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Experiences of female partners of masculine identifying trans persons

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Abstract

This study explores the intimate relationship experiences of cisgender (i.e., not transgender) female partners of masculine identifying transgender persons, with a particular focus on these partners' self-understanding of their sexual orientation. Limited research about this topic has been conducted to date. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight South African women who are or have been cisgender female partners of masculine identifying trans persons. Although the interviews showed that the relationship experiences of female partners of masculine identifying trans persons are diverse, several common themes emerged in the narratives. The way that participants labelled their sexual orientation did not change from before to after their relationship with a transgender partner. The participants reported varied family and community responses to their relationships. Specific emotional and informational support needs for women with transgender partners were identified.

Keywords

cisgender; lesbian; sexual orientation; relationships; South Africa

Even as the experiences of transgender persons become more widely addressed by scholars and activists, the perspectives of those who partner with transgender persons have received little research attention (Brown 2010). This study explored the experiences of women who have partnered with masculine identifying trans persons in South Africa. One of the key questions of this research was to determine whether the sexual orientation of cisgender female partners of masculine identifying trans persons, or the cisgender person's understanding thereof, had shifted following their involvement with a trans partner. The cisgender women's experiences with their partners' transitions, as well as with community and family reactions to their relationships, were also explored.

The term *cisgender*, which is mostly known and used in the transgender community, was coined by Carl Buijs in 1995 to refer to persons who are not transgender – those who conform or agree with the gender assigned to them by society, matching their sex at birth (Serano 2007, Klein 2008). *Cis* is a Latin prefix literally meaning 'on this side of' or 'not across'. The term cisgender is used throughout the manuscript in reference to the research participants. The participants' partners are referred to as *masculine identifying trans persons*. Over the years it has become more inclusive to refer to people who transition from female to male this way rather than using the previously well-known term 'female to male,' or FTM. The term FTM has been subjected to critique, as it buys into the notion of a two-gender

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binary and does not allow any gender identities on the continuum other than strictly male and female.

The relationship between transgender identity and sexual orientation is complex. Many transgender people will use sexual orientation labels that describe their sexual attractions in accordance with their gender identity rather than their birth sex (i.e., masculine identifying trans persons who are attracted to women and identify as heterosexual; Iantaffi and Bockting 2011). Less is known, however, about the sexual orientation of cisgender partners of transgender persons (Brown 2010). Entering a relationship with a transgender person, or co-transitioning with an existing partner, may radically complicate a cisgender person's experience of her sexual orientation – and may have different implications for heterosexual and sexual minority women. Cisgender partners may not only undergo some period of internal questioning or confusion around their sexual orientation identity, but they may also have concerns about how their sexual orientation will be perceived by others (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). Previous research has documented the latter issue to be of particular salience to cisgender sexual minority women with transgender partners; they may face prejudice within LGBTI circles and thus lose their sense of connection to and support from these communities (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Lev 2004; Brown 2009; Cook-Daniels 1998, 1999; Shackleton in Judge, Manion & de Waal eds. 2008; and Theron 2009). As the male identifying trans partner's transition progresses and he becomes well adjusted in society as male, it furthermore conveys challenges and stigma to lesbian partners who want to continue claiming a lesbian identity, but do not wish to out their partners as trans (Cook-Daniels 1998).

In this study, we explore the sexual orientation identity of cisgender female partners of masculine identifying trans persons, with attention to both the personal and social significance of that identity. We also examine some of the issues related to co-transitioning, relationship gender dynamics, societal acceptance, and informational and educational needs that have been identified as important in other studies (Brown 2009; Fleming, MacGowan, & Costos 1985; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). To our knowledge, this is the first study to address trans partnership issues in the South African context.

Method

The study participants were eight female partners of masculine identifying trans persons residing in South Africa. These women represent different ethnicities, language groups, and cultural and class backgrounds; characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. The participants were mixed with regard to their self-identified sexual orientation. Three described themselves as lesbian, three described themselves as bisexual, and two described themselves as heterosexual. Most participants were currently in relationships with transgender partners at the time of their interview, however, one participant was interviewed after her relationship with a transgender partner had ended. Most participants also were involved with their partners from the time they initiated their transition (although the specifics of the transition, i.e., hormones, surgery, or social/legal transition, were unique to each couple); one participant became involved with her partner after he had transitioned, and another became involved with her partner after he began hormone therapy. Given the discrimination faced by gender and sexual minorities in South African society as well as the close-knit nature of the trans community in South Africa, pseudonyms were allocated to all female participants and their trans partners in order to protect their anonymity.

