

- Rothblum, E. (2014). Mars to Venus or earth to earth? How do families of origin fit into GLBTQ lives? *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 10*, 231–241.
- Shulman, J. L., Gotta, G., & Green, R.-J. (2012). Will marriage matter? Effects of marriage anticipated by same-sex couples. *Journal of Family Issues, 33*, 158–181.
- Shumaker, S. A., & Brownell, A. (1984). Toward a theory of social support: Closing conceptual gaps. *Journal of Social Issues, 40*(4), 11–36.
- Thoits, P. A. (2010). Stress and health: Major findings and policy implications. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 51*(S), S41–S53.
- Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms linking social ties and support to physical and mental health. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior, 52*(2), 145–161.
- Umberson, D., Thomeer, M. B., Kroeger, R. A., Lodge, A. C., & Xu, M. (2015). Challenges and opportunities for research on same-sex relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 77*, 96–111.
- Webb, S. N., & Chonody, J. (2014). Heterosexual attitudes toward same-sex marriage: The influence of attitudes toward same-sex parenting. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 10*, 404–421.
- Webb, S. N., Chonody, J., & Kavanagh, P. S. (2017). “If you don’t like gay marriage, don’t get one!”: A qualitative analysis of attitudes toward same-sex marriage in South Australia. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 13*, 439–458.

## Chapter 8

# Gender transition and same-sex marriage

## A qualitative consideration

Andrew S. London, Carrie Elliott, Rebecca Wang,  
The Wentling, and Nataliee Simpson

A substantial portion of individuals who identify as transgender are currently or were previously married. Using data from the 2014–2019 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, London (Chapter 4) estimates that 37.5% of persons who identify as transgender are currently married, while at least another 19.4% were previously married. Marriages involving transgender individuals are heterogeneous and complex. Whether any given marriage involving a transgender person can be considered a “same-sex marriage” depends on the characteristics of both spouses and many factors, including whether and how the distinction between sex, gender, and sexuality is taken into account; the medico-legal context in which sex is assigned at birth and gender and sex designation are changed; whether sex assigned at birth and gender status of the marriage, either by participants themselves or the state; and how gender transition changes the self-concepts of the participants and their experiences of their marriage. What appears from the perspective of an observer – be that family, friends, researchers, or the state – to be a same-sex marriage might or might not be considered one from the perspective of the participants. Moreover, a marriage may change from being a different-sex marriage to a same-sex marriage, or vice versa, as it endures over time and through the gender transition of one or both of its members. Thus, an analysis of marriages involving transgender individuals can provide conceptually important insights into the limits of the categories “same-sex” and “different-sex” marriage.

In this chapter, we draw on narrative data from a qualitative, in-depth interview study involving a diverse sample of 39 adults who identified with the term “transgender” and were living in a gender different from their sex assigned at birth. We focus primarily on the stories of the 11 currently married participants and present illustrative examples. Their stories about their marriages enable a critical examination of the concept of same-sex marriage. We develop our analysis with reference to the life-course perspective because its five principles – linked lives, agency, lives in time and place, life-long development, and timing and sequencing (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003;

Elder & Shanahan, 2006) – are useful conceptual lenses through which to focus an analysis of gender transition, legal sex designation, and sexuality in relation to same-sex marriage. We begin with a discussion of sex, gender, and sexuality as distinct and contested concepts, a brief overview of the five main principles of the life-course perspective, and a description of our data and methods. Our results elucidate the personal, social, and cultural salience of marriage in the lives of transgender persons, and the ways that the lived experiences of married transgender individuals can complicate conceptualizations of “same-sex” and “different-sex” marriage.

## Literature review

### Sex, gender, sexuality: contested concepts

Social scientists recognize the conceptual distinctiveness of sex, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, they generally contest heteronormative, essentialist, “born-this-way” claims that normatively gendered behavior and sexuality are naturally determined by genetic sex and claims that gendered behavior and/or sexuality that is considered non-heteronormative represent some form of moral, social, or physical aberration (Luca, 2008). Drawing on a critical, constructionist perspective that contends that all social categories are socially constructed as well as considerable empirical evidence (Irving, 2003), many sociologists and queer theorists have argued that culturally dominant categories that reference sex, gender, and sexuality emerge through various social processes – both relational and institutional – and that their meanings shift over time and across different contexts (Connell, 1987).

