**"I am not defined by this box"**

**An Analysis of Cisgender-Transgender Couples Navigating Identity in the Netherlands**



*Figure 1 Man, C. (2020) Can You Be Brutally Honest, Ink on Paper, (Chella Man) https://chellaman.com/Can-You-Be-Brutally-Honest.*

Researcher: Ian Samuel Olivier Blom

Main Supervisor: Dr. Layal Ftouni

Second Reader: Dr. Christine Quinan

RMA Gender Studies

Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities

29th of July 2021

Utrecht University

# Abstract

The present thesis has investigated the relational constitution of gender/sex/sexuality within Dutch cisgender-transgender relationships. This has been done through a discussion of cisgender-transgender relationships and their existence within broader social norms/normativity, and bringing these in relation to the concepts of identification and disidentification. In order to investigate these dynamics, five couples from the Netherlands were selected of whom one person could be categorised as a transmasculine individual, and one person could be categorised as a cisgender person. Through qualitative interviews, information was gathered surrounding the couples' relationships, experiences and relations to norms and normativity. Hereby it was found that cisgender-transgender couples relationally constitute and navigate their gender/sex/sexuality, this being both in relation to each other and social norms/normativity, through processes of identification and disidentification. In particular, it has been found that while within the Netherlands labels and categories relating to identity are given much social importance, the couples often actively disidentified with these normative labels and categories. In addition, particular social issues/phenomena were mentioned as being of influence in the construction of norms within the Netherlands that they had to navigate in their gender/sex/sexuality identification and disidentification, namely generational gaps and media representation. Specifically, transnormative media representation and 'older generations' were argued to be factors in the hindrance of transgender acceptance and normalisation within society, while social media and 'younger generations' were argued to bring about progress herein. These findings contribute to the gaps within existing research that have so far lacked in representing existing relationships between cisgender and transgender people that do not consist of violence and suffering. Furthermore, these findings contribute to the gap in research regarding the concept of the Dutch "hokjesmaatschappij."

# Acknowledgements

This thesis project was made possible by the insights, encouragement and support of many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank all of the research participants that partook in this project. I want to thank them not only for participating, as this project would not have existed without their participation, but also especially want to thank them for their generosity, openness and vulnerability. Because of your many valuable insights, and you sharing your experiences with such largesse, working on this project has been an enriching and inspiring experience.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Layal Ftouni, for her expertise, insights, as well as empathy and patience. Your academic, and sometimes more personal, support have continually motivated me to work hard and turn this project into something that makes a valuable contribution to the field of gender studies. Furthermore, your feedback has been invaluable in keeping this project and its focus on track, and getting the most out of it.

I would also like to thank all of my university professors, as they have taught me to think critically, provided me with many new lenses to view the world through, and have always provided me with academic as well as personal support with the greatest empathy.

Next, I would like to thank my parents, for always providing their unconditional support in everything that I do. Thanks to you I have been able to broaden my horizons, see more of the world, and most importantly, be myself.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my colleague and friend Niels van Kleef, for thinking with me whenever I had questions, and for playing Fortnite with me whenever I needed to empty my head and take a break from my thesis.

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

Within the transgender community, a common fear that can be observed is the idea that transgender people are unlovable and therefore, will never find love. This fear can be argued to be rooted in general views on transgender people presented in media, personal experiences, as well as research pointing toward a noticeable aversion toward transgender people as romantic and/or sexual partners (Schilt et al. 2009; Blair et al. 2018). However, in contrast to these perceptions and observations, cisgender-transgender couples do in fact exist. To explain this existence of cisgender-transgender relationships that is unaccounted for within existing research, and gain insight into how they navigate normative constructions of gender/sex/sexuality within these relationships, this research project will investigate the social, relational constitution of gender/sex/sexuality. It will do so by examining cisgender-transgender romantic relationships (in the sense of a cisgender person and a transgender person having a "romantic and/or passionate attachment" to each other), and considering how each partner has navigated/navigates their relationship in relation to specific gender/sex/sexuality categories, as well as how they understand their gender/sex/sexuality in relation to each other, thus putting into question the assumed fixity of the categories of 'cisgender' and 'transgender' that this project is based around. Specifically, this research project will focus on cisgender people who are in a relationship with a transmasculine individual. Hence, by interviewing cisgender-transgender couples, this research project aims to gain insight into how people who do not adhere to different forms of normativity (such as heteronormativity and its attachments to binary sex/gender) navigate their 'identity' in relation to each other, as well as in relation to contextually specific social gender/sex/sexuality norms. In other words, this project aims at investigating the tension between gender/sex/sexuality as social categories and the lived realities of the people who occupy these categories, by analysing how gender/sex/sexuality take shape in cisgender-transgender romantic relationships. The research question central to this project is the following:

> How can Dutch cisgender-transgender romantic relationships provide insight into the relational constitution of gender/sex/sexuality?

The central research question will be answered by investigating the following questions:

I.  What do the research participants think the dominant understandings of gender/sex/sexuality are in the Netherlands?
II. How do the research participants understand and construct their gender/sex/sexuality:
    a. In relation to each other?
    b. In relation to social norms?

Current research on cisgender-transgender relationships, or more generally, research on transgender people in romantic/sexual contexts, focuses mainly on transphobic violence, the undesirability or fetishization of transgender people, and exclusion of transgender people as potential partners (Bettcher 2007; Schilt et al. 2009; Blair et al. 2018; Schilt et al. 2014). Though this research is highly important, especially since acts of transphobic violence are still a common occurrence, it is similarly necessary to highlight stories that are not centred around violence and suffering, to offer a different perspective on cisgender-transgender relationships, and in order to demonstrate that transgender people can also thrive, live happy lives and be loved/desired (Blair et al. 2018: 5). Moreover, highlighting these narratives is important because they might contribute to lessening the stigma surrounding dating transgender people – by creating visibility and putting into question structures of cisnormativity and heteronormativity – and with that could eventually lessen the violence directed at transgender people. In addition, representation of transgender people as viable romantic partners might challenge "dominant mainstream […] constructions of transpeople" by establishing transgender people as agential, living, loving human beings – who are not only subjects of desire but also desiring subjects themselves – rather than an abstract social category whose image is dominated by negative representation (Bettcher 2007: 60).

Furthermore, when analysing existing research, there is a seeming impossibility of cisgender-transgender relationships being able to exist; as the criteria for belonging to a certain gender category differ between various social contexts, and the criterium for belonging to one's gender category in a romantic/sexual context is based around genitalia, this would mean that cisgender-transgender relationships are only possible if the transgender person in question has had bottom surgery (and even then their transgender identity could still be an issue) (Schilt et al. 2009: 446; Bettcher 2007: 48). Therefore, this research project will explore cisgender-transgender relationships and how they might problematize this existing theoretical framework of gender/sex/sexuality, in which there is currently no room for transgender people to be able to be considered as viable romantic/sexual partners (unless the cisgender partner is pansexual). In other words, this project aims to fill the aforementioned theoretical gaps regarding transgender people as potential romantic partners by empirically examining and underlining the realities of their existence. By interviewing cisgender-transgender couples, it will examine how gender/sex/sexuality are relationally constituted (rather than being pre-determined, static categories), and how these couples navigate gender/sex/sexuality categories. Further, it will question if/how cisgender-transgender couples might fit into existing, normative categories of gender/sex/sexuality.

The research project will focus specifically on the context of the Netherlands. It will do so by means of the narratives and insights provided by the interviewees, and how they see their experience

as ingrained within Dutch society at large. Specifically, it will address the Netherlands as a "hokjesmaatschappij" (meaning that within Dutch society at large there is a strong tendency to categorise and label everything/everyone) which has currently not been addressed within existing research. In addressing this tendency, as well as gender/sex/sexuality norms more generally within the Netherlands as observed by the research participants, it will investigate how the couples relate to and construct their gender/sex/sexuality in relation to these norms, specifically through processes of identification and disidentification.

Next to the introduction, methodology section and conclusion, this thesis consists of a theoretical framework and two empirical chapters. The theoretical framework consists of the literature that enables the analysis of the empirical findings from the interviews. Specifically, it provides a discussion of relevant literature on gender/sex/sexuality, gender embodiment, social norms and normativity, relationality, relationships and desire. The discussion of this literature does not only provide the means for analysing the data gathered from the interviews, but also demonstrates how some of these concepts were socio-culturally, historically constructed, in order to make it clear that these concepts are not descriptive, but carry with them very specific socio-cultural meanings and histories that are inextricably linked to how these concepts and categories are used today. In chapter 1, based on the interviews, the couples' relationships and their navigation of gender/sex/sexuality in relation to each other are discussed through the concepts of identification and disidentification (Muñoz 1999). In chapter 2, their navigation of gender/sex/sexuality through processes of identification and disidentification is placed within the broader context of the Netherlands. Herein, these processes of identification and disidentification will be analysed in relation to normativity and social norms, as well as media representation and generational differences. As a final note, the interviewees have been given pseudonyms, in order to anonymise them and with that protect their privacy.

# Theoretical framework

In order to gain insight into the social and relational constitution of gender/sex/sexuality in cisgender-transgender relationships, it is important to first clarify what is meant by these terms. Thus, what follows is a discussion of the main concepts and theories that this thesis builds on. Specifically, this chapter will discuss theory relevant to the empirical analysis, which consists of the discussion of the socio-cultural and historical construction of sex/gender/sexuality, gender embodiment, hetero-, homo-, cis-, and trans-normativity, different manners of subversion/navigation of norms, as well as relationality.

## Sex, Gender and Sexuality

Sex, gender and sexuality could be argued to be the foundational concepts of Gender Studies as a field, which indicates that these concepts have been and still are widely discussed and debated. As this project will point out, these concepts are not only important within this field of study in terms of theoretical discussions, but are likewise inextricably linked to the daily lives of cisgender-transgender couples. To gain insight into how sex, gender and sexuality are present within these relationships, and are constructed within these relationships, below follows a discussion of some of the foundational and relevant theorisations of sex, gender and sexuality, and in particular how they can be understood as being socially, relationally constituted. Specifically, it will highlight a Butlerian, performative and socially constructivist, as well as a phenomenological, approach to gender, sex, and sexuality, as these approaches best enable me to make the argument that cisgender-transgender couples co-constitute their sex, gender and sexuality in relation to each other and social norms.

## Sex/Gender

One of the foundational authors within the field of Gender Studies is Simone de Beauvoir, who famously wrote that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (De Beauvoir 2010: 330). Following this, she states that "the figure that the human female takes on in society" does not manifest from a biological, psychic or economic destiny, but rather, takes shape within and is a product of a particular society (ibid.). In other words, what a woman is, is dependent on the society in which she exists rather than a biological essence, and thus, it is not sex, but gender that determines a woman's experience within a particular society. With this she challenged the then dominant idea that "that there are two stable, incommensurable, opposite sexes and that the political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles, are somehow based on these "facts"" (Laqueur 1992: 6). As Butler – who builds on the work of De Beauvoir in her own work, expanding it beyond the category of 'woman' to discuss gender more broadly – explains, De Beauvoir builds on Merleau-Ponty's claim that "the body is an historical idea [rather than] a natural species" to explain that gender

8

is not a natural fact but historically situated (Merleau-Ponty in Butler 1988: 520). Furthermore, De Beauvoir signals the relational constitution of gender, as she argues: "[o]nly the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an Other," meaning that 'sexual/gender difference' only has meaning if there is an 'Other' to differentiate oneself from (ibid.). This again puts into question the 'innateness' of gender, as an individual's gender only gains meaning/relevance in relation to others. She goes on to explain how, from early childhood, girls and boys are socialised in differing ways, which constitutes seemingly natural gender differences (De Beauvoir 2010: 330-334).

As previously mentioned, Judith Butler, a foundational theorist within the field of Gender Studies, built on the social constructivist approach to the category of 'woman' of De Beauvoir, and with this developed gender performativity theory. Specifically, continuing from the work of De Beauvoir, Butler argues that gender, rather than being a substantial identity, should be understood as an identity that is socio-temporally constituted (Butler 1988: 519-520). Further, according to performativity theory, gender identity is to be understood as a matter of *doing* rather than *being*, gender being constructed "through a stylized repetition of acts" in which various "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments" create the illusion of an immutable gendered self (Butler 1988: 519). In other words, gender exists inasmuch as it is produced and reproduced through (inter)action (Abelson 2014: 551). Here, gender is to be comprehended as "an object of belief," its reality and existence depending on the reproduction of it by all 'players' involved (Butler 1988: 520). Concretely, this reproduction consists of the body expressing itself through the possibilities of gendered *being* tied to a specific socio-historical context, which are restricted by "historical conventions" (which are not external to but an integral part of the reproduction of gender through *doing*) (Butler 1988: 521). However, restriction does not mean full inability to transgress; for example, though 'cisgender' is the norm, Butler argues that "a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way," meaning that a specific type of embodiment does not dictate 'gender' (Butler 1990: 6). In addition, gender is a form of 'collective doing' (rather than an individual one) that is restricted by specific "sanctions and proscriptions" (Butler 1988: 525). Specifically, this means that gender is done in a way that individuals, as part of a society, manage their gender performance in accordance to what is socially expected of them 'as members of a particular gender' (Abelson 2014: 551). This is because if one would step outside of the boundaries of what is an acceptable way of doing gender, they are "at risk of being held accountable to normative expectations of gender in every interaction," which in turn functions to sustain and naturalize the gender binary (ibid.; Butler 1988: 522). What is an acceptable way of doing gender or what the criteria are for belonging to a certain gender category differ between social contexts; for example, in the workplace belonging to a certain gender category is based on gender presentation, while in a heterosexual context it is based on the 'match' between gender presentation

and genitalia (Schilt et al. 2009; 2014) In other words, gender norms are sustained and naturalized through surveillance and policing of people as 'gendered beings,' the criteria of which differing between various social contexts, while in reality these norms are also constantly transgressed (Enke 2013: 74). This particular lens regarding the possibilities and restrictions of 'doing gender,' and the continuous tension between these restrictions and the transgression thereof, is especially useful in grasping how exactly cisgender-transgender couples co-construct their gender/sex/sexuality in relation to each other and social norms.

Where Butler (1988) stays on the theoretical side in explaining the socio-cultural, collective reproduction of gender, Kale Bantigue Fajardo (2014) illustrates how essentialist notions of sex and gender can be problematized, by discussing the life and work of Nice Rodriguez, a queer Filipino-Canadian writer. As someone who was born and raised in the Philippines and afterwards living and writing in Canada, Rodriguez' work expresses "multiple cultural logics," specifically "in relation to how racialized and classed genders and sexualities are understood in different, but linked national, local, and metropolitan spaces" (Fajardo 2014: 126). Their work provides "various fragmented and scattered perspectives" related to their experiences and self-understandings as a "butch, dyke, macho, lesbian, and immigrant," which illustrate how the same body and expression can carry different meanings within varying cultural contexts, and that one's self-understanding is largely dependent on these cultural meanings in which they find themselves situated (ibid.). More importantly, it illustrates that one body can carry all of these meanings at the same time, and that one meaning is no more accurate or valid than another. This point is particularly important, as it supports this thesis' discussion of generational differences in understandings of gender/sex/sexuality, in that one understanding is not necessarily more 'valid' than the other. In the case of Rodriguez, they refer to themselves as butch, which they understand as being similar to the term "tomboy," but which can elsewhere be understood as a form of "transgender Filipino masculinity," female masculinity and/or "lesbianism," depending on one's perspective and understanding of gender (Fajardo 2014: 127). In other words, whether a person is read and interacted with as "female", "male" or something else, is dependent on the social context the person is situated in more so than their anatomy, meaning that gender is not so much something someone possesses, but is rather a socio-cultural interpretation of a particular body/person (ibid.).

So far, the literature that has been examined has pointed to the socio-cultural construction of gender, highlighting that gender is not 'natural' or 'a given.' This further means that gender is not universal, though it is often regarded as such (Lugones 2017; Aizura et al. 2014). Rather, dominant understandings of gender in 'the West' that are understood to be universal, biological facts, are actually marked by a long colonial history in which these ideas were forcefully spread and

implemented. Though most interviewees were white, and race was not broadly discussed during the interviews, this perspective is crucial in understanding current gender/sex/sexuality norms within the Netherlands, how they were constructed, and possibly how to deconstruct them.

As Maria Lugones explains, colonialism

[…] imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing (Lugones 2017: 186).

This binary gender system is based upon a "categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logic" that is "central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking," which organises sex/gender into naturalized binary categories through a colonial gaze (Lugones 2010: 742; Aizura et al. 2014: 311). In other words, sex/gender and sexuality can be understood as technologies that were utilized "to categorize colonized bodies into distinct kinds" (Aizura et al. 2014: 308). Within this system, sex/gender, but also race and sexuality, are utilized to categorize people in terms of the human and the non-human, through which people are then hierarchically organised, which in turn erased local understandings of gender and/or other principles of social organisation, and served as a justification of "the removal, "re-education," or wholesale genocide of colonized others" (Lugones 2010: 743; Aizura et al. 2014: 308). Concretely, this means that the binary gender system is "racially differentiated, and [that] the racial differentiation denies humanity and thus gender to the colonized" (Lugones 2010: 748). This is illustrated by Hortense Spiller's conception of the flesh, which is distinct from the body; herein, the body signifies the captor (who has a liberated subject position) and the flesh signifies the captive, which underlies the "zero degree of social conceptualization," being "culturally unmade" into quantities, and with that becoming "ungendered" (Spillers 1987: 67-68, 72). Colonialism thus created a hierarchy within society in which only White (bourgeois) people are understood as "men" or "women," and consequently puts colonized people (and more specifically, gender in relation to Blackness) into a position of social intelligibility (Lugones 2010: 748; Lugones 2017: 203; Bey 2019: 72). This is because colonised people "were not necessarily understood dimorphically," meaning that they did not fit into the binary categories of "male" or "female," thus not being able to be considered fully human, as the category of the human was based on sexual dimorphism (Lugones 2017: 159). This also exposes the construction of the idea of binary 'biological sex;' binary biological sex is an ideal that, according to the logics of the colonial gaze, only White people were able to adhere to (Lugones 2017: 194-195). Sex/gender is thus always already racialized – binary sex/gender being reserved for the White subject – this binary system

having been forcibly implemented through "colonial and anti-Black foundational violence of slavery and settler colonialism" (Gossett 2017: 185).

Continuing along this line of the "racially differentiated" being understood as being outside of this binary gender system, Marquis Bey offers a framework in which Blackness – which they argue, does not refer to ""just" a physical descriptor," but additionally signifies "a radical mode of interrogating and subverting power, a queer political radicality" – can aid in subverting or abolishing this gender system (Bey 2019: 66). This is important in the discussion of sex/gender (as a hegemonic system of categorization), since knowing how sex/gender could be 'undone' or done differently can provide insight into how sex/gender is done. In other words, this perspective allows for thinking sex/gender outside of the norm, while also contributing to understanding how the norm works in the first place. Furthermore, it puts into question if the sex/gender system is something that is worth holding onto, or necessary at that, since, as the literature so far points out, this system came into place through violent implementation that has meant the dehumanization of people of colour, and moreover, is still maintained through surveillance, policing and violence (Gossett 2017; Butler 1988; Abelson 2015; Enke 2013). This aforementioned question is of particular relevance, as it relates to how the interviewees discussed gender, specifically as the majority of interviewees subvert the hegemonic gender system in some form, wherein the discussion of the implementation of this system can provide insight into how or why this might be.

Returning to the point of the active maintenance of the hegemonic gender system through surveillance, policing and violence, this manner of maintenance takes place because it is arguably the only way in which the binary gender system can continue to exist; only through holding people accountable and sanctioning 'gender transgression' can these norms be upheld.[1] One example of this are the surgeries performed on intersex babies; the existence of intersex people – whose existence directly contradicts and destabilizes the idea of "biological sex" being binary – is erased by surgically modifying their bodies in order to uphold the illusion of binary sex/gender (Lugones 2017: 194).

To return to Bey then, we may ask

[...] if colonization is a practice of claiming sovereignty over a population, of imposing a template onto a disparate, perhaps even joyously unruly terrain, then decolonizing gender strikes me as a perpetual practice of undoing such impositions and living gendered life—or maybe even living life ungendered insofar as "gender" is itself a hegemonic regime from which

---

[1] A case study that further illustrates this point is the story of David Reimer, see Butler 2004, pp. 57-74.

decolonization and abolition seek to extricate us—in subversion of these impositions (Bey 2019: 60-61).

