Toward an Inclusive Model of Lesbian Identity Development: Outlining a Common and Nuanced Model for Cis and Trans Women

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Abstract

This article proposes an integrative model of lesbian identity development that places cis and trans women together as equal contributors. Two of the most influential current models of female sexuality are reviewed, and we use their commonalities to build the foundation of our integrative model. We also use Tate’s (2012) model of lesbian identity as a scaffolding to integrate trans women’s experiences alongside cis women’s. Finally, we provide the outline of the Inclusive Model of Female Sexuality and discuss the convergences and divergences in female experiences that exist between cis women and trans women in the formation of lesbian identity.

Keywords: women’s sexuality, lesbian identity, trans women, queer, development
While many lesbian readers of this journal will be acutely aware of their own identity development, recent psychological models of human sexuality do not make a discrete track for “lesbian identity”—or for other scholarly labels used to designate specific sexual orientations (e.g., “bisexual,” “queer,” “heterosexual”). Instead, these recent psychological models focus on the plasticity or fluidity of female sexuality and argue that a lesbian identity is simply one of the possible outcomes within this larger phenomenon. Importantly, these recent models argue that any sexual identity (lesbian or otherwise) may take different paths to emerge and can change over time (under certain circumstances). Consequently, interest in lesbian identity development as a specific experience to be explained within psychology might be viewed as waning to some extent in favor of the broader theoretical models of female sexuality. Additionally, the scope of who might be counted as a lesbian has become broader, based, in part, on the arguments of Tate (2012), who focused on self-categorization as female (rather than other people’s perception of self as female) as the main criterion for inclusion. So long as a person self-identifies as female and is romantically and sexually attracted to others who self-identify as female, these individuals are counted as lesbians. Furthermore, Tate (2012) argues that at least two models of female self-categorization exist: (1) as current identity only, or as (2) identity across any point in the life course.

In this article, we address both a specific interest in lesbian identity (within the larger context of female sexuality) and the inclusion of trans women within all aspects of female sexuality. Our work unfolds in three major parts. In the first part, we summarize and compare two of the most influential current models of female sexuality, the “intimate careers model” (Peplau, Spalding, Conley, & Veniegas, 1999) and the “dynamical
systems approach” (Diamond, 2007). In the second part, we introduce an inclusive model of female sexuality that makes integral places for both cis and trans women’s experiences in the totality of female sexuality. In the third part, we develop this inclusive model of female sexuality using a theoretical branching structure that allows scholars to discuss “lesbian identity” as a specific psychological experience. Also in the third part, we discuss the convergences and divergences in female experiences that exist between cis and trans women in the formation of lesbian identity, recognizing that different women might use different specific terms to self-label this identity (e.g., “dyke,” “lesbian,” “queer woman”). In this way, we invite the reader to consider our use of “lesbian” as a shorthand to include all ways that women might name this identity.

**Brief Summaries of the Two Recent Psychological Models of Female Sexuality**

As we have noted above, two recent psychological models of female sexuality that subsume lesbian identity development are the Intimate Careers Model (ICM; Peplau et al., 1999) and the Dynamical Systems Approach (DSA; Diamond, 2007). We briefly summarize each model to orient the reader to the structure of our subsequent model (which we term the Inclusive Model of Female Sexuality).

**The Intimate Careers Model of Female Sexuality**

Peplau et al. (1999) propose that scholars examine the development of women's sexual orientations in a way that is parallel to career development—hence the name: intimate careers model (ICM). Peplau et al. (1999) derive their definition of career from Goffman (1961), who explains a “career” as any social strand of a person’s course through life. Similar to the pathways that lead people to their careers, the developmental
origins of a woman's sexual orientation are diverse and affected by a number of factors and events (Peplau et al., 1999). According to Goffman (1961), “careers” are two-sided, consisting of internal and external matters. Internal matters refer to experiences, such as self-image and felt identity. External matters refer to experiences that are a part of what Goffman (1961) calls the “publicly accessible institutional complex,” which are official positions, valid relations, and lifestyles. For example, a person’s occupational career may be as a professor, which concerning external matters, may involve having a specific rank (e.g., Assistant Professor), belonging to a university or college, having an office, and teaching courses. Importantly, each of these specific elements can and may change over time. Concerning internal matters, being a professor may involve a person’s feelings of self-worth in the occupation and felt identity as someone who contributes to academic knowledge and/or toils against obstacles to knowledge. Again, any specific element of the internal matters can and may change over time. As such, Goffman’s (1961) notion of a “career” allows for movement back and forth between individual agency and social structure, as well as accommodates certain changes within the internal and external concerns.