The participants were approached by the first author, who was acquainted with them through her activist work. The participants did not, however, all know each other. Semi-structured interviewing was used, allowing for conversations dense with information but that were

informal enough to allow interviewees to freely speak about topics many of them had not spoken about before. All participants signed consent forms prior to their interviews, which were digitally recorded.¹ Seven interviews were conducted in English and one, with Rika, was conducted in Afrikaans (quotations from her interview are thus presented in translation). English was a second language for four of the participants interviewed in English, as well as for the interviewer. However, because English is the language in which most business is conducted in South Africa, the participants indicated they were comfortable conversing in it. Only the person transcribing, the research supervisor, and the first author had access to the interviews.

Results

The findings are organised into three thematic areas that emerged from the interviews: sexual orientation identity for the cisgender partners; complexities of the co-transition process; and family and community acceptance of the transgender-cisgender relationship.

Sense of self: Positioning cisgender sexual orientation

Inasmuch as the participating cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans persons were all female, they represented a whole array of sexual orientations. During the course of each interview, the first author explored with each participant how she would describe her sexual orientation both before and after initiating a relationship with a trans partner. None of the eight participants expressed a change in the way they identified their sexual orientation following a relationship with a trans partner, but they did display fluid understandings of their own sexual orientation or of their partner's gender. It also became clear that the way some of the cisgender women understood their sexual orientation, and the way their sexual orientation was perceived by others, hinged on their understanding of their trans partner's bodily composition. Most of the women expressed some shift in the way they generally viewed sexual orientation, gender and gender identity.

Lebogang and Ntombi, who were both aged 25–30, identified as heterosexual. Both entered relationships with their partners when their partners were assuming masculine lifestyles (Ntombi's partner was already using a male name socially) but had not yet taken steps to physically or legally transition. Because both understood their partners to be male, they found their attractions to their partners to be consistent with their identities as heterosexual. For Lebogang, however, this process was initially fraught; she worried whether she had 'become lesbian' because she was in a relationship with a female-bodied person. Ultimately, she psychologically resolved this issue when her partner assured her that he wanted a male body and she began to understand his body as male.

Amanda (aged 31–35), Busi (aged 25–30), and Susan (aged 30–35) identified as bisexual. These participants were less invested in gender as a binary construct, and therefore also less attached to constructions of sexual orientation dependent on that binary. Susan explained her view of gender roles:

I've never been the most feminine person. I'm still trying to show off about one skirt in my cupboard. So the gender type orientation – I've never seen the major line between male and female. There is no difference to me. It is how you are. If you're useless in plumbing, then you're useless in plumbing. It doesn't make you

¹Although only the first author, her research supervisor, and the transcriptionist had access to the interview material for purposes of this research, all of the participants were willing to have their interviews shared with Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) for archival purposes.

‘not a man’. I’m a terrible cook, but that doesn’t make me even less of a woman.
[Susan]

Amanda described sexual attraction to both men and women:

It was the person, it wasn’t whether they were male or female and I’ve been with men all my life sort of thing. [...] if somebody had come to me and said to me was I gay or if I was straight, I wouldn’t actually know the answer because it was almost as if I was in between. It was depending on the circumstances sort of thing.
[Amanda]

Like Amanda, Busi spoke of attractions to individuals regardless of their gender:

I came to the realisation that what had attracted me to my previous partners had not been first their gender or whatever, it had been the self. I had either been attracted to a personality trait or one thing or the other and then came down to how we had sex, but sex usually comes after the attraction. [Busi]

However, Busi also felt the term ‘bisexual’ was an insufficient descriptor of her sexual orientation, without accounting for the possibility of attraction to people ‘in between’, in transition, or altogether in a ‘new’ gender category. Throughout her relationship with a masculine identifying trans person, she gained much more knowledge in the whole kaleidoscope of genders and orientations, which broadened her mind.

Claire (aged 36–40), Nosizwe (aged 25–30), and Rika (aged 50–55) identified as lesbians. These women faced the most challenges in reconciling their sexual orientation identity with the fact of their relationship with a masculine identifying trans person. However, this was not always an internal challenge; rather, these participants were confronted with others’ assumptions and exclusionary behaviours.