The decolonization of gender thus means giving space to the "joyously unruly terrain" that lived realities of sex/gender consist of. Bey proposes Blackness – which they argue to be not just a physical descriptor but simultaneously "a radical mode of interrogating and subverting power" – as a way of reaching this "joyously unruly terrain" – or to reach an ungendered way of living life – arguing that gender is fundamentally fugitive in its encounter with Blackness (Bey 2019: 66, 72). Blackness enables here a "capacity under captivity" through its "generative mutability," which refers to Blackness' inherent gender transgression and troubling of gender, and its placement outside of the hegemonic binary gender system (ibid.). Within this line of thinking, Bey offers the practice of self-determination – a Black practice because of its inherent 'gender trouble' and because Blackness refuses to adhere to 'what is, what was, and what should be' – as a way to 'ungender' or 'gender from without' (Bey 2019: 80-81). Gender self-determination refers to doing gender differently by doing gender badly, and with that subverting normative rules (Bey 2019: 62, 80). Self-determination here redefines the neoliberal understanding of self – which understands the self as being related to individual freedoms such as choosing to do whatever one desires – by understanding self-determination as being inextricably linked to "all other revolutionary struggles" (Bey 2019: 81). Gender self-determination can thus be understood as a coalitional practice, that is not tied to one individual, but is a collective undoing of gender; through self-determination one creates an unbounded space of radical openness that is inherently distinctive from what is determined (Bey 2019: 63, 81). Put differently, gender self-determination is coalitional, since it does not only mean that one lets oneself determine one's gender, or leave it undetermined, but also encompasses a radical openness to everyone else in the same manner, not 'reading' people and determining their gender based on that, but being 'radically open' to any/all possibilities, including undetermination. This creates endless possibilities for 'showing up to the world,' not just for oneself but for everyone, without having anyone pre-determine what this showing up means (Bey 2019: 63). Importantly, this self-determination is based upon a gendered fugitivity in which gender is 'always on the run' and refuses to be bound to any singular manifestation or definition (Bey 2019: 67, 81). Thus, the praxis of self-determination goes against the violence that underlies all structures of domination including the hegemonic binary gender system, by 'ungendering'/refusing gender (Bey 2019: 81). This framework of self-determination as coalitional practice is particularly useful in the discussion on the relational constitution of gender/sex/sexuality by cisgender-transgender couples, because it offers a lens through which to understand the radical openness performed particularly by the cisgender partners in supporting their trans partner during the development of the trans partner's gender within the relationship. Furthermore, the framework

proposed by Bey contributes to gaining understanding into the effects of these relational constitutive practices on shifts in perspectives/views on gender that are taking place in Dutch society regarding.

## Gender Embodiment

The role of the body in sex/gender has already briefly been touched upon, since sex is often understood to encompass the 'natural, biological, organic' characteristics of "female" and "male" bodies, and the gender binary is upheld by – amongst other previously mentioned factors – social and medical interventions (García Selgas 2014: 185; Butler 1993: 91; Pine 2010: 319; Lugones 2017: 194). However, gender embodiment is not the same as hegemonic binary 'biological sex.' Though it can indeed be understood as 'biological sexual difference' – such as hormonal differences and 'sexed brains' – gender embodiment should rather be understood as an active, ongoing practice of becoming (Hayward 2013; García Selgas 2014; Butler 1993). In her attempt to examine and discuss the materiality of the body, Judith Butler notes that she

> could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies "are" (Butler 1993: ix).

In other words, the inability of bodies' materiality to be fixed turned out to be central to understanding gender embodiment (ibid.). Concretely, this means that the body is not a fixed, 'biological' object, but rather an active, ever-changing entity that, though also influenced by its environment, creates meaning in and beyond itself (García Selgas 2014: 188-189). Gender embodiment can thus be understood as the manifestation of the body's active and constructive possibilities (García Selgas 2014: 189). Furthermore, to quote Gayle Rubin: "we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it," which means that we can only know the body in and through the socio-historical, cultural context that it is situated in (Rubin 1999: 149). Butler's (1993) emphasis on the body's (socio-physical) mutability, as well as García Selgas' (2014) and Rubin's (1999) emphasis on socio-cultural, environmental influences on this mutability, are especially useful to my analysis of trans embodiment in relation to sex/gender, and even more so sexuality, as the interviews pointed toward similar sentiments regarding physicially changing bodies and their meanings.

The body's materialization as "sexed," or the understanding of a body as being "sexed," relates to questions of cultural intelligibility (García Selgas 2014: 189; Butler 1993: xi). The matter of cultural intelligibility is important to note since this research project is founded upon questions related

to cultural intelligibility; can cisgender-transgender couples be culturally intelligible as the gender/sex/sexuality they understand themselves as? Or do they subvert normative formations of gender/sex/sexuality altogether through the relational constitution of their gender/sex/sexuality? These are some of the questions that I will try to answer. Specifically then, in relating cultural intelligibility to gender embodiment, possibilities for gender embodiment's materialization are restricted to some extent by the norms that form the basis of the hegemonic binary gender system, which dictate which bodies are culturally intelligible and which are not (and as we have seen, this intelligibility is also related to questions of race) (ibid.; Lugones 2010; 2017). The category of "sex" through which bodies are put into categories of cultural intelligibility is a normative, "regulatory ideal;" "sex" is as much constructed as gender, since neither are prediscursive (Butler 1993: 1; Butler 1990: 7). Concretely, this means that who/what is able to be 'known' and understood as 'human' within a normative, historically situated framework, is restricted to binary categories of "male" and "female," which only encompass very specific types of embodiment. As Paul B. Preciado states, binary sex is a rather phallocentric concept of embodiment; a body is either defined through the presence or absence of a penis, which constitute 'the two mutually exclusive possibilities' that are maleness and femaleness, outside of which there is only disability and pathology (Preciado 2018: 5). Further, that binary sex is a regulatory ideal becomes especially clear when examining the history of the idea of binary sex. Though it is often thought that "sex" has always been understood as binary (that it is just the natural, self-evident way of understanding bodies), in which people are categorised as "men" and "women" based on bodily differences that are deemed oppositional, sex was actually thought to be 'unisex' and thus singular for thousands of years (Preciado 2018: 12; Laqueur 1992: 4). Specifically, it was thought that "male" bodies and "female" bodies carried the same genitalia, except women's were inside the body while men's were outside, which even meant that there were no separate words for 'men's' and 'women's' reproductive organs (Laqueur 1992: 4-5). Only during the late 18th/early 19th century did the transition take place from a unisex to a binary sex model, which as Laqueur argues, was not a result of scientific advancements but of politics (Laqueur 1992: 5, 8-9).

Returning to questions of gender embodiment, binary sex is not only the norm through which people are understood, but also through which bodies are regulated; the norm of binary sex actually produces the bodies it claims to naturally encompass (Butler 1993: 1). Gender embodiment can thus be understood as the materialization of the regulatory practice of forcibly upholding the sex/gender binary (ibid.). According to Butler, bodies are in constant need of "forcible reiteration" of the norms that form the basis of the hegemonic gender system, which in turn is caused by the fact that bodies are never able to fully comply to the binary sex/gender norms that they are supposed to adhere to (Butler 1993: 1-2). This is illustrated by the instabilities and possibilities that accompany this

everlasting process of gender embodiment's (re-)materialization, which constantly threaten to destabilize the hegemonic sex/gender system (ibid.). In this sense, lived realities and embodiments that actively subvert and problematize the binary sex/gender system, which are currently rendered culturally unintelligible, can actually form the basis of the rearticulation or doing away with 'sexed/gendered' bodily norms.

One such way in which gender embodiment can subvert normative formations of the materialization of sex/gender is illustrated by Eva Hayward, whose text illustrates the active workings of gender embodiment exceptionally well. In discussing transgender embodiment, she explains that rather than understanding it as a transformation, which implies that something changes about the body itself wherein one moves from one place and ends in another, transgender embodiment can more accurately be understood as a form of regeneration (Hayward 2013: 178, 181). Regeneration here refers to the "re-shaping and re-working bodily boundaries," contained within and initiated by the same body (ibid.). Referring back to Butler's statement that gender embodiment has the ability to destabilize the hegemonic sex/gender binary system through its constant (re-)materialization, transness illustrates one such way as "[t]o be trans is to be transcending or surpassing particular impositions whether empirical, rhetorical or aesthetic" (Hayward 2013: 181). Concretely, Hayward proposes the cut as one such way, as the cut signifies possibility, and a process of becoming and healing (Hayward 2013: 182). Furthermore, the cut is not simply an action; it is a component of the process of the open-ended materialization that is (trans)gender embodiment (ibid.). In other words, the cut is an active process, rather than a singular action, wherein the body is in a process of becoming; it is part of the (re-)materialisation of one's own body, through one's own body, the cut itself not 'getting rid of' a part of the body, but instead *being part of the body* (ibid.). The cut thus does not 'transform' the body, but regenerates it – meaning to "give new life or energy, to form, to construct" – by bringing out the body's potentiality that it always already contained within itself (Hayward 2013: 183-184). This means that the body is not a static entity restricted by binary sex, which is illustrated by the "re-" in regeneration; as Hayward explains,

> [r]e-generativity is a process that is enacted through and by containment (the body). In this way, regeneration is a re/iterative enactment of not only growing new boundaries (re-bodying), but of imperilling static boundaries (subjective transformation) (Hayward 2013: 184).

In other words, the existence of the possibility of regeneration 'imperils' and 'queers' the restrictions and boundaries of the power structure that is binary sex. The body, not being contained by physical or

structural boundaries and having the ability to grow new boundaries, thus carries the potential for possibly endless possibilities of embodiment, and is in a constant state of becoming (ibid.).

## Sexuality

*"Sexuality is as much a product of culture as it is of nature. It is not simply a matter of biological or psychological 'drives' or of genetic imprinting. The most important sexual organ is between our ears" (Weeks 2003: i).*

Sexuality is generally understood to be the "most spontaneously natural thing about us" and is strongly tied to most people's sense of self; it has become "the truth of our being" (Weeks 2003: 3). However, as most literature on sexuality will point out, similarly to sex/gender, sexuality is inherently embedded in structures of power, and is a product of socio-historically situated human activity (Foucault 1978; Sedgwick 1990; Rubin 1999; Weeks 2003; Preciado 2018). In addition, sexuality is as fluid as sex/gender, being able to take many different forms and manifesting in different ways (Weeks 2003: 1-2). Furthermore, current dominant understandings of sexuality are not universal, and have come into existence through specific historical developments (Foucault 1978; Sedgwick 1990).

Unlike the repressive hypothesis, which presents Western society (specifically from the 1600s until the mid-1900s) as prudish and repressive in relation to sexuality, Foucault argues that during this time a discursive explosion surrounding sex and sexuality took place (Foucault 1978: 17). The ways in which topics surrounding sexuality were able to be discussed were restricted and policed; how, where and with whom one could discuss such topics became more clearly and strictly defined (Foucault 1978: 18). However, though there was indeed a "politics of language and speech" that restricted the manners in which sexuality could be discussed, an 'opposite' movement took place as well, in which institutions incited people to speak about it to an increasing degree; there was "a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail" (ibid.). Under the influence of Catholicism, every aspect of one's sexuality – including desires, fantasies and daydreams – had to be 'confessed' and with that guided (in order to lay bare and limit 'transgressive' desires), thus transforming desire into discourse (Foucault 1978: 19-21). Toward the beginning of the 18th century, another form of incitement to discuss sexuality arose, in which sexuality became a topic of "analysis, stocktaking, classification, and specification, of quantitative or causal studies," meaning that it became not only a question of morality but also of rationality (Foucault 1978: 23-24). In other words, sexuality became not solely something that was discussed in manners of condemnation or toleration, but also something to be "[...] managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function

according to an optimum" (Foucault 1978: 24). This was because governments felt that they had to manage 'their people' as a "population," which meant that phenomena such as birth and death rates, fertility, and health had to be mapped and managed (Foucault 1978: 25). In terms of sexuality, this meant that the way in which an individual 'made use of' their sex and its effects became a concern/interest of the state, which resulted in the intensive observation, analysis and intervention in couples' sexual conduct (Foucault 1978: 26).

Importantly, sex and sexuality becoming a manner of discourse was based in the effort to drive out any form of sexuality that did not contribute to reproduction (procreation) and thus the maintenance of the state; sexuality was constituted in a way that was "economically useful and politically conservative" (Foucault 1978: 36-37; Rubin 1999: 143). Concretely, this resulted in the creation/expansion of a system wherein sexuality became dictated and managed through legal structures, socio-cultural norms, pedagogical controls and medical establishments (Foucault 1978: 36). Within this system, non-normative sexualities were pathologized, branded as "mental illness," and displayed as abomination (ibid.). In other words, sexualities came to be named and categorised not just as mere descriptions of acts and desires, but were categorised along the lines of the normative and the non-normative (Foucault 1978: 37; Weeks 2003: 5). These sexualities were governed by "canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law," which were all centred around specific marital norms (such as heterosexuality and monogamy), marriages being under constant surveillance (ibid.). However, as heterosexual marriage became the one and only norm, it started to disappear from public discourse and was moved to the private; simultaneously, sexualities that were previously 'just' labelled as abominations came under closer scrutiny (Foucault 1978: 38). This resulted in "unnatural" and peripheral forms of sexuality – such as adultery, rape, incest and necrophilia – becoming a specific category within the field of sexuality (ibid.). Furthermore, sexuality went from being an issue of the law to an issue of medicine; peripheral sexualities were now monitored and controlled by a new medico-sexual regime (surveillance from within social arenas such as schools and families) (Foucault 1978: 40-42).

This new form of surveillance and persecution of peripheral sexualities contained the "incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals" (Foucault 1978: 42-43). One such way in which individuals were now specified is illustrated by the figure of "the nineteenth-century homosexual," who "became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology," who was not so much characterised through their sexuality but was understood to have an 'innate femininity' or a 'hermaphroditic' soul (Valentine 2007: 41; Foucault 1978: 43). In other words, and individual's entire personhood/being became inextricably linked with their sexuality, "the

homosexual" becoming a new "species" and later a type of identity (that was contrasted with heterosexuality), but which was also understood as a type of 'gendered inversion,' meaning that sexuality here was also linked to 'gender' (ibid.; Sedgwick 1990: 2; Ahmed 2006: 69; Valentine 2007: 40-42). "The homosexual" and others marked by sexual 'abnormality' were thus made classified and categorised through new categories of intelligibility, specifying the individuals and incorporating these categories into their being (Foucault 1978: 44, 47; Hansen 1979: 67-68). What these historical developments surrounding sexuality illustrate is that unlike understandings that take sexuality to be 'natural' and strictly biological, sexuality can more accurately be understood as a socio-historical construction based around human bodies and relations. To this end, Foucault's conceptualisation of sexuality and his analysis of its history are particularly generative for grasping how sexuality became an identificatory phenomenon, which particularly highlights 'sexual deviance.' More specifically in relation to this thesis project, Foucault's work offers a lens through which cisgender-transgender couples' navigation of their sexuality, particularly in relation to social norms and general social need/desire for labels, can be interpreted.

As Rubin explains, though "biological capacities" do play a role in human sexuality in some way (insofar as "human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures"), sexuality is part of historically constructed social systems, which includes specific language, various forms of institutionalisation (such as the ones described by Foucault (1978)), and specific conceptions of normativity and non-normativity (Rubin 1999: 149). To quote Preciado:

> Sexualities are like languages: they are complex systems of communication and reproduction of life. As languages, sexualities are historical constructs with common genealogies and biocultural inscriptions. Like languages, sexualities can be learned (Preciado 2018: 8).

What I think this illustrates is that how sexualities are generally understood is bound to language, history and culture; however, this does not mean that one is infinitely bound to this history. Sexuality and our understandings of it are not static but fluid, meaning that sexualities are infinitely mutable. Though history may create certain possibilities and impossibilities, through, among other developments, medical and legal institutionalisation, education, and (media) representation, "[i]t is possible to learn and invent other sexualities, other regimes of desire and pleasure production" inasmuch as we can imagine them (ibid.).

Relatedly, Sara Ahmed offers a theorization of sexuality as a spatial orientation (Ahmed 2006). Within this framework, similarly to Butler's (1988) performativity theory, the normative is understood to be "an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time" which creates the bodily space for action (Ahmed 2006: 66). Within this framework, what is "straight" is what falls "in line" with other lines,

which can be interpreted as "straightness" being 'aligned' with other forms of normativity (ibid.). When this alignment is ruptured, even just by one factor – for instance, disability – this has an overall "queer" effect as it breaks with the 'straight' pattern of lines, meaning that if one fails to be 'in line' with normativity in even just one way, this results in 'queerness' (ibid.). According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is inseparable from the bodily experience; he sees sexuality as being reflective of how people 'project their manner of being' toward the world, toward time and toward other people (Merleau-Ponty in Ahmed 2006: 67). He argues that 'the sexual body' is a body that orients itself in a way that "is sensitive to all the rest," one that senses "the nearness of the objects with which it coexists" (ibid.). Sexual orientation can thus be understood as a spatial "orientation" that is inextricably bound to the world and with that other bodies – being sexually and/or emotionally 'oriented'/directed toward particular bodies – influencing how we 'inhabit and coexist' in the world, meaning that sexuality can be understood as inherently relational in that it exists through coexistence (Ahmed 2006: 67-68).

Here, sexuality is defined as "the direction of one's desire" in which they are pulled toward others, wherein the people that one's desire is directed toward "are already constructed as the "same sex," or the "other sex" (Ahmed 2006: 70). Because of the normalization/naturalization of heterosexuality, this means that sexual orientation is "in line" when it is oriented toward "the opposite sex," since within a heteronormative framework, it is presumed that there is a "straight line" that directs 'the one sex' toward 'the other sex,' thus their sexual orientation being 'in line' with their "sex" (Ahmed 2006: 70-71). What this illustrates is that firstly, sexuality/sexual orientation cannot be separated from the body, since sexuality encompasses an 'orientation' between specific bodies. Furthermore, within a normative framework, bodies and sexual orientations are directed among normative 'lines.' As Foucault has illustrated, when being oriented toward "the same sex," it is not only a question of sexuality; it actually 'puts into question' one's "sex," meaning that understandings of sexuality are also related to questions of 'sex'/'gender' (Foucault 1978: 43; Ahmed 2006: 71). Moreover, "queer" desire, that is considered to be 'out of line' with the orientation that is normatively coupled to one's "sex," has been read in this way to put it 'back in line' (Ahmed 2006: 71). For example, "if the inverted woman is really a man, then she, of course, follows the straight line toward what she is not (the feminine woman)," meaning that "queer" desire is read in such a way that it "queers" 'sex'/'gender' in order to bring it 'back in line' (meaning desiring "what we are not") (Ahmed 2006: 72). In other words, sexuality and sex/gender are read along a 'straight line' that is defined by what is "right, good or normal," with that attempting to 'correct' "the slantwise" direction of "queer desire" (ibid.). However, as Ahmed illustrates, this does not mean that queer existence is erased; though heteronormativity attempts to put queerness 'back in line,' queerness actually creates/opens

up different "lines of connection between bodies that are drawn to each other in the repetition of this tendency to deviate from the straight line," meaning that following these 'slanted' lines puts bodies into reach that were previously 'unreachable' (Ahmed 2006: 105, 107). Furthermore, the 'straight line' actually depends on "queer slants" to appear as a straight line; 'queerness' does not exist without 'straightness' and vice versa (Ahmed 2006: 106). Concretely, inhabiting the "queer slant" is a process of everyday negotiations wherein one has to deal with the "straightening devices" of heteronormativity and the violence related to it (Ahmed 2006: 107). Ahmed's emphasis on sexuality as an orientation from one body to others, or between bodies, is a valuable addition to the previously described work of Foucault, as it does not only again refer to the 'straightening devices' (or in the language of Foucault, power structures) of normativity that aim to direct sexualities in a straight line, but also describes sexual orientation as an occurrence between physical bodies. Furthermore, she brings up the question of sexual orientation in relation to 'sex' and 'gender,' which is particularly informative for the analysis of the workings of cisgender-transgender couples' sexual orientation toward each other and the roles of the body and normativity herein.

## Social Norms & Normativity

*"[…] the strength of the normative standard is so powerful that our society is constrained to go to extraordinary lengths to perpetuate a clear distinction between what is considered normal and acceptable, and what is abnormal and intolerable" (Shildrick 2002: 68).*

As illustrated by the literature outlined in the previous sections, social norms[2] and normativity[3] greatly influence (though do not dictate) our *being* in this world. Though the ways in which this normativity manifests itself may differ between various socio-cultural contexts, as different socio-cultural contexts know different social norms, social norms and the power structures surrounding them influence our perceptions of the world and the people in it, how we interact, and how we move through life. The upcoming section will consider some of the existing literature written on hetero- and homonormativity, and cis- and transnormativity, to get a sense of some of the ways in which these types of normativity (which are influenced by social norms) influence contemporary understandings of

---

[2] Understood as "[c]ommon standards within a social group regarding socially acceptable or appropriate behaviour in particular social situations, the breach of which has social consequences. The strength of these norms varies from loose expectations to unwritten rules. Norms (such as those for social roles) are internalized in socialization," but are able to be (and frequently are) transgressed. In: *Oxford Reference*, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100515327.

[3] Though there is not one singular definition for "normativity," I understand normativity to be a belief system based on particular social norms, presenting this particular belief system as the only, natural way of being and with that privileging this particular way of being.

gender/sex/sexuality. Specifically, what is important to uncover for this thesis project, is the effects that these types of normativity have on the ways in which people understand and shape their gender/sex/sexuality, and on how people interact with and relate to other people.

One of the most widely known forms of normativity is heteronormativity, which is tied to compulsory heterosexuality. Simply put, heteronormativity is the belief system that presents heterosexuality as the default, 'natural' sexuality, and is rooted in a dichotomous understanding of sexuality (heterosexuality in opposition to homosexuality) and a binary, biological determinist conception of gender (male and female) (Barker 2014: 858; Schilt et al. 2009: 441, 443). As the History of Sexuality points out, though it was not named as such, heterosexuality – and more specifically reproductive heterosexual marital relations – became the sexual norm through specific historical developments (Foucault 1978). Furthermore, Foucault's work illustrates that sexuality cannot be understood as being separate from power systems, since sexuality is always already tied to, and actually rooted in, conceptions of normativity and non-normativity (ibid.). Relatedly, Rubin (1999) presents the specific hierarchy that heteronormativity consists of, which arranges forms of sexuality based on normality, naturality and morality. This hierarchy, which is socio-historically constructed, puts "[m]arital, reproductive heterosexuals" at the top of this sexual pyramid, followed by "un-married monogamous heterosexuals in couples" and then "most other heterosexuals" (Rubin 1999: 151). This already illustrates that heteronormativity is not just about heterosexuality being the one and only norm, but that it is interwoven with other norms, such as monogamy and marriage (which, as Foucault (1978) and Rubin argue, are tied to Western Christian heritage), though 'non-heterosexual' desires for and practices of reproduction are also rendered monstrous, especially when simultaneously being "racialized" (Dahl 2018: 195-196). Further down the pyramid, "[s]table, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability," followed by 'promiscuous' lesbian women and gay men, and all the way down there are "transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers" and people "whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries" (ibid.). What this illustrates is that normativity does not just rely on one's 'sexual identity,' but also how one carries out this 'identity' (which is further illustrated in the discussion of homonormativity below).

