Dis/Orientations of Gender and Sexuality in Transgender Embodiment

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When disclosing to new acquaintances that I am transgender, I can be almost certain that they will ask about my sexual orientation: "Do you like men or women, then? Do you see yourself as gay or straight?" Explaining that I don't really think about my sexuality in straightforward terms never quite seems to satisfy. Transgender bodies and their relations to sexual orientation seem to inspire curiosity in both everyday encounters and the academic world. The relationships of gender and sexuality in general have been theorized in many ways, and from many different perspectives, as Diane Richardson demonstrates in *Patterned Fluidities: (Re)Imagining the Relationships between Gender and Sexuality* (2007). However, transgender sexualities in particular have been studied relatively little, especially when it comes to non-heterosexual transgender bodies. Gayle Salamon explains that some transgender writers avoid the subject to distance themselves from the historical tendency to view transgender identification as a form of hypersexuality or sexual fetishism. Salamon argues that sexuality should nevertheless be addressed by transgender studies, as disregarding it presents transgender bodies impossible as desiring subjects (Salamon 2010, 45).

J. Michael Bailey, in their[1] notorious *The Man Who Would Be Queen* (2003), argues that a "standard lecture" within social sciences claims that sexual orientation, gender identification and gendered behavior are completely separate and independent of each other (Bailey 2003, xi) – probably referring to scholars and texts that, as described by Richardson, argue "for the importance of conceptualizing sexuality and gender as analytically distinct but overlapping categories" (Richardson 2007, 463–464). According to Bailey, the standard lecture is wrong, and at least in the case of transgender women, transgender identification is in fact all about sexuality: "Transsexuals lead remarkable sex lives. Those who love men become women to attract them. Those who love women become the women they love" (Bailey 2003, xi–xii). This argument (which exemplifies the above-

1 In English, gender is always present in the pronouns used to refer to a third person – "she" for women and "he" for men – unlike my native Finnish, which only has the gender neutral "hän". Not only is this problematic in referring to people who are not women or men, it also forces the writer to assume, guess or avoid mentioning the gender of the person referred to, when gender identification and/or pronoun preference is not known for certain. For this reason, I have chosen to use the singular generic third person "they" instead of gendered pronouns in this article.

mentioned fetishization of transgender bodies) can be seen as belonging to the "gender as an effect of sexuality" category identified by Richardson – sexual desire preexists and causes gendered behavior (Richardson 2007, 462). While I consider Bailey's analysis – that transgender identification is a manifestation of sexual orientation – problematic, I also remain suspicious of "the standard lecture" – or indeed of any argument that proposes a simple, universal explanation for the relationship of gender and sexuality. However, I agree with Richardson that, to take into account the diversity of gender and sexuality, "we require theoretical frameworks that allow more complex analyses of the dynamic, historically and socially specific relationship between sexuality and gender, as well as the gendered and sexualized specificity of their interconnections" (Richardson 2007, 464).

I have previously examined the dynamics of queer gender and sexuality in transgender embodiment from the perspective of *intra-active entanglements* (Kondelin 2014). Intra-action has been proposed by Karen Barad in their book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) as an alternative to interaction. While interaction refers to connections between ontologically separate and independent entities, intra-action suggests relations among bodies that are always already entangled together in complex connections, affecting and being affected by each other (Barad 2007, 139–141). Barad formulates a theory of agential realism, central to which is an understanding of material connections as intra-active, entangled *phenomena* instead of predetermined and individual *things* interacting with each other: according to Barad, the distinctions between "things" are determined within phenomena, and different phenomena thus produce different boundaries and categories between their components (Barad 2007, 146–150).