As Nosizwe explained,

The lesbian community feels very much betrayed by me. [...] finally I’ve got somebody that I love as a human being. [...] but the community where I operate now is questioning, definitely. [...] You’ve betrayed us. You’ve been the voice of lesbians all along [...] who’s gonna be talking for us – for our rights and all those things. [Nosizwe]

Nosizwe felt she had to respond to these friends by arguing, “He’s not trying to change me – he’s not trying to convert me to anything.” Claire, who was similarly involved in LGBTI activist work and who self-labelled with the more politicized term ‘dyke’, also expressed the perceived loss of her sexual minority identity, resulting from others’ assumptions that she was in a heterosexual relationship with a cisgender male.

...they [ignorant cisgender, heterosexual] can say terrible things in front of you about gay or lesbian people. The other thing is, politically I feel kind of like I have to claim more space. And then, being invisible is kind of hard. You’re invisible as a heterosexual person. Nobody looks at you. Nobody pays any attention to you. You’re completely invisible. I can kiss my partner in public spaces, hold his hand, lots of displays of public affection and people are sweet about it. We’re newlyweds.
[Claire]

Co-transitioning experiences

Cisgender female partners of masculine identifying trans persons are deeply implicated and affected with the realities of being in a ‘relationship in transition’. Most of the participants in the study were involved with their partners for at least some aspect of their partner’s transition; only one was in a relationship that had begun after the partner’s complete

transition. In this sense, they ‘co-transition’: having to adapt to their role as the partner of a masculine identifying trans person. The participants reported that their partners’ gender transition directly impacted their own lives and their relationships in several different ways.

Each couple had its own approach to defining the cisgender female partner’s role within the transition process and to coping with practical matters related to the transition. Ntombi (aged 25–30), for example, whose partner was assuming a masculine role at the time they met, explained that she and her partner discussed each step of his physical transition together.

I would love for him to get to a point where he actually shaves his beard. But we’ve talked about it and we’ve both agreed that I do not want the bottom changed. Go for top surgery, do anything you want, but just do not change the bottom. I like it the way it is. [Ntombi]

As Ntombi’s quotation suggests, her partner’s physical changes were one important factor in the co-transitioning process. This was true for Claire (aged 36–40) as well, who explained: “Riaan really basically went through a bit of an adolescence [when he initiated hormone therapy] and that was [...] surprising and kind of fun, I guess.” Not all of the participants, however, felt that they were included in their partner’s transition decisions or process. Rika (aged 50–55), who had been with her partner for many years before he came out as a trans man, described feeling cut off from her partner:

He mostly made his own decisions and only informed me about it afterwards when he’d already decided it was going to be done. Andrew was a private person. I could also not go into the bathroom when he was shaving. Although I gave his first T injection when he started injecting testosterone... he then afterwards decided he will do it himself. [Rika]

Rika went on to describe feeling lonely as a result of being excluded from the process of her partner’s physical transition. For other participants, the partner’s physical transition could introduce other concerns. Nosizwe (aged 25–30) and Busi (aged 25–30), who identified as lesbian and bisexual, respectively, described feeling expected to legitimize their partners’ physical transition by enacting a more traditional feminine gender role. Nosizwe told of feeling pressure to ‘be available and submissive’ as the female partner of a trans man, imagining that she would need to live up to a stereotypical expectation of an ‘African wife’.

...one of my questions was what is expected of me. I haven’t dated a lot of African people. [...] I got so frightened because now he’s an African man, so now my problem was, I got worried because if I get exposed to his world, what is expected of me? To be an African wife, to be able to listen when I’m told without asking questions? [Nosizwe]

Expressing similar concerns, Busi closed her interview off with an extremely complex analysis of the dynamic with her partner, and her role in constructing his identity as a trans man. She believed that her partner, Patrick, felt it necessary to duplicate a very polarised gender binary in order to validate his masculinity. Speaking from Patrick’s point of view, Busi said the following:

I [Patrick] need to be clearly defined, you know? I [Patrick] provide, and you [Busi] take care of this because at the end of the day, I have very few joys especially when it comes to who I am and how I identify and the one way we can actually sustain this is if you [Busi] support me in being that feminine character I need, you know, I need to have somebody who’s going to qualify these boxes, take them off and be comfortable in your position. It makes it easier for me [Patrick] to navigate the world as a man when I’ve got a woman at home that I’m calling, that I’m loving. [Busi]