Consequently, an “intimate career” refers to the arrangement and patterning of one’s intimate relationships across the lifetime and involves both internal and external matters that may change over time (Peplau et al., 1999). Because ICM focuses on female sexuality in general, an important feature of an intimate career for Peplau and colleagues is that it is neutral with regard to the relative contributions, or the presumed key ingredients, of a specifically lesbian identity. That is, the kind(s) of sex and love that a woman experiences and the amount of nurturance in her relationships are not assumed by
the ICM. Additionally, even how a woman labels her sexual orientation (e.g., lesbian, dyke, gay, bisexual, queer) is not assumed by this model. Instead, when considering what might be described as lesbian identity, the ICM only expects that the person’s partner(s) identifies as female when the person herself identifies as female.

Finally, ICM is based on the presumption that social contexts play a central role in the major types of careers found in the industrialized world—occupational and intimate. For occupational careers, the categories of jobs available, their entrance requirements, and their pay and reputation, as well as a person’s class, ethnicity, and education are ultimately shaped by a given society (Peplau et al., 1999). The parallel for intimate careers is that the social identities, scripts, and institutions available to individuals are also shaped by a society and will thereby shape sexual identities. Biology may play a part in the development of both occupational and intimate careers, but this influence does not predetermine either type of career for women (Peplau et al., 1999).

A Dynamical Systems Approach to Female Sexuality

Diamond’s (2007) dynamical systems approach (DSA) focuses on nonlinear variability in women’s attraction, behavior, and self-labeling. Diamond argues that a characteristic feature of dynamical systems thinking is the notion of nonlinear change over time, which can be contrasted with what she terms “traditional models” that largely focus on processes of gradual, straightforward change over time. According to Diamond (2007), nonlinear change is not based on a simple proportional relationship between cause and effect. Instead, changes in nonlinear relationships are often abrupt, unexpected, and difficult to predict. Furthermore, nonlinear change allows for the spontaneous emergence of novel forms, which includes new erotic feelings and experiences through
unpredictable interactions between different elements in the psychological system. Yet another key feature for DSA for female sexuality is “periodic reorganizations,” which include episodes of re-labeling (public or private) in sexual self-concept at various points in the lifetime.

Traditional models of same-gender sexuality fail to adequately conceptualize change in female sexuality over time. Consequently, Diamond (2007) argues that many periodic reorganizations have historically been discounted and ignored in the data on sexual orientation. Same-gender sexuality has been presumed to be a stable phenomenon, such that within-person variability appears atypical and unexplainable. Thus, Diamond (2007) argues that, whereas traditional models focus on breaking down sexual orientation phenomena into their individual components, a dynamical systems approach focuses on understanding how complex phenomena (e.g., sexuality) take a variety of different forms according to the complex, changing relationships among multiple factors (see also Fogel, 1993).

Illustrating the merits of DSA, Diamond (2007) argues that many women appear capable of abrupt, discontinuous shifts in their sexuality. Specifically, she points to cases of women who report no awareness of same-gender attractions until mid- to late-adulthood (see also Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Cassingham & O’Neil, 1993; Charbonneau & Lander, 1991; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Loewenstein, 1985; Saghir & Robins, 1973). Additionally, spontaneous emergence of novel forms may occur in lesbian identity development (Diamond, 2007). From a dynamical systems perspective, transformative interactions between the basic psychobiological systems underlying sexuality and affectional bonding may be responsible for such emergent desires
(Diamond, 2007). For example, a number of sexual-minority women have reported relationship-specific and emotionally-triggered desires (Diamond, 2007). Some women report that their desires are directed toward the person instead of their gender or genital anatomy (see also Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990; Cassingham & O’Neil, 1993; Diamond, 2002, 2006; Golden, 1987). Lastly, according to Diamond (2007), female same-gender sexuality includes periodic reorganizations. A typical example of a phase shift in lesbian identity development is when a woman who had not labeled her sexuality previously begins to identify as “lesbian.” Overall, Diamond’s (2007) DSA considers the nature, prevalence, and meaning of within-person variability in female sexuality, which includes lesbian identity development.

**Who Are “Women” in the Intimate Careers Model and the Dynamical Systems Approach?**

Although the ICM and DSA models focus on sexuality in an inclusive way, recognizing the different self-labels that women might use in the U.S. (e.g., “lesbian,” “dyke,” “queer,” “bisexual,” “unlabeled”), they both have a decidedly “cisgender emphasis” for who counts as women. That is, they include only women who were assigned female at birth and who continue to identify as female. Subsequent articles by both Peplau (e.g., Peplau, 2001; Peplau & Garnets, 2000) and Diamond (e.g., Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Diamond & Wallen, 2011) confirm that their focus is on cis women and same-sex attraction.