In this article, I take a look at relations of intra-active productivity of gender identification and sexual orientation in the lived experiences of transgender bodies. In their *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed works with a queer interpretation of phenomenology to analyze (sexual) orientation as a way for the body to relate to other bodies and the world. According to Ahmed, "[o]rientations involve directions toward objects that affect what we do, and how we inhabit space" (Ahmed 2006, 28). We take different directions toward different objects, and are moved by them accordingly. While being orientated means knowing our bodies' location and direction, it also necessarily involves being aware of our body in relation to other bodies (Ahmed 2006, 1–28). Disorientation, then, means not having a direction, or being unable to take one, being "out of line" in terms of our surroundings (Ibid., 157–162): it "shatters our involvement in a world" (Ibid., 177). My focus here is on the significance of disorientation in the gendered and sexual intra-actions of transgender lives: What kinds of experiences cause transgender bodies to become disorientated in terms of gender and/or sexuality? What effects does such disorientation have to the experiences of gender identification and/or sexual orientation of transgender bodies?

As a Transgender Body, for Transgender Bodies

Jay Prosser (1998) and Viviane Namaste (2009), both openly self-identifying transgender scholars, criticize queer and feminist research for using transgender bodies as tools in formulating theories on gender and sexuality while failing to take into account the everyday lives and challenges faced by actual living transgender people, as well as the bodily materiality of transgender existence. I take their concerns seriously, employing theories that I consider well-equipped to address these issues: In both Barad and Ahmed's theories, the focus is on material bodies and their relations to each other. Furthermore, the importance of temporal and spatial specificities to bodily connections is highlighted. (Ahmed 2006, 1–24; Barad 2007, 25–38.) Namaste employs the concept of indigenous knowledges – bodies

of scholarship that explore "the complex ways that colonialism has been enacted through knowledge-production, and that [provide] alternative models of research" – in demanding that transgender research focus on producing knowledge that "will be useful to the people and communities under investigation" in partnership with existing transgender communities and individuals (Namaste 2009, 23–25). In this spirit, I write from what I call a transgender standpoint – as a transgender body, on transgender bodies, for transgender bodies. I want to articulate and actualize my belief that we who are transgender need to have voices and agencies of our own in the production, review, and discussion of knowledges concerning us. A similar reasoning underpins my working "for transgender bodies": making transgender existence, experiences, multiplicity and agency visible in academics and the society.

While my own position makes a transgender presence inherent in my research, I can hardly claim to be able to represent any other individual transgender bodies. To best account for the lived experiences of actual bodies, I chose to interview six non-heterosexual, assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) transgender people[2] – Kaarna, Era, Tapio, Tuomo, Perttu and Daniel (names altered for the sake of anonymity) – about their lived experiences of gender and sexual orientation, mapping out the different ways these two factors intra-act and produce each other. All of my informants are white[3] Finns, and range from 20 to 30 years. Three of them live in Helsinki and the other three in the cities of Turku, Tampere and Jyväskylä. The interviews were conducted in a quite casual conversational manner with only a loose script of themes and keywords: I wanted to minimize my own presuppositions' effects on what my informants would tell me, and thus did not plan a list of questions beforehand. I am, however, conscious that my proximity to the topic and my involvement in the Finnish transgender activism have unavoidably affected both the interview situations and my interpretation of them.

David Valentine, in their book *Imagining Transgender. An Ethnography of a Category* (2007), demonstrates that experiences that they or I would describe as transgender can be named, articulated and embodied in radically diverse ways in different cultural and subcultural contexts (Valentine 2007, 105–137). Identity categories of sexual orientation are likewise specific to certain times and places (Ahmed 2006, 79–92), as is the distinction between (trans)gender and sexual identities (Valentine 2007, 143–172). As I am studying the experiences of Finnish transgender people as a Finnish transgender person, I have no reason to assume that all or any of the experiences I examine here are shared by transgender bodies elsewhere. I also recognize that analyzing people who are white, young and living in the bigger cities of Finland is likely to produce a significantly different view than would emerge if my group of reference was more diverse, or if I had interviewed assigned-male-at-birth people instead.

2 I have chosen to restrict my focus on non-heterosexual AFAB transgender bodies for a couple of reasons: While I believe there would be valuable insight to be gained on the intra-actions of gender and sexuality in the experiences of heterosexual and/or assigned-male-at-birth transgender bodies as well, I want to avoid oppositional comparisons between different categories in my writing, and thus consider it more fruitful to limit my inquiry to a more narrowly defined group. As AFAB transgender bodies, especially non-heterosexual ones, have been less studied in the past (see Rosario 1996, 36; Salamon 2010, 9), I find it appropriate to turn my attention toward that direction.