Not all of the participants felt they were put in such a position, however. Lebogang (aged 25–30), who identified as heterosexual, reported that she and her partner did not conform to such a rigid binary:

Now there's no such thing as the olden days that the hmm... the man has to support the family and the woman has to stay home. Now it's equal... I provide, you provide, we mix and match. [Lebogang]

A common theme among the participants' experiences was that the process of co-transitioning created needs for informational and emotional support. Some participants learned of their partner's trans identity in the courtship stage of their relationship, while others were in longer-term relationships during which their partners came out as trans. In any event, there were questions to be dealt with regarding this 'new' information. Amanda (aged 31–35), for example, who began a relationship with her partner when he was already on hormone therapy, faced some initial challenges since she was not familiar with the concept of transgenderism.

He told me upfront, it was a very big shock to me initially and I think the shock was, and that's what I always say, is not so much that it was what he was. [...] It was the fact that I wasn't aware of what could actually be out there! [Amanda]

Amanda relied on her partner to discuss and share information about being transgender and the transition process, and these open discussions addressed many of her informational support needs.

[I told him] 'you know what, we've discussed a lot of things, we've been open about a lot of things [before]. Let's discuss this? Let's talk about it, you tell me what it is? Tell me how it is, tell me what you expect, etcetera' and we started talking about it and I think that helped a lot because obviously he's done so much research. He's done all of that but then in a way, he could guide me to what I wanted to know. [Amanda]

Amanda also sought out additional resources online, and found support through an online forum for significant others, friends, family, and allies (SOFFAs) of transgender people that was managed by a local community-based organisation. However, internet-based resources were not accessible to all participants, especially those who lived in more rural/isolated areas or were unemployed. Some participants therefore reported grappling with a need for information about transgenderism, as well as a gamut of emotions with regard their partners and their future as a couple or family, and had few available resources to help them address their informational and emotional support needs. For some, their trans partner was the only close source of information. Comprising a subculture of a group already burdened by minority status, cisgender female partners of a masculine identifying trans person have a very small chance of finding another person in a similar situation with whom to relate. Taking into consideration many other differences, for example, their sexual orientation, age, language, culture, and geographic locality, even further narrows the chances of meeting a like-minded cisgender female partner to identify with and with whom to build peer support.

For Busi (aged 25–30) and Rika (aged 50–55) – both of whom experienced other difficulties in their relationships, and who separated from their trans partners before or shortly after they were interviewed – their partners created power differentials by blocking access to supportive resources. Busi reported that her partner directly prevented her from accessing support because he was an activist who was concerned with maintaining the appearance of a happy relationship, and believed that any suggestion of difficulties in the relationship would threaten his work. Rika was put in a position where she would have had to seek out information or support services secretly, and in fact, she regretted not doing so:

I should have done more research or talked about it; even if I had to do it secretly, I should have. I should have because then I could have handled the whole situation in a completely different way; because I didn't really understand everything. I think I still don't understand everything completely... [Rika]

Busi's and Rika's stories illustrate how the stresses around co-transitioning may be amplified in the context of emotionally abusive relationships.

Family and community acceptance

Involvement in a transgender-cisgender relationship had various implications for the participants in terms of their interactions with family and community members. Here we refer to communities both in the social/geographic sense and in the sense of collective identity; interactions within communities of the latter type were of special importance to the lesbian- and bisexual-identified participants.

As reported by one participant, strong negative reactions from community members could present threats to physical safety. Lebogang (aged 25–30) was personally threatened by someone who had been a friend of her partner, Matome, but was angered to learn of his transgender status. This individual threatened to rape Lebogang in order to 'teach her a lesson' and ensure that she knew what/how it is to sleep with a 'real' man.

...he's gonna teach me, like um, I don't know the man genitals, so he's gonna teach me, in other words, like he's gonna sleep with me to make me feel how's it like being with a man. [Lebogang]

The man threatening Lebogang went to her home while Matome was away; he was forced to leave a note under her door because she was not home. Fortunately, this person missed his window of opportunity to fulfil his threat – since Matome was at home the next time he visited.