“Sex” and “gender” as academic terms are often used as equivalents, and this practice often goes unquestioned (but see Tate 2012; van Anders, 2015, for exceptions). By failing to distinguish between the terms, scholars privilege cisgender profiles of self-
categorization (see Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; Tate, Youssef & Bettergarcia, 2014). Both Peplau and Diamond have used the phrase “same-sex attraction,” rather than “same-gender attraction,” since their initial publications in 1999 and 2007, respectively, even though Diamond co-wrote an article about transgender populations (Diamond, Pardo, & Butterworth, 2011). While Peplau and Diamond may not intend to exclude trans people, their language has this effect. Throughout this article, we use the term “same-gender” to foreshadow that we believe it is possible and, in fact, necessary to include trans women (and possibly other trans* experiences) in any theory of women’s sexuality and its development.

How and Why Trans Women Count as Women

Tate (2012) delineated a current identity model and a life-course identity model that are based on someone’s felt-sense of being a “girl/woman”—exclusively or in addition to other gender labels. Her current identity model includes all individuals who identify as a girl/woman at the moment of scholarly consideration, and thus cis women, trans women, and genderqueer/nonbinary individuals who identify as both female and male (e.g., two-spirit, bigender, pangender) are able to be included in this definition. However, in this model, a number of groups cannot be described as lesbians: trans men (even if they once—in the past—identified as women or as lesbians), genderqueer/nonbinary individuals who identify as neither female nor male (e.g., agender and nongender), and cis men (Tate, 2012, Table 1).

Tate’s (2012) life-course identity model expands the self-categorization consideration to any point during a person’s lifetime. For instance, trans men who identified as women in the past could be included as lesbians under this model. However,
newer theorizing might be viewed as weakening the efficacy of the life-course identity model. Specifically, Tate and colleagues (2014) have pointed out that the autobiographies of trans women and trans men suggest that they often recognize their true gender selves from an early age and rarely, if ever, see themselves as part of the gender category assigned at birth. However, they may not disclose publicly until years or even decades later, and one of the reasons may be to avoid prejudice and discrimination. The same is often true for non-binary trans individuals. Thus, the life-course identity model might be accurate and workable, but it may fail to take into account how prejudice and discrimination (as just two sources among many) might affect private and public disclosure dynamics.

**A Weak (though Persistent) Challenge to Trans Women’s Inclusion as “Women” for Scholarly Discussions**

The foregoing point about trans men’s self-categorization experiences also challenges a persistent perspective held by a small group of people within feminism about who counts as “woman.” This perspective is referred to as “radical feminism” by its proponents, and sometimes referred to as “trans-exclusionary radical feminism” (TERF) by its opponents in the U.S. (Goldberg, 2014). For reasons that become clear below, we refer to it as TERF to underscore the idea that the position is not appropriately radical feminism—it is more appropriately categorized as reactionary feminism relying on otiose assumptions—and that it is expressly exclusionary of trans women (as well as trans men). A main tenet of TERF is that being assigned to the category of female (viz. birth-assignment) sets in motion a cascade of socialization experiences that result in a
bond between all people raised as girls (cf. Goldberg, 2014). However, in light of recent work on the subject, this does not seem to be the case.

There is little reason to believe that socializing people using the label of their birth-assigned category will result in any sort of social bond with others who have the same birth-assigned labels. In particular, the autobiographies of trans men provide very clear counterevidence. In the narratives provided by Chaz Bono (2011), Jamison Green (2004), and Dhillon Khosla (2015), each describes his early recognition of being male—not female—and his attempts at various points to resist the ways that he was socialized based on his birth-assigned category. Each also describes varying levels of affinity with girls and then women. Since some of these men are romantically interested in women, their affinity toward women might be better characterized as sexual-emotional attraction rather than a common socialization based on their shared gender assignment at birth. These autobiographies clearly illustrate the meaning of social construction espoused by Berger (1963): that any socialization is actively processed by the self in ways that allow for consent, assent, and dissent. Their experiences demonstrate that trans men often actively resist female socialization (even with periods of acquiescence to others’ perceptions to fit in or to avoid further prejudice and discrimination), which directly undercuts the TERF argument that socialization by itself creates similarities. In fact, many trans men may experience a “self-socialization” away from girlhood and womanhood and into boyhood and manhood.

Similarly, many trans women experience a parallel process in the other direction—toward “self-socialization” into girlhood and womanhood. A favored argument of TERF proponents is that trans women’s socialization as boys will lead to
fundamentally different experiences of gender that are incompatible with being a woman (Goldberg, 2014). Here again, autobiographies—in this case, by trans women such as Jennifer Finney Boylan (2013), Janet Mock (2014), and Jan Morris (1974),—show exactly the opposite. Each describes her early recognition of being female—not male—and her attempts at various points to resist ways that she was socialized based on her birth assigned category. Of course, different family dynamics and societal options led each woman to disclose her female identity at different times in her life. Also, each describes varying levels of affinity with boys and then men. Since some of these women are romantically interested in men, their affinities might again be better described as attraction toward this group, rather than a similarity in socialization based on a shared gender assignment at birth.