3 Ahmed's writing always engages issues of race and ethnicity in one way or another. I believe it is extremely important to consider these issues in connection to transgender bodies as well: as demonstrated by Signe Bremer, for example, specific processes of racializing certain bodies can make it harder for such bodies to believably present themselves as men (Bremer 2010, 100-102.) However, while I am convinced that the whiteness of my informants is in some way essential to their experiences of transgender embodiment and sexual orientation, it is not possible to analyze race in any significant way within the bounds of this article.

As observed by Valentine, not all people who for example attend transgender support groups, or are labeled as transgender by others, use the word to describe themselves or even recognize it (Valentine 2007, 3–4). Within academic transgender studies, the term has "multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes even contested meanings" – it can, among other things, operate as an umbrella term for various forms of gender crossing or refer to bodies and identifications that fall outside binary gender (Stryker & Currah 2014, 1). In this article, I use the first definition. I am uncomfortable with making a distinction between "transsexual" and "transgender" bodies or identifications, feeling unable to clearly define the difference. Furthermore, as the population of Finland, and accordingly our trans communities, are small in number, I am suspicious of any identity categories that keep us divided into even smaller groups, thus possibly further complicating the organization of political activism.

Told experiences as research data come with their own challenges, as observed by Tuija Saresma (2010): because the experiences of others can only be accessed as they are told, and because the people studied, in addition to the researcher, have their own motivations in the process, experience can never be taken as a faithful account of what has happened. Furthermore, we can only access our own past from the perspective of our own present, as pointed out by Tuomo during our discussion: "My history of gender... I find it quite difficult to tell about it, as I feel that it changes a little bit all the time how I see it, from the perspective of the present time.[4]" Saresma also remarks that putting too much emphasis on recounting experiences as told and in the same language used by the people studied can lead to the researcher merely reorganizing and describing their material instead of analyzing it (Saresma 2010, 61). This in mind, I try to balance between giving a voice to the people I study and sufficiently analyzing and problematizing my data to produce a meaningful difference instead of merely reproducing my material. For example, to let my informants' voices "be heard" in my text, I have done my best to communicate their personal word choices and styles of speech in translating the direct quotes from Finnish to English – and to keep my approach analytical, I consistently present their words in intra-action with my theoretical frame.

4 K5: 2.

Dis/orientations of Gender and Sexuality

Sexual orientations, following Ahmed, concern the ways we take sexual directions toward other bodies, and our own bodies' relation to them. Such orientations of a body, as well as the body itself, have their particular histories, their "conditions of arrival", rather than being something that is obvious and given. (Ahmed 2006, 79–85.) Even though the Finnish political activism concerning non-heterosexual orientations frequently employs the statement that we are "born this way", our perceptions of our orientations often change over time: all the people I interviewed report changes or periods of uncertainty in their history of sexual orientation.[5]

Ahmed furthermore demonstrates that gender can also be thought in terms of orientation: it limits our object choices and also happens as an effect of them (Ahmed 2006, 58–59). In my interviews, individual gender identification and expression, both connected to cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity but not determined by them, emerge as significant aspects of gendered embodiment.[6] Another concept important to transgender experiences is passing or blending, referring to becoming read by others into one's intended gender: it emerges as a goal of

5 K1: 2., 4., 12. & 24.; K2: 1., 3. & 80.; K3: 18.; K4: 40. & 94.; K5: 10.–16.; K6: 22. & 39.

6 K1: 8. & 72.–87.; K2: 155.; K3: 2.–10.; K4: 6. & 32.; K5: 4.–6., 113.–122.; K6: 14.

presenting our gender in certain ways and not others, as well as of bodily transformations achieved in medical gender reassignment processes.[7]