None of the other participants reported such an extreme, violently negative response to their relationships. However, they did share concerns about acceptance from their family members. Not all participants were open to all family members about their partner's trans status, but those that were found some family members supportive and others less so. Amanda's (aged 31–35) mother had initially liked her partner, but some damage was done to that relationship when an unknown person informed Amanda's mother that her partner was trans. Busi (aged 25–30) said that her mother that was distantly 'fine', one sister was 'happily ignorant', and another sister was a great source of support.

The one place I found real understanding is with my younger sister. [...] Her interest in my partner is pretty much the same interest she's displayed, historically with my other relationships. [Busi]

Lebogang was staying with her aunt at the time she found out about her partner's trans identity. She was frustrated with the conditions that her family members put on her relationship.

Like then they don't want [my partner], they don't want him to come to the yard and the house they don't want me to go there. [...] Where, when was I supposed to see him? [Lebogang]

Some of the cisgender women related that their trans partners were to various degrees well accepted by their own families. Ntombi (aged 25–30) shared very special tales of how her partner is included in traditional ceremonies, which tend to be very gender-segregated. Her partner's mother also decided on his new male name, even before he verbalised his desire to transition.

And when you know in our black culture when you go to funerals the men will have to be in a separate area and the women will be in separate areas and they will dress a certain way, when that happens, he's part of that. [...] Men must be in a kraal, women must bring them food and raw meat. They don't eat meat cooked in the house. So we'll bring raw meat for them and they will braai it for themselves with the – in an open fire outside. They eat certain parts of the meat when the animal has just been slaughtered, like the hearts, the liver. Um, we eat your tripe. Yeah, and they would braai that. No woman is allowed in there, no woman is allowed to eat that meat. But he is! [Ntombi]

Ntombi's partner's inclusion in these traditional rituals reflected his family's acceptance of his identity as a man. However, stories from other participants illustrated how the cisgender partners were sometimes placed in the position to grapple with or shield their trans partners from others' prejudices. Rika (aged 50–55), for example, was in a long-term relationship with her partner in which they were understood by their family to be a lesbian couple. She struggled with how she should come out, again, this time about her partner being trans:

Although my children knew I was gay, it was difficult for me to tell them what was going to happen now. They didn't discriminate against me or Andrew over that. It was just what their friends would say about that. Maybe it was wrong of me to think of it like that at that time because I also have grandchildren and the stress was partnered with that. [Rika]

Rika expressed that her partner's trans status was something that had to be communicated with care, and she was concerned with other people's perceptions and possible prejudices. Another participant, Busi, was expected to protect her partner from such prejudices in social situations – and this was a task that required advanced planning and came with a huge emotional burden. Busi's partner held her responsible for 'screening' all possible events before arriving, to predict who would and would not handle the situation in an acceptable manner. It was her task to pre-empt all scenarios, and her partner relied on her to be 'spot-on,' which sometimes resulted in disappointment if there was a misjudgement. He expected 'smooth sailing'; just one small 'slip' from somebody and a social outing could be spoiled. Busi took the extra responsibility to basically justify the reactions of each person in the room.

Before we go out, I need to consider who's gonna be there, how they're orientated. [...] The moment we enter some places, I have to identify who's gonna be the most comfortable person to be around, who's gonna know that we're dealing with a "he" not a "she" and just put it out there nicely, so that everybody else catches on because just that one person is gonna use the incorrect pronoun and that's gonna throw us off completely. Uhm, and it can ruin the whole night, really. [...] but by that time, I think the damage had already been done because I now know that we're gonna get home and there're gonna be tears. And if not tears, there's gonna be a rage that just lasts however long – it depends... [Busi]

Ntombi spoke of being put into the role of 'trans 101' educator. She accepted this role, imagining that open discussion of her experiences would open minds in her community.

It's kind of making me comfortable with myself, with the relationship I'm in, and all the decisions I've made. [...] we can't hide it anymore, you know, especially in our black communities, I feel like I'm playing a big role because it hasn't been out and here I am, as comfortable as I am, I talk about it anyway, you can ask me anything and I'll tell you. They ask me about sex. I tell them. Because I don't think there's anything to hide. It's more helping them to realize that if they're gonna have kids that are gonna be trans, they need to understand that it is possible. It happens. [Ntombi]

For the lesbian- and bisexual-identified participants, prejudice within activist communities was also a topic of concern. The heterosexual-identified participants in this study were not affiliated with lesbian or feminist activist communities, and thus did not have this same experience. But for some, their sense of belonging to an activist community was more immediate than the relationship with their biological families. This was especially the case for Nosizwe (aged 25–30) and Claire (aged 36–40), who identified as lesbian and lesbian/dyke, respectively. Re-integrating themselves within those communities while in a relationship with a trans man was a challenge, due to ignorance around transgender issues and the perception that relationships with a masculine identifying trans person constituted some sort of betrayal.

