. Unique friendship barriers across gender identity and sexual orientation of friend.

Barriers significantly more likely for friendships with transgender (TG) and sexual minority (SM) individuals	%				χ^2
	Normative		Non-normative		
	CG	HS	TG	SM	
Invalidating gender identity and personal experience	5.8	2.0	6.0	9.0	12.6
Transgender issues dominate conversation and friendship	0	<1	11.9*	2.2	67.3
Negative emotions, drama, and emotional instability	<1	<1	6.0*	1.7	26.6
Fear of being "Out"-ed by association or disclosure	1.7	<1	3.9*	<1	6.5
Barriers significantly more likely for friendships with cisgender (CG) and heterosexual (HS) friends	%				χ^2
	Normative		Non-normative		
	CG	HS	TG	SM	
Not knowledgeable on issues of gender, sex, and privilege	9.5	5.8	<1	4.1	34.9
Insensitive use of language in reference to identity	6.9	2.9	<1	<1	34.2
Difficult to talk about transgender/sexuality issues	4.8	2.0	0	0	37.6
Fosters feelings of discomfort	7.5	5.6	8.8*	<1	4.3
Not understanding non-normative experience	28.9	11.8	<1	4.7**	168.1
Fewer shared experiences	4.3	3.2	<1	2.2**	10.6
Barriers that do not differ across normative (CG/HS) and non-normative (TG/SM) dimensions of identity	%				χ^2
	Normative		Non-normative		
	CG	HS	TG	SM	
Judgmental	1.7	4.3	2.2	2.1	NS
Not accepting	7.6	3.0	<1	13.4**	NS

Note: All reported chi-squares are significant at the 0.001 level unless designated NS.

*Planned comparison ($p < 0.01$): theme significantly more frequent for TG (vs. SM) friends.

**Planned comparison ($p < 0.01$): theme significantly more frequent for SM (vs. TG) friends.

out in public and have 'normal' friends who do 'normal' things." It is clear that although asked only about a friend who is heterosexual, a cisgender identity was also assumed. Likewise, the majority of answers regarding cisgender individuals assumed a heterosexual identity. Because of this, a secondary analysis was not

necessary or appropriate to differentiate between the normative identities (i.e. heterosexual and cisgender). However, a secondary analysis was conducted to further differentiate unique experiences between sexual minority and transgender friendships.

Unique benefits and barriers to friendships with transgender and sexual minority individuals

Eight benefits and four barriers were significantly more likely to be expressed in reference to transgender and sexual minority (non-normative) friends when compared to cisgender and heterosexual (normative) friends. Unique benefits included: (1) understanding non-normative experience; (2) knowledgeable on issues of gender, sex, and privilege; (3) shared experiences; (4) can talk about transgender issues; (5) offers support via mentoring and shared resources; (6) comfortable being myself; (7) shared community: “family” and belonging; and (8) non-judgmental/open-minded (see Table 1).

Consistent across these benefits was the way participants related benefits of transgender and sexual minority friendship to common understandings, shared experiences or knowledge in ways that made non-normative experience primary. These shared understandings were described both at the individual and community level. Duck (1991) discusses the general way in which friends can “develop their own sets of shared concerns, common interests and collective problems, as well as shared meanings, common responses to life and communal emotions” (p.13). What makes these commonalities even more important to transgender friendship experience is the fact that they are much less likely to be present in friendships with cisgender and heterosexual friends. As one participant noted,

“Having other trans-identified friends normalizes my own trans experience for me simply by providing contact with someone who is ‘like me’ . . . It makes me feel like less of a freak to have contact with other people who share my experience.”

Similar sentiment was expressed for sexual minority friends: “Being a minority in this manner can lead to a feeling of community and a strong sense of ‘us.’”

The fact that some participants viewed gender and sexual minorities through a lens of commonality was clear when considering their responses. Even when asked about friendships with sexual minorities specifically, participants often recast their responses by referencing friends in larger LGBT community:

“Having LGBTQIA and perverted friends is like breathing air. It’s like the most valuable thing there is. It’s a mirror held up to yourself. It’s (in a non-ableist way) up to five senses that can experience you: you are seen, you are heard, you are touched. Sometimes you’re even smelled and tasted!”

Participants described their friendships with gender and sexual minorities as providing support, information, a sense of “family,” and a feeling of being “at home,”

with others who “live in the same universe”, or “community” that sometimes operates as a “support group” and provides a “mirror” for their own experience—a place for “letting one’s hair down” and being “fully myself.” Many participants described a friendship narrative with transgender and sexual minority individuals consistent with previous literature that views within LGBT community friendships as functioning as “family” (Nardi, 1992; Weinstock, 2000; Weston, 1991). These friendships were described as a respite from larger society, where the same level of comfort and community are not achieved. Benefits with transgender and sexual minority friends, then, were borne out of lack of support, understanding, and services not readily provided by traditional family, friends, and society. As one participant put it, “they know what it feels like to face the tyranny of the majority.”