While in discussions of transgender presentation the focus is often placed on the actions we take and the clothes we wear, all bodies also get characterized as masculine and feminine – easily equated with male and female – according to their form. Wide shoulders, narrow hips, angular jaw and being tall, for example, are understood as masculine, whereas narrow shoulders, wide hips, round jawline and being short are seen as feminine (Kinnunen 2008, 165–233). AFAB transgender bodies, especially if they have not undergone medical treatment for gender reassignment, can therefore easily become misgendered[8] as women if their expression is not unambiguously masculine. This is demonstrated in the narratives of Perttu and Kaarna, who both identify to some degree as feminine but definitely not women: on the one hand Kaarna, who is still waiting to receive masculinizing medical treatment, says that feminine expression can make them seem gender conforming as a woman, especially to people who aren't aware of their transgender identification[9]. Perttu, on the other hand, wears a beard to avoid being gendered as a girl, but says it still happens quite often.[10] Here, bodily matter can be seen to have a kind of agency of its own in the gendering of our lives: in the terms of agential realism, "matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, *matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency*" (Barad 2007, 151).

7 K1: 24.–30. & 89.; K2: 45.–63.; K5: 65.–103.; K6: 14. & 42.

8 Misgendering refers to situations in which other people, mistakenly or on purpose, interpret our gender in a way that is in conflict with our preferences, for example calling us "ma'am" when we'd like to hear "sir".

9 K1: 85.

10 K3: 36.

As observed by Ahmed, sexual orientations affect other things we do in addition to our sexual behavior: sexuality is not determined merely by our objects of desire, but also as specific relations to the world, so that assuming "different orientations, different ways of directing one's desires, means inhabiting different worlds" (Ahmed 2006, 68). Sexual orientation has become "a matter of being", a necessary component of our subjective identities (Ahmed 2006, 68–69). It is thus integral to our subjectivity to be sexually orientated, as the way we direct our sexual selves determines the way we exist. Additionally, it is important to know how other bodies orientate themselves: we can only know our relation to them, and thus determine and confirm our own orientation, insofar as we are aware of the lines they move along. It might be said that we are orientated toward sexual orientations. From this viewpoint, orientations can be seen as objects to turn toward. Ahmed describes, in their analysis of happiness, how objects become feeling-causes – that is, able to cause feeling (Ahmed 2010, 33). In this line of thought, I consider orientations as identity-causes, or objects to identify-with. Different orientations produce different identifications, thus opening some possibilities for the body to extend itself in action while closing others at the same time.

Moments of *dis*orientation are, according to Ahmed, vital to our understanding of orientation (Ahmed 2006, 5–6). They can be experiences of losing our direction, of the shattering of "[our] sense of confidence in the ground or [our] belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make life feel livable" (Ahmed 2006, 157). While experiences of disorientation can be temporary, or even something "that comes and goes as we move around during the day", Ahmed points out that they might also "persist and become a crisis" (Ahmed 2006, 157). Being misgendered, or failing to pass as or to blend in with our intended gender, as a continuously repeating experience that it can be in the lives of transgender bodies, is easy to perceive as such a crisis – and it might indeed

be that gendered disorientation only becomes dysphoric when it persists in this way. In relation to gender, disorientation can involve discomfort with the norms of behavior determined by our assigned gender – or it might emerge as a sense of disconnection from that gender altogether, often defined as *gender dysphoria* in discussions of transgender bodies (see Halberstam 1998, 152, Salamon 2010, 164–165). Examples of what I read as articulations of dysphoria in my interview texts include feelings of self-hatred and hatred of one's gendered body parts as well as frustration and helplessness caused by being constantly misgendered by others.[11]