A related TERF argument is that trans women are granted male privilege—whether they want it or not—by virtue of being seen as male and that this experience delegitimizes their claim to womanhood, because so-called “women born women” (or cis women) never experience male privilege. If male privilege is conceptualized as being perceived and treated as male, then this TERF argument is either naïve or internally incoherent, as some cis women describe being granted male privilege—whether they want it or not—because they are seen as male based on their manner of dress and hairstyle (e.g., Lucal, 1999). For example, butch women are more often than not referred to as “sir” or “mister” (e.g., Lucal, 1999) and frequently questioned about their presence in women’s bathrooms. Thus butch-presenting, as well as other so-called “gender bending,” cis women experience male privilege unless they announce their identities as female (see Devor, 1989; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Lucal, 1999). To the extent that
TERF endorsers believe that other people’s perceptions are all that is necessary to experience male privilege, then butch-presenting cis women are also experiencing male privilege.

The logical extension of the TERF argument is that butch women have a less legitimate claim to being women because they are participating—whether they want to or not—in a patriarchal system that grants male privilege to any individual who is consistently read as male. However, sociologists like Lucal (1999) have argued that women not presenting as feminine “could be one of [the] contributions to the eventual dismantling of patriarchal gender constructs” (p. 793).

Interestingly, some TERFs might agree with Lucal’s argument that being a butch-presenting woman challenges patriarchy. Yet, if women can participate in the dismantling of patriarchal gender constructs by not participating in social expectations of visual femininity, identifying as female (as Lucal does), and announcing their gender identity when given the opportunity—even though they may experience male privilege some of the time—then why are trans women disallowed from doing the same? It would seem that trans women are participating in the dismantling of patriarchy by announcing their gender identity as women and rejecting any childhood socialization that misattributed male privilege to them. This is especially powerful given the new evidence that trans women and cis women are virtually identical in their processes of female self-categorization in childhood and in adulthood (see next section). Some TERFs argue in response that there is a fundamentally female essence that only those with vaginas possess, a ludicrous idea that feminists have long fought to dispel.
New Evidence that Supports Trans Women’s Inclusion as “Women” for Scholarly Discussions

Two recent psychological studies provide even more evidence that weakens the TERF position and simultaneously underscore why cis and trans women need to be considered as equal contributors to any theory that focuses on women. In one study, Olson, Key, and Eaton (2015) provided some of the first published evidence that gender self-categorization patterns are nearly identical between trans and cis girls (and, separately, between trans and cis boys). Briefly, Olson et al. (2015) used a computer-administered test called the implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) to measure children’s reaction times to pairings of “girl-me” and “boy-me” word pairs. Olson et al. found that trans girls showed no detectable difference in their reaction times from cis girls, but these trans girls were significantly faster at responding to “girl-me” pairs than cis boys. (Similarly, trans boys showed no detectable difference in their reaction times compared to cis boys, but trans boys were significantly faster at “boy-me” pairs than cis girls.) Olson et al. (2015) concluded that unconscious processes (which are believed to motivate IAT responses) are basically the same within different self-categorization profiles of girls (cis or trans) and of boys (cis or trans).

Research from our lab (Tate & Bettergarcia, 2015) shows similar patterns using a different assessment tool. Specifically, Tate and Bettergarcia asked adult participants to provide an estimate of their self and gender category overlap by choosing one point along a continuum of overlapping circles. The scale starts with two completely non-overlapping circles (the first point on the scale), and then features circles that increasingly overlap until the seventh (and last) depiction presents two completely overlapping circles. Tate
and Bettergarcia asked participants to indicate their self and gender category overlap in the manner described above with five different gender categories as items: “female,” “male,” “trans female,” “trans male,” and “genderqueer.” Accordingly, a participant could range anywhere from no overlap between self and a specific gender category to complete overlap between self and a specific gender category. Tate and Bettergarcia’s study was a way to test Tate’s (2012, 2014) theory that felt-sense of gender identity may exist along a type of continuum. She argues that a felt-sense of female identity, for instance, might be reflected in a complete or near-complete overlap between self and “female” gender category and simultaneously in no or very little overlap between self and “male” gender category—for both cis and trans women. In Tate and Bettergarcia’s study, cis and trans women showed virtually identical high overlaps with the “female” category and low overlaps with the “male” category items. (Likewise, cis and trans men showed virtually identical high overlaps with the “male” category and low overlaps with the “female” category items.)