Claire, for instance, spoke strongly about the invisibility of (lesbian) partners of trans persons in these communities. It almost seemed as if the cisgender female lesbian women were ‘punished’ by other lesbians for ‘looking’ heterosexual and thus excluded from lesbian spaces, although the trans partner was still politically correctly accepted in broader LGBTI spaces, as representing the T in the acronym.

I don’t have access to some of the spaces that I used to have access to, but on the other hand it’s become less important for me, I suppose. I’m happy to leave those spaces behind. [...] you become a non-person really in those spaces, because you don’t have any legitimacy. And your legitimacy is through suffering with your partner and being a lesbian person, you know. You can’t claim it anymore and therefore you kind of don’t exist. Your partner does, though, because they’re trans. You become invisibilised. You’re the non-person. But your transgender partner is still recognised. They’re still the T. [Claire]

Claire and Nosizwe also spoke of the judgment they perceived from feminist and lesbian activists in their circles, which compromised their sense of community support.

I’ve experienced some challenges as a person who’s always been very much involved and very strong in lesbian circles and LGBTI in general. I’ve noticed because recently now I’ve had to answer questions of ‘what are you now?’ [Nosizwe]

And:

...my women friends who count themselves among feminists and feminist dykes found it really hard to be uncritical and nonjudgmental through my partner’s transition. [Claire]

In most areas of South Africa, including the large cities, the queer and LGBTI communities are fairly small. Claire described the way in which the tightly-knit relationships in her lesbian friendship circles contributed to a very uncomfortable tension between lesbian and trans identities. She also points to the way in which the trans person’s embodiment of a masculine gender identity put her own lesbian identity into question in the eyes of even her closest friend.

In fact my best girlfriend at that time through a lot of Riaan’s transition, she had her own very hard time with his transition. I mean, the thing is, lesbians we often have very small friendship circles that are quite close. And you know everybody slept with everybody and you might have a dinner party and everybody has some kind of intimate relationship with everybody there. So you know, she had her own hard time about feeling like she was losing someone [...]. So, me talking about my difficulties or challenges or even the magical stuff around our growing relationship or anything like that was not really accepted. [Claire]

As the concluding statement of the above quotation suggests, Claire's social support resources were diminished as she experienced rejection from friends. This is further evidence of unmet emotional support needs among this group of cisgender female partners of masculine identifying trans persons.

Discussion

Central to this research was establishing the textured experiences of female cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans persons. The participants discussed their own sexual orientation identities in relation to their partnerships, their experiences co-transitioning with their partners, and reactions to their relationships from family and community members. It was apparent that the experiences within the sample were diverse, and on certain points there were notable contrasts between the experiences of the heterosexual and sexual minority cisgender female partners.

The study participants unanimously concurred that involvement with a masculine identifying trans partner did not change the way they labelled their sexual orientation. The two heterosexual-identified participants understood their partners to be male, or, in the case of one participant, her eventual arrival at this understanding clarified the concerns she had been experiencing as a heterosexual woman partnered with a female-bodied person. The three bisexual participants in this sample seemed to have the easiest adjustment to the fact of having a transgender partner. Amanda and Susan, for example, who identified as bisexual before they met their trans partners, managed to 'adapt easily' to a heterosexual lifestyle, while still reasoning that they would be equally comfortable in a lesbian relationship. The bisexual women were not very much attached to categorical gender and sexual orientation labels to begin with, which may have also contributed to their relative comfort with the implications of their partnership for their own identities. Others have suggested that bisexual women may be uniquely positioned to cope with some of the identity-related challenges posed by partnership with a trans person (Lev 2004; Califia, 1997 as cited in Brown 2009).