Dysphoria can limit the daily activities of transgender bodies in many ways. Era, for example, related that at one point they used to go running at night, to avoid being seen by other people[12], and Daniel says that they distanced themself from social contact as their dysphoria got worse; even with the few friends they had, they felt incapable of physical intimacy such as hugging.[13] Here, again, the agency of bodily matter is made clear: even though we might be able to hide certain visible signifiers of gender in our bodies by, for example, binding our breasts, physical touch can remind us of the existence of those body parts and their gendered significance. The fear of dysphoric moments, such as being misgendered or becoming physically aware of body parts that feel wrong, emerges as a dysphoric feeling in itself, as a constant awareness of our lack of orientation. Similarly, as sexual orientations are of great importance to us as identity-objects, a prolonged sense of sexual disorientation might very well become a crisis. While Ahmed argues that disorientation, in addition to producing knowledges about our cultural organization of orientations, might be precisely what queer action should involve itself in, they also recognize that disorientated bodies might need to become reorientated in order to be able to function in the world (Ahmed 2006, 158–179). In terms of sexual orientation, this might mean we come to desire objects that deviate from the direction we have been heading, and/or we might experience disappointment with the objects encountered so far along our current path. One way to deal with this, to reorientate ourselves, is to renegotiate our identification according to the desires that have disorientated us – for example, coming to identify as bisexual instead of gay, as Daniel said they did.[14] Or we might accept our sexual orientation as approximated, should we feel that a small number of exceptions is not enough to turn us from our previous direction. Further still, we might come to perceive sexual orientation as having different functions in different situations, and accordingly assume multiple identifications of sexual orientation, as Tapio described doing: As they are primarily attracted to men and masculinities, as well as through their past identification with male homosexuality and gay culture, they become gay. Because they are also able to desire women and other-gender bodies, they also define themself as bisexual. They further identify with queer as a sexual orientation because it is "defined by being something else", because they see gender as a wide spectrum and don't feel able to claim being attracted only to men, and also as a political statement against normative systems of gender and sexuality.[15]

In terms of (trans)gender, reorientating ourselves can likewise involve seeking different supportive methods to stay on our former path or turn to a new direction. All of the people I interviewed have chosen to undergo a process of medical and/or legal gender reassignment, but they had also attempted – some partly due to perceived difficulties related to the reassignment process[16] – different optional strategies before that, such as negotiating a wider definition of the category of woman and/or trying to

11 K1: 24.; K2: 15. & 45.; K6: 4.
12 K2: 45.
13 K4: 2.
14 K4: 40.
15 K6: 22., 28., 34., 40., 74., 76. & 116.
16 K6: 4.–5.

find a comfortable way to inhabit that category[17]. While such strategies ultimately did fail these particular bodies, they seem likely to be more effective devices of reorientation for others. Having here considered the concepts of orientation, disorientation and reorientation from the perspective of gender and sexuality, I move on to examine the relationships of gender and sexual orientation to each other, and their roles in producing one another.

Making a Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Intra-action

The organization of gender and sexuality in Western society, as described by Judith Butler, depends on maintaining "relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (Butler 2006, 23) – ideally, on the existence of masculine men who have penises, desire women and practice heterosexual intercourse with them, and feminine women with vaginas, who desire to be penetrated by men (Ahmed 2006, 22–26) – in other words, on gender and sexuality being inseparably entangled into each other. However, as there clearly are bodies and practices that deviate in one way or another from this normative structure, the intra-actions of gender and sexuality appear more complex, producing different patterns in different situations.

Gay and lesbian as categories of identification are good examples of instances in which gender and sexual orientation can be seen as entangled into each other. While they can be, and often are, understood as sexual orientations first, they are also often seen as referring to certain kinds of gendered bodies. As Tapio puts it in the interview, "[...] sexual identification is of course a different thing than gender identification, but in a way, lesbian is also a gender".[18] Perttu, for example, said they have noticed that their social status is "gay man", meaning that they are seen as a man by other people, but "allowed quite a lot of feminine and woman-typical things" – even though they don't actually sexually identify as gay.[19] On the one hand it could be said that Perttu's "social sexual orientation" is gay, but their "descriptive sexual orientation" is something else. In this sense, sexual orientation can be seen to take part in our lived gender. On the other hand, bisexuality or pansexuality are not as likely to function in this way, as they determine neither the gender of their subject nor that of their object – sexual orientation and gender cannot be understood as one and the same.