These studies provide direct evidence that cis and trans girls and women respond virtually identically to measures of unconscious (Olson et al.) and conscious (Tate & Bettergarcia) gender self-categorization tasks. Consequently, positions (especially TERF positions) that argue for the primacy of other people’s views of the self as female (girl or woman) must contend with and appropriately counter-argue these new findings. Also noteworthy, these findings provide additional support to the trans women and men (e.g., Bono, 2011; Devor, 1997; Green, 2004; Mock, 2014; Morris, 1974; Serano, 2007) who state that their felt-sense of self-categorization is just as deep and abiding as cis women’s or cis men’s, respectively.
The Inclusive Female Sexuality Model

Given that both qualitative and quantitative evidence show that cis and trans women are equally implicated as self-identified women, it is time to develop a model of female sexuality that respects this fact. Accordingly, in this section, we provide a new, more nuanced model of female sexuality that revises existing psychological models. We term our model the Inclusive Female Sexuality Model. Our Inclusive Model builds on the ICM and DSA models and features departures from both because of the divergent experiences of cis and trans women in the U.S. Below, we enumerate the main tenets of the Inclusive Model under the headings “Convergences” (for similarities between the experiences of cis and trans women in the development of female sexuality) and “Divergences” (for dissimilarities between the experiences of cis and trans women in the development of female sexuality). When appropriate, we indicate where the Inclusive Model is similar to or departs from the ICM and DSA frameworks. Finally, in each section, we note when the convergences are virtually indistinguishable between cis and trans girls or women and when there are nuances between them that lead to divergence.

The main divergences between cis and trans women’s experiences result from the psychological effects of prejudice and discrimination against trans women. Other divergences also apply to different experiences that trans girls/women have with or without hormone use and/or surgical interventions.

An Inductive Branching Structure

The Inclusive Model employs an inductive branching structure to recognize the different terms that women in the U.S. use for their sexuality. We then divide these terms into what we collectively refer to as queer* (i.e., lesbian, dyke, bisexual, pansexual,
asexual) and hetero* (i.e., heterosexual, straight, heteroflexible). Within each major branch, there are additional sub-branches. We have attempted to capture this inductive structure in Figure 1.

*Figure 1. Branching Structure for the Inclusive Model of Female Sexuality*

As noted above, “queer*” refers to all classes of discrete labels that can be further parsed into (1) a broader set of attraction or behavioral desires and (2) a narrower set of attraction or behavioral desires. The broader set for queer* conveys an attraction to all possible categories of people—that is, cis women, cis men, trans women, trans men, and nonbinary individuals—even while the strength of attraction toward these groups may not be equal. Accordingly, the broader queer* branch includes labels such as “bisexual,” “pansexual,” and “queer+” (the latter of which tries to expressly convey the linguistic use of “queer” as being attracted to all groups of people).

The narrower set for queer* conveys an attraction to only some groups of people—again, irrespective of strength of attraction across the groups within the subset.
For example, for some women, “lesbian” indicates an attraction toward cis women only, but for other women, “lesbian” indicates an attraction toward cis women, trans women, and nonbinary individuals. Similarly, for some women, “queer\” might implicate attraction toward cis and trans women, trans men, and nonbinary individuals (or any combination thereof), but not toward cis men.¹

Likewise, “hetero*” refers to all classes of discrete labels that involve, on one side, a broader set of attractions and, on another side, a narrower set of attractions (see Figure 1). As a narrower label, “heterosexual,” for some women, might include attraction toward cis men only, but for other women, the same label indicates attraction toward both cis and trans men. As a broader label, “heteroflexible,” for some women, might implicate a majority attraction to men (cis only or cis and trans) and a subjectively less prominent, though meaningful, attraction toward any of the other profiles (i.e., trans women, cis women, and nonbinary individuals). As with the queer* branch, the relative strength of attraction toward the groups within a broader or narrower set varies across persons.

The Narrower Queer* Branch in the Inductive Structure

For the remainder of this article, we focus on the branch of women’s sexuality that is described as queer* and the branch that tends toward a narrower attraction set (e.g., “lesbian,” “dyke,” “queer\”). Again, we refer to these discrete terms collectively as “lesbian identity” as a shorthand, even though some women use other words to describe themselves (e.g., “dyke,” “queer\ woman”). We do this so that scholars can use a single term to capture the experiences of women who are attracted to individuals who are

¹ The use of “\” on “queer\” is meant to indicate a subset, rather than all possible groups, and can thereby be contrasted with the “queer+” label to capture in language the two uses of the same term “queer” in U.S. discourse.
mostly, if not exclusively, also identified as women. We focus our discussion on the narrower queer* attraction in order to consider a more inclusive way to conceptualize lesbian identity.