However, transgender participants also detailed four barriers unique to friendships with transgender and sexual minority friends: (1) invalidating gender identity and personal experience; (2) transgender/sexuality issues dominate conversation and friendship; (3) negative emotions, drama and instability; and (4) fear of being “out”-ed by association or disclosure. Again, these barriers underscore assumed commonality of experience among gender and sexual minorities but, in these cases, the shared or assumed similarity compromises the friendship. One participant expressed this in the following way:

“Many trans people tend to think there is one universal way of being trans, and that way usually doesn’t apply to me at all. It can be annoying to have to remind people that we have different experiences and they shouldn’t make assumptions.”

Another participant indicated that among sexual minority friends there are “tendencies to make false equivalencies between sexual orientation and gender identity and mistakenly assume they understand trans experiences better than they do.”

Participants also discussed the way the assumed similarity among gender and sexual minorities often led to too much of a focus on issues of gender and sexuality:

Many of the LBGQTQ friends that I’ve had, have really emphasized their sexuality; so much so that it takes on a larger presence in their lives than maybe even food, politics, or religion . . . I am often uncomfortable with sexuality being such a large focus of one’s life.

Often just being associated with other gender and sexual minorities compromised participants’ ability to present as desired: “If you are in a situation where you aren’t out, you stand a chance of accidentally being outed because of the company you keep.”

Unique benefits and barriers of friendships with other transgender individuals

Five benefits and four barriers were significantly more likely to be expressed in reference to transgender friends when compared to sexual minority friends. Benefits

included: (1) shared experiences; (2) can talk about transgender issues; (3) offers support via mentoring and shared resources; (4) comfortable being myself; and (5) helps me present as identified gender (“pass”) (see Table 1).

Even though participants saw transgender and sexual minority friends in ways that distinguished them from cisgender and heterosexual individuals, transgender friends were seen as providing a unique type of friendship beyond that of sexual minorities. The degree of shared experiences and understanding was seen as greater with transgender friends. Transgender friends were often characterized as being able to “completely understand” and were seen as being on “the same page.” One participant noted “other transgender people are the ONLY ones who fully ‘get it’ so there is some understanding and kindred spiritedness there.”

This commonality was often articulated as a type of support and understanding that went beyond understanding being a minority, and related specifically to being transgender. Participants characterized their transgender friends as able to “understand gender issues and dysphoria.” Consequently, “they can offer real life advice from experience.” These friends were seen, often, as “mentors” who made up a larger “support network” and “transgender community.” Often this network helped connect individuals to specific resources, as one participant noted that transgender friends made it “much easier to find trans-friendly businesses/doctors, etc.” Others described how it was nice to be seen as a resource or mentor to others.

Participants valued that their transgender friends were able to “talk to them about hormones,” “speak specifically about ‘trans-related issues,’” and discuss “passing” and “medical interventions.” One participant describes:

“For those who have transitioned, specifically those who have undergone surgeries, hormone replacement therapies, or who are living as a gender different from what they were sexed at birth—all of these experiences are unique in our culture and because the trans experience is also highly stigmatized or emphasized as different, exotic, and so on that I can talk about my feelings and thoughts about my body and my daily life with other trans people. And to some extent, I can’t share this sort of “mirroring” with cis people.”

Overall, transgender friends were characterized as providing a unique type of understanding and support above and beyond that of sexual minority friends. In addition, transgender friends and networks were seen as providing access to information and resources in negotiating the health care system and around issues of transition, similar to Hines’ (2007) findings on friendships between transgender individuals.

Participants also detailed four barriers that were more likely experienced in friendships with transgender friends: (1) transgender issues dominate conversation and friendship; (2) negative emotions, drama, and emotional instability; (3) fear of being “out”-ed by association or disclosure; and (4) fosters feelings of discomfort (see Table 2).

Transgender friends were often seen as too focused on issues of gender identity. A challenge was seen as “keeping conversation from ALWAYS focusing on gender

and identity.” This was particularly true for individuals who were transitioning. One person noted “I would not make friends with a person who is in transition because that is all they want to discuss.”

Participants characterized some transgender friends as focused on “drama,” “trauma,” and “emotional baggage.” One participant remarked, “the reality of our lives means that at any given time a lot of us are really stressed or depressed and it can make being around more than one or two other trans people for a while draining.” Other participants noted that this was not only draining but sometimes “their gender issues can trigger my own.”