Sex represents a complex arrangement of bodily processes, including genitalia, hormones, chromosomes, and reproductive capacity (Kessler, 1990; Preves, 2001). However, it also represents a socio-legal status and relationship to the state given that sex assignment is made and recorded at birth, institutionalized in various administrative and regulatory processes, and ultimately documented on a range of state-issued documents (e.g., birth certificate, passport). Sex designation at birth establishes legal recognition and can only be changed through individual agency, often in the face of contestations over criteria and legal interpretation (Currah & Moore, 2009; Meadow, 2010; Wentling, 2016). Gender represents the constellation of societal norms and cultural expectations that are linked to sex designations (Lorber, 1993). Normative gender behavior, expression, and roles are learned through socialization and actively performed and modified in various contexts (Lorber, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The various components of sexuality – attraction, behavior, and identity – are aspects of personhood that are distinct from sex and gender and potentially fluid across the life course (Hoy & London, 2018).

Gender identity – a psychological concept related to one’s sense of being a woman, a man, both, or neither (Stryker, 2008) – and gender transition can (re-)shape lived experiences of sex, gender, and sexuality. Changes in these aspects of personhood brought about by gender transition further challenge heteronormative and essentialist assumptions about the fixed, natural alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality.

### The life-course perspective: theoretical considerations

Will you marry me? As the question itself suggests, marriage, fundamentally, is about the linking of lives. The linked lives principle of the life-course perspective highlights the interdependence of individuals engaged in meaningful social relationships. Contemporary, Western notions of marriage are grounded in ideologies of exclusivity, modern love, and culturally scripted choice (Martin & Kazyak 2009; Swidler, 2001; Wolkomir, 2009). They are also recognized as legally linking one individual’s life to another’s.

While marriage is fundamentally about the linking of lives, its modern, Western form can also be seen as an example of human agency within structure (Settersten & Gannon, 2005). The life-course principle of agency calls attention to the active role individuals play in responding to the opportunities and constraints they encounter. Within the constraints variably engendered by law, religion, cultural tradition, community, and family, modern, Western marriage reflects considerable agency exercised by individuals in relation to partner choice, the timing of marriage in the life course, whether the marriage endures or is ultimately terminated, and the arrangements and dynamics of the relationship, among other marriage-related matters.

The life-course principle of lives in time and place also focuses attention on the structural aspects of human agency within structure. Lives and agency are embedded in historical time and specific geographic locations. Individual choices are not made in a vacuum; they occur in malleable time- and place-bounded institutional and policy contexts that enable some kinds of choices and constrain or outright prohibit others (Wilmoth & London, 2021). However, structural change also happens at particular times and in particular places, creating new opportunities for some individuals and/or placing new constraints on the agency of others. On June 26th, 2015, the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage across the US through their ruling in *Obergefell v Hodges*, and it became possible for any adult couple to marry, regardless of its members’ sex assignment at birth, current sex, gender, or sexuality. However, it is important to remember that prior to the *Obergefell* decision, the legal status of marriages involving transgender individuals was complicated both by state laws that determined how their sex was legally recognized and changed, and by state laws that determined whether marriage was restricted to different-sex couples (Chauncey, 2004; Kimport, 2013). Pre-*Obergefell*, legally changing one’s sex, if allowed,

would not disrupt the legal status of a pre-existing different-sex marriage in any state, but could in specific historical moments affect whether individual states would allow or recognize the legality of specific future marriages (Taylor 2007). In the context of varied and changing state policies, transgender individuals who legally changed their sex could find themselves in a number of different legal positions regarding their existing marriages or their ability to marry, including the following: being in a same-sex marriage that was legally recognized as a different-sex marriage; being in a different-sex marriage that was legally recognized as a same-sex marriage; being in a same-sex marriage that was legally recognized as such; and being unable to marry because their marriage would be legally understood as same-sex by the state in which they resided and same-sex marriage was not legally recognized in that state at that time.