**Convergences along the Narrower Attraction Branch within the Queer* Branch**

Because trans and cis girls have virtually indistinguishable self-concepts as female (cf. Olson et al., 2015), the Inclusive Model starts from the premise that during childhood and adolescent development, girls of any profile may experience at least four different convergent experiences. These are: passionate, nonsexual female friendships; sexual contact with both boys and girls; a diversity of lesbian identifications; and sexual personality considerations. The first two are common to the ICM and DSA models. The last two (diversity of lesbian identifications and sexual personality considerations) are particular to the Inclusive Model, and, for this article, we focus only on those women who assume a lesbian identity (e.g., “lesbian,” “dyke,” “queer\ woman”). The diversity of lesbian identifications and sexual personality considerations can also refer to the broader queer* attractions branch (e.g., “bisexual,” “queer+”). Sexual personality considerations are relevant to all female sexual identities.

**Passionate, Nonsexual Female Friendships.** Both the ICM and DSA describe passionate, nonsexual female friendships as one type of same-gender female sexuality (see also Peplau, 2001). In Diamond’s (1998) work, the (presumably) cis women, whom she described as “sexual minority” women, often experienced passionate, nonsexual female friendships during adolescence or early adulthood. There is no reason to suspect that trans girls and young women would have a different trajectory. Even if a trans girl is not publicly disclosing (in part to avoid prejudice and discrimination; cf. Tate et al.,
2014), her private disclosure and her subtle attempts to live consistent with her self-concept might facilitate such passionate friendships with other girls and young adult women. Thus, from the perspective of self-reporting, both cis and trans girls should be able to identify (or, as adults, be able to recall) and discuss at least one passionate, nonsexual friendship with another girl (cis or trans). Moreover, cis and trans girls should be able to identify the features of these friendships that made them passionate, and some reasons why they were nonsexual.

These nonsexual reasons might have different nuances for cis and trans girls. Many cis girls in the U.S. likely never considered or suppressed their feelings because of the prevalence of heteronormativity (cf. Peplau, 2001). This would presumably also be the case for many trans girls who transitioned in childhood. However, for trans girls who transitioned during adolescence, the nonsexual reasons might stem from different motivations. Because many of these trans girls would have been misidentified as “boys” growing up, heteronormativity would appear to work in their favor for sexual or emotional contact with girls. That is, in a heteronormative context, a trans girl might be unhindered in dating girls if everyone else thinks that she is a boy.

Yet, herein, a deep similarity might be at play for both cis and trans girls—irrespective of transition status for trans girls. Even a trans girl who has not yet transitioned and therefore might be seen as male and “allowed” to be sexually attracted to women may recognize that she feels passion for a particular female friend, unlike anything she has experienced before. This recognition may, in fact, be a common experience for all girls, cis or trans, who tend toward a “lesbian” self-label. As Diamond’s (1998) research illustrates, some lesbian-identified (cis) women vividly
describe their passionate, nonsexual friendship with another woman as being the first
time they really experienced intense emotional or sexual desire for another person, and
they often never disclosed this intensity to anyone else. Trans girls would have no
difficulty both experiencing this intensity and keeping it private.

**Sexual Relationships with Both Female and Male Partners.** As the ICM and
DSA note, some (cis) women who later identify as lesbians have had at least one cis male
sexual partner (e.g., Diamond, 2007; Peplau, 2001). There is good reason to suspect that
some trans women who subsequently identify as lesbians have had the same experience.
The often varied sexual histories of cis women are usually interpreted as evidence of
female sexual plasticity (Peplau, 2001) or fluidity (Diamond, 2007). Similarly,
demographic studies of trans people (e.g., Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2012) show
variability in the partners of trans women, pointing to a convergence in the research on
women.

Considering only the subsets of women whom we include under the “lesbian
identity” label, there are some women (cis or trans) who may have felt some low-level
attraction toward cis men, but who have never pursued it further, or are simply
uninterested in men of any kind (cis or trans). This experience can be gleaned specifically
from Diamond’s (1998) work, in which she compared the (cis) women who reported
relationships with men (before the initial interview or after the follow-up interview) to
the women who did not report any sexual contact with men. The factors influencing
attraction should be further probed, but there is no reason to believe that cis and trans
women differ greatly here. Instead, this too may be a convergent experience within
female sexuality that characterizes the narrower attraction branch describable as lesbian identity.