This aforementioned hierarchy, that is illustrative of heteronormativity in that a specific type of heterosexuality is socially favoured over other 'sexualities' and with that normalized, carries various consequences for people's *being* in society. As Rubin describes, people who were considered sexually non-normative, who were positioned on a lower level in the sexual hierarchy, were pathologized, criminalised, and stigmatised, which made sexually 'non-normative' people prone to, among other things, violence (for example, through police raids on gay and lesbian bars and the criminalisation of sex work), discrimination, and restricted social, and economic and physical mobility (which are still, at

least to some extent, issues to this day) (Rubin 1999: 145-146, 151; Valentine 2007: 43). Furthermore, as Adrienne Rich (1980) has pointed out and theorised, heteronormativity (that is, heterosexuality being presented as the only 'normal' or even possible form of sexuality), creates a type of (societal) compulsion. In discussing lesbian existence, she demonstrates that power structures such as the aforementioned ones – together with less overt ones such as socialization and a lack of representation of other ways of being – "have enforced or insured the coupling of women with men and obstructed or penalized our coupling or allying in independent groups with other women," meaning that heteronormativity and the power structures that support it (or are founded upon it), as well as the active subordination of 'non-normative' sexualities, construct and steer sexuality in such a way that heterosexuality becomes the only viable option (Rich 1980: 636-637). To quote Robert McRuer,

> […] it is precisely the introduction of normalcy into the system that introduces compulsion. "Nearly everyone […] wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn't seem to be a choice at all" (McRuer 2006: 90).

In other words, part of the pervasiveness of heteronormativity is that compulsion is created through the formulation of sexualities among lines of normativity and 'non-normativity' or deviance (which, as Rich has illustrated, are then upheld by power structures).

Next to heteronormativity, there have also been theorizations of homonormativity, of which there are two main understandings. Firstly, homonormativity can be understood as the ways in which gay and lesbian people uphold, sustain and are included within heterosexist institutions and value systems, rather than challenging them, which includes having a "relationship to a neoliberal politics of multicultural diversity that meshes with the assimilative strategies of transnational capital" (Stryker 2008: 145). In other words, this understanding of homonormativity signals the complicity of gay and lesbian people in systems of heteronormativity, based on a "depoliticized gay culture" that is "anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Puar 2007: 38). In addition, this form of homonormativity relates to homonationalism, wherein white homosexual people (specifically homonormative gay, and to some extent lesbian, people) become encapsulated within the idea of the nation as they are contrasted with "racial and sexual others" (Puar 2007: 39). The other main formulation of homonormativity specifically focuses on the relation between gay and lesbian 'identities' in relation to gender-normativity and non-normativity. Specifically, the term was deployed to point out and

to name the ways that homosexuality, as a sexual orientation category based on constructions of gender it shared with the dominant culture, sometimes had more in common with the straight world than it did with [transgender/transsexual people] (Stryker 2008: 146).

This form of homonormativity can be seen as the development of the rejection of being pathologized, wherein homosexuality was understood to be coupled with/linked to a type of 'gender inversion.' Thus, many (mostly white and middle-class) gay and lesbian people – from the mid-20th century onward – sought to differentiate themselves from gender/sexual "deviants" (and their subcultures), insisting on their normativity, which was not only a rejection of gender 'non-normativity' but simultaneously a rejection of "class and racial otherness" (Valentine 2007: 42-43). This is because "overt" or "flamboyant" homosexuality was regarded as incompatible with middle-class employment (ibid.). In other words, many gay and lesbian (and also bi, though this is not often mentioned) people adhered to heteronormativity in that they depended on binary, normative conceptions of gender – "male" and "female" – which transgender people problematized and sought to 'queer' (Stryker 2008: 146-147). In addition, homonormativity referred/refers to the exclusionary gay and lesbian politics that exclude gender non-normative people, and with that attempting to secure "privilege for gender-normative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant cultural construction of gender," meaning they do not only adhere to heteronormative social norms but also ground themselves in biological determinist understandings of sex/gender (Stryker 2008: 147-148).[4]

As already briefly mentioned, these forms of normativity are not just based on normative understandings of sexuality and sex/gender; questions of sexual normativity are inextricably linked to questions of race. As Rubin states, these types of sexual normativity and morality "has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics. It grants virtue to the dominant groups, and relegates vice to the underprivileged" (Rubin 1999: 153). This is illustrated by Saidiya Hartman's (2019) illumination of the life of Mattie Nelson and wayward minor laws. Though Mattie moved away to New York to escape a fate of domestic work and with that a legacy of slavery, she found that there too lingered the "intimate history of slavery" and the sexual stigma that was bound to it (Hartman 2019: 52-53, 58-59). Relatedly, Hartman describes that "[s]tigma isn't an attribute, it's a relationship; one is normal against another person who is not," which in this case meant that white women and their sexuality were framed as 'respectable' at the expense of black women, who were framed as shameful and deviant (Hartman 2019: 59). In other words, the same sort of 'sexuality' or sexual acts were treated differently based on race and slavery's legacy, wherein black women's sexuality was framed as

---

[4] A contemporary example of such a form of gay, lesbian and bisexual politics is the "LGB Alliance," founded in the UK, which argues to fight for the protection of lesbian, gay and bisexual rights "as recognised by biological sex" from "gender ideology" https://lgballiance.org.uk/.

'immoral,' and even criminalised through "wayward minor laws" that turned even consensual sexual acts into crimes on the basis of the idea that black women's sexuality would lead them into prostitution or 'moral depravity' (Hartman 2019: 199). Though generally based on sexual morality and heteronormativity, these laws disproportionately targeted and criminalised (young) black women, making them even more vulnerable to state violence (Hartman 2019: 200-201). This happened because

> [t]he actuarial logic at work predicted the kind of persons and the kind of acts that were likely to lead to crime and social disorder. [And thus] [s]tate racism exacerbated the reach of wayward minor laws, marking blackness as disorderly and criminal (Hartman 2019: 202).

What this case illustrates is that sexuality and the norms/normativity attached to it cannot be separated from questions of race, but instead should be analysed and understood in relation to race.

As the discussion of homonormativity has already illustrated, there are not just systems of normativity surrounding sexuality, but also systems surrounding sex/gender normativity (though as the literature on hetero- and homonormativity has illustrated, these systems work in tandem with and are thus not separate). These systems of sex/gender normativity can be labelled as cisnormativity and transnormativity, which are arguably interlinked. From its origins, the term cisgender came into use to name people who 'stay with' their sex assigned at birth, in order to take away some of the normativity underlying the categories of "man" and "woman," that were contrasted with "trans man" and "trans woman" (thus "man" and "woman" underlying 'cisness' and 'natural' gender) (Enke 2013: 61). It was meant to "de-centralise the normative group," exposing its normative privilege, and positing it as one possibility of being that was no more legitimate than other ways of being, instead of it being the norm through which everyone else, and especially transgender people, are defined (Enke 2013: 64-65). However, the term cisgender has turned into a category that naturalises the norm instead of questioning it; 'cis-' has become associated with being static, stable, and staying *within* certain (normative) parameters of gender, while 'trans-' is associated with a *crossing* of these parameters (Enke 2013: 61). The possibility of 'staying within' normative parameters of gender, or the implication that a certain 'gender' is supposed to "match" a specific "sex," implies that 'gender' actually *has* a "sex," which thus means that "sex" has priority in determining in sex/gender (Detournay 2019: 60). Cisnormativity then, is the system that is based on the belief that 'cisgender' is the default, 'natural' way of being, which "transgender" is then measured up against; 'cisgender' never has to prove itself – as it is never questioned what makes someone 'cis enough' – and with that "serves to judge the realness or legitimacy of all people's sex/gender" (though interestingly enough, 'cisgender' also depends on 'transgender' in that 'cisgender's' 'accuracy' is measured against 'transgender's' deviance)

(Bey 2019: 62; Enke 2013: 66; Detournay 2019: 59-60). Further, it creates a type of thinking that everyone is 'cisgender' until proven otherwise, of which the consequences are especially (but not exclusively) felt by transgender people. For instance, it requires transgender people to "pass" as the gender they 'identify as'/"claim to be,"[5] because cisnormativity creates the assumption that gender can be 'read' off of people's physical appearance (which does not only assign specific physical characteristics to a certain 'gender' but also upholds traditional normative forms of masculinity and femininity in general through assigning gender to things such as clothing, hairstyles, and (lack of) usage of make-up) (Enke 2013: 66). Another visible effect of cisnormativity is transphobic violence; cisnormativity is based on the idea that 'gender' is tied to a specific form of gender embodiment, specifically in regards to genitalia (people are assigned "cultural genitalia" based on their gender presentation, which is rooted in cisnormative ideas of gender and embodiment) (Schilt et al. 2009: 441). When there is an 'incongruence' between a perceived gender embodiment (or "cultural genitalia") and one's genitalia, this can cause transgender people to be perceived as 'deceivers' or 'liars,' which is then perceived as being in need of 'disciplining' for 'transgressing' "the seemingly natural gender binary," which can have violent and even deadly consequences for the transgender person in question (Schilt et al. 2009: 444-446; Bettcher 2007: 46-50).

Transnormativity strongly relates to cisnormativity, as transnormativity is based on medicalised conceptions of transness – the "born in the wrong body narrative" – wherein the focus lies on a transformation of the body from one 'binary gender' to 'the other' through hormonal and surgical interventions, and with that upholds hegemonic gender norms (that are based on cisnormativity) (Enke 2013: 66; Puar 2015: 52; Bettcher 2014). The term 'transgender' used to be used as an alternative to binary gender, a signifier for people who lived full time as a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth without undergoing any type of medical intervention, or more generally people along the "entire spectrum" of non-normative gender expressions/identities (Valentine 2007: 32-33; Enke 2013: 63). In other words, 'transgender' used to stand for "the sense that one could live non-pathologically in a social gender not typically associated with one's biological sex" (Enke 2013: 63). However, in more recent times the term transgender has become re-pathologized; though the term "transsexual" was a medical term from its origins as it was invented by medical professionals to denote a medical transition from "male" to "female" or vice versa, and transgender was specifically a rejection of this binary, medical system, transgender has now come to stand for almost the exact same way of being as transsexual (Valentine 2000: 213; Aizura 2018: 6-7).

---

[5] When discussing transgender 'identities'/people, these are often the terms used to describe their gender, which is illustrative of cisnormativity, since "cisgender" people are said to "be" a certain gender, while "transgender" people are said to "identify as" a certain gender (which implies that they *are* actually something else).

Furthermore, this medicalisation of 'transgender' is based on very specific, medical understandings of sex/gender that are aimed at upholding (cis)gender normativity, which is illustrated by the narratives – based on guidelines created by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) – that transgender people have to identify with in order to gain access to medical treatments. Specifically, to prove that they are "really trans," transgender people have to present the narrative that they experience gender dysphoria (which is a diagnosis in the DSM-5 that refers to "psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity")[6], and often must have 'shown signs' of gender 'non-normativity' starting from early childhood (such as performing gender nonconformity) (Aizura 2018: 5-6; Spade 2003: 24). These narratives are not just constructed by and reinforced by medical professionals, but are also taken up by transgender people themselves; "the transnormative subject" regards their body as "endlessly available for hormonal and surgical manipulation and becoming" and often views their transness/trans body as a defect that is in need of fixing, and with that tries to adhere to cisgender norms of being as much as possible (Puar 2015: 52).

As Jin Haritaworn and C. Riley Snorton state, it is necessary to investigate the production of the transnormative subject

> [...] whose universal trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility, recognition, protection, and self-actualization largely remain uninterrogated in its complicities and convergences with biomedical, neoliberal, racist, and imperialist projects (Haritaworn & Snorton in Puar 2015: 45).

In other words, there is a need to interrogate normative narratives of transness that have come to dominate and dictate what transness should be/look like, specifically because these narratives surrounding transness uphold/are complicit in other forms of oppression. Referring back to Lugones (2010; 2017), cis- and transnormativity can be seen as normative systems that serve to uphold binary, colonial formations of sex/gender, because as she illustrates, only white subjects are culturally intelligible as 'cisgender' or 'gender-normative' (Lugones 2010: 742, 748; Lugones 2017: 203). Moreover, Bey explains that, because it has been historically and socially displaced from hegemonic systems of binary gender, Blackness "runs from gender," thus inherently rejecting being 'made captive' by gender normativity (Bey 2019: 72). Furthermore, in recalling both Lugones and Spillers, who illustrate that "the exclusion of blackness is the precondition for gender categories," blackness can be understood as the "trans to gender, not transgender," meaning that gender is always already

---

[6] 'Gender Dysphoria' *American Psychiatric Organisation* https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria.

racialized (Detournay 2019: 68). Thus, this means that the cis- and transnormative subject is always already white. This is further illustrated by the fact that transnormativity functions to 'cure' transness by constructing the body in line with cisnormativity, with that erasing any trace of non-normativity, which requires "altering one's gender presentation to conform to white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual understandings of normative gender," meaning that cisnormativity indeed rests on other forms of normativity that are bound to social hierarchical power structures (Puar 2015: 53).

To summarize, these types of norms highly influence social life, the ways in which people can be, and how people interact. Particularly, these norms create particular kinds of compulsion, wherein it becomes almost impossible to not adhere to these norms, specifically because they are presented as the only possible, and desirable, way of being. Moreover, subversion of these norms, or ways of being outside of these norms more generally, are impeded, socio-culturally erased, or (partially) invisibilized. In addition, in line with Foucault (1978) and McRuer (2006), this compulsion is increased by sanctioning deviance, as well as by introducing a normality-abnormality binary into the gender/sex/sexuality system (and relatedly 'nobody wanting to be abnormal'). Nonetheless, importantly, these norms do not dictate social life entirely. Though the norm creates/shapes the categories of identification that one can 'identify with,' and people willingly or unwillingly 'fall within' these socially constructed categories, it is worth noting that – similarly to Bey's (2019) discussion on 'doing gender differently' or performing fugitive gender – the concept of disidentification nuances this discussion on the influence of norms on identifications, as it signals the possibility of reshaping/rethinking existing identity categories, rejecting them entirely, and/or constructing new categories. Two authors who have written about the concepts of identification and disidentification, and whose work is particularly relevant in regards to this project, are Judith Butler (1993) and José Esteban Muñoz (1999).

In her discussion on the categories of "sex," particularly how they are used within political discourse, Butler argues that these categories are "haunted" by the categories' own production and foreclosure of instabilities (for instance, one can think of the existence of people born with an intersex condition, which troubles the idea of binary sex) (Butler 1993: 4). Continuing from this point, she argues that though these identity categories are mobilized in order to reach particular political goals, "it may be that the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation" (ibid.). Moreover, she posits that these practices of – in particular collective – disidentification relating to "regulatory norms" are precisely those practices through which "both feminist and queer politics are mobilized," and which have the possibility to enable a reconceptualization of, in this case, which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern" (ibid.). In other words, in Butler's discussion, disidentification signifies a

subversion, as well as a reconceptualization, of regulatory norms that dictate how/who people can be. Furthermore, though identification is a part of this, as identity categories that break with cis-heteronormativity and people openly identifying with these are crucial in mobilizing "groups at the political periphery" and with that being able to claim rights through visibility[7], she argues that disidentification is equally, or might be even more, pivotal in the political fight for queer liberation. This is because disidentification arguably 'queers,' subverts and/or reshapes "the regulation of identificatory practices" that dictate the intelligible and unintelligible subject (Ayoub 2016: 22; Butler 1993: 3). As this point regarding identification and disidentification in relation to queer political and legal liberation and rights will be discussed further in chapter 1, it is important to highlight Muñoz' (1999) conceptualisation of disidentification as this will enrich Butler's account of the concept. According to Muñoz, disidentification refers to the survival strategies performed by minority subjects "in order to negotiate a majoritarian public sphere" that sanctions the existence of these subjects for the inability or rejection of "the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Muñoz 1999: 4). In other words, similarly to Butler's discussion, disidentification here specifically refers to the renegotiations by minority subjects of "majoritarian" social norms that constitute who counts as a valid and intelligible subject of the state. However, disidentification is not solely related to the state, but also to dominant culture within a given society in general, as Muñoz argues that

> "[…] disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (Muñoz 1999: 31).

Moreover, he describes disidentification as the "recycling and rethinking of encoded meaning," wherein minority subjects reconstruct cultural texts in a way that makes them "account for, include and empower" minorities and their identificatory practices (ibid.). In other words, disidentification can be understood as minority subjects taking the majority culture that has rendered them socially unintelligible, its accompanying identificatory categories and their underlying norms as 'raw material,' and reshaping it to account for their own identifications. Thus, disidentification is not simply a practice of standing against dominant culture and rejecting it, but rather it consists of working with the dominant culture in such a way that it is transformed to fit minority subjects' own needs and purposes. However, this process of disidentification is not to be confused with existing normative identifications simply becoming more inclusive; through the active doing of gender/sex/sexuality by 'minorities,' and making use of these normative identifications within this process, these existing identifications themselves are inherently reshaped. This point, and the concepts of identification and

---

[7] For more on visibility politics in relation to LGBT rights movements, see: Ayoub (2016).

disidentification, are especially crucial to note in relation to this research project, as much of the discussions during the interviews centred around identity categories, and how the interviewees navigated these. Particularly, the concept of disidentification offers a framework through which their particular experiences can effectively be understood, and the language through which these experiences can be analysed. Moreover, the concepts of identification and disidentification contribute to the discussion of the categories of cisgender and transgender within this thesis project, particularly regarding the discussion of how these concepts are approached in theory in contrast to how they are dealt with, and how people relate to them, 'in real life.'

## Relationality, Relationships and Desire

In the discussion of gender/sex/sexuality and various, interrelated types of normativity, I have already briefly mentioned relationality. The term "relational" refers to both "of or relating to kinship" and "characterized or constituted by relations."[8] Taking these two definitions together, relationality – within this project – refers to the constitution of gender/sex/sexuality through specific kinship relations, as well as specific power relations (as illustrated by the previous paragraphs). To briefly summarize, the literature discussed so far points out that gender/sex/sexuality are inextricably linked to systems of power. In this case, this means that specific socio-cultural norms that have been historically constituted dictate – to a certain degree, as these norms are constantly transgressed – what, how and who one can be, and with that how people present themselves to the world (Enke 2013: 74; Guadagno et al. 2011: 642). The processes of disciplining and regulating bodies are not solely bound to institutional forms of power; bodies are also regulated by the people around us, as well as ourselves, due to the internalization of aforementioned norms and the anticipation of "being held accountable" (Abelson 2014: 551; Butler 1988: 522). This is further explained by Foucault, who notes that when a subject finds oneself in "a field of visibility" and knows they are able to be perceived by others, they "assume responsibility for the constraints of power," meaning that they have internalized the power that they might be/are subjected to, and with that both discipline themselves as well as holding others accountable/subjecting others to this same power, thus reproducing these power relations (Foucault 1995: 202-203). In other words, the ways in which power and norms inform the ways in which people can 'be' is inherently relational; people internalize these norms in the anticipation of being held accountable by others, and hold others accountable in the same way, and with that reproduce these norms. This is not a conscious, active doing, but happens through everyday

---

[8] 'Relational' *Merriam-Webster,* https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relational.

interactions based on these internalized norms (such as illustrated by Butler's (1988) gender performativity). To illustrate this point further, Fernando García Selgas notes that

> The kind of man that I am, my masculinity is part and effect of all my relationships since my early childhood, when I found myself invested with obligations, expectations and fields of desire articulated in relation to my own performative practices and the active embodiment of dispositions, bodily schemes and manners, i.e., to the practical constitution of gender embodiments (García Selgas 2014: 189).

This quote highlights that, in this case masculinity, is not an inherent, individual quality of a particular subject, but is "part and effect" of the relationships one has with other people and the expectations and obligations that underlie these relationships (which in turn are based on particular norms). Moreover, hetero-, homo-, cis-, and transnormativity further illustrate some of the concrete workings of this disciplinarity/relational accountability, as these forms of normativity influence how people can form relationships with each other, as well as how people can give shape to their bodies and lives. However, again it has to be kept in mind that though power structures like these *influence* relationality, they do not *dictate* it, as lived realities are never fully able to adhere to such norms, which is illustrated by the creation of clear distinctions between normality and acceptability on the one hand, and abnormality and intolerability on the other (and the attempts to contain the 'slippages' constituted by the existence of 'non-normative' bodies) (Shildrick 2002: 68-69).