The three lesbian-identified participants in this study articulated challenges that have also been identified in studies of trans partnership in the global North (Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). Maintaining their lesbian identities was difficult when other lesbians no longer accepted them and they were excluded from LGBTI community spaces. Nosizwe spoke about the ever-growing LGBTIQ acronym, concluding that she might have to add the letter 'D' for *Disappointment*. She referred to feeling that she had disappointed her family when she initially came out as a lesbian, and then that she had disappointed her friends and fellow activists when she became involved with a trans man. Notably, however, the lesbian-identified participants continued to identify as lesbian following their involvement with a masculine identifying trans partner. In contrast, Brown's (2010) study with sexual minority female partners of masculine identifying trans persons in the USA and Canada found that all participants who identified as lesbian prior to their partner's transition self-identified as "queer" or "open" after their partner's transition. In South Africa, where the "queer" label is still recognised as an imported concept, perhaps it is not surprising that similar shifts in sexual orientation self-identification were not observed.

The participants' narratives illustrated the ways in which transitioning processes, or the co-transition, is central to cisgender – trans dyad relationships. The co-transition seemed to consume prime energy from both partners, and presented opportunities for partner bonding but also created unique stressors. For each couple, there was much to be negotiated in terms of the practicalities of the transition process as well as the less tangible ways that the cisgender partners would support their partner's gender transition (i.e., by enacting a particular role as the feminine partner). The participants also reported limited avenues

through which they could address the informational and emotional support needs brought on by their partner's gender transition. As other literature suggests, cisgender persons with transgender partners may need time to adjust to being in a relationship with a trans person and may find themselves dealing with new emotions and questions (Cook-Daniels 1998; Fleming, MacGowan, and Costos 1985; Lev 2004).

What gender transition entailed for each participant's partner was somewhat different. The importance of the cisgender partner's gender expression in relation to the trans partner's gender expression (i.e., confirming the trans partner's male gender identity via the cisgender partner's feminine gender expression) also varied from couple to couple. Although there are many factors that likely influenced each couple's experiences, some could be attributed to larger contextual factors. For example, the availability of health care for transgender people (and challenges in accessing and paying for such care) is likely to affect day-to-day matters in co-transition. The limited availability of such care in South Africa is demonstrated by the fact that the waiting listing for gender affirming surgeries at the Groote Schuur Hospital, the only state hospital openly acknowledging their gender clinic, is 26 years long. This is due to the overwhelming amount of trans people being seen by the hospital and theatre time only being allocated for four surgeries per year. South Africa is also a culturally diverse country, in which not only are there unique spaces in which the gender binary can be contested (e.g., female traditional healers who have ancestral wives; see Morgan and Reid 2003), but others in which norms are enforced with extreme violence (Martin, Kelly, Turquet, and Ross 2009). There is thus a multiplicity of cultural norms that may influence cisgender – transgender partnerships and how they are perceived by others.

The participants spoke of both positive and negative reactions to their relationships from other people. While some participants found acceptance and support among their families, many of the participants' stories illustrated that, like their trans partners, they functioned on the margins of society regardless of their perceived cisgender privilege. They spoke of challenges in communicating about their partner's trans identity or trans issues in general, and in protecting their partner from other's prejudices. The lesbian cisgender female partners, particularly Claire and Nosizwe, were concerned about exclusion from the lesbian (and feminist) community. Although this finding does not seem unique to the South African setting (Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009), neither is the historical tension between lesbians and feminists on the one side, and the transgender community on the other, of which the lesbian-identified participants were well aware. This tension came to the fore, for example, during the 2007 Coalition for African Lesbians' leadership institute and illuminated the discourse between lesbians, feminists and trans men. In Matebeni's report of the meeting, she highlighted how trans men often lead LGBTI organisations in many African countries, yet the African feminists charter, which was tabled at that meeting for adoption, 'sidelined and strongly rejected' trans people, particularly trans men – as they were seen as men and thus part of the 'system needing to be dismantled' (Matebeni 2009:8). Serano has elaborated more on this exclusion of trans people and clearly stipulates, 'it is negligent for feminists to focus only on those who are female bodied' (2007: 6).

Conclusion

Embarking on a research topic which has not been explored in South Africa to date, and remains under-researched in the international transgender canon, posed several challenges. While some research has emerged in the North about female cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans persons, coming from the fields of psychology, sexology, gender-, queer studies and feminisms, this is a new research area for many scholars from South Africa and Africa. The limited literature available to draw on proved to be both a challenge and an opportunity, creating a space with freedom in which to shape a new body of knowledge. Our

uniquely South African composition, including multiple cultures, and historical dynamics different from those of the North, ensures a pre-existing gap in need of filling. Although the present study is limited by its small sample, it represents an important first step toward documenting the experiences of global South women who have masculine identifying trans partners within the academic research literature.