While reorientations of gender identification can involve strategies such as gender reassignment, and disorientations of sexuality can lead us to assume new sexual orientations, gender identification and sexual orientation are also intimately entangled into each other. As our society's organization of gender and sexuality aims at maintaining coherence between different aspects of gendersex, to keep the individual and cultural lines of orientation straight, different mechanisms are required to deal with deviating lines and "off line" individuals (Ahmed 2006, 65–107). These mechanisms operate at the intersections of gender and sexuality, trying to keep these lines from going their separate ways and, where that is not possible, aligning them neatly in relation to each other. Because of the proximity of gender and sexuality to each other, and their many points of entanglement, gender can produce an effect that reads as sexuality and vice versa.

In some of the most obvious instances, if we look at the entanglement of gender and sexual orientation as an intra-active phenomenon, the gender of an individual (and of their object of attraction) can be thought to

17 K2: 9.; K3: 2. & 9.–15.; K6: 4., 14. & 22.

18 K6: 22.

19 K3: 4.

produce their sexual orientation: A woman, being exclusively attracted to bodies perceived as women, becomes lesbian. A woman exclusively attracted to men becomes heterosexual. In some cases, it seems, this production happens the other way round. Kaarna said that they identified with the idea of male homosexuality first, which then led to questioning their gender. In their fantasies they could only picture themself as a participant of a gay sex scene, if they imagined themself "[...] to be, like, a guy, or guy*ish*"[20]. In this case the experienced sexual orientation gave an impulse for identifying with gender that would match it. It also follows, as a consequence of this two-way productivity, that who we are seen to be in terms of gender, and who we are seen to be with, affects how our sexual orientation is interpreted by others – woman plus woman equals lesbian, man plus man equals gay, and woman plus man equals straight.

According to Ahmed, to orientate ourselves we must both know something is there to turn toward *and* know our own location (Ahmed 2006, 1–10). To have a gender-based sexual orientation, then, involves quite a bit of knowledge about gender – that of our own and/or that of others. If we are unsure of our gender, or our knowledge points to a kind of gender that doesn't follow the lines we are positioned on, we have no easy means to extend ourselves along those lines. Then again, knowing our own gender might not help, if our knowledge of the gender of other bodies is lacking or we feel that we cannot trust the accuracy of such knowledge. As we are, as I have argued, orientated toward having a sexual orientation, this kind of ambiguity concerning gender can be seen as doubly disorientating: First, it throws us off-line in terms of normative sexual orientation – we become unsure of what our orientation is. Second, it forces us off the line that points toward having that kind of orientation – we might come to question the significance, the possibility, of having such orientations in general. Sexual disorientation and disorientation of gender can, as seen here, act as cause and effect of one another in different ways.

As demonstrated by Ahmed, disorientation as an affect can move around, spreading and sticking to bodies: not only are queer bodies disorientated, off-line, they can also disorientate other bodies and spaces by their presence (Ahmed 2006, 170–171). In some intra-actions, transgender bodies seem able to disturb the organization of sexual orientation for other bodies on an individual level. While Tapio's heterosexual-identifying long-term male partner isn't attracted to men, the relationship has survived the changes in Tapio's gender identification and expression; they laughingly employ a concept of "compulsory homosexuality" to describe their relationship to a heterosexual male partner.[21] However, moments of disorientation are not always met with humor: in my interview texts, several instances emerge in which the productive relations between gender and sexuality cause moments of disorientation that can be read as dysphoric. For example Tapio describes having often felt discomfort in being interpreted, because of their relationship with a man, as "straight" before transitioning.[22]

Negotiating Difference

As both gender and sexual orientation seem able to shift and change during our lives, they take on different functions to each other in the course of such shifts. Kaarna, Tapio, Tuomo and Perttu all had identified as lesbian or experimented with lesbian identification and practices at some point in their past. Kaarna, despite identifying very early on with male homosexuality, has felt unable to actualize that kind of desires: In