What is still left in need of clarification, is what relationships are and how they are formed, as well as how relationships are tied to questions of desire. As Attwood et al. explain, during 'modern times' "various discourses of intimacy" have become entangled with specific forms of relationships that can develop between people (Attwood et al. 2017: 249). Within 'traditional' discourse, intimacy refers to "physical contact, sex, romance or passionate love," specifically between husband and wife (which refers back to the Christian values and relationship/sexuality hierarchy as discussed by Rubin) (ibid.; Rubin 1999). However, more recently a broader range of intimacy and relationships has been theorized, discussing "non-normative, casual and promiscuous intimacies" (which thus deviate from the Christian, heteronormative relationship norms) and intimate labour (which pays attention to the various forms of commodification of intimacy, within and outside of the household) (Attwood et al. 2017: 249; Boris et al. 2010: 1-2). One such way in which 'non-normative' relationships have been theorised – meaning relationships outside of the heteronormative matrix – is through the concept of queer kinship, which is particularly relevant in regards to this thesis project as it focuses on relationships that break away from normative relationship formations and the norms attached to it. Generally speaking, kinship can be understood as

the idiom of social interaction, organizing economic, political, and ceremonial, as well as sexual activity. One's duties, responsibilities, and privileges vis-à-vis others are defined in terms of mutual kinship or lack thereof. The exchange of goods and services, production and distribution, hostility and solidarity, ritual and ceremony, all take place within the organizational structure of kinship (Rubin 2011: 41).

In other words, kinship can be comprehended as the way in which people interact with and relate to each other, these relations taking place within particular structures that define and/or dictate how these relations are structured, and what relations can take place and which cannot. This definition of kinship relates to Bourdieu's conception of relationality, which he defines as the "structure of objective relations which determines the possible form of interactions and of the representations the interactors can have of them," wherein one can think of structures such as heteronormativity (Bourdieu 1984: 244). However, he notes that subjects do not simply follow 'internalized rules' that would objectively reflect a social structure, but in contrast, interact with the world on the basis of their own interpretations and "imperfect knowledge" of the world (Bottero 2009: 400). This means that relationality can be determined as the ways in which social interactions take place between human beings based on their "imperfect knowledge" of the world, which in turn is influenced by particular social norms and structures.

Returning to the question of queer kinship, in contrast to traditional relationship formations, queer kinship (or queer family) has broken with the norms of nuclear family formations (Nicolazzo et al. 2017: 305). This has meant conceptualising 'family' or 'kinship' outside of biological/genetic connections; instead, queer kinship refers to the "queering [of] the notion of family and kinship, [wherein] people with diverse sexualities and genders have created their own sense of family, which reflects a shared vision and set of values," meaning that 'queer' people create their own family on the basis of shared values – meaning that they *relate* to each other hereupon – rather than on blood relations or normative conceptions of kin (Rubin 2011: 41; Nicolazzo et al. 2017: 307). Furthermore, while 'biological' relatives are family through genetics, queer kinship consists of actively chosen 'family members' who continually "provide support and care" to each other (Nicolazzo et al. 2017: 307). In other words, queer kinship is not defined by conceptual affective ties (meaning the family members 'could' care for each other on the basis of how their relationship is defined through social norms), but can rather be understood as social support mechanisms (ibid.). Specifically in relation to trans people, the giving and receiving of support amongst each other in relation to "systemic genderism" has been noted to be especially important within kinship formations and relations (Nicolazzo et al. 2017: 312). Extending this to cisgender-transgender relationships, this point raises the question as to what role this type of gender-related support plays within the formation and maintenance of these types of

relationships. Furthermore, the concept of queer kinship more generally provides a starting point through which to examine the romantic relationships between the cisgender and transgender partners, in contrast to their relationships with their family (more specifically, parents) and their friends. In particular, it helps in understanding the differences in their relationship dynamics, as well as the importance of these different types of relationships in their lives.

Relatedly, conceptions of intimate labour give insight into what can be deemed intimate/intimacy. Performing intimate labour leads to "knowledge and attention that are not widely available to third persons," such as "shared secrets, interpersonal rituals, bodily information, awareness of personal vulnerability and shared memory of embarrassing situations" (Boris et al. 2010: 4). This illustrates that intimacy can be defined as the sharing of 'private,' personal 'information' and moments amongst specific people (thus carrying a type of 'exclusivity'), which in romantic relationships also involves particular emotions, through which interpersonal, intimate relationships/bonds are formed. In other words, relating this back to queer kinship, non-heteronormative romantic relationships can be understood as bonds that are formed and maintained through mutual support, and sharing 'personal,' intimate information and particular emotions that are exclusive to this specific relationship. However, returning to the concept of 'private,' various authors problematize this distinction between the public and the private in relation to intimacy, relationships and desire (Holland 2012; Robinson 2014; Eng 2010; Boris et al. 2010). To quote Boris & Parreñas, "[i]ntimacy occurs in a social context; it is accordingly shaped by, even as it shapes, relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (Boris et al. 2010: 1). By this they mean that all facets of social life, including the intimate, is part of and thus shaped by (and similarly, shapes,) a particular social contexts and its social norms (which also relates back to Rich's (1980) conceptions of compulsory heterosexuality). Specifically, in discussing the relation between sexuality and race, Eng explains that sexuality and race are often dissociated from each other, especially within queer liberalism, while in fact race and sexuality co-constitute each other and dictate each other's social legibility (Eng 2010: 4). This means that the private cannot be separated from the public; for example, though racial segregation in the intimate, private sphere was formally ended, this "did not necessarily abolish personal prejudices" which continue to shape and influence "family and kinship relations outside the formal reach of the law" (Eng 2010: 6-7; Robinson 2014: 320). In other words, the distinction between the public and the private in the realm of intimacy can be deemed redundant as they are intimately related. Along these lines, 'the private sphere' is inextricably linked with hierarchies of 'the public sphere,' meaning that 'the private sphere' is regulated and guided by hegemonic norms (Eng 2010: 8). This is further illustrated by Schilt et al., who argue that everyday workings of heteronormativity shape the possibilities for intimate relationships between cisgender and transgender people, and on the

other hand that heteronormativity is reproduced by cisgender people who exclude transgender people from their dating pool on the basis "that heterosexuality and gender identity follow from genitalia" (Schilt et al. 2009: 441-443).

The connection between the public and private sphere also puts into question the idea of 'personal preference' – and with that the neutrality of desire – which is often used when describing particular traits that people look for in a partner (Robinson 2014: 318; Holland 2012: 41-42). As Holland states then, "[a] personal preference can become morally reprehensible when the private becomes public," by which she means that if this 'private preference' – in this case 'racial preference' – becomes publicly known, it becomes tied to the public culture of racism (Holland 2012: 42). Therefore, she argues that desire should be understood in relation to quotidian racist practice, wherein desire is inherently racialised and racism shapes as well as limits human desire (Holland 2012: 42-43). More generally, Foucault illustrates that desire is indeed not neutral as he explains that

[...] since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself (Foucault 1978: 23).

By this he means that through historical developments, desire has been turned into discourse, and because of that, desire has been modified by orienting it toward normativity and pathologizing desire that did not adhere to normative standards. Holland also goes against the idea of the erotic/desire being tied to individual autonomy – wherein the individual becomes separated from "the regulatory structures that make community, place, and home" – and instead argues that the erotic is actually "compelled" by such structures, including race (Holland 2012: 47, 61). In other words, she problematizes conceptions of 'personal preference' through which racism in the intimate sphere is normalized, and argues that these 'personal preferences' cannot be separated from the public life of racism (since this influences people's "psychic lives") (Holland 2012: 72; Robinson 2014: 319; Lundquist et al. 2015: 4). Thus, sexual subjectivity and desire cannot be separated from "external constraints," which – in returning to the focus of this research project – raises the question as to whether the exclusion of transgender people from people's potential dating pools is also tied up to such constraints, rather than being a matter of 'personal preference' (Blair et al. 2018: 17-18). Related to this question, one theory suggests that gendered experiences within romantic relationships are not only dependent on individual enactments of gender, but also on how partners enact gender in relation to each other's gender (Thomeer et al. 2020: 221-222). By this they mean that people understand their own gender differently depending on whether they interact with a man, a woman or a non-

binary person, which also shapes the relationship dynamic (Thomeer et al. 2020: 222). Though this theory does not explain processes of partner selection – wherein transgender people might be excluded – it might explain relationships that fall outside of heteronormative frameworks, in that it does not depend on normative ideas of gender/sex/sexuality and instead argues that the specific manifestations of gender/sex/sexuality are formed in the relationship between partners.

## Methodological approach

The rationale underlying this project is most accurately described as a phenomenological approach. This particular approach is best suited for this project, because the research builds around the research participants' own definitions and interpretations of their experiences, rather than trying to interpret what they tell through pre-existing terms. This focus on participants' own definitions and interpretations is in line with the phenomenological approach, wherein the primary source of data consists of "the views and experiences of the participants themselves" (Goulding 2005: 302). This means that the research project focuses on participant's views and subjective experiences, and takes these as "fact" (Goulding 2005: 302-303). However, the project grounds these experiences by discussing them in relation to social norms/normativity, because the literature, as well as the research participants themselves, point to the inextricable link between personal experiences and broader social systems that influence these experiences. This phenomenological approach combined with rooting the answers in existing theory is in line with feminist methodologies, as it aims to challenge existing power structures (such as heteronormativity and cisnormativity) (Naples 2003: 16). This does not mean that this project aims at uncovering an 'objective, universal truth' about relationships between cisgender and transgender people, which is partially "because facts and knowledge are "artefacts created by humans, who are social, sexual, and political creatures" and are thus never fully objective to begin with (Jain 2017: 568). Rather, in line with the phenomenological approach, it seeks to *highlight* the specific views and experiences of the research participants "to enlarge and deepen understanding of the range of immediate experiences," which in this case is the experiences of people with(in) cisgender-transgender relationships (Goulding 2005: 302). Furthermore, "not-knowing" – referring to leaving subjects undefined – is an integral part of knowledge production, which includes being open to "the unfamiliar," as well as creating space for opacity (accepting difference without trying to 'know' or 'understand' it) (Page 2017: 14-15; Glissant 2010). In other words, the phenomenological approach allows for the participants to specifically not-define themselves, and with that share their experiences and views without categorising them.

## Methods and Limitations

The data for this research project were gathered through semi-structured qualitative interviews, conducted in Dutch. Specifically, with the phenomenological approach in mind, an interview guide was established consisting of open-ended questions that covered the main topics that would have to be discussed in order to be able to answer the research question. Though eventually all topics from the interview guide were covered, how they were covered and in what order was fully dependent on the

answers of the interviewees, meaning that rather than following a 'question-answer' format, this format of interviewing took into account the interests of the interviewees and reshaped the interview accordingly. Concretely, this meant going deeper into particular comments or stories told by the research participants, that were not included in the interview guide, by means of probes. The interviews were between fifty minutes and two hours long depending on the length of the participants' answers regarding the questions asked and topics that were brought up by them or myself. The interviews were conducted online via Skype, Teams or Zoom, and were recorded through the recording function on either of these programs.

For this project, five couples were selected, consisting of one partner who falls somewhere along the transmasculine spectrum, and one partner who can be categorised as a cisgender person, of no particular sex/gender or sexual orientation. Though I did not want to determine for people what their gender is, and am aware that in using these categories in this way these categories might come across as 'descriptive and natural,' I had to strategically use these categories in order to find the right participants and to be able to answer my research question. The participants were found by means of a call for participants posted on social media platforms specifically targeted at transmasculine individuals. The participants were then selected on the basis of convenience sampling, meaning that the 'sample' of participants is the one that was most easily accessible to me (Bryman 2012: 201). This type of sampling was chosen because there was a scarcity in applicants.

Finding and securing research participants in this way poses a few problems: firstly, the members of these platforms are predominantly white and relatively young (people being at least sixteen, and most people being in their twenties and early thirties), meaning that the sample group is fairly, though definitely not entirely, homogenous in this way. Further, because of the use of convenience sampling to find participants, and because the sample size is small, the findings of this project are not representative of cisgender-transgender couples as a 'group,' nor are they generalizable. However, for the purposes of this project this is not necessarily an issue, because the purpose of this study – as previously mentioned – is not to create generalizable knowledge about cisgender-transgender couples as a group, but rather to highlight some of the views and experiences of people who are in such relationships. Furthermore, though finding research participants in this way does not create a representative or generalizable narrative, it does provide a basis on which further research can be built, and can still be linked to existing research on this topic (however small amount there currently is) (Bryman 2012: 202).

For the purposes of this research project, semi-structured qualitative interviews were the most suitable option for data collection. This is because this type of interview allows participants to

define (or not-define) terms for themselves (such as cisgender and transgender), and gives room to participants to talk about their views and experiences in their relationship while still covering the topics necessary for answering the research question (Hesse-Biber 2014: 118-119). Further, because all of the questions were open-ended, this allowed for a wide variety of answers and made it possible to get insight into the specific views and experiences of the participants (in contrast to a questionnaire for example, wherein people have to answer questions and pick specific answers that might not be relevant to their situation) (Hesse-Biber 2014: 119; Bryman 2012: 470). However, because the interview guide was created prior to the interviews, and based around topics deemed relevant in answering the research question, not all topics were equally relevant to each participants' situation, meaning that the depth in which particular topics were discussed varied between each couple.

The main limitation in conducting the interviews for the purposes of this project was the fact that the interviews had to be conducted in an online space, due to the global pandemic. Conducting interviews online in contrast to offline meant that the ways in which the people in that space could express themselves were limited, such as body language in expressing empathy and support as an interviewer. Furthermore, this online space also seemed to create a stricter interviewer-interviewee dynamic, wherein many of the interviewees waited to speak until asked a specific question, rather than it being a more casual, conversational space. However, in line with feminist research praxis, I did open up space at the end of each interview to let the interviewees ask questions – and when they did, I offered them the same vulnerability as they did during the interview – or bring up other concerns they might still wanted to share (Bryman 2012: 492). This was done at the end of each interview as to not let my answers 'contaminate' the participants' answers. This form of opening up space made the interview more reciprocal, despite the online aspect of the space somewhat limiting the conversational possibilities. Lastly, returning to questions of vulnerability, the choice of interviewing couples with both partners being interviewed at the same time, rather than separately, might have affected the results as well. This could be the case because some questions were sensitive in such a way that answering them in full honesty with their partner present might be difficult (though this could still be the case when interviewing people separately). Even though this could be a potential flaw regarding this research project, interviewing the couples together was the most logical decision as this project centres around questions of relationality, and interviewing couples together provided more insight into their relational dynamics, especially because some of the interview questions also created discussions between the two partners and with that provided insight into how they experienced and navigated certain things together.

## The Positionality of the Researcher

As I am an 'insider' within this research project, as a Dutch transgender man (though also an 'outsider' as someone who is not in a relationship, as well as being a researcher), I strongly had to keep in mind my own position. As I previously mentioned, I could relate to a lot of what was said during the interviews, meaning I had "insights from the lived experience," which is often seen as 'tainting objectivity' (Farahani 2010: 115; Brannick et al. 2007: 60). However, according to Brannick et al.

> [...] as researchers through a process of reflexive awareness, we are able to articulate tacit knowledge that has become deeply segmented because of socialization in an organizational system and reframe it as theoretical knowledge and that because we are close to something or know it well, that we can research it,

meaning that if a researcher is reflexive of their own position and the biases that originate from it, they can actually use being an insider (or 'being native,' as Brannick et al. describe it) to their advantage and generate rich knowledge (Brannick et al. 2007: 60). In addition, vulnerability and reciprocity were also particularly important during the interviews because of my own position, again not so much as a researcher, but as a transgender man who has gone through many of the same (though also different) experiences in terms of living in the Netherlands as a transgender person. However, as the interviews took place in an online space, it was sometimes difficult for me to show and with that offer my empathy and support when sensitive or difficult topics arose, as I usually show this through body language rather than words (as using words to comfort someone is not my strong suit). However, as previously mentioned, I did offer vulnerability through opening up in case they had questions for me. In these terms, there was no case of a power imbalance, meaning the space was equal and safe.


## Data Interpretation

In order to be able to analyse and interpret the data gathered from the interviews, the interviews were transcribed, wherein time stamps were included in order to be able to double-check direct quotes used in the analysis. After transcribing the interviews, common themes were established by comparing the transcripts. Specifically, to highlight the common themes that are of potential theoretical significance, the transcripts were coded – which means labelling the data – in order to organize the data thematically (Bryman 2012: 568). This was done by means of initial coding, which refers to coding as many lines as possible with very specific labels, and then looking for common themes within these codes and grouping them, particularly the ones related to the research question (Bryman 2012: 569). This way of coding is the most useful for this research project, as it avoids viewing

the data through pre-conceived notions of what is important, and instead, in line with the phenomenologist approach, looks at the data itself in detail to uncover what is important to the research participants, and their particular views on these matters (Goulding 2003: 302). After coding the data, the data was analysed through comparing what has been gathered from the different interviews, particularly the specific experiences and views of the research participants, in combination with the literature discussed in the theoretical framework. In other words, the theoretical framework was used to make sense of the experiences of the participants, to put them into a broader context, and connect them to broader social phenomena (such as forms of normativity).

## Notes on Translation

Since all interviews were conducted in Dutch, everything that was said that needed to be included in the analysis was translated into English (whether this was translating direct quotes or translating and with that paraphrasing the interview). As Yi Li (2011) notes, translation is not a neutral process; for example, when she attempted to translate a poem she wrote in English into (Mandarin) Chinese – her first language – she found that while in English the poem conveyed strong emotions, when she translated it into Chinese the "poem sounded remote and detached from [her] reality" (Li 2011: 21). Upon discovering this, she wondered what had happened to her research participants' stories when she translated them from Chinese to English (ibid.). This case illustrates that though in the language that something is translated into similar words to the original ones may exist, they might not convey the exact same meaning/feeling, and with that might end up misrepresenting what was said. To avoid this to the best of my ability, and to stay critical of the idea of "the power of English to represent everyone and everything," the original Dutch quotes have been included in the appendix whenever something that was said was directly translated into English (whereby the translated quote is marked by a letter, and the Dutch quote can be found in the appendix following that same letter) (Roberts in Li 2011: 28). However, it has to be recognised that "[l]anguage can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a person's life is inevitably a violation," meaning that even when one translates what a person has said as accurately as possible, or even just writes it down without translation, some parts of experience are still lost through language's inability to fully capture it (Josselson in Li 2011: 28).

# Chapter 1: Identification and Disidentification within Cisgender-Transgender Relationships

At the outset of this project, the main focus laid upon gender/sex/sexuality in terms of social and identity categories and their relational constitution within cisgender-transgender romantic relationships. This was because existing literature discussing these types of relationships mainly focus on gender/sex/sexuality categories and the socio-cultural norms constituting them (Schilt et al. 2009; Blair et al. 2018). Specifically, the literature points to struggles regarding transgender people's ability to fit into normative categories of gender/sex/sexuality, and illustrates that because most people are still stuck in a binary, biological determinist way of thinking, transgender people do not fit into most people's image of desirable or possible partners. However, as more general, conceptual/theoretical literature on gender/sex/sexuality points out, gender/sex/sexuality are not pre-social, static phenomena, but rather can be understood as relationally and socio-culturally constituted (De Beauvoir 2010; Butler 1988; Abelson 2014; Bey 2019). This means that while for some people their specific identification with gender/sex/sexuality does determine their relations with people (meaning that for example, someone identifies as a lesbian and is therefore attracted to and engaged in relationships with women), in other cases it is actually their relations with other people that shape these understandings of gender/sex/sexuality, thus these understandings being fluid and ever-changing instead of being tied to a specific label. In interviewing five cisgender-transgender couples to investigate this tension in current research, it became evident that within actually existing romantic relationships between cisgender and transgender people – in contrast to the hypothetical ones that the aforementioned research is based on – it was actually questions of disidentification (and to a lesser extent identification) that were particularly central regarding the role of gender/sex/sexuality in their relationship and daily lives together. Thus, building mainly on Butler (1988; 1993), Muñoz (1999) and Bey (2019), in this chapter I will argue that in the case of these specific cisgender-transgender couples, gender/sex/sexuality identity are constituted and continually navigated in relation to each other, through processes of identification and disidentification.

## Navigating Identity: Identification and Disidentification

Riley: "I don't know, the whole [idea of] terms and labels, it doesn't really matter, I just fall for some people and don't for other people, that's pretty much it" (a).

For the majority of the participants – though not all, which will be discussed further down – this was the main type of response when asked about their sexual and/or gender identity and how they would define it. In terms of sexual orientation, most participants either did not attach a label to it, or identified as pansexual (which in this case, for most participants, referred to attraction to or falling for

a person rather than a particular gender). Though a lot of the participants replied in this manner, they had varying explanations as to why they did not feel the need to categorise or label their sexual orientation. For instance, Riley, who is non-binary and, in their own words, in transition toward a more masculine physique, explained that they never liked "attaching a word" to their sexual orientation, firstly because they simply did not care for it, but also because these labels cannot fully encapsulate their particular situation, as they explained that

> I think that for me right now it is difficult to attach a label to it in general because if you
> yourself are not a man or a woman then you can also not be gay or straight (Riley) (b).

This point that Riley made makes particular sense when referring back to Foucault (1978); current societal views on sexuality are founded upon a history wherein sexuality was regulated by the state in order to be able to manage populations (Foucault 1978: 24). Concretely, this meant driving out any form of sex(uality) that did not contribute to procreation, thus formulating desirable sexuality around male-female procreative relationships and pathologizing every other type of sexuality (Foucault 1978: 36-37; Rubin 1999: 143). In other words, since sexuality in its origins was founded upon the sex/gender binary – i.e. 'men' and 'women' – (and centred around heterosexuality), it makes sense that categories originating from this history do not encapsulate non-binary gender (Schilt et al. 2009: 443). However, in the words of Preciado: "[i]t is possible to learn and invent other sexualities, other regimes of desire and pleasure production" (Preciado 2018: 8). This means that though history has influenced the present, it is not determinant of it. In that sense, sexualities can be reshaped, recreated, or newly invented, which happens through the *doing* of sexuality by people in non-normative ways, which is already happening through the lived realities of people, including the ones who have been interviewed for this thesis project.