The life-course principle of timing and sequencing draws attention to how the influence of events, policies, and institutions on individuals depends to some extent on the timing, duration, and sequencing of occurrences or exposures in the life course. Although marriages can happen at any point in the adult life course, they are strongly influenced by prevailing normative expectations about age at first marriage. Marriages that occur “on-time” are more culturally legible than those that occur too early or too late in the life course, and individuals who do not marry are, in some historical eras and contexts, subject to scrutiny, questioning, and stigma. As cohorts age, they are exposed to historical events, institutional arrangements, policies, and cultural expectations at the same point in the life course. With variation by gender, race/ethnicity, immigrant generation, socioeconomic status, and other factors, individuals within cohorts experience similar normative expectations with respect to marriage. Members of older cohorts, who transitioned to adulthood and became eligible to marry in historical periods prior to *Obergefell*, could enter different-sex marriages as heteronormatively expected and legally allowed or choose not to marry at that point. Given prevailing medical and legal options for gender and/or sex transition (Meyerowitz 2002; Stryker, 2008), some members of such older cohorts who would eventually undergo a gender transition in later life may have chosen to enter different-sex marriages early in the life course as normatively expected. Some who married early on stayed married and later underwent their gender transition within the context of an existing marriage, while others divorced before or after their gender transition and thereby became eligible for remarriage under different circumstances. Existing marriages can shape personal decisions about the timing of gender transition, while personal decisions about gender transition can shape marital outcomes in various ways. While members of more recent cohorts, who grew up in an era of progress toward or outright marriage equality, face a different set of choices with respect to sexuality, gender transitions, and marriage, it is important

to bear in mind that marital biographies can be complex and that decisions made at one stage of the life course can influence subsequent decisions.

The final life-course principle – lifelong development – emphasizes the notion that human development is continuous and that all life stages are rooted in prior development. In order to understand gender transition and how marriage has or has not been involved in the lives of transgender individuals, we need information about: early-life and current circumstances, including where they now live; the timing, duration, and sequencing of key events in the life course; agency as it relates to marriage, gender transition, current sex, and sexuality; and the diverse social ties that individuals develop and sometimes leave behind. Engaging the dynamic, lived complexities of historically and geographically contextualized lives at the nexus of marriage, gender transition, sex designation, and sexuality provides a unique vantage point from which to think critically about what the categories “same-sex marriage” and “different-sex marriage” do and do not encompass.

## Methods

This investigation draws on data from qualitative, open-ended interviews with 39 individuals who identified with the term “transgender,” were 18 years or older, and had chosen a gender different from their sex assigned at birth. All of these individuals had participated in a prior mixed-methods study on transgender citizenship (Wentling, 2016) and indicated that they were willing to be re-contacted for a follow-up interview. Follow-up interviews were developed as a new project that was collaboratively designed by the authors of this chapter and approved by Syracuse University’s Institutional Review Board. The semi-structured interview guide was designed with the life-course perspective in mind, but the interview was not conducted as a formal life-history interview. Our five-member research team is diversely embodied by race, nationality, gender, sexuality, age, and transgender status.

Given that transgender studies have mainly focused on gender transition among white, middle-class transgender people (Bryant & Schilt, 2008; Witten, 2009), we purposively sampled participants on the basis of race/ethnicity, younger and older age, and military service. Importantly for the purposes of contextualizing what we can learn from an analysis of these data, interviews were completed between March 14 and July 3, 2012, prior to the *Obergefell* decision. All five members of the research team conducted interviews by phone or voice-over-internet protocol. We conducted interviews conversationally using an interview guide that included extensive modules of questions about gender transition; family; intimate, sexual, and romantic relationships; and several other topics. Although the interview guide did not include specific questions about marriage or related concepts (e.g., divorce), 34 of the 39 participants talked in substantive ways about

marriage or related concepts, and, when they did, we probed for additional information as the conversation evolved. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 3 hours and 17 minutes, with most interviews lasting approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. With participants' consent, we audio-recorded the interviews. We subsequently transcribed the audio-recordings verbatim. (For more information about the lives and experiences of participants in this study, see Wentling, 2020; Wentling, Elliott, London, Simpson, & Wang, 2021.)