**Diversity of Lesbian Identifications.** The cis and trans women whom we characterize as having a “lesbian identity” typically face a common developmental question, “which label should I use to convey my sexual identity?” Very soon after “coming out” as a “lesbian,” “dyke,” “queer," or any similar label, this subset of women begins to understand that there are further labels that lesbians often use. Although language changes generationally, some of the oldest and most recognizable labels are “androgynous,” “butch,” and “femme.” Within these broad labels, or as possible replacements, terms such as “futch” (femme-but)h, “masculine of center” (abbreviated MOC), “tomboy,” “boi,” “feminine of center,” “kiki,” “stud,” and many more have developed. Whatever the specific labels, lesbians appear to engage in a process of self-discovery to determine the label that fits best. This process is poorly understood in terms of psychological properties. Instead, most researchers take for granted that women somehow arrive at these labels, can report them to others (including interviewers), and that the self-label is relatively stable after some point (cf. Walker, Golub, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2012). Again, there is no good reason to believe that cis and trans women arrive at these labels through divergent processes. It seems likely that trans women who have a sense of themselves as female since childhood or early adolescence would be considering how they want to label their sexuality just as cis women do.

**Sexual Personality Considerations.** Scholars currently do not know the process by which lesbian labels are ultimately chosen, but what is known is that these labels are not correlated with what might be described as “sexual personality” (Walker et al.,
2012)—that is, whether a person is a “top” (viz. most comfortable being the sexual initiator), “bottom” (viz. most comfortable being the sexual consenter), or “switch” (viz. equally comfortable being the sexual initiator or the consenter). Walker and colleagues (2012) showed that the common belief that butches are tops and femmes are bottoms is inaccurate. Consequently, whereas butch, femme, and other labels do not necessarily indicate sexual personality, women still need to consider what their sexual personality is and then communicate this to potential sexual partners. In the case of sexual personality, scholars are likely to find similar processes for cis and trans women. Because most trans women never experienced their private identity as male (or at least not completely as male), they would not fit heteronormative gender assumptions and would not be any more likely to be a top than a switch or a bottom. Instead, trans women’s acknowledgement of their female self-categorization means that they likely determine their sexual personality through the same process as cis women.

**Divergences along the Narrower Attraction Branch within the Queer* Branch**

The main divergences between cis and trans girls/women in the Inclusive Model relate to social visibility as girls/women and anatomical expectation concerns for partnered sex. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a start. Importantly, these divergence experiences still assume a female self-categorization, so differ completely from TERF positions (as described above).

**Social Visibility as Girls/Women.** For cis girls and women, the public referent (as female) and the private referent (as female) appear the same, but as Tate argues, one’s private referent is the common denominator for understanding their gender self-categorization experience (Tate, 2012, 2014; Tate et al., 2014). In the social world,
however, cis girls and women are socially visible from a young age because the private and public perceptions converge. Consequently, for interpersonal interactions, cis girls and women will rarely have their legitimacy as “female” in U.S. society challenged, especially not in childhood. The challenge for cis women may happen if they violate visual presentation expectations, such as being a tomboy or butch-presenting woman (e.g., Lucal, 1999), or if they express same-gender sexual desires among individuals with virulently anti-gay attitudes. Nonetheless, this legitimacy is not usually challenged on self-categorization grounds—that is, most people accept that she is really a woman.

Instead, this “legitimacy” is actually a statement about her being a “good woman” or a “good example of womanhood” from a heteronormative perspective.

Trans girls and women, on the other hand, have to deal with both senses of the so-named “legitimacy” issue. As a number of contemporary narrative accounts reveal (e.g., Mock, 2014; Morris, 1974; Serano, 2007), trans girls and women are confronted with the social perception that they are somehow not really girls or women. This experience can be seen as the tension between the private knowledge (in this case, “I am really a girl or woman”) and the public perception that resides in the comments or behaviors of others (in this case, “that person is not a girl!” or “you’re not really a woman”). Thus, in order for trans girls and women to even be seen as queer* women, they must publicly disclose their private identities as girls or women. This public disclosure can result in being subjected to prejudice and discrimination, codified in terms such as “transphobia” and “transmisogyny” (i.e., specific anti-trans female sentiment or misogyny toward trans women). Thus, trans girls and women must first struggle to socially claim a female label before they can begin to use a lesbian identity label.
**Anatomical Expectation Concerns for Partnered Sex.** Within lesbian communities, one of the salient features of partnered sexual contact is the expectation that partners will have breasts (of various shapes and sizes) and vaginal-vulval external genital structures (again, of various shapes and sizes). With medical intervention, such as hormone therapy and surgeries, trans women can have the same range of breast and external genital structures as cis women. Consequently, the most common forms of lesbian eroticism are equally applicable to this subset of trans women’s bodies.