20 K1: 8.

21 K6: 100.–104.

22 K6: 40.

intra-action with gay men, they have been seen as a woman, and thus not as a desirable object. In intra-action with straight men, they have been produced as a woman. They explain having therefore experimented with lesbian orientation, which resulted in interesting discussions and friendships, but not mutually satisfying sexual relationships.[23] Even so, their solution reads as a reasonable one: we might feel, for different gendered reasons, unable to actualize our desires for the objects we are facing, and turn to look for alternatives. Or it might be that our choice of objects limits our capacities to extend ourselves to act in some way not directly related to sexual desire: Tapio and Perttu believe their past lesbian identification to be connected to the wider possibilities of gender expression offered by lesbian identities than narrow heterosexual womanhood.[24] Tuomo, however, feels they have always been romantically attracted to similarity of gender, and that their objects of attraction have changed in accordance with their own gender.[25]

As gender identification and sexual orientation are closely connected, and as heterosexuality is still the norm in the Finnish society, matters of sexual attraction can complicate negotiations of transgender identification. Daniel, for example, says that having been attracted to males as a child and a teenager made it more difficult for them to identify as a transgender man.[26] Similarly, Tuomo considers their brief heterosexual identification during their transition as being caused by the lingering belief that transgender identification necessarily involves heterosexuality.[27] According to David Schleifer's (2006) study on gay AFAB transgender men, assuming a homosexual identification can help to relieve transgender men's gender dysphoria related to breasts and vaginas as traditionally feminine body parts, even enabling them to incorporate these bodily aspects into sexual activity "in ways that reinforce their masculinity and heighten their sexual pleasure" (Schleifer 2006, 71). While precisely this kind of usage of sexual orientation did not emerge in my data, there are multiple instances in which a homosexual identification appears helpful in negotiating conflicted experiences of gender, such as allowing a more feminine male presentation in Perttu's description of their gender. Perttu also points out that they are still often interpreted as female by others, and that even though they prefer to be seen as ambiguously gendered, they are more comfortable with a male gendering than a female one.[28]

Hence, a gay male social role can be seen to work for them in two ways: first, it allows for a more feminine spectrum of interests and expression than is accepted for straight men, and secondly it allows others to interpret Perttu's gender as "feminine male" instead of the otherwise likely "masculine female". For Kaarna, gay male identification actually preceded their transgender identification, which suggests that it might occasionally be easier to grasp the cultural specificities of sexual orientation than our experiences of gender conflict. Gay identification also seems to have become important in the formation of Tapio's gender identification, as they told that they had experienced the gay male subculture as something easily identifiable with in the past, even though they are now strongly critical of it.[29]

From another perspective, as we vary our gender presentation situationally in the present as well as in the past (see Damsholt 2012), modifying our gender presentation can also be helpful in negotiating sexual orientation and partner choices in some instances. Tuomo's situational presentation

23 K1: 24.–38.
24 K3: 18.; K6: 22.
25 K5: 22.
26 K4: 38.–40.
27 K5, 12.
28 K3: 2.
29 K1: 4.–8.; K6: 30.–37.

as a man – appearing "as a man out there in the world", despite of their identification as "something like man-none-whatever" – can be seen to function in this sense in relation to their sexual relationships with (masculine) cisgender men.[30] As their gender presentation probably reads as male to most people,[31] their potential partners are likely to be men looking for sex with men. Though not all men interested in sex with men identify as gay, and not all gay-identifying men exclude other-gender people as their desire-objects, it still seems likely to be easier and definitely simpler to articulate a male identification, especially as Tuomo is not looking for long-term relationships[32] – after all, they need to be open about their non-normatively gendered body to their partners (which again demonstrates the agency of bodily matter in our gendered intra-actions), and explaining a non-binary gender identification on top of that might be excessive.

To summarize, as gender and sexual orientation can be seen as intra-actively entangled into each other, but not completely identical, changes in one are very likely to cause changes, or some amount of disorientation, in relation to the other. Transgender people are almost certain to experience sexual disorientation as a cause and/or an effect of their gender dysphoria, as well – or as a cause of the ways their bodies produce gender in their sexual intra-actions. However, this mutual productivity can also allow the use of sexual orientation to support transgender bodies, and vice versa: the experiences described suggest this potential is both consciously and unconsciously employed by transgender bodies in their daily lives.