Our sample is diverse in numerous ways. Overall, 22 of the 39 participants reported at least one non-White race and/or Hispanic ethnicity. Geographically, participants were drawn from all regions of the US. Twenty of the participants identified as men, 18 identified as women, and one identified as non-binary. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 71 years, with 19 of the participants between the ages of 18 and 34 years. Participants who identified as men were younger than participants who identified as women, with 13 of the men and six of the women between the ages of 18 and 34 years. Reflecting this age difference, participants who identified as men reported shorter durations since medical transition than did participants who identified as women; 80% of the participants who identified as men had medically transitioned in the prior ten years compared to 61.1% of the participants who identified as women. All but four of the participants reported hormone use. Gender-affirming surgery was more common among participants identified as men than among participants identified as women.

Our analysis was informed by thematic narrative approaches (Riessman, 2008). We read transcripts to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participants' thoughts about and experiences with marriage. For the purposes of this chapter, we read the data with the categories "same-sex" and "different-sex" marriage in mind. Our presentation of the results includes interview quotes that center participants' voices and descriptions of their own experiences (Denzin, 1989). Doing so allows for a better understanding of the complex, intertwined social processes operating at the nexus of marriage, gender transition, sex assigned at birth, current sex, and sexuality. All names referenced herein are pseudonyms.

## Results

In part reflecting the social, cultural, and personal significance of marriage among transgender people, the vast majority of participants discussed marriage in some way, and many wove comments and commentaries about marriage and its meaning into the conversations that evolved during the interviews. Participants spoke, sometimes at length, about their prior and current experiences with marriage and how their gender transition shaped their marital biographies. Some talked about how their gender transition affected their decision to marry or end a marriage. Some talked about close

ties with in-laws or about how inclusion in a marriage ritual signaled the value and significance of their family relationships. Others talked, sometimes painfully, about exclusion from a family wedding and breaches in family relationships resulting from parental disapproval of their gender transition. Many never-married and previously married individuals talked about their aspirations to marry and start families of their own.

While our interview data are rich and provide numerous pathways into a discussion of the meaning of and experiences with marriage among transgender individuals, in the remainder of this chapter, we draw on data from the interviews with the 11 currently married participants. Among them, seven identified as men and four as women. Six identified as white, four as multi-racial, and one as Black. Three also identified as ethnically Hispanic. Six participants had military experience, and nine had an Associate's degree or more. Four were working full-time, three were students, three were disabled, and one was retired. We organize our discussion of how marriages involving transgender individuals trouble the categories "same-sex marriage" and "different-sex marriage" by gender because there were clearly gendered patterns evident in the data. Throughout, we draw on relevant principles of the life-course perspective to help contextualize our discussion.

### Currently married women

Perhaps reflecting their older age and race/ethnicity – when they were born, the historical period in which they transitioned to adulthood, and the marital laws and norms that existed at that time – all four of the currently married women in the sample initially entered different-sex marriages with cisgender women. At the time they initially contracted these marriages, they were recognized legally as men based on documents that reflected the assignment of male sex at birth. Over the course of their marriages, they underwent transitions and variably changed their embodiment and legal sex designation. At the nexus of their experiences with marriage, gender transition, current sex, and sexuality, some of the complexities involved in designating marriages involving transgender individuals as "same-sex marriages" begin to become evident.

Angela, a 64-year-old, non-Hispanic White woman, described how she came to be married to her wife as a fairly normative pathway into legal marriage for the time period in which they grew up:

We grew up together, we were neighbors. We lived probably six blocks apart, and I got to know her in the third grade 'cause we both went to the same grade school. And then we went to the junior high dances together, and then, when we went to high school, she went to a different high school, so we kind of split that way. And she dated boys, I dated girls. And then, after high school, we got back together then and got married.

I dated, I had the reputation of loving or leaving them with all the girls that I dated in high school. But, I guess I could never find anybody that marched what Beth was. So, I just never fell for any of the girls.