Discomfort was uniquely expressed in friendships with other transgender individuals in terms of jealousy and competition. One participant noted “occasional ‘envy’ which comes with seeing friends transitioning ahead of yourself.” Another described “becoming jealous of my trans friends who are able to live more freely as trans, or who have been able to transition more fully.” Jealousy and competition also included having “financial differences” or “more success with outside, sexual relationships.” One participant touched on a number of these barriers:

“There is a weird competition between trans people I think. I think there is generally an internal or even external comparison many of us do to compare which is prettier, more passable, further along in their transition and more successful in general. Also, there is a concern that the other trans person may out you or judge you. Being around other trans people draws attention to my own trans identity which I don’t always want to be reminded of.”

Other participants went beyond noting barriers to transgender friendship to discussing no interest or association with LGBT or transgender communities. This sentiment was summed up by the following quotation: “I definitely do not seek out other trans people and have no interest in “trans community” at all. Self ghettoisation is never pretty, no matter the reason. (sic)”

Unique benefits and barriers of friendships with sexual minorities

Four benefits and four barriers were significantly more likely to be expressed in reference to sexual minority versus transgender friends. Benefits included: (1) shared community: “family” and belonging; (2) non-judgmental/open-minded; (3) offers more diverse perspectives and interactions; and (4) opportunity to educate about transgender issues; and (5) opportunity for sexual partners (see Table 1). As a group these benefits had elements that both acknowledged sexual minorities as having non-normative experiences (shared community: “family” and belonging) but also saw their experiences as outside transgender experience much like cisgender and heterosexual friends (opportunity to educate about transgender issues, offers more diverse perspectives & interactions). At times, sexual minority friends were seen as uniquely able to draw on their experiences as a sexual minority but to remain more objective and non-judgmental than transgender friends. One

participant said of sexual minority friends, “they understand an extent of what I feel, but have a differing enough viewpoint to be able to offer objective advice.”

Participants also detailed two barriers that were more likely experienced in friendships with sexual minority versus transgender individuals: (1) not understanding non-normative experience; and (2) fewer shared experiences (see Table 2). The quote below includes elements of both of these barriers:

“Cisgender sexual minorities frequently feel that they understand transgender individuals better than they actually do because the T is included in LGBT. They are more likely to feel that the T is the least important part of the LGBT community, but still feel that they should be appreciated as allies. They are less likely to acknowledge their own privileges and ingrained cissexism.”

Participants also noted that often sexual minorities can “make false equivalencies between sexual orientation and gender identity” and that unique experiences of transgender and sexual minority individuals become “conflated.” Also noted was the “prevalence of highly gendered spaces and situations in many LGB communities”

To some degree, how participants responded to the question of sexual minority friendships often seemed to depend upon whether participants themselves identified as a sexual minority. Not surprisingly, transgender participants who were also sexual minorities tended to focus on their shared experiences with sexual minorities. For example, “having friends who identify as a sexual minority helps me to realize that I am not alone in my struggle for sexual orientation equality.” And, “I’m queer as well and so they understand.” Transgender participants who identified as heterosexual were more likely to discuss being misunderstood (e.g. “sometimes that they don’t always understand that after my transition I am straight”) and isolated (e.g. “I have identified as straight for many years, and felt like I didn’t really fit in with them, and that’s been slow to change.”) from the larger LGBT community.

Conclusion

In thinking through the present findings it is important to note that participants were discussing friendship experiences in direct response to prompts that asked them to describe the unique benefits and barriers of friendship with transgender, cisgender, sexual minority, and heterosexual individuals. Analyses were intentionally framed to uncover transgender friendship patterns across gender identity and sexual orientation of friends. Although we do note the benefits and barriers that were similar across friendships, we elaborate on the findings that speak to the unique aspects of each friendship type. Consideration of the differences along with the similarities is necessary for a full characterization of these friendships. Three benefits and two barriers discussed by participants did not differ in across gender identity or sexual orientation of the friend.

Additionally, the findings of this research may over emphasize the role of identity in friendship. In fact, some participants questioned or rejected the framing of this research entirely. When asked about friendships with sexual minorities, one participant indicated “it depends on the person, not their sexual identity.” Another responded that the benefits of having cisgender friends: “are the same as having friends period—they provide support, love, communion, and the opportunity to live in community and to grow as a human being.”

Despite the limitations of a framework which disproportionately emphasizes unique friendship experiences the present findings expand our understanding of transgender friendship in important ways. Because transgender friendship has rarely been studied, it has been discussed primarily in the context of the larger LGBT friendship literature. There were distinct ways that our findings resonate with that literature. In particular, the discussion of friends as “family” was emphasized specifically in the transgender friendship narratives with sexual minorities. In addition, the way that participants’ friendship experiences were strongly influenced by the normative/non-normative dimensions of friends’ identity parallels the way the LGBT friendship literature has made distinctions between friendships within and outside the LGBT community. This research also highlights the ways that the larger LGBT community is not always the ideal friendship site for transgender individuals and how the traditional LGBT framework may not always capture the diverse experiences of those who identify as transgender.