According to Ahmed "[d]isorientation involves failed orientations" (Ahmed 2006, 157–160). From this perspective, non-heterosexual AFAB transgender histories can be seen as histories of failure: We have failed and will fail again in inhabiting the category of women, in passing as men and blending in with men. We fail in being comfortable with being seen as straight or as lesbian, desiring women,[33] in having sex with men, and in not having sex with men. While not all of us share all these experiences of failure, we all have failed in extending ourselves in space as ourselves in the gender we were assigned to at birth. Indeed, to paraphrase Jack Halberstam, failing is something transgender bodies do and have always done exceptionally well (Halberstam 2011, 3).

However, failure doesn't always need to be seen as a disaster. As Halberstam further argues, as success requires spending a lot of energy in trying, "then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards" (Halberstam 2011, 3). In becoming disorientated, in losing our way, in failing our orientation, we might find previously unperceived directions to turn to, that offer surprising new rewards. When assigned-at-birth gender and heterosexuality are presented as the only options, or at least the most prestigious ones, failing in living them might be just what is needed to become aware of what else is out there besides the straight lines of normativity – moments of disorientation are able to denaturalize orientation.

Conclusion

The dynamics of orientation, disorientation and reorientation of gender identification and sexual orientation play an important role in the embodied transgender lives of my informants. As gender and sexual orientation are intimately entangled into each other, and thus produce each other in various intra-active relationships, and as both emerge as important

30 K5: 4.–5., 18.–20. & 57.–60.
31 K5: 4. & 78.–80.
32 K5: 18.–20.
33 K1: 12., 24. & 38.–39.

identity-objects in our society, those of us who are transgender can avoid the issues of sexual orientation no more than cisgender individuals, although we might find them more disorientating. The diversity of experiences that has emerged here is significant – if gender and sexuality operate in so many different ways in the lives of six young, white Finnish AFAB transgender people, how could it be possible to summarize in any simple or universal manner the experiences of all the different bodies and identifications that have been described as transgender?

Richardson uses the concept of patterned fluidity to conceptualize the relationship of gender and sexuality to each other as "not free floating", but "governed through state and suprastate laws and regulations, as well as by local customs and practices" (Richardson 2007, 471). This is an important notion to my observations as well: though diverse and mobile, the intra-actions of gender and sexuality in the experiences of my informants have patterns, and are governed by a multiplicity of rules, assumptions and agencies. However, I want to avoid reading for a simple story of "good fluidity" against "bad regulations" here. As I have demonstrated here, it is often precisely the regulative or restrictive powers surrounding us that produce shifts and course changes in our gendered and sexual lives. Sometimes we might play this to our advantage, to blend in as gay men instead of having our gender questioned because of perceived femininity. In some situations we may be forced into a new category against our will: as Prosser points out in their *Second Skins,* not all transgender bodies aspire to fluidity, but "seek […], quite simply, to *be*" (Prosser 1998, 32).

The experiences, mechanisms and potentialities of the transgender bodies I have observed here can't be taken as universal, and that was not my aim in the first place: I wanted to point out and consider diversity rather than similarity. However, I don't want to assume such diversity as universal to transgender bodies in all times and places, either. It is probable that this kind of diversity in experiences and practices is only made possible by certain kinds of surroundings, and that other places and times produce differences quite different from what we see here. I think I have opened up some interesting directions here, though, to turn our attention toward in the future: I believe that further studies on the patterns and changes in gender identification and sexual orientation, and on their entangled intra-actions, along the timelines of transgender becomings, will be beneficial to transgender politics in particular and our understanding of gender and sexuality in general.

References

Interviews

Recorded one-on-one interviews. Original recordings and written transcripts in author's personal archives.

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K2: Era, 16.10.2013.

K3: Perttu, 21.11.2013.

K4: Daniel, 22.11.2013.

K5: Tuomo, 22.11.2013.

K6: Tapio, 23.11.2013.

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