Personal connection, proximity and shared experiences in their neighborhood and schools, apparent conformity to gender roles that were consistent with the sex they were assigned at birth, limited opportunity to explore options for gender transition, and documents that certified their eligibility to marry according to the prevailing laws all contributed Angela and Beth's legal different-sex marriage in 1968.

Reflecting the life-course principles of life-long development, lives in time and place, and agency, it was not until much later, around 2000 and after the emergence of a more public transgender movement (Valentine, 2007), that Angela began to acknowledge gender identity dysphoria and explore options for transition. Over the course of her transition, Angela has taken hormones and undergone procedures to align her embodiment more closely with her identity. She has also legally changed the sex designation on her birth certificate, driver's license, passport, and Social Security record.

Angela sees herself as always having been a lesbian, but acknowledges that her wife does not identify as lesbian. Although Angela has exercised agency and changed various aspects of her life and body, she suggests that her transition has not had much impact on their relationship. The one area that Angela acknowledges has changed in their relationship is physical intimacy.

Well, I guess our intimacy, with my spouse. There's only one thing that changed *[laughs]*. There's no more insertion with her, with what I used to have, 'cause it's gone. But, in our house, nothing has changed. We still caress, we hold, um, it's just that she is not a lesbian. So, that blows a lot of people away when we're speaking at the venues and we told people that, you know. I've always been a lesbian, but she is not. 'Okay, so how does that work?' Well, she just doesn't touch a lot of my female parts. But, it's getting better each year. She gets more accepting. But, she still loves me as a person so, um. And to me, in my life, I've always loved women. I, you know, men turn me off.

Angela and Beth's experience with marriage illustrates some of the ways that the categories of "same-sex marriage" and "different-sex marriage" may not adequately or accurately encompass the lived experiences of transgender individuals. Their marriage was contracted legally as a different-sex marriage. Seemingly, based on their early-life socialization and adolescent and young-adult identifications, they too saw their marriage as a different-sex marriage, although Angela's claim that she has always been a lesbian complicates even that assumption. Angela never shared whether she currently sees

her marriage as a same-sex marriage, but it is clear that she and Beth are often read as a same-sex couple. At the same time, Angela reports that Beth is not a lesbian. Angela's transition does not change the fact that they legally married as a different-sex couple, but it does change how their relationship is read as they interact with others in the world. Angela's transition is connected to her ability to articulate that she has always been a lesbian, but it does not change Beth's identity as a straight woman (according to Angela). Overall, their story raises questions about how sex, gender, sexuality, legal designations, and personal identities connect to personal understandings and externally attributed categorizations of marriages as "same-sex" or "different-sex."

Exemplifying to some extent the importance of timing and sequencing in the life course and life-long development, Peggy describes how her marriage and family roles influenced decisions she made about the timing of her gender transition. Peggy is a 44-year-old, non-Hispanic White woman, who was married to a woman with whom she had three biological children at the time of her interview. Initially, Peggy and her spouse contracted a different-sex marriage in a historical period when that was the only legal option available. At the time of the interview, Peggy and her spouse were in the process of divorcing. Peggy's wife discovered Peggy's cross-dressing early in their marriage, and was not only unsupportive but physically and emotionally abusive towards Peggy. At one point, Peggy's wife kicked Peggy out of their home and had her arrested on false charges of abuse. Peggy and her wife were in the process of getting divorced, which was necessitated by Peggy's wife's abusive behavior in response to Peggy's transition and the fact that for Peggy's wife Peggy's gender transition is not compatible with the different-sex marriage that she entered into years before.

Peggy talked about other ways that gender dysphoria and gender transition-related issues intersected with her experiences of marriage, and how her marriage affected her choices and decisions about gender transition. For example, Peggy discussed her initial decision to marry as follows:

And yet, in my mind, I'm thinking: 'What the hell's wrong with me?' Cause there was no exposure to it *[gender dysphoria]*. And, I wouldn't want to say I got married to make it go away, but, in a kind of way, I guess, I kind of...you know, if I get married this is going to go away definitely. But, I didn't plan my marriage because of that *[mnnnnnnnnnn]*. And, shortly thereafter, um, it, there was a point like when I was 28, and I'm like, this is never going away.