Although the focus of this work was to consider patterns of friendship experience across friends’ sexual orientation and gender identity, our findings also serve as a beginning point for understanding different friendship patterns that exist among transgender individuals. For example, friendship experiences with sexual minorities varied based on whether the participants also identified as transgender. In addition, some of our participants expressed no desire to have a connection to LGBT and transgender communities. It is important to note that our recruitment strategy, which relied upon online transgender resources and referrals, likely led to an underrepresentation of such individuals. This is significant as the benefits and barriers to friendships within and outside of LGBT and transgender communities would likely be experienced differently. In addition, we intentionally recruited participants broadly and although we included both transgender and gender variant individuals, we did not seek to understand how participants may approach friendship differently based on their unique conceptualizations of gender identity. Understanding patterns of friendship experiences among transgender individuals is an important direction for future research.

Another important direction for understanding the current findings would be to explore friendship benefits and barriers in relation to transgender identity development and disclosure. Friendship, in general, is emphasized during times of transition, when individuals’ identities are at odds with the norm, and during times of great social change (Weeks, 1995). Transgender friendship experiences are ideally understood in this context. Likewise, transgender identity is not static. Rather it is experienced as a developmental process (Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004) where transgender experience of friendship would likely differ with regard to

where an individual is in that process. Friendship experience is also impacted by disclosure of transgender identity or status in the context of friendship (Galupo et al., 2014). Although we did not systematically analyze data related to our participants' transgender identity development or salience of their identities it is important to recognize that some of the benefits and barriers of friendships would be experienced differently at different points in identity development. Because friendship is experienced in social context and in relation to friends' identities, identity development of friends (based on sexual orientation and gender identity, both normative and non-normative) would also be relevant. For example, the barrier "transgender issues dominate conversation and friendship" may be more likely to be an issue to an individual who is friends with someone who is more actively processing their transgender identity than themselves. Likewise, the benefit of "opportunity to educate about transgender experience" may only be a benefit if the friend is at a stage of understanding their cisgender identity and position of privilege.

Transgender friendship, intersectional theory, and cultural constructs of normality

The present research provides a unique contribution to the friendship literature by focusing on friendship from a transgender lens. By approaching the topic from an intersectional theoretical perspective, the analysis moves beyond strictly describing friendships with individuals of different identities to exploring how inequities are used to construct cultural conceptions of normality and ultimately shape both transgender and cisgender experience. It is important to note, however, that we primarily attended to intersections of identity for sexual orientation and gender identity of the friend. We did not differentiate experience across participants' sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity nor did we attend to race or class in our intersectional analysis. Further analysis along these lines would be necessary to fully examine friendship experiences of transgender individuals. However, the specific focus on sexual orientation and gender identity used in the present intersectional analysis is particularly useful for understanding the larger discourse on normality in the LGBT literature.

The LGBT friendship literature, which almost exclusively focuses on sexual orientation, had previously conceptualized normative experience based explicitly on notions of heterosexuality (Galupo, 2007a, 2009; Muraco, 2012; Nardi, 1999; Shepperd et al., 2010; Weinstock, 2000). While cisgender identities and experience were assumed, they have not been previously explored as categories of analysis in the research. Thus, when reading this literature it is difficult to disentangle the way cultural constructions of normal are impacted by heterosexism and cisgenderism.

As transgender experience is problematized in society and pathologized in the psycho-medical literature it is particularly useful to attend to the discourse regarding normality expressed in transgender friendship narratives. The use of cisgender as a category of investigation had not previously been incorporated in the friendship literature and was crucial to exposing how normative identity is dually

constructed upon cisgender and heterosexual assumptions. In considering friendship, some participants discussed the way being associated with, or accepted by, cisgender and heterosexual friends contributed to a felt sense of normality in their own lives. Participants themselves defined both cisgender and heterosexual friends as “emotionally stable,” “grounding,” as “‘normal’ friends who do ‘normal’ things.” Acceptance from these friends provided a “validation” not provided by friendships from within the LGBT communities. It was clear from the narratives that heterosexual or cisgender identity alone was not enough to regard a friend as normal. Rather, it was the combination of the two.

The conceptual conflation of gender identity and sexual orientation can make it difficult to address the unique ways that transgender and cisgender individuals negotiate these two dimensions of identity across social situations. By simultaneously considering gender identity and sexual orientation, the present research makes visible the intersection between the two in the context of friendship and serves as a model for using cisgender as a category of investigation in relationship and social identity research.

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