Returning to Riley's discussion of their sexuality, they explained that they currently use the term pansexual to describe their sexual orientation, but similarly to their partner Kylie, a cisgender woman, they argued that this label similarly engenders confusion, because when they tell others that they are pansexual, people assume that they could fall for any person, masculine, feminine or otherwise. They summarised their explanation by saying that "those terms actually only make everything more complicated" (c). Similarly, Kylie, who also currently identifies as pansexual, argued that she uses this label simply because other labels do not fit her attraction to her non-binary partner, as those labels, in their conventional social meaning, are based around the gender binary. However, similarly to Riley, she argued that the term pansexual does also not accurately represent her sexual orientation, as she is not attracted to feminine women, but is attracted to masculine people regardless of gender. In other words, for both of them the term pansexual is the only label that they found was

able to fit their sexual orientation, but does not accurately represent it as their particular type is more specific than the label allows for. Since social categories like these influence how people relate to each other, it makes sense that one would want to find a category that accurately describes them. With that, in this discussion on labels, Riley finally added that the actual point is that they assign the term pansexual, and non-binary, to their sexuality and gender in order for other people to understand them and so that they can explain their situation to them, while actually "I am just being myself, I am just this […] and that is the most important point, not so much what label you attach to it" (d).

This case can be read as a process of identification and disidentification. Specifically, their identification with the term pansexual can be read as a form of strategic identification; similarly to how people identified with specific categories to be able to gain rights, they use these categories strategically in order for other people to understand them, thus out of social necessity (Philogène 2012: 32; Ayoub 2016). On the one hand, this is necessary because these categories exist to make sense of the world and our position within it (Deaux 2012: 205). Furthermore, as power and social norms influence how people can relate to each other, and within this particular context labels are given social importance, it makes sense that people would feel the need to claim a certain label, even if it only has a social function rather than a personal significance (Butler 1988; García Selgas 2014; Foucault 1995). On the other hand, there is an observable tendency toward disidentification; though they strategically identify with the term pansexual, they disidentify with it in a manner that contains a 'working with' dominant culture that forces people to 'identify' themselves, and reshape it to fit their particular needs (Muñoz 1999: 31). In this case, it means claiming the label pansexual out of social necessity, but doing it in a way that reshapes the term to fit their particular situation. Moreover, they came to this label in their relationship with each other, which underlines the relationality and social interwovenness of such labels, meaning that labels (only) gain meaning in relation to other people (or institutions) (Ásta 2018: 22). Specifically, Kylie felt the need to find a label (insofar as labels are given social relevance) that accurately represented her relationship with her current partner and their specific gender identity, as her previous identification was based on her past relationships, with people of different genders than her current partner. However, it can be argued that what meaning a label gains depends on the people carrying these labels as much as, or even more so than, the specific, generalised social meanings attached to these labels. In addition, this case illustrates a broader trend found amongst the participants of this thesis project, which is the desire to move away from labels, and the view that labels are not (or at least not significantly) important. This development is particularly significant as much of the LGBTQ+ rights movement was/is based around specific identificatory categories, wherein people have fought hard to be able to claim these labels with pride, as well as gain rights base upon them (Ayoub 2016: 21).

In contrast to Riley and Kylie, both partners from one of the other couples that were interviewed had quite a defined, though still fluid, sense of their sexual orientation. Lenny, a transgender man in a relationship with Dana, a cisgender woman, explained that he identifies as heterosexual, and that he is currently only attracted to women, but would not fully rule out men, though at that moment he could not picture himself being in a relationship with a man. His attraction to women already existed prior to his relationship with Dana, and is something he 'figured out' before he came to his current sense of gender identity. In addition, similar to most other participants he also said that he did not really think about it or really consciously put a label on it, as he thinks it does not really matter, which is partially because he is in a relationship rather than dating and thus does not have to think about it in the first place. The other partner in the relationship, Dana, explained that after being engaged to a man she figured out that she is actually not attracted to men, and after a short relationship with a girl Lenny and Dana 'fell into' their current relationship. With this, Dana explained that she has fallen for Lenny as a person, and could probably never fall for a man again. Relatedly, she experienced some difficulties in trying to define her sexual orientation as she is attracted to Lenny who is a transgender man, and thus the label of lesbian was 'not accurate' for that situation, while more generally still only being attracted to women. In addition, while Lenny wanted people to see their relationship as a heterosexual one, Dana "did everything to define [herself] as a woman who is attracted to women," which was a cause of dispute as Lenny did not want other people to perceive them as a lesbian couple, which was partially because he was only at the start of his physical, medical transition, and did not want other people to see him as a woman (e).

In other words, in this process of navigating identity categories, it becomes clear that not only 'personal identity' is at play, but that these identity categories are inherently related to social norms and 'being read' in social situations, which is then not only a question of self-identification (or disidentification) but also of performativity and gender embodiment. How one is read depends on one's presence in the world and the social context they are present in, and the particular norms that shape this social context (meaning the social meanings attributed to specific acts and bodies) (Tudor 2017: 22; Butler 1988: 526; García Selgas 2014: 187). Specifically, in this case it was Lenny's fear that if Dana presented herself and with that would be read as a lesbian, he would be read as a lesbian too, based on his gender embodiment (having a masculine, though possibly androgynous appearance) in combination with his proximity to Dana. In other words, how one is read depends not only on one's own (gender) performance, but also on one's proximity to other bodies and how they are read (Ahmed 2006: 67-68). This is further illustrated by Dana's struggle with Lenny's changing physique, and with that going from being read as a lesbian couple to being read as a straight couple, thus making 'queer desire' fall 'back in line' with normativity, which she specifically did not want as she had finally

"left the closet" (Ahmed 2006: 72). While for Lenny identification as straight and male were bigger concerns when he was read as a lesbian, for Dana her identification as a woman who is attracted to women became more important to her when she was no longer read as a lesbian. However, she ended with the conclusion that she does not care about what other people think, and that their relationship and how they feel about it are more important. On the other hand, Dana being in a relationship with a man and simultaneously identifying as a lesbian (though she also partially let go of this label) can also be read as a form of disidentification, in that through her being and doing she reworks the term to make it work for her, thus disidentifying with 'lesbian,' rather than 'identifying' with a different term (Muñoz 1999: 31). In other words, identification and disidentification are relational, wherein its importance can change over time, and which are inherently related to social norms, which makes sense as social categories, though they are also used for personal identification, are also used to perceive and interpret others (Deaux 2012: 206).

In terms of gender, most interviewees assigned some sort of label to it. For the cisgender partners, some of them used the term "cisgender" to describe themselves, while others did not but argued that they were okay with that label being used for them. The people who described themselves as cisgender, either did so because they simply saw it as a descriptive term, and/or because they felt it was important to name the norm (which is what the term was originally created for), which in terms of gender is cisgender (Enke 2013: 61). Every interview started with the question if the interviewees wanted to introduce themselves, and they could say as much or as little about themselves in this introduction as they wanted. Taking one example, when Sky, who is a non-binary person, introduced themselves one of the things they mentioned is that they are non-binary and that they use they/them pronouns. Allison, the partner of Sky, had introduced herself before Sky, but after Sky's introduction added that she is "cis" and uses she/her pronouns. When asking how she relates to the term cis, she answered:

> I don't really necessarily explicitly identify with that term, but I think that is also due to us living in a society wherein [being cisgender] is seen as something really normal. I think that in relation to Sky I've maybe actually started identifying with it more actively; because we are in a relationship I've become more aware of the impact that being cis or having a marginalised gender, what that entails. So I think it's really important that at the point where Sky sort of constantly has to justify themselves, I prefer to mention that "oh yeah I am cis and I use the pronouns she and her," to in that sense 'equalize' the situation (Allison) (f).

In that sense, identifying explicitly as cisgender for her was not so much a matter of personal identity, as she explained when summarizing her answer that she does not actively identify as or think of

herself as cisgender, but was more so an act of solidarity toward her partner, as well as a move from a more activist/ally standpoint as she acknowledged that being cisgender is a privileged position within society while being non-binary is a socially marginalised position. In this sense, gender identification is not (solely) personal, but also relational as well as political. Through her relationship with her partner, she saw a necessity to actively identify with the term cis, as usually only the people deviating from the norm are expected to 'identify as' something, which further naturalizes the norm as they are measured against it while people who 'are' the norm are not (as being 'cis enough' is not a 'thing') (Bey 2019: 62; Enke 2013: 66; Detournay 2019: 59-60). Some of the other cisgender partners shared similar sentiments as Allison's, while others only recently became aware of the term and/or simply viewed it as a descriptive term, explaining that "that's just what it's called," or for example saying that "I identify as a woman and I was born a woman so yeah that means I am cisgender," meaning that they looked at the conventional definition of cisgender and found it applicable to their situation, but did not actively think about or identify with it outside of that (g). This type of usage of the word 'cisgender' makes sense, as categories like these are generally regarded as terms to describe people based on 'objective' characteristics (Deaux 2012: 206).

For the transgender interviewees, most of them had a more explicit, specific view on their gender (identity), and had thought about it more extensively, whether it be because they were trying to figure out what their gender encapsulates or means to them, or because they were forced to do so because of the way in which being transgender is highly medicalised (Aizura 2018: 5-6; Spade 2003: 24). For instance, Nolan in introducing themself said that they are non-binary transmasculine. When asked if they could tell more about this, they explained that they first thought that they were a trans man, but that this did not feel right. They further explained that they did not feel like a "girly-girl" when they were a child, and during puberty realised they were different from "most other girls" in their class. In investigating what these feelings might mean they encountered the term transgender, and after doing more research through the internet they discovered the term non-binary, which they felt fit them better than "trans man." In addition to this process of internet research, they expressed that they had always felt more comfortable with "the more masculine," which they attributed partially to their socialisation as female, and wanting to move away from this female image because they knew that that was not who they are. What this experience illustrates is that firstly, when one does not adhere to a specific norm, in this case particular gender norms assigned to being female, one (might) start to think about the particular meaning of this 'deviance' (while when someone is part of the norm, they do not have to think about their gender as such) (Enke 2013: 64-65). In other words, social norms are integral within identification as well as disidentification, which is exactly in line with Butler and Muñoz, who argue that disidentification is the working with those exact norms that constitute

identity categories to reshape them (Butler 1993: 4; Muñoz 1999: 31). Furthermore, Nolan's case illustrates gender as a social and relational phenomenon, rather than (just) an individual identity; through living with and encountering other people, they realised what they were and also what they were not. In this sense, it is because of other people's gender that one might start questioning their own.

On the other hand, one of the other transgender interviewees, Brandon, had a different take on his gender and transition; when asked about his gender, he said that he is "not cis, and besides that I don't really think about it." Continuing from there, when asked if he did think about it more in the past, he explained: "you will have to at the moment when you go to the VU, in that case you're kind of being forced [to think about it]." Moreover, further into the interview, when I asked Brandon if I interpreted correctly that being trans does not play a big part in his life, he explained:

> It's not that I think about it of my own accord, but from within society you are constantly confronted with it and that to me is an issue, and if it had just been a bit more normal then maybe I could have been a bit more open about it but now when you enter a [social] situation you're continuously actively occupied with hiding it, which also just sucks, but then you think about all of those annoying people with all of those annoying questions, not even necessarily toward yourself but also just those you see everywhere and those annoying "kut" questions and then you're like nevermind (Brandon) (h).

By not really naming his gender, describing it as "not cis," and explaining what he went through, he pointed out several issues; firstly, he showed that not all transgender people have to have, much less want, an essay's worth of words to describe their gender. This contrasts dominant social norms of doing/performing gender, wherein people who do not adhere to the norm are demanded to 'explain themselves,' which mirrors the history discussed by Foucault wherein people were made to turn their, in this case, desire, into discourse, through which 'deviant' people were later on categorised as particular human kinds (Butler 1988: 520-521; Foucault 1973: 24, 38, 42-43). In contrast, by not defining himself, he 'does gender differently' and with that subverts normative gender rules and expectations (Bey 2019: 82, 80). Furthermore, by saying he is 'not-cis,' and not categorising his gender in that way, he made a claim to opacity, and with that demonstrated that being trans is not all about categorising and explaining oneself (Page 2017: 14-15; Glissant 2010).

Continuing from Brandon 's case, what other participants also pointed out, and what might be the main take-away from the conversations about labels and categories during the different interviews, is that transgender people just want to be themselves, and not always have to explain what that entails to other people. In other words, there is a visible desire to 'run from gender,' to

perform gender fugitivity, and with that rejecting being held captive by gender normativity (Bey 2019: 72). As Brandon points out with his statement however, Dutch people who want to medically transition in some way, usually end up at the VU medical centre, which is the main 'expertise centre' regarding transgender medical care in the Netherlands. When transitioning in this way, transgender people are made to think about and explicitly word and define their gender, usually having to adhere to a specific, standardised narrative of transness, in order to be allowed access to necessary medical treatments, and thus are forced (back) into normativity (especially in the case of non-binary people for whom there is barely any space within this system, considering medical institutions largely enforce the gender binary) (Enke 2013: 66; Puar 2015: 52; Bettcher 2014; Aizura 2018: 5-6; Spade 2003: 24). In that sense, one does not have freedom over their own gender, which includes the freedom to leave it undefined. Furthermore, what his story illustrates is that because of the social stigma, stereotypes and regarding transgender people that exist – which will be discussed more extensively in chapter 2 – 'being oneself' as such, and not hiding parts of oneself or one's life, is made more challenging. However, in the case of Brandon, when leaving this medical system, he did gain the freedom to 'undefine' himself, to not bind himself to a particular definition of gender, and with that was able to perform gender fugitivity, though he partially made this choice because of social stigma (Bey 2019: 67, 81).

In addition, some of the interviewees that did have a more extensive description of their gender identity, or specific labels attached to it, also did not necessarily care for these labels that much. Riley, who is non-binary, stated about this label that:

> I use that term so that people, others, can understand it and I can explain it but actually what matters is that I am just being myself and you know, this is what I am, and what label you want to attach to it, yeah, I think everyone just has a certain feeling of "this is me" (Riley) (i).

In other words, similarly to what they said about categorising sexual orientation, the labels they attach to their particular situation do not necessarily matter as much to themselves as they do to the people asking them to explain their gender and/or sexuality to them, which is again illustrative of the fact that identity categories are not solely meant for self-identification but also for making people socially intelligible within a particular social context (Foucault 1978: 44, 47; Deaux 2012: 206). Of course, gender refusal in this sense does not have to be mutually exclusive with the sentiment of people wearing their labels with pride, but it does need to be pointed out that having to label your gender or sexuality is not fully a 'free choice;' it is also an effect of particular social norms that label some forms of existence as normative while marking other forms of existence as 'deviant' or 'abnormal' (Butler 1993: 1; García Selgas 2014: 189; Lugones 2010: 748; Lugones 2017: 203; Bey 2019: 72).

## Transitioning within a romantic relationship and questions of the body

All of the couples that were interviewed went through the trans partner's transition together, during the relationship. For some, they started their transition – social and/or medical – just before or right at the start of the relationship, while others started gradually transitioning while further into the relationship. The impact this had on and within the relationship, varied greatly between the different couples. However, questions surrounding identity, the body, as well as care, came up in all of their stories. Hence, this upcoming section will highlight some of the challenges and effects that the trans partner's transition had (and has) on their relationships, and how the couples navigated these changes.

Firstly, one aspect in regards to bodily, and sometimes 'identarian,' changes within the relationship that stood out during the interviews is the question of desirability. Most of the transgender partners pointed out that one of their concerns regarding their physical transition was the question of "will they still find my attractive?" Interestingly enough, this was mostly a concern coming from the trans partners, while only one of the cis partners carried the same concern. This is interesting, because according to Schilt et al. "genitalia [are regarded] as the key determiner of gender and sexual identity" in sexual, 'private' situations, and because of that, cisgender people in particular require of their sexual partners to have their physical genitalia match with their 'cultural genitalia' (Schilt et al. 2009: 441, 450). In other words, based on this argument, one would expect the cisgender partners of transgender people to have an issue with their trans partner's bodies (within a sexual context), as from the viewpoint of Schilt et al.'s framework, there is a 'discrepancy' between their gender and the physical manifestation of it. However, most of the couples had conversations about these concerns at some point, and herein the cis partners actually often reassured their partner, pointing out that they had fallen for the person and not their body. For instance, when asked what it was like for Sky to go through their transition and the related bodily changes within their relationship, and if this made a difference compared to if they had not been in a relationship, they noted:

> Yes for sure, I had sometimes thought "oh yeah will she still find me attractive? […] what if I change into something that doesn't fall inside the expectation of the relationship anymore (Sky) (j).

When they discussed these concerns with Allison, their partner, however, they were quickly reassured by their partner, which they partially attributed to Allison being bisexual and therefore not solely being attracted to a body that has characteristics that are socially categorised as 'feminine.' Because of this, and their open communication about both of their concerns and questions, they were able to navigate Sky's transition and their bodily changes together without significant issues. This means that in

contrast to Schilt et al.'s argument, genitalia, or the body more generally, or even gender, did not factor into Allison's attraction to Sky; though Schilt et al. based their argument on cisgender heterosexual subjects' possible attraction to transgender people, it could be argued that the body might not matter in attraction as much as their research points out (Schilt et al. 2009: 460-461). On the other hand, as Sky also argued, Allison's bisexuality might also play a role in this; whereas within a heterosexual context the 'stakes' are high – particularly for heterosexual men as their sexual identity and their standing as 'real men' "is threatened by the one-act rule of homosexuality" – and thus the body does matter (in a sense that normative heterosexuality is based around normative 'sex' categories), for (bisexual) women there is no similar threat to their sexual and/or gender identity (Schilt et al. 2009: 460; Butler 1993: 17). Thus, changes in Sky's personal and/or social identification, as well as their body, in that sense have less social – or personal – impact on Allison, particularly because she had already claimed a 'queer' identity. Furthermore, from this case it can be gathered that while according to Schilt et al. social norms – in particular heteronormativity – largely dictate (sexual) interactions between cisgender and transgender people, in this case it is actually disidentification that dictates these interactions, as Allison and the majority of the cisgender partners more generally shaped their identification in order to fit their partner rather than having norms dictate their desire.

In contrast to this example, one of the other couples walked a bumpier road navigating transition while being in a relationship. When asked about how she experienced Lenny's transition, Dana replied:

Dana: I found it very intense, very intense, I would not do it [dating someone in transition] again […]. We had been friends for quite some time already so I've fallen in love with the female version you know fine in my head it all sounded like "it wouldn't be a big deal, it's doable, a surgery like that, what does it all even matter," but when it came down to it, full panic mode because hey what happens after a surgery like that, yeah it changes, I totally hadn't stopped and considered that in terms of: "but what if everything's taken off and I don't like you anymore," because that *can* happen, and he was like yeah so much fun, so much fun, and I was there crying in a corner in the hotel room like I don't want it I don't want it, the day before [surgery]. […] Nice that it all went so fast for you because in 8-9 months you went through your entire transition, you were on hormones, you were simply a man you know, all of those sorts of things, you got the ball rolling and I was just walking along with you like "yeah hey fun I've just entered a new relationship how fun nice that I am here too you know."

Lenny: Yeah we didn't talk about that very much at the time (k).

Continuing from there, she further explained that during that time in the relationship the focus laid very much on Lenny and his transition, how he was feeling and his stance on the matter, which caused Dana and her feelings, and how she experienced all of the changes they went through together, to fall into the background. Though she saw that these changes coming from testosterone and top surgery were making Lenny happier and more confident as a person, Dana had a hard time because the changes were coming rather fast and they did not talk about how Dana experienced these changes. This means that in contrast to the other participants, for Dana her partner's changing body posed a bigger challenge relating to her desire for him. This makes sense, as he masculinized his body through hormones and surgery, and with that was technically not 'in line' anymore with her orientation toward 'feminine' bodies (Ahmed 2006: 67). However, in the end her desire for her partner as a person came before her identification as a woman loving women; she disidentified with the term 'lesbian' in that sense, not fully doing away with it, but working with it in order to make sense of and create space for her desire for her partner (Muñoz 1999: 31). In other words, though bodies do influence desire, they are not solely determinant of it.