In planning the research, the first author relied, in part, on her experiential knowledge. Having been in relationships with masculine identifying trans persons twice, she anticipated some familiarity with most of the possible replies she might receive in the interviews. However, each cisgender female partner that was interviewed brought her own individuality into the research and ensured rich text. Having been more than four years removed from a cisgender-trans dyad relationship, the first author was not fully prepared for the emotional strain it put on her, nor was she prepared for the emotional energy she would need to exert during the research period.

It became apparent during the interview process just how isolated cisgender female partners are, in general. A number of the cisgender female partners might have agreed to participate in the study with the interview process as secondary objective, as it would give them their first opportunity to talk about issues, both generally and more specifically, with someone who has direct knowledge of the issues their partners were facing. For those participants whose partners had isolated them from social support resources, being approached for the purpose of the research absolved them of the blame attached to seeking information for themselves.

Due to the overwhelmingly heteronormative world the cisgender-trans couples are bound to function in, and the specific needs for transgender-related education and emotional support the study participants articulated, it is clear that many cisgender partners of masculine identifying trans partners might benefit from debriefing, counselling, therapy and guidance. Challenges and stressors might manifest themselves throughout or during any phase of relationships-intransition. These stressors do not arise because of one person in the relationship being trans *per se*, but rather as a result of a transphobic, heteronormative society.

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Table 1

Interviewee characteristics (at the time of interview)

Pseudonym	Self-identified sexual orientation	Age range	Race/ethnicity	Educational Attainment	Relationship status at time of interview	Process of partner's gender transition during relationship
Amanda	Bisexual	31–35	White, English	Bachelors degree	Engaged	HRT ⁴ initiated prior to relationship
Busi	Bisexual	25–30	Black, isiZulu	Some tertiary	With partner	Partner had top surgery during relationship; did not use HRT
Claire	Lesbian/Dyke	36–40	White, English	Masters degree	Engaged ¹	Partner completed medical ⁵ and legal ⁶ transition during relationship
Lebogang	Heterosexual	25–30	Black, Tsonga	Matric	Planning engagement (discussing <i>lobola</i> ²)	Partner defined himself as 'different' at first, before having the vocabulary to identify as trans. He underwent HRT, hysterectomy and made legal transition during relationship
Nosizwe	Lesbian	25–30	Black, isiXhosa	Matric and work related 'in-service certificates'	With partner	Partner made social transition ⁷ during the relationship
Ntombi	Heterosexual	25–30	Black, isiXhosa	Matric and work related 'in-service certificates'	With partner	Partner made social transition before relationship began; did not initiate medical or legal transition
Rika	Lesbian	50–55	White, Afrikaans	Matric	Not with partner	Long-term relationship prior to partner's coming out as transgender; partner made medical and legal transition before relationship ended
Susan	Bisexual	30–35	White, English	Matric and work related 'in-service certificates'	Married ³	Relationship began post-transition ⁸

¹ This couple planned a civil partnership. Under South Africa's Civil Union Act, (same-sex or opposite-sex) couples can register their union as a marriage or a civil partnership. This couple wished to utilise the civil partnership option as a political statement.

² *Lobola* is a traditional custom aimed at bringing two families together, creating mutual respect, and indicates that a man is able to provide for his wife. It is very specific to marriage custom. The importance is in the process of negotiating and payment of cows (basically "wealth").

³ This couple married under South Africa's Marriage Act as an opposite-sex couple (only opposite-sex couples can marry under the Marriage Act). The transgender partner had legally transitioned long before meeting his cisgender female partner.

⁴ HRT = hormone replacement therapy.

⁵ In this case, medical transition refers to HRT, top surgery, and hysterectomy.

⁶ Legal transition refers to gender markers and legal name change at the Department of Home Affairs.

⁷ Many trans people who want to undergo physical transition are not always able to, due to lack of opportunities and access. Social transition refers to the process of living in the gender one identifies with, regardless of physical/medical transition.

⁸ In this case, it was legal and medical transition, including HRT, top surgery and phalloplasty.