Although Peggy acknowledges that she had relatively little exposure to anything related to gender transition when she was growing up, she clearly describes the strength of her desire to transition and how the marital and family roles she had assumed earlier in her life were influencing her decisions about gender transition. Peggy continued:

I knew I wanted to start being a different person to society. Um, I wanted to, but I, yet I was conflicted because I had my wife, and then I had a child at that point [mmmm]. So, you fall into a role of being a dad. So, now I've played lots of roles. I've played big brother to my brothers. I'm the oldest in my family. I've played military guy. I've played married guy. And it doesn't, it just doesn't go away. Um, at one point I thought I could hide it. Um, at lots of points, all throughout my life, it would come up to a point.

At the time of the interview, Peggy had not been able to change her name legally because of the impending divorce. However, she had changed the sex marker on her driver's license and with Social Security. In part because they are engaged in a legal process to dissolve a marriage that was initially contracted as a different-sex marriage, it seems likely that the state, Peggy, and her spouse would all consider their current marriage to be a different-sex marriage even though it involves two people of the same gender. Still, this is noteworthy because, under other circumstances, a marriage involving two people of the same gender would likely be considered a "same-sex marriage" by some observers. Peggy initially hoped that entering into a different-sex marriage would alleviate her feelings of gender dysphoria, but ultimately experienced different-sex marriage as placing her in gendered roles like "married guy" and "dad" that were unsustainable. Reflecting life-long development and the influence of the timing and sequencing of events in the life course, Peggy's earlier entry into marriage and parenthood roles shaped her decisions about transition to some extent.

Over the course of our interview with Caroline, a 46-year-old, non-Hispanic White woman, she described both an ongoing marriage and an intended future marriage. The ongoing marriage started as different-sex marriage in an era when only different-sex marriages were legal. During the course of this marriage, Caroline came out as transgender, began dressing full-time as a woman, and eventually underwent gender affirmation surgery. She also legally changed her name and changed the legal sex designation on her birth certificate, driver's license, passport, and Social Security record. She remains married, but Caroline describes her marriage as "dissolved." She says that the legal divorce she desires is on hold due to matters of finance and health insurance coverage for her current spouse. She told the interviewer:

I'm still currently married, um, so she could stay on my insurance ... Well, in the divorce agreement is that I keep her under there for at least another three and a half years. Well, I can get married now, but then I would have to pay for her health insurance. Or, I can't get married in the next three and a half year and I don't have to. So, if I want to get married now, I can file the paperwork and tell them I want to finalize

the divorce, and I would have to come up with the money to pay her health care for the next three and a half years. ... I'll probably wait. To do the divorce is very costly for me, and I'll probably have to pay a lot of alimony because, just for the situation there, my attorney said I would probably get eaten alive if we went in front of a judge saying it's my fault the marriage dissolved. And I have a relatively good job in a union shop making some good money, and she's in poor health and stuff. So, part of the agreement was that it wasn't a 50-50 split, it was more like a 65-35 or something like that there. So, financially there's no way I would handle paying the alimony I'm paying her and health insurance. So, we'll stay married on paper the next three and a half years and years, and then we'll [Caroline and her fiancé] get married so he can be on my insurance.

Thus, illustrating life-long development, the influence of earlier events on later events, and how benefits are conferred through the legal linking of lives, her current marriage to a woman continues due to the legal constraints on agency associated with dissolving a previously contracted different-sex marriage. In some ways, Caroline's existing marriage is a marriage of convenience that persists in order to allow her to meet the financial commitments agreed to in her divorce negotiation and for her spouse to keep needed health benefits.

Although Caroline remains legally married, she is engaged and living with a cisgender man. Caroline described how they got together as follows:

I was upfront. My fiancé, he knew. Shows how long ago that was. I had a Facebook, no, not Facebook, but MySpace, I had a profile and put right on there in my profile that I was post-op transgender and you had to be ok with that. And, he said he kinda went back and forth, because he'd seen a picture and he liked it, and it caught his attention. And, after he read it, I guess he didn't know what...and he did a little research and went back and forth and figured, you know what, we'd meet and have a drink. And we met, and met again and again, and pretty soon we were together, and he moved in. And it's been three years now.