Furthermore, in contrast to the case of Allison and Sky, this example illustrates a concern that some of the transgender partners in other couples had: that their transition would "take up too much space" within the relationship (Ward 2010: 79). Though a relationship consists of two (or more) partners, it can occur that the focus lays on one of the partners, which can happen in any relationship wherein one partner is going through a big life event. According to Ward, the particular support and affirmation provided by a partner – specifically within femme-FTM relationships – should be understood as a specific form of emotional labour, which is described as "the affective and bodily efforts invested in giving gender to others or actively suspending self-focus in the service of helping others achieve the varied forms of gender recognition they long for" (ibid.). Through these praxes of intimate labour, wherein the partner of a transgender person works to affirm their partner's gender, the cisgender partner actually works to contribute to the constitution of their gender itself (Ward 2010: 79-81; Thomeer et al. 2020: 223). Though in the case of Lenny and Dana the term labour might be accurate, as Dana's experiences could be understood as labour, since it definitely took a toll on her and a "suspension of self-focus" took place, for the other couples a more equal affective exchange took place during and 'after' transition. This means that both the cis partner and the trans partner, though in different ways, emotionally (and sometimes physically) took care of each other. This is in contrast with cisgender-heterosexual romantic relationships, wherein it is (mostly) women who perform care labour, which is representative of the inequalities produced by heteronormativity and patriarchal culture (Thomeer et al. 2020: 222; Scarborough et al. 2019: 176). Furthermore, as "not just personal experiences of gender," but also the interaction between the two partners' gendered

experiences, shape each other's gender and the dynamics within the relationship, it makes sense that within non-heteronormative and non-cisnormative relationships, the relationship dynamics follow a less heteronormative script (which could be described as queer kinship) (Thomeer et al. 2020: 224-225; Nicolazzo et al. 2017: 305; Rubin 2011: 41). One example of this queer kinship dynamic that multiple trans partners mentioned is the fact that they were very careful not to take up too much space in the relationship. As Sky explained when discussing the effects of going through their transition within their relationship, they were concerned with:

> Doesn't it take up too much of the relationship in terms of that you often think of "but I shouldn't talk about it too much because then it might be only about that thing" or something, that you talk about, or it becomes too big of a thing, so that is something that I was very aware of, that my transition would not become too big of a topic [within the relationship] that you simply can't ignore (Sky) (l).

Relatedly, they, as well as most of the other couples, had (many) conversations about how the cis partner was feeling, how they were experiencing the transition, concerns they might have, and how they could navigate everything together. In that sense, taking care of each other and each other's needs was a topic that often came up during the interviews.

In relation to mutually navigating identity and bodily changes, there is another story that one of the couples shared that is worth highlighting. At some point during the interview, Riley mentioned that they, to their surprise, found that a significant amount of people were open to dating a non-binary person, and had no issue with them being non-binary. Responding to this statement, Kylie argued that though this might be true, many people underestimate what it is like to be with a non-binary, or transitioning person; what it entails, what issues one might encounter, and what impact being trans can have on a person's day-to-day life. For example, Riley expressed that showering together posed a problem at the beginning of the relationship; they explained that they are not happy with their body, and that they want their partner to see them as masculine as they feel that they are. Because they have not started their medical transition yet, they felt as though they still looked like a woman in terms of their body, and that therefore their partner seeing their body would result in her seeing them as "too much like a woman," especially because as they argued, at that point their gender expression fully depended on their clothing. In asking how they navigated situations like these, Kylie explained:

> Look, I just found that, I wanted to convince Riley like "I accept you the way you are otherwise I wouldn't have been here," and I refuse […] that someone will not shower, even though they would really like to, because they feel too insecure about their body, I just refuse to let that

slide, so then I just think "what are we going to do? Do I have to wear a blindfold, so I will shower blindfolded?," fine, and in the end we did actually turn off the lights and just lit a candle (Kylie) (m).

The manner in which Kylie handled this situation is particularly illustrative of the way in which 'care labour' contributes to the co-construction of gender. As gender is always already an ideal rather than a fact of nature, its 'upkeep' is often in need of some sorts of acts of affirmation (Ward 2010: 81). As Riley here in a sense feared 'failing' doing their gender, and 'being read' as a gender that is not their own, Kylie resolved this issue by attending to their specific, gendered needs in a way that affirmed both her partner's gender as well as her attraction to them (Ward 2010: 80-81). Herein, Kylie did not 'give' Riley their gender, but did co-construct it with them, in a sense that they were able to de-centre the body and its normative social meanings in identity formation (Malatino 2020: 35; Butler 1993: x-xi). This can be interpreted as a mutual or 'collective' form disidentification or "doing gender differently," as both partners took the normative meanings assigned to specific bodies and reworked them to fit their gender identity, and decentred the body while the body is often taken as the sole determinant of gender within normative society (Bey 2019: 80-82; Muñoz 1999: 31; Butler 1993: 1).

More generally, when discussing cis-trans relationships, literature such as Ward points to the hardships, struggles, and difficult situations that a trans person's transition presents within such a relationship, specifically for the cisgender partner (Ward 2010). However, though these topics did arise during the interviews, because I asked about them, it became clear that aside from encountering some hurdles – which is not necessarily trans- or transition-specific – it was actually (as previously mentioned) the co-constitution of gender/sex/sexuality and queer kinship dynamics that were central to their relationship and the role of gender herein. For instance, Brandon and Gary agreed that Brandon's transition did not impact the relationship, and next to 'being down to earth,' attributed their experiences with his transition being this 'smooth' to all of the changes occurring gradually, and being together every step of the way. This again signals the relational, co-constructive dynamic of gender/sex/sexuality: because they went through the transition process together, they were also able to navigate changes in 'identity' and the body together, and actually mutually shape their self-understandings, which also included processes of disidentification in that Gary does not identify as a man who is attracted to men, even though he is in a relationship with a man and is often read as 'gay' (Thomeer 2020: 224; Muñoz 1999: 31). The other couples – except Lenny and Dana – carried similar sentiments, arguing that the physical changes due to medical transition were not that difficult to deal with as the partners would be there with them (almost) every day, which arguably makes it easier to get used to the changes that are occurring. Comparing this to Lenny and Dana's story, it seems that the matter of "pace" is an important factor in experiencing these changes together, wherein especially

for the cis partners it is important that changes do not happen at too fast of a pace wherein they are not able to keep up. This means that for the trans partners, taking care of their partners also means involving their partners in the transitioning process, taking them by the hand and guiding them along the way so they know what will happen and can slowly get used to the changes, letting them know that they have support and do not have to go through the process alone, just like the trans partner who also gets this support.

To summarise, a lot of the couples have navigated their relationships and the trans partner's transition in a way that they mostly worried about not losing their partner and staying together rather than the transition and changes it would bring about itself. This was mostly due to their ability to navigate any changes together, through which they were able to co-constitute their gender/sex/sexuality – through specific processes of identification and disidentification – in a way that made them able to make sense of their changing identities and bodies together. Moreover, a lot of the cis partners did not care about the bodily and/or gendered changes of their partner, and most partners did not have much difficulty adjusting to the changes as they were there when they were happening. The partners have fallen for their partner as a human being, rather than necessarily a gendered human being, though their attraction and identification of it did often involve processes of disidentification to 'make it fit' their 'new' situation. Though gender is always present within these relationships, the way in which it is present varies, as well as its importance within particular contexts/situations (which will be discussed further in chapter 2). As one of the research participants suggested, gender categories, meaning the way that they are known by other people (or become intelligible within the perception of other people) is exactly related to this being known by other people; they do not necessarily want to identify through these categories, but use them for other people to understand them, even though these categories can never capture the fluidity, non-staticity, and specificity of their gendered experience. In other words, gender does not necessarily matter for individuals – though for some it does – but because people cannot separate themselves from the social context they are present in, in relation to other people and in relation to particular sets of norms they *become* or *are made* gendered, or *have to* gender themselves in order to be culturally/socially intelligible (Butler 1993: xi-xii, 3; Deaux 2012: 206).

While this chapter focused more on the personal, 'private,' relational aspects of the constitution of 'identity' and the influence of navigating transition together on the relationship dynamics, next chapter will focus more on the particular influence of social norms/normativity in navigating and shaping 'identity.' Specifically, it will discuss issues of social norms/normativity in relation to age gaps and media representation, and how these are entwined with the processes identification and disidentification of particularly the transgender interviewees.

## Chapter 2: "We leven in een hokjessamenleving": being queer* in the Netherlands and the impact of media representation

When preparing the interviews, next to the more personal questions about their relationship and their bonds with family and friends, I had also prepared a few questions about the context of the Netherlands more generally. Initially these questions were meant to gather information to be able to contextualise the answers of the participants a little bit, and would have probably been contained into one paragraph included in the introduction. However, during the interviews these questions brought up answers and stories from which could be gathered that living in the Netherlands, the particular culture, and the specific social issues that are present in the Netherlands, especially regarding LGBTQ+ issues, were much more central to and present within the couples' lives than initially thought. Therefore, this chapter will discuss the couples' social lives within the social context of the Netherlands, with a particular focus on gender/sex/sexuality. Specifically, building mainly on Muñoz (1999), Butler (1988; 1993), Glover (2016), Enke (2013), and Deaux (2012), it will argue that these cisgender-transgender couples' co-construction and navigation of gender/sex/sexuality is – next to being relational in the sense of their relationship to each other – ingrained within and influenced by broader socio-cultural norms. Furthermore, by means of the participants' observations, it will illustrate some of the social forces that are of influence in shaping these socio-cultural norms and views on gender/sex/sexuality.

### Gendered social interactions within a "hokjesmaatschappij"

For some it might be more noticeable than others, but through the interviewees' stories, especially the trans participants' stories, it became clear that people's social interactions in their daily lives are highly gendered. Much has been written on the social life and social construction of gender, but this knowledge is not that widely available and accessible outside of academia (though through social media these types of knowledge are slowly spreading to 'mainstream society') (Ásta 2018; De Beauvoir 2010; Butler 1988, 1990, 1993, 2004; Bey 2019; Enke 2013; Fajardo 2014; Lugones 2010, 2017; Schilt et al. 2009, 2014; Valentine 2007). Because of this lack of diversity in 'mainstream' knowledge about gender, the majority of people have a knowledge of gender that is based on, and usually limited to, what they learned in high school in biology class. Thinking from within this framework, this means that gender is often equated to 'biological sex,' wherein there are only two options, namely "male" and "female" (García Selgas 2014; Laqueur 1992; Lugones 2017; Schilt et al. 2009; Rubin 1999; Butler 1993). Because this is generally the way people think about gender, gender non-normative people – especially people living outside of the normative gender binary – can

sometimes encounter difficulties or hurdles in their daily lives, in relation to which they have to continually navigate and negotiate their gender. For instance, Sky and Allison described a few of the issues Sky encounters in their daily life when it comes to living as a non-binary person:

> Allison: […] when we were going to that [COVID-19] test street, I found that very typical, we were sitting in the car and we were both wearing a mask and someone says to Sky: "here you go ma'am," Sky hadn't said anything, it was literally just based on this [the upper half of their face] […], Sky was like where did you get this idea you know, why do you say ma'am.
>
> Sky: On top of that I was also the one behind the wheel.
>
> Allison: Yes.
>
> Sky: And you were looking very femme.
>
> Allison: Yes.
>
> Sky: So actually in every other, in 9 out of 10 situations we would much sooner be read as a hetero, cis hetero couple […].
>
> Allison: […] It's just because you're not a man you know so at the very moment when someone reads you as 'not-male' there is one other option, namely, 'female' (n).

This particular example is not only illustrative of the fact that much of society is based around the binary gender system, but also that reading and being read are big factors in how people are treated within society, rather than their actual gender (Tudor 2017: 22). This means that especially for people who are non-binary, as well as gender-nonconforming people, as Sky states themselves: "when you don't say anything you're always addressed in the wrong way," which is because society is based upon a binary gender system and therefore people do not even consider the possibility of someone being non-binary, and therefore everyone is read as and with that addressed as either female or male (o). For binary transgender people, this is often an issue to a lesser extent. In other words, this is where the issue of 'passing' comes into play. Binary transgender people have the ability to pass (which in this case means being read as the gender they actually are), if they have access to the necessary medical treatments, and with that are often, though not always, able to 'blend into' normative society (Tudor 2017: 23; Aizura 2018: 5-6). In the Netherlands specifically, this is also because gender-affirming medical care is usually fully covered by the basic type of insurance that everyone is required to have. On the other hand, the Dutch trans medical system is based on very specific ideas of what a transgender person should be, look like, and what their 'life story' is, and because transgender medical care is still widely monopolized in the Netherlands by the VU medical centre, transgender people do

not really have a choice but to adhere to these specific medicalized narratives. Referring back to a statement from chapter 1 that Brandon made, you have no choice but to form a specific narrative and gender identity when seeking to medically transition, because otherwise you are either rejected or your process will be slowed down (Aizura 2018: 5-6; Spade 2003: 24). A specific example Brandon gave of this is:

> "Just like that friend of mine who got rejected at the VU to get his hormone treatment because he had a pink phone case and if you were a real man you wouldn't have a pink phone case so just like that six more months added to his waiting time at the VU" (Brandon) (p).

In other words, not only does this trans medical system largely cater to binary transgender people – which also makes some non-binary people hide that they are non-binary instead of a binary transgender person at the VU – but additionally, it adheres to very specific ideas of what a man or a woman should be, based on very traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Moreover, this means that 'passing' is not a personal choice, not only because it rests upon the perception of others (which in turn is dictated by very specific bodily norms, which are not just gendered but also racialized and related to ability), but also because it is more of a requirement dictated by medical institutions (Aizura 2018: 5-6; Spade 2003: 18-19; Tudor 2017: 24). In terms of performing and relating to their gender then, for transgender people this means that they often measure their 'transness' against these normative standards and narratives, which creates ideas of the ability to be 'trans enough' or 'not trans enough' (Enke 2013: 66; Aizura 2018: 6; Spade 2003: 20). In other words, when the gender binary enters medical institutions that provide transgender medical care, a system of transnormativity is created and sustained that forces cisgender norms upon transgender people. In practice, this means that many transgender people attempt to or desire to 'pass' and live up to these standards, and actively identify with them, because they are told they should in order to be 'trans enough,' to avoid social stigma, or because they want to be 'normal' (Spade 2003: 21; McRuer 2006: 90).

To return to Sky's experience, it becomes clear that non-binary people are not able to 'pass' or be read consistently as their gender, specifically because people are always read through a cisnormative framework of sex/gender (Tudor 2014: 24). Tudor explains this type of reading/passing as "as that of a transing person who passes as unambiguously gendered in situations that request the performance of (one side of) binary gendering (and who often fails)" (ibid.). Concretely, this means that a non-binary person is read through a cisnormative, binary gender framework, and is therefore (almost) always "misread" (ibid.). In the case of Sky, this did not influence their gender performance, as they do not have the desire too pass as 'male' or 'female.' However, it did influence how they relate to their gender: firstly, in the sense that constantly being misread in social situations caused

exhaustion and frustration, and additionally, because the existence of non-binary people is not a widely known nor accepted fact, their gender is not only a type of personal identity, but also automatically an activist and 'educational' position. This means that living as a non-binary person and taking up that space to be themselves is met with many questions and people debating their existence, thus them having to defend non-binary existence as a whole and educating people on it in order to be 'read' and addressed correctly.

In relation to medical institutions, Brandon provided another experience he had together with his partner, that is exemplary of how medical institutions are entangled with societal norms and biases regarding gender and sexuality. When discussing the fact that they are often read/labelled as gay because they are two men in a relationship together, and the negative consequences this can have – such as being associated with certain stereotypes that they do not fit in or relate to – they brought up their experiences with the blood bank.

Brandon: At the blood bank it [being labelled as gay] was bothersome.

Gary: Yes.

Brandon: Gary was always allowed to donate blood but then I got a different letter in my passport and thereupon it wasn't allowed anymore because suddenly we were dirty and gay but then you argued with them and then it was allowed.

Gary: Yes I just explained the situation to the doctor and then it was like oh yeah sure for this once you're allowed to but we're putting an annotation in your file that you have to visit the doctor every time to discuss it and this last time I had a different doctor and they said "I'm going to remove this annotation because it is nonsense" so now I can donate blood again as a 'normal' person.

Brandon: Congratulations! You're normal!

Gary: I've won back one hetero privilege.

Brandon: Yes after you seriously had to out me five times and that doctor started staring at me every time as if I was a fucking alien, but I think that was the most bothersome thing you've had to go through [for being read as gay] (q).

This experience exemplifies the (problematic) entanglements between medical institutions and their rules and regulations, and gender and sexuality, particularly the societal norms and biases linked to them. This particular situation can be argued to find its legacy in the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, and the stigma resulting from it that people read as gay still carry – during which black and/or

gay men were disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS – upon which these regulations for blood donation are still based (Kelliher 2014: 250; Kroeger 2003: 246-247).[9] Specifically, these regulations are based around the idea that (and research that suggests that) men who have sex with men have a high chance of having HIV/AIDS – thus constructing the category 'gay men' and generalising this group – rather than looking at people and their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS case by case, based on their sexual behaviour (Waarlo 2021). Furthermore, this situation is entangled with gender, and more specifically institutions of gender, as only when Brandon changed his gender marker in his passport did this issue arise, while nothing else changed about their already existing relationship, meaning that regulations like these are based around social categories and assumptions based on these (such as assumptions surrounding 'biological sex' and gender), rather than the actual people and bodies they involve (Deaux 2012: 205). This means that within institutions like these, institutionalised gender/sex/sexuality norms construct people in ways that might not relate to their self-identifications, and with that people having to renegotiate their gender/sex/sexuality in relation to this. Herein, processes of disidentification were required, disidentifying with normative formations of gender in relation to the body, reshaping these institutional categories to include their lived realities (Muñoz 1999: 30; Butler 1993: 1, 4).

In addition, these examples demonstrate another issue that was raised by the interviewees, which is that the Netherlands is very much a "hokjesmaatschappij," which is a Dutch word referring to the persistent tendency within Dutch society at large to put people in boxes. For instance, this point was made by Nolan and Tobias; they expressed that they do not assign labels to people or make assumptions about people's identities, based on appearance for example, and would rather ask people how they identify themselves. When asked if more people thought about identity in this way, Nolan said:

> Yes, but by far not everyone, I think people are very quick to attach labels to others themselves, and I actually think that mainly people who've been in contact with it themselves or themselves belong to the LGBT+ community that they more regularly would think like "labels aren't everything" and if people want labels let them decide for themselves, while the cishet community has that tendency way less, that they are more inclined to be like "I see two men walking hand-in-hand, they are gay" (Nolan) (r).

This manner of thinking and assigning labels to people makes sense as categories like these generally exist to make sense of the world and the people in it, including one's own position (Deaux 2012: 205).

---

[9] According to these institutions, men who have sex with men have a higher risk of getting infected with hepatitis B or HIV, and therefore regulations are in place that prohibit or impede 'gay' men from donating blood (Waarlo 2021).

However, this does not mean that categories and labels are neutral and simply observational; categories are also used to "make judgements about other people in their environment," which can underlie (harmful) stereotypes, and which are often – if not always – oversimplifications (hence the necessity for intersectionality) (Deaux 2012: 206-208). The fact that labels underlie many stereotypes and assumptions about people, and their refusal of labels more generally, then explains why Nolan and Tobias prefer to ask people how they identify.

Moreover, Tobias said that the tendency to label people also comes from people growing up within a 'label society,' and with that growing up with this tendency to label everything. This cultural phenomenon particularly impacts LGBTQ+ people, as they are usually the ones who are labelled, which is because the norm is often left undefined and is usually not a topic of debate about as it is "just normal" (Enke 2013; Bey 2019; McRuer 2006). In other words, this culture based around the desire to 'know' and 'understand' people (through labels), almost creates a necessity for LGBTQ+ people to either actively identify or disidentify through a particular label, which in a sense restricts people's possibilities of *being* (Philogène 2012: 32; Muñoz 1999: 4; Bey 2019: 67, 81). Another consequence this thinking in narrow boxes thus has, is that there is not much room for fluidity or leaving oneself undefined (though more and more people seem to identify as queer, which is exactly a label signifying undefinition and fluidity) (Bey 2019; Van Erp 2021). For instance, Allison expressed this in relation to sexuality, particularly regarding the journey she had in exploring her own sexuality. When asked about what she thought of the general view of sexuality in the Netherlands and the visibility of bisexuality, she explained:

> In my view people enormously think in boxes, so also at the moment when, as a lesbian or as gay, so still as monosexual, so for one gender, you are really forced into this one box you know, you come out of the closet and simultaneously step into another one, it's very strict and safe and there is no room for exploration and a spectrum actually (Allison) (s).

Continuing from there, she explained that because of this binary, 'boxed' thinking, it took her a very long time for her to realise that she is bisexual; she argued that there is no room for bisexuality to exist or for visibility of it, to which Sky added that she actually had to come out more often because of this. In other words, these types of labels and types of thinking restrict the possibilities of being for many people in a sense, because people are expected to fit into neat, binary boxes (Enke 2013: 74). Specifically, this case relates to questions of normativity; in Allison's case, what she describes as monosexuality, relates to the system of heteronormativity – as well as homonormativity – that upholds a binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality, as well as a binary that places men in opposition to women and is based around an 'either-or' principle (i.e. monosexuality) (Barker 2014:

858; Schilt et al. 2009: 441, 443; Stryker 2008: 146-147). Indeed, since society at large is built around this system of heteronormativity, the existence of bisexuality can technically not exist, specifically because these binaries are artificially upheld (though in reality, these norms are constantly transgressed) (Enke 2013: 74). In other words, non-binary existence or bisexuality, among other 'identities,' are often not considered as being in the realm of possibility, and with that frequently face erasure and lack in visibility. Because of this, people who fall inside these categories have to 'come out' within social interactions more frequently for people to address them in the right way or to properly understand their situation (Deaux 2012: 208). Put differently, because of these culturally dominant types of thinking within the Netherlands, people with non-normative 'identities' constantly have to negotiate, define and almost defend their 'identities' in relation to other people and their socio-cultural context (ibid.; Muñoz 1999: 4; Fajardo 2014: 126; Abelson 2014: 551). Though having to navigate one's identity in relation to social identity categories and social norms is not specific to the Netherlands, this phenomenon could be observed as a central aspect of the participants' navigation of their identities, as well as being seen by the participants as being central to Dutch culture (Deaux 2012).