However, some trans women do not have or even seek medical interventions (Factor & Rothblum, 2008). This subset of trans women must therefore consider how their anatomical features can be mapped to broader lesbian eroticism and sexual contact because their bodies do not match the expected template for lesbians. Yet, there are places within the larger scope of cis lesbian bodily experience where these trans women can find helpful insights. For example, they can compare themselves to cis women who seem most similar to them in terms of physical features (e.g., breast size, height, body shape). Additionally, they can point to the fact that lesbian sexual activity features non-vulval elements (e.g., anal stimulation, wearing of strap-ons; Newman, 2004) that are consistent with their own bodily features. Such comparisons will likely boost these women’s self-esteem and help them feel confident that they too can be part of lesbian eroticism.

**Discussion**

We have reviewed two contemporary psychological models of female sexuality and expanded them to make an integral place for trans women alongside cis women. Our Inclusive Model of Female Sexuality is applicable not only to lesbian identities but to all
forms of female sexuality that are cis and trans* inclusive. The main focus of this article was the subset of self-labels that we categorize under “lesbian identity.” We used Tate’s (2012) current identity model of lesbian identity to build a model of female sexuality that includes cis women’s and trans women’s experiences as equally important.

We acknowledge that nonbinary individuals with a gender-blended self-categorization (i.e., as both female and male) can also be included in our model. However, an appropriate discussion of gender-blended self-categorization requires another article because we do not assume that the intrapersonal dynamics of women with a “binary identification” (i.e., cis women and trans women) are completely aligned with those of individuals who have a “nonbinary identification” as both female and male simultaneously (e.g., two spirit, bigender, pangender). More research about nonbinary identification is needed in order to determine the extent to which nonbinary self-categorization experiences may be different from binary self-categorization experiences.

Our Inclusive Model has identified four experiences of convergence and two experiences of divergence that cis and trans women have relative to each other when considering same-gender sexuality. As we have noted, there are more convergences and divergences than we listed. We were interested in starting a conversation and line of scholarly inquiry, rather than providing an exhaustive list. For instance, one of the main divergences that we did not discuss was the experience of anti-trans woman prejudice within lesbian communities (e.g., Goldberg, 2014). Since other authors (e.g., Green, 2006; Johnson, 2007; Serano, 2007, 2013) have examined that topic from different perspectives, we thought it best to focus on new conceptual territory. We have no doubt, however, that the existence of such prejudice and discrimination is a reason why some
trans women do not identify as “lesbians,” “dykes,” or related self-labels used in lesbian communities (see Rossiter, 2016, in this issue).

**Uniqueness of the Inclusive Model**

As we noted, our Inclusive Model makes an explicit place for trans women as an integral part of understanding female sexuality. In this way, our Inclusive Model has a broader base than either the ICM or DSA, which enables us to identify convergent and divergent phenomena for cis and trans women that might otherwise be overlooked. For instance, the nature of passionate, nonsexual friendships has been expanded by our Inclusive Model to include trans girls and women who have not publicly disclosed. This consideration might never have been made by the cisgender focus of the ICM and DSA.

Our Inclusive Model also introduces a new perspective on the dynamics that may occur for a woman with respect to social support and her minority sexuality—as lesbian or another label. Take, for instance, the interpersonal picture painted by the television series *Transparent*. This series focuses on a trans woman who was married to a cis woman for many years, but who only publicly disclosed her private identity after their divorce. Considering the actual psychological dynamics for a trans woman in this type of situation, she may have been living a type of “stealth queer” relationship during the marriage. Knowing her own self-categorization as female for most of her life, she might have searched for a partner who would be more accepting of her as trans. In actual (versus fictional) life, this might lead certain trans women to see bisexual and pansexual women as more appropriate partners, based on the assumption that they would be supportive after disclosure because they are attracted to individuals from more than one gender category.
Similarly, one can imagine a cis woman who does not disclose her attraction to other women. This type of cis woman might engage in a long-term relationship with a cis man, but likely one who is bisexual or pansexual for the same reason as the trans woman in the foregoing example: her partner might be understanding and supportive of non-heterosexual experiences. This is a unique insight from the Inclusive Model of female sexuality that is not easily derived from either the ICM or DSA.

**Coda**

We have presented the beginnings of a new model of female sexuality that necessitates the inclusion of trans women alongside cis women from the outset. We hope that our Inclusive Model inspires continued analysis of women’s experiences, as well as leads to a consideration of cis- and trans*-inclusive male sexuality and various nonbinary sexualities. Taking this article as a template, theorists would do well to fundamentally change their underlying assumptions about human sexuality, rather than incrementally add social categories to the cisnormative and heteronormative existing models. Finally, we believe that the Inclusive Model of Female Sexuality is amenable to intersectional analyses because it is built on a broader, more inclusive foundation than previous psychological models by including both cis and trans women’s experiences.
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