When this marriage occurs, after she is able to finalize the dissolution of her current marriage, Caroline will legally be in another different-sex marriage based on current sex and gender. While the *Obergefell* decision would have allowed them to marry under any circumstance a few years after this interview took place, in the absence of marriage equality, Caroline could have married a cisgender male because she had changed her legal sex. The timing of sex marker changes was, in that era, still potentially consequential for access to legal marriage.

**Currently married men**

The currently married men in our sample are generally younger than the currently married women. They were raised and transitioned to adulthood in historical periods where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) visibility in popular culture and media was more prominent and positive role models were increasingly available. LGBT civil rights organizations at the state and federal levels were having some success in terms of marriage equality but also in a range of other domains. For those who were in college in this era, LGBT organizations were increasingly available and LGBT perspectives were increasingly woven into the curriculum.

Notably, the currently married men in our sample were all married to women, and their experiences were variable. Some but not all of their spouses were lesbian-identified. Some of these couples first got together when they were quite young, with some meeting in college, and some had already been together for a long time even though they were still quite young. Most of the currently married men transitioned while they were with their spouse, although sometimes their transition began before the marriage occurred. Perhaps reflecting age and cohort differences, men's discussions of marriage reflected different constraints on agency than women's discussions of marriage since all of the women initially entered legal different-sex marriages with male sex designations on their legal documents. The men we interviewed were more likely to experience constraints in entering into legal marriage because of the patchwork of state and federal rules that regulated marriages prior to *Obergefell*. Like the analysis of current marriages involving transgender women, an analysis of current marriages involving transgender men provides insights that trouble the categories of "same-sex marriage" and "different-sex marriage."

For example, Brenton describes his marriage in terms that do not quite fit either the same- or different-sex mold. Brenton is a 45-year-old White Hispanic man. He first met his wife in 2002 when they were in seminary. When he came out to her as transgender, she told him that it "made more sense." They were together for three years before he started to transition. When he told her that he wanted to start taking hormones, Brenton said that she was surprised but supportive. Brenton reported that he was initially against marriage; he was "part of that whole camp about heteronormativity." However, he went on to say that he and his wife are "not mimicking heterosexual norms. We're living our own lives, having our own marriage. /Yeah/ And, I, which, I just love it. I love it a lot."

In describing his gender transition, Brenton was quite specific about dates and timing and volunteered that he married toward the end of his transition. Although this was prior to marriage equality, he was legally able to do so because he had already changed the sex marker on his "government ID," which illustrates, again, the importance of timing and sequencing in the life course:

Ok, so, starting in 1996 identifying as just generic trans, by like 2000 I had started to identify more as, I think I would just say tranny queer or something like that. It was before the word tranny was such a landmine. Um, and then, it wasn't until 2005 that I started the physical part of a transition. Started with hormone injections in 2005, chest reconstruction in 2006, um hysterectomy and phalloplasty and all that goes with that in 2008 and 2010. Oh, and legal name change in 2005, legal sex marker change for government ID 2006. And then I got married in 2006 also, you know, because I was legally able to get married at that point.

Brenton emphasizes that although he and his wife are legally married in a different-sex marriage, they are not mimicking heterosexual norms. He finds it important to contextualize that their different-sex marriage is "their own marriage," not a heteronormative marriage. His story also highlights the challenges that many LGBT individuals faced accessing marriage prior to the *Obergefell* decision. This is an example that illustrates the importance of timing and sequencing because he needed to time his marriage in relation to stages of his transition in order to be able to fully access legal different-sex marriage. While his physical transition continued past his marriage, it was necessary to change the sex markers on his legal documents for him to legally marry his wife.

As noted previously, some of the men married cisgender women who are heterosexually identified. This is the case for Ethan, who is a 35-year-old Hispanic man, who also identifies as heterosexual. Ethan started dating women in high school