## Generational gaps and media representation

In relation to these aforementioned normative, binary ideas about gender/sex/sexuality, every couple brought up the observation of a generational gap in relation to the acceptance of, in contrast to the aversion toward, transgender people. Concretely, they argued that in the Netherlands "the older generation," by which they usually meant people in their late thirties or early forties and upwards, is very much behind in the acceptance of transgender people compared to 'today's youth,' and especially the 'TikTok generation,' meaning Gen Z. This generational gap in terms of transgender acceptance, and in particular the acknowledgement of the existence of and acceptance of non-binary people, was, by everyone, linked to "onwetendheid," which is a Dutch word meaning "ignorance," i.e. "a lack of knowledge, education or awareness."[10] This means that 'the older generation' is associated with 'backwardness' and a lack of acceptance of transgender people and more generally the LGBTQ+ community, while younger generations are seen as more open-minded and with that have a bigger change of being accepting toward LGBTQ+ people. In other words, the participants noted a clear boundary between 'older generations' and 'younger generations,' wherein older generations are more likely to reinforce traditional gender/sex/sexuality norms and labels attached to these, whereas

---

[10] 'Ignorance' *Merriam-Webster* https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ignorance, consulted on 18th of June 2021.

younger generations are argued to be more open to 'doing gender/sex/sexuality' differently (Enke 2013: 74; Deaux 2012: 205; Bey 2019). This generational gap in acceptance was attributed to two particular (social) factors: firstly, it is attributed to differences between generations themselves, meaning that older generations grew up in a 'different world' than people grow up in today. For example, Tobias mentioned that only around 2010 did gay people's existence gain more mainstream visibility, and with that slowly started to get normalized and accepted (which is a further development of earlier LGBT movements that were legitimised by the EU, making 'gay acceptance' into a European norm) (Ayoub 2016: 22, 29; D'Emilio 1983: 468). This means that before this time, gay people, and even much less so transgender people, were visible within society, since (media) representation is crucial in introducing "new kinds of knowledges in the world, new kinds of subjectivities are explored, and new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operation" (Glover 2016: 340). With that, people growing up before that time came in touch with gay people (mostly through media) less than people do now, and therefore might not have thought about gay existence much, if at all. Furthermore, older generations have lived through the AIDS crisis, which left a significant stigma on gay people, and with that contributed to how people from this generation view(ed) gay people (Kelliher 2014: 250; Kroeger 2003: 246-247). Moreover, currently society is changing quite rapidly in terms of views on gender, and while this is seen as relatively 'normal' for today's generation, older generations might argue that 'back in their day' these phenomena did not exist.

The second factor, which was also the factor that the interviewees discussed rather extensively, and which is directly linked to the first factor, is the factor of media representation and the presence of transgender, and more generally LGBTQ+, people in media. The difference in generations and their views on gender and sexual diversity was directly linked by the interviewees to media representation, and more specifically to representation on Dutch TV, as well as on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. However, there were mixed views on the correlation between trans- and LGBTQ+-acceptance and media representation, as some argued that the visibility of particularly non-binary people had a positive impact while others argued that trans representations particularly in Dutch mainstream media had a negative impact. One particular Dutch TV show that was mentioned by many of the participants, and that has become somewhat of a cultural phenomenon, is the reality TV show by the name of "Hij is een Zij," which translates into "He is a She." The description of the TV show on the website of the broadcaster, NPO, reads:

Young transgenders are followed for one year. The programme shows what it is like to have been born in the wrong body. What do they have to go through to become who they are?[11]

Concretely, the series follows around six transgender people for one year, and documents the steps in their medical transition that they are taking during that time. Some of the interviewees discussed the TV show and the impact it has had on their lives in a positive manner; for instance, when discussing the influence of media on acceptance and visibility and asking if they could give a specific example of media that influenced them personally, Nolan answered:

Yes for sure, like I mentioned before "Hij is een Zij" has been quite important to me in that way, when Mick was in one of the seasons who is also non-binary, it's just the fact that there are more people like me, that you're not weird or alone, that's definitely made a big difference for me yeah (Nolan) (t).

In other words, for Nolan this form of representation contributed to their identification, in that representation constitutes the 'object' it talks about (Glover 2016: 341). Furthermore, Lenny and Dana mentioned that people who have seen this show might have a bit more knowledge about transgender people than people who have not seen it, which again signals the 'educational' function of representation (Glover 2016: 340). In other words, the show can be seen to have a positive impact in terms of representation, seeing oneself reflected on screen, as well as creating mainstream visibility and having people encounter transgender people through the screen who would otherwise not encounter them. This can be not only affirmative, but actually can contribute to how subjects shape their identity, as representation has the ability to introduce people to ways of being that they might not have known about due to the influence of systems of normativity (ibid.; Butler 1988; Abelson 2015; Enke 2013).

However, though "Hij is een Zij" can be argued to have a positive impact on the Dutch transgender community and trans acceptance, there were also some critical reflections made upon the series. For instance, when discussing trans representation within Dutch society at large, Brandon and Gary explained the following:

Gary: [...] [media representation] often focuses on either the sexual side or the medical side and struggles.

Brandon: Yeah that sucks, only suffering.

Gary: So, and about how they're not accepted and those sorts of things.

---

[11] 'Hij is een Zij' *NPO* https://www.npostart.nl/hij-is-een-zij/KN_1676940, consulted on 20th of June 2021.

Brandon: Yes it's only the suffering that's widely reported for instance you've got programme's such as "Hij is een Zij" but those only want to 'go into business' with you at the moment when you're about to get surgery, otherwise they don't want to do anything with you (u).

He then went on to mention that this caused quite the controversy within the social media group that I found the interviewees from; he explained that when someone applies for the show to participate in it they are pushed to adhere to a particular narrative; they always want to include a trans person's old name and old photographs, and are eager to film you when you are about to get surgery or, as a trans man, are trying to get pregnant. In the social media group several people had opened up about their experience with the show, explaining that they had applied to participate in it but were turned down because they were not getting any surgeries yet or were already 'done' with their medical transition. In other words, if a trans person is not taking any sorts of medical steps within their transition, they will not be included in the TV show. Brandon and Gary, as well as Lenny and Dana, were therefore critical of the show. Particularly Brandon argued that the series contributes to the medicalisation of trans existence and the medicalised views the general public has on transgender people. Specifically, he explained that when this type of representation is the only representation people see of transgender people, which is highly focused on medical transition and trans people's bodies, people will think that it is acceptable to ask transgender people (invasive) questions about their bodies.

Regarding this particular TV show, and LGBTQ+ media representation more generally (according to the interviewees), it thus becomes clear that though these forms of representation can be educational and positive, especially when they represent people who are socially 'invisible,' media representation can also reinforce narratives that generalise 'groups' in such a way that "the complexity that exists among those who share a similar subjectivity" is diminished (Glover 2016: 340-341). Specifically regarding "Hij is een Zij," transness is framed solely around medical narratives and bodily changes, particularly constructing transgender people's narratives around the 'born in the wrong body' narrative, which oftentimes reinforces the gender binary (Spade 2003: 24; Tudor 2017: 24; Aizura 2018: 5-6; Bettcher 2014: 384). With that, transness is reduced to a singular narrative revolving around people's bodies and medical interventions, and with that many other ways of being trans are made invisible. This also influences how transgender people navigate their own gender; particularly regarding non-binary transgender people, if this type of representation is the only one they see, this might force them into the gender binary, or make them think they are not 'trans enough' (Bettcher 2014: 385). In other words, while representation provides possibilities for identification, as well as disidentification, a lack of representation or a lack of diversity of experiences

therein can have limiting effects of processes of identification and disidentification as it reinforces in this case transnormativity (Glover 2016: 340-341, 343; Bettcher 2014: 385)

As Allison also explained more generally about the questions she got asked about her partner, when people find out that someone or their partner is transgender, it often becomes a topic of conversation wherein people ask very personal questions. Moreover, as Allison argued, herein people do not feel as though they are crossing certain boundaries, and with that throw out any type of basic social etiquette. In other words, these types of representation wherein the focus lies heavily on transgender people's bodies and medical interventions such as surgeries and hormone treatments, this might result in the general public viewing transgender people through this transnormative, medicalised lens, and makes them feel as though it is okay to ask these personal questions about transgender people's bodies that would otherwise be regarded as invasive and inappropriate (Glover 2016: 340-341, 344; Spade 2003: 24; Tudor 2017: 24; Aizura 2018: 5-6; Bettcher 2014: 384). Moreover, in the case of Sky and Allison, people seem to feel particularly inclined to ask these types of questions, as non-binary existence is underrepresented in media, and therefore people want to 'understand them' and want to know 'what they are' (because non-binary people fall outside of the gender binary, thus being outside of the realm of cultural intelligibility) (Glover 2016: 340, 344; Bettcher 2014: 384; Butler 1993: xi; Bey 2019: 72).

In relation to mainstream media, other interviewees gave several other examples, such as an episode of a Dutch documentary series about "detransitioners" (wherein which the few people who were depicted in the episode were not representative of the transgender community and had underlying mental issues) and a quiz show wherein they made a question about NikkieTutorials, asking about her deadname.[12] Furthermore, several of the interviewees pointed out that in the media in general, depictions of non-binary people are both scarce and oftentimes "belittling and ridiculing," which as Sky mentioned, does not help with improving the situation for non-binary people, which can be attributed to trans media representation generally being transnormative (Glover 2016: 344). Particularly, when transgender people are represented in the media, for instance when transgender people are mentioned in the news, this often happens in a sensationalizing manner or in a way that people's transness is specifically highlighted. Regarding this issue, and the influence of representation of transgender people on acceptance, Kylie for example explained that

---

[12] "Deadname" is a term often used within the trans community, which refers to the name they were given at birth.

Kylie: I've said this to Riley a few times, I'm very much of the opinion of "drop a seed and water it every once in a while," and let people think about it for themselves, but at the moment when you're pushing it down people's throats you can expect resistance [...]

Riley: Yeah you mostly mean that it can have the opposite effect when you keep insisting on it that people will start to grow a dislike for it (v).

They went on to argue that for example when a product is created such as rainbow "muisjes,"[13] next to the blue and pink ones that already exist, it is no big deal in itself, but once it gets specifically marketed as "now there are also 'muisjes' for trans people!," a specific distinction is made between transgender people and 'normal people,' which represents transgender people as this special, distinct group, which in turn causes conflict (usually in comment sections on news websites or social media pages) because it gets represented as something that transgender people specifically asked for which makes the general public think that transgender people want 'special treatment' (Goldberg-Hiller et al. 2003: 1076). Some argued that this is also the case with the introduction of specifically non-binary characters in Dutch TV shows, wherein instead of letting the non-binary be introduced as any other person, they are specifically introduced as "now there's also a non-binary person," while as Riley and Kylie argued, it would be better if either everyone's gender got named, or nobody's at all, in order to normalize non-binary representation and existence. In other words, media representation can often be harmful to transgender people, as gender is only specifically mentioned when it involves transgender people, and with that making it seem like 'special treatment,' which in turn causes resistance, especially within older generations as those are the ones often targeted by news articles like these (Goldberg-Hiller et al. 2003: 1076). These views also impede non-binary people's ability to live openly as themselves, as living openly outside of cultural norms is met with people holding one accountable to these norms and sanctioning this 'crossing over' them, meaning that non-binary (and 'non-normative' LGBTQ+ people in general) have to constantly renegotiate their identity in relation to the reinforcement of norms (Abelson 2014: 551; Butler 1988: 522; Foucault 1995: 202-203).

In contrast to these negative impacts caused by mainstream media representation of transgender people, some interviewees also mentioned some positive aspects of media representation, particularly in relation to social media and the younger generations that are active on these platforms. For instance, two of the couples mentioned TikTok as a positive influence on today's youth in terms of representation of transgender and specifically non-binary people, and with that the

---

[13] In the Netherlands a tradition exists wherein when a baby is born people will eat a biscuit with sprinkles on them made from anise seeds which are called "muisjes", which are typically either blue and white or pink and white, meaning that if a person assigned female is born they will typically eat a biscuit with pink "muisjes" and if a person assigned male is born they will eat blue "muisjes."

normalization of trans existence, which, as previously discussed, is one of the effects of media representation of underrepresented 'groups' (Glover 2016). This is because on TikTok transgender people, binary and non-binary, are able to create their own platform to speak from, and with that have the ability to shape how they are represented and understood. In other words, whereas more traditional forms of media are seen to reinforce transnormative transgender narratives, these newer forms of media create new possibilities for representation (Glover 2016: 344). With that, from the lens that Bey provides, it could be argued that coalitional praxes of doing gender differently are taking place on these platforms – as they are public acts of subversion and self-representation in terms of identification – that open up space for identifications outside of normativity (Bey 2019: 62-63, 80-81). Moreover, it was mentioned that children nowadays hear and see much more of transgender and more generally LGBTQ+ people in all their diversity because of these social media platforms like TikTok, which contributes to the normalization of the existence of people outside of the general cis-hetero-norm that is still ingrained within society (Enke 2013; Bey 2019). These types of representation also contribute to LGBTQ+ people being affirmed in their being more than before, as they are able to see people like them in an increasing manner (Bey 2019: 63, 81; Glover 2016: 340). For instance, Kylie, who works at a high school, mentioned that she is seeing more kids living openly as trans or queer, and with that it seems as though within younger generations it is increasingly getting accepted that some people are LGBTQ+. More generally, most of the couples mentioned social media and LGBTQ+ representation of social media platforms in some way in relation to younger generations being/becoming more accepting of LGBTQ+ people than older generations.

To put it concisely, it seems that media representation is both limiting as well as enriching when it comes to processes of identification and disidentification, and being transgender, in the Netherlands. When done 'badly,' media representation of transgender people can give a very limited, narrow-minded view of trans existence, often presenting transgender people's lives as solely revolving around their bodies, wherein particularly the "born in the wrong body" narrative gets pushed to the forefront. As Brandon said, as a trans person you are often working hard to counter being defined by your body, "I am not my body, I am not defined by this box," while in contrast this is all people tend to focus on, which these types of medicalised representations contribute to. Since these types of representations often target 'older generations,' as Sky put it, "the people who make the rules," for example in regards to customer service etiquette, these representations can have many real-life repercussions (aside from getting asked invasive questions). On the other hand, it seems that because, in this case binary and non-binary transgender people, can create their own representation through social media, and have their voices, views and opinions be heard in this way, media representation can also positively impact people; specifically younger generations who are active on these platforms.

Furthermore, from their stories it also became clear that the generational gaps created limitations and possibilities for the participants; in relation to older generations, they were more restricted in their being and had to constantly actively disidentify with norms that are forced upon them by these older generations and the norms they reproduce/co-produce within society. On the other hand, in relation to younger generations they more often had the ability to just *be*, as younger generations were argued to be more open to fluidity, undefinedness, and overall a bigger diversity of 'identities.' Finally then, this chapter has illustrated broader socio-cultural norms and some of the ways in which they manifest within Dutch society, in relation to processes of identification and disidentification, specifically in relation to the transgender participants. Particularly, it has shown how questions of cultural intelligibility and the forms of normativity that shape this intelligibility were of influence within the lives of the cisgender-transgender couples that were part of this project.

## Conclusion

Returning to the main research question that this thesis is based around, this project aimed to investigate and gain insight into the processes through which Dutch cisgender-transgender couples relationally constitute their gender/sex/sexuality. Relatedly, the main conclusion of this project, based on the interviews that were conducted and the analysis thereof, is that cis-trans couples navigate and co-construct gender/sex/sexuality through processes of identification and disidentification. These processes are linked to both their personal lives and their relationship, as well as their situatedness within broader social norms, which are inextricably linked. The results of the interviews indicate that instead of identifying with specific categories to describe their gender/sex/sexuality, they often actively disidentify with these normative categories. Based on the couples' narratives, this was for the following reasons: because these categories do not fit their lived realities, because they feel it is unnecessary to label their gender/sex/sexuality and/or because society impedes their ability to wear these labels with pride, though they might want to more actively identify with them. Specifically in terms of their relationship to each other, they would also find that categories, in their conventional meanings, did not fit their particular relationship and self-understandings, which further created a necessity for disidentification. Moreover, regarding their relationship to each other, they noted that their attraction to and love for each other was more important than labels and identification. In practice, this meant that they often let go of conventional modes of identification, in particular how identifications would normatively relate to particular bodies, and instead relationally constituted their understandings of their gender/sex/sexuality through processes of disidentification. In relation to bodies, through the couples' narratives, it can also be concluded that within these relationships the body was often decentred in relation to sexuality, meaning that the physicality of the body was not as important regarding sexuality as much as their attraction to each other as people. This could be attributed – at least partially – to their disidentification regarding gender and its normative relation to specific bodily characteristics. This means that participants disidentified with normative bodily meanings, and instead formed their attraction around their partner as a person rather than necessarily a specific gender attached to this person.

In other words, while labels are still important within the LGBTQ+ community – as they also contribute to creating community – based on the observations made through the interviews, there is simultaneously a move toward more 'undefined' self-understandings. This could be interpreted as moving away from normativity, or working with normativity to reshape it, in that labels inherently contain certain standards for what a person carrying that label needs to be, and the interviewees rejecting/transforming these standards through disidentifying with them. Thus, the interviewees seem to be moving toward a more 'queer' way of being, wherein 'queer' relates to breaking free from any

type assimilationism and social norms. Furthermore, the participants recognised these processes taking place beyond themselves, based on their experiences and observations in relation to their own lives, as well as within various types of media, particularly social media. However, it could also be observed that sometimes there was a necessity to strategically identify with particular categories, in order for others to understand them, or due to medical protocols that required explicit identification and specific trans narratives. In other words, though a desire to disidentify or reject labels was present, this could not always be acted upon due to social norms/normativity. Specifically, the participants related this to Dutch society and the general Dutch population's tendency to label everyone and 'put people in boxes,' which further relates to processes of passing and 'being read.' In other words, because (Dutch) society is still structured around these normative categories and the desire to categorise people, it was sometimes necessary for people to still 'choose' a label for themselves, particularly in terms of gender.

Though this research project has achieved what it set out to achieve, future research that continues from this project could improve on several points. Firstly, it would be effective to conduct follow-up interviews with the same couples. This is because the interview guide that was constructed for this project was fairly general. Though the broadness of the interview guide allowed for participants to steer the interview and raise topics and arguments that were relevant and important to their specific situations, follow-up interviews could then address these topics raised by the participants again in more depth. Moreover, follow-up interviews would enable following the couples for an extended period of time, which would then allow for further insight into how they continually navigate gender/sex/sexuality within their relationship over time, and what hurdles they might encounter herein. This would have been particularly fruitful in relation to the participant who was at the start of their medical transition, as it would be interesting to follow the process of how the couple would navigate the partner's physical changes and their navigation of this in relation to identity, and changes in being read within their particular social context. Further, this project could be improved upon within future research by conducting these (multiple) follow-up interviews in person rather than online. This would enable the researcher to form a stronger relationship with the participants, which could in turn result in more in-depth information coming from these interviews as trust is built and intimacy is developed.

In addition, it has to be noted that these observations are based on the lives and stories of only five cisgender-transgender couples. Therefore, more research has to be done wherein a bigger and more diverse sample of cisgender-transgender couples is interviewed, in order to find out whether moving away from labels is a wider trend within this 'group,' and to allow for an analysis that also takes into account questions of race and class. Furthermore, future research could expand beyond

cisgender-transgender couples to the LGBTQ+ community more generally, with a specific focus on LGBTQ+ youth (generation Z and the younger half of millennials), in order to investigate whether moving away from labels is a bigger trend within the entire community, or specific to cisgender-transgender couples. Moreover, it would be particularly generative to compare different age groups within the LGBTQ+ community in regards to their views on identity labels. This is because the interviewees raised the issue/topic of age gaps, noting that within 'older' generations the 'label mentality' is much more prominent than within younger generations. Specifically within the LGBTQ+ community this makes sense, because as mentioned previously, it has been observed that the coming out narrative and claiming specific identities has been crucial in gaining the rights that the LGBTQ+ community currently has (Ayoub 2016). In other words, since 'the older generation' has had to overcome adversities and stigmatization (for example regarding the AIDS crisis), it would make sense that they wear their labels with pride as they fought hard to be able to claim them openly. However, as Butler (1993) notes, claiming labels and fighting for rights in this way is only the first step in queer liberation. The next step would be to break free from these labels since they can be restrictive, as they underlie certain norms that dictate who/what one can be. Furthermore, a desire for breaking free from these labels makes sense when looking at the history they originated from, and the power they execute upon how people can live/be. For instance, within transgender healthcare transgender people are still very much restricted by the gender binary, and medicalization that holds onto one particular narrative of transness, thus restricting how one can be transgender. Thus, regarding this issue, research into generational gaps would be particularly interesting, as for example older generations of transgender people, who transitioned before the 2010s, often identify with the term transsexual rather than transgender, as this was the common term to refer to people who are trans. In contrast, by younger generations the term transsexual is seen as outdated and transmedicalist (meaning they rely on and identify through medical narratives of transness that can be understood as oppressive). In short, more research needs to be done that investigates the liberatory and restrictive effects of labels within the LGBTQ+ community, with a specific focus on generational differences, to gain insight into current developments within the LGBTQ+ community regarding questions of identity and ways of living more generally.

In short, returning to the results of this project, what can be learned from the couples that were interviewed is that one should not think in terms of impossibilities, but rather, in terms of possibilities. While existing research relating to (hypothetical) transgender-cisgender relationships focuses on undesirability, violence, difficulties and impossibilities, these couples, through sharing their stories, have demonstrated that relationships between cisgender and transgender people are not only possible, but also fruitful, loving and successful (Schilt et al. 2009; Blair et al. 2018; Ward 2010). In

other words, these couples go against the narrative that tells transgender people they cannot be loved, and instead show that transgender people can be loved not in spite of their gender or body, but *with* their gender. This is made possible not only by processes of identification and disidentification, but also by their performance of love, intimacy and care. These findings are not only important in relation to expanding upon existing research and broadening knowledge surrounding cisgender-transgender couples, but are especially crucial in terms of their social importance. As transphobia and transphobic violence are still big social issues in the Netherlands and elsewhere, it is all the more important to highlight stories and lived experiences that provide a different perspective. As the interviewees have demonstrated by sharing their experiences, transgender lives are not doomed to be marked by suffering, pain and hate. On the contrary, their lived realities are proof of the possibilities of transgender people to live happily and be loved.

# Bibliography

Abelson, M. J. (2014) 'Dangerous Privilege: Trans Men, Masculinities, and Changing Perceptions of Safety' *Sociological Forum* 29-3: 549-570.

Ahmed, S. (2006) 'Sexual Orientation' in: *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* Durham & London, Duke University Press: 65-107.

Aizura, A.Z. (2018) 'Provincializing Trans' in: *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* Durham, Duke University Press.

Aizura, A.Z., T. Cotten, C. Balzer/C. LaGata, M. Ochoa & S. Vidal-Ortiz (2014) 'Introduction' *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1-3: 308-319.

Ásta (2018) *Categories We Live by: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Attwood, F., J. Hakim & A. Winch (2017) 'Mediated Intimacies: Bodies, Technologies and Relationships' *Journal of Gender Studies* 26-3: 249-253.

Ayoub, P.M. (2016) 'The Politics of Visibility and LGBT Rights in Europe' in: *When States Come Out. Europe's Sexual Minorities and the Politics of Visibility* New York, Cambridge University Press: 21-52.

Barker, M. (2014) 'Heteronormativity' in: T. Teo (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* New York, Springer: 858-860.

Bettcher, T.M. (2007) 'Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion' *Hypatia* 22-3: 43-65.

Bettcher, T.M. (2014) 'Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance' *Signs* 39-2: 383-406.

Bey, M. (2019) *Them Goon Rules: Fugitive Essays on Radical Black Feminism* Tucson, University of Arizona Press.

Blair, K.L. & R.A. Hoskin (2018) 'Transgender Exclusion from the World of Dating: Patterns of Acceptance and Rejection of Hypothetical Trans Dating Partners as a Function of Sexual and Gender Identity' *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 1-22.

Bottero, W. (2009) 'Relationality and Social Interaction' *The British Journal of Sociology* 60-2: 399-420.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction* London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Brannick, T. & D. Coghlan (2007) 'In Defense of Being "Native": the Case for Insider Academic Research' *Organizational Research Methods* 10-1: 59-74.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods (4th Edition)* Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press.

Butler, J. (1988) 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' *Theatre Journal* 40-4: 519-531.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble* New York, Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies That Matter* New York, Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing Gender* New York, Routledge.

D'Emilio, J. (1983) 'Capitalism and Gay Identity' in: Abelove, H., M.A. Barale & D.M. Halperin (red.) *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* New York & London, Routledge.

Dahl, U. (2018) '(The promise of) Monstrous Kinship? Queer Reproduction and the Somatechnics of Sexual and Racial Difference' *Somatechnics* 8-2: 195-211.

De Beauvoir, S. (2010) *The Second Sex* New York, Vintage Books.

Deaux, K. (2012) 'Categories We Live By' in: S. Wiley, G. Philogène & T.A. Revenson (eds.) *Social Categories in Everyday Experience* Washington, American Psychological Association: 31-43.

Detournay, D. (2019) 'The Racial Life of 'Cisgender': Reflections on Sex, Gender and the Body' *Parallax* 25-1: 58-74.

Eng, D.L. (2010) *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* Durham & London, Duke University Press.

Enke, A.F. (2013) 'The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies' in: S. Stryker & A.Z. Aizura (eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* New York, Routledge: 234-247.

Fajardo, K.B. (2014) 'Queering and Transing the Great Lakes: Filipino/a Tomboy Masculinities and Manhoods Across Waters' *GlQ: a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20-1-2: 115-140.

Farahani, F. (2010) 'On Being an Insider and/or Outsider: A Diasporic Researcher's Catch-22' in: L. Naidoo (ed.) *Education Without Borders* New York, Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality Volume I: an Introduction* New York, Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* New York, Vintage Books.

Frank, A., P.T. Clough & S. Seidman (2013) *Intimacies: A New World of Relational Life* London & New York, Routledge.

García Selgas, F.J. (2014) 'Gender Embodiment as Gender-Enacted Body: A Review of Intimate Partner Violence and Gender Embodiment Perspectives' *Gender Issues* 31: 185-201.

Glissant, É. (2010 [1990]) *Poetics of Relation* Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan Press.

Glover, J.K. (2016) 'Redefining Realness?: On Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, TS Madison, and the Representation of Transgender Women of Color in Media' *Souls* 18-2-4: 338-357.

Goldberg-Hiller, J. & N. Milner (2003) 'Rights as Excess: Understanding the Politics of Special Rights' *Law & Social Inquiry* 28-4: 1075-1120.

Gossett, C. (2017) 'Blackness and the Trouble of Invisibility' in: *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* Cambridge, MIT Press: 183-190.

Goulding, C. (2005) 'Grounded Theory, Ethnography and Phenomenology' *European journal of Marketing* 39-3/4: 294-308.

Guadagno, R.E., B.M. Okdie & S.A. Kruse (2012) 'Dating Deception: Gender, Online Dating, and Exaggerated Self-Presentation' *Computers in Human Behaviour* 28: 642-647.

Hansen, B. (1979) 'The Historical Construction of Homosexuality' *Radical History Review* 20: 66-73.

Hartman, S. (2019) *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* New York & London, W.W. Norton & Company.

Hayward, E. (2013) 'Lessons from a Starfish' in: S. Stryker & A.Z. Aizura (eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader 2.0* London & New York, Routledge: 178-188.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2014) *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer (2nd Edition)* Thousand Oaks, AGE Publications.

Holland, S.P. (2012) *The Erotic Life of Racism* Durham & London, Duke University Press.

Jain, T. (2017) 'Researcher vs Advocate: Ethnographic-Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Scholarship' *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 36-6: 566-585.

Kelliher, D. (2014) 'Solidarity and Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners 1984–5' *History Workshop Journal* 77: 241-262.

Kroeger, K.A. (2003) 'AIDS Rumors, Imaginary Enemies, and the Body Politic in Indonesia' *American Ethnologist* 30-2: 243-257.

Laqueur, T.W. (1992) *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Li, Y. (2011) 'Translating Interviews, Translating Lives:Ethical Considerations in Cross-Language Narrative Inquiry' *Tesl Canada Journal* 5: 16-30.

Lugones, M. (2010) 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism' *Hypatia* 25-4: 742-759.

Lugones, M. (2017) 'Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System' *Hypatia* 22-1: 186-209.

Lundquist, J.H. & Lin, K.H. (2015) 'Is Love (Color) Blind? The Economy of Race among Gay and Straight Daters' *Social Forces* 93-4: 1-27.

McRuer, R. (2006) 'Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence' in: L.J. Davis (ed.) *Disability Studies Reader, 2nd Edition* New York, Routledge: 301-308.

Naples, N.A. (2003) *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research* New York, Routledge.

Nicolazzo, Z., E.N. Pitcher, K.A. Renn & M. Woodford (2017) 'An Exploration of Trans* Kinship as a Strategy for Student Success' *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30-3: 305-319.

Page, T. (2017) 'Vulnerable Writing as a Feminist Methodological Practice' *Feminist Review* 115: 13-29.

Philogène, G. (2012) 'Understanding Social Categories: an Epistemological Journey' in: S. Wiley, G. Philogène & T.A. Revenson (eds.) *Social Categories in Everyday Experience* Washington, American Psychological Association: 31-43.

Pine, F. (2010) 'Gender' in: Barnard, A. & J. Spencer (eds.) *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* London & New York, Routledge: 319-329.

Preciado, P.B. (2018) *Countersexual Manifesto* New York, Columbia University Press.

Puar, J.K. (2007) 'The Sexuality of Terrorism' in: *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* Durham & London, Duke University Press: 37-78.

Puar, J.K. (2015) 'Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled' *Social Text 124* 33-3: 33-61.

Rich, A. (1980) 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' *Signs* 5-4: 631-660.

Robinson, B.A. (2014) '"Personal Preference" as the New Racism: Gay Desire and Racial Cleansing in Cyberspace' *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1-2: 317-330.\

Rubin, G.S. (1999) 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' in: P. Aggleton & R. Parker (eds.) *Culture, Society and Sexuality: a Reader* New York, Routledge: 143-178.

Rubin, G.S. (2011) 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex' in: G. S. Rubin (ed.) *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* Durham, Duke University Press: 33-65.

Scarborough, W. J., R. Sin & B. Risman (2019) 'Attitudes and the Stalled Gender Revolution: Egalitarianism, Traditionalism, and Ambivalence from 1977 through 2016' *Gender & Society* 33-2: 173–200.

Schilt, K. & L. Westbrook (2009) 'Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: "Gender Normals," Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality' *Gender & Society* 23-4: 440-464.

Schilt, K. & L. Westbrook (2014) 'Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System' *Gender & Society* 28-1: 32-57.

Sedgwick, E.K. (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet* Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press.

Shildrick, M. (2002) 'Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk' in: *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* London, Sage.

Spade, D. (2003) 'Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender' *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 18: 15-37.

Spillers, H.J. (1987) 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' *Diacritics* 17-2: 64-81.

Stryker, S. (2008) 'Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity' *Radical History Review* 145-157.

Thomeer, M.B., D. Umberson & C. Reczek (2020) 'The Gender-as-Relational Approach for Theorizing About Romantic Relationships of Sexual and Gender Minority Mid- to Later-Life Adults' *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 12: 220-237.

Tudor, A. (2017) 'Dimensions of Transnationalism' *Feminist Review* 117: 20-40.

Valentine, D. (2007) *Imagining Transgender* Durham & London, Duke University Press.

Van Erp, M. (2021) *De Roze Revolutie* (Documentary Series) NPO, VPRO.

Waarlo, N. (2021) 'Homomannen in Monogame Relatie Mogen vanaf September Bloed Doneren'
https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/homomannen-in-monogame-relatie-mogen-
vanaf-september-bloed-doneren~b661e40ba/, consulted on 25th of July 2021.

Ward, J. (2010) 'Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression' in: E. Boris
& R.S. Parreñas (eds.) *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*
Redwood City, Stanford University Press.

Weeks, J. (2003) *Sexuality, Second Edition* London & New York, Routledge.

# Appendix

a. Riley: [...] ik weet niet het hele termen en labels dat doet er eigenlijk niet zo ik val gewoon op sommige mensen wel en op sommige mensen niet dat is het een beetje (p. 39).

b. Riley: [...] ik denk dat voor mij is het nu sowieso moeilijk om er een label aan te hangen want als je zelf niet man of vrouw bent ben je dan kan je ook niet gay zijn of straight zijn [...] (p. 40).

c. Riley: [...] die termen maken het allemaal eigenlijk alleen maar ingewikkelder (p. 40).

d. Riley [...] ik ben gewoon dit, ja en wat voor label je er aan wil hangen, ja, [...] en dat is het belangrijkst en niet zo zeer wat voor label je eraan hangt denk ik, ja (p. 41).

e. Dana: [...] dat ik er alles aan deed om mezelf soortvan te definiëren als een vrouw die op vrouwen viel ofzo (p. 42).

f. Allison: [...] ik identificeer me daar niet per se heel erg expliciet mee maar dat is denk ik ook omdat we in een samenleving leven waarin dat als een heel erg normaal iets wordt gezien eh ik denk dat ik me wel misschien in relatie tot Senn ook daar juist wat meer actiever mee ben gaan identificeren omdat ehm ja doordat wij in een relatie zijn ook wel veel bewuster ben geworden van ehm ja de impact die ja die cis dat cis zijn of juist een gemarginaliseerde gender hebben wat dat met zich meebrengt dus ik vind het dan ook wel heel belangrijk eigenlijk dat op het moment dat Senn zich soortvan ja een hele tijd moet verantwoorden ofzo dan vind ik het ook fijn om dan aan te geven van ohja ik ben cis en ik gebruik de voornaamwoorden zij en haar om het in die zin meer ja gelijk te trekken (p. 43).

g. Dana: [...] ik identificeer mezelf als vrouw ik ben als vrouw geboren dus ja dan ben ik cisgender [...] (p. 44).

h. Brandon: het is niet dat ik ermee bezig ben vanuit mezelf maar je wordt er wel vanuit de maatschappij continu mee geconfronteerd en dat vind ik gewoon een issue, en als het gewoon wat normaler was geweest dan had ik er misschien wel wat opener over kunnen zijn maar nu ben je wel gewoon steeds als je in een situatie komt actief bezig met het verborgen houden zegmaar dat is ook gewoon kut maar dan denk je aan aaaal die vervelende mensen met al die vervelende vragen niet eens naar jou per se maar ook gewoon die je overal ziet en die vervelende kutopmerkingen en dan denk je van ja laat maar (p. 45).

i. Riley: ik heb die term zodat mensen zodat anderen het snappen en ik het uit kan leggen maar eigenlijk gaat het er gewoon om ik ben gewoon mijzelf weet je ik ben gewoon dit, ja en wat voor label je er aan wil hangen, ja, ik denk dat iedereen heeft gewoon een bepaalde gevoel van dit ben ik (p. 46).

j. Sky: ja zeker je hebt tenminste je ik heb wel ehm daardoor ook wel eens gedacht van oh ja maar gaat ze me dan nog wel aantrekkelijk vinden […] dadelijk verander ik naar iets wat niet meer binnen de verwachting van de relatie zit ofzo […] (p. 47).

k. Dana: ik vond het heel heftig, heel heftig, ik zou het niet nog een keer doen nee nee vragen is meer […] wij waren al best wel lang vrienden dus ik ben zegmaar verliefd geworden op de vrouwelijke versie nouuja weet je prima in mijn hoofd klonk het allemaal van nou het valt allemaal wel mee is wel te doen zo'n operatie wat maakt het ook allemaal uit nouja puntje bij paaltje helemaal in paniek want he wat gebeurt er na zo'n operatie ja het verandert gewoon ja daar had ik zelf gewoon helemaal niet bij stil gestaan in het kader van maar wat als alles eraf is en ik jou niet meer leuk vind he want dat kan gebeuren en hij had zoiets van ja super leuk super leuk eindelijk m'n mastectomie en ik zat daar in een hoekje van de hotelkamer te huilen van ik wil 't niet ik wil 't niet […] leuk dat het allemaal voor jou zo snel ging want je bent gewoon in 8-9 maanden tijd heb jij gewoon een hele transitie doorgemaakt en je zat aan de hormonen je was gewoon een man weet je dat soort dingen allemaal je heb alles het hele balletje rollen en ik liep er maar achteraan zo van ja hé leuk ik zit net in een nieuwe relatie wat gezellig leuk dat ik er ook ben weet je

Lenny: ja daar hebben we het toen niet echt heel veel gesproken (p. 48).

l. Sky: neemt het ook niet te veel in beslag van de relatie qua dat je toch wel vaker ook wel dacht van maar ik moet het er ook niet te veel over hebben want dan is het dadelijk alleen maar dat ding ofzo waar je het over hebt of dan wordt het een te groot iets dus daar was ik me ook wel heel erg bewust van ehm dat mijn transitie daarin niet een ja een heel groot onderwerp is waar je ook eigenlijk niet omheen kan want (p. 50).

m. Kylie: kijk ik vond gewoon van ik wilde Robin ook overtuigen van ik accepteer je zoals je bent want anders ben ik hier niet ehm en ik vertik het […] dat iemand niet doucht terwijl diegene dat wel graag zou willen omdat diegene zich te onzeker voelt over diens lichaam dat vertik ik gewoon dus dan denk ik nou wat gaan we doen moet ik een blinddoek op doen dat ik geblinddoekt ga douchen? prima ehm en toen hebben we inderdaad de lampen uit gedaan en een kaarsje gewoon […] (p. 50-51).

n. Allison: toen we naar die teststraat gingen dat vond ik zo typisch we zaten in de auto we hadden allebei een mondkapje op en iemand zegt tegen [Sky] alstublieft mevrouw [Sky] had niks gezegd het was gewoon letterlijk gewoon soortvan op basis van dit [bovenste helft van diens hoofd] dat was zo soortvan is er een oordeel en [Sky] zat zo van ja hoe kom je er nou bij weet je wel waarom zeg je dan mevrouw zo van ja

Allison: ik was ook nog eens degene die achter het stuur zat

Allison: ohja

Sky: en jij zag er echt heel femme uit

Allison: ja

Sky: dus eigenlijk ieder ander ieder in 9 van de 10 situaties zouden we dus veel eerder gelezen worden als hetero cis hetero koppel zegmaar ook qua de verdeling qua alles maar het was echt in een keer het was gewoon uit het niks was het echt gewoon de folder werd gegeven en het was alstublieft mevrouw, nou

Allison: ja dan zeg ik ook van ja het is gewoon omdat ze je bent niet man weet je wel dus op het moment als iemand jou leest als niet man is er een andere optie namelijk vrouw dus ehm ja (p. 54).

o. Sky: als je niks zegt wordt je altijd gewoon verkeerd aangesproken en gelezen in de door de buitenwereld (p. 54).

p. Brandon: nee maar net als die vriend van mij die bij de VU werd geweigerd voor zijn hormonen omdat hij een roze telefoonhoesje had en als je een echte man zou zijn dan zou die geen roze telefoonhoesje hebben dus hoppakee 6 maanden wachttijd erbij bij de VU (p. 55).

q. Brandon: ja bij de bloedbank was het vervelend

Gary: ja

Brandon: [Gary] mocht altijd bloed doneren maar toen kreeg ik een andere letter in m'n paspoort en toen mocht het niet meer want ineens waren we vies en gay maar toen heb je ruzie gemaakt en toen mocht het wel [gelach]

Gary: ja toen heb ik dat gewoon uitgelegd aan de arts hoe dat zit en toen was het zo van oh ja vooruit voor deze keer mag het maar we doen een aantekening in je dossier dat je iedere keer langs een arts moet om het te bespreken en deze keer had ik een andere arts en die zei van ja deze aantekening ga ik eruit halen want het is gewoon onzin dus nu mag ik gewoon als een 'normaal' persoon doneren

Brandon: gefeliciteerd! je bent normaal!

Gary: ik heb 1 hetero privilege teruggewonnen

Brandon: ja nadat je mij daar echt 5 keer moest outen en dan die arts iedere keer naar mij ging staren alsof ik een fucking alien was maar dat is denk ik het vervelendste wat je hebt gehad denk ik (p.56).

r. Nolan: ja, maar ik denk lang niet iedereen, ik denk dat mensen heel snel zijn van zelf labels plakken en ik denk eigenlijk dat voornamelijk mensen die er zelf mee in aanraking zijn geweest of gekomen of zelf in de LHBT+ community thuis horen dat die sneller zoiets hebben van labels zijn ook niet alles en als mensen al labels willen laat ze het lekker zelf bepalen terwijl de cishet gemeenschap dat misschien een stuk minder heeft, dat die sneller geneigd zijn van ik zie twee mannen hand in hand lopen die zijn homo, zo zeg maar (p. 57).

s.  Allison: ja ehm ik vind dat eh dat er ontzettend in hokjes wordt gedacht dus ook op het moment dat jij dat iemand als ja als lesbisch of als homoseksueel dus zich nog steeds als monoseksueel dus voor één gender op één gender van het dat je gewoon echt heel erg wordt gedwongen om van het ene hokje weet je wel je komt uit de kast en je stapt weer een andere kast in gewoon het is allemaal zo strikt en veilig en soortvan weinig ruimte voor ontdekking en spectrum eigenlijk (p. 58).

t.  Nolan: voor mij zeker, zoals ik al zei Hij is een Zij is daarin best wel belangrijk geweest voor mij zeker toen Mick in het seizoen zat die ook non binair is gewoon het feit dat er meer mensen zijn zoals ik dat je niet raar of alleen bent, dat heeft voor mij wel heel veel verschil gemaakt, ja (p. 61).

u.  Gary: [...] maar het is heel vaak ook heel erg gericht op ofwel de seksuele kant ofwel de medische kant en de struggles en

Brandon: ja dat is kut alleen maar lijden

Gary: dus en hoe ze niet geaccepteerd worden en zulke dingen

Brandon: ja dat is alleen maar het lijden dat heel erg breed wordt uitgemeten bijvoorbeeld ook heb je wel programma's als Hij is een Zij maar die willen alleen maar met jou in zee op het moment dat jij op het punt staat om een operatie te krijgen en anders willen ze gewoon niet dingen met jou gaan doen (p. 61).

v.  Kylie: dat heb ook bijvoorbeeld eens tegen [Riley] gezegd je ik ben heel erg van drop gewoon een zaadje en geef het af en toe water en dan laat iemand zelf erover nadenken maar op het moment dat je het iemand door diens strot gaat duwen dan kan je ook weerstand verwachten [...]

Riley: ja nouja jij bedoelt vooral je kan er ook het averechts effect mee bereiken als je te veel erop gaat hameren dat mensen er op een gegeven moment een hekel aan gaan krijgen (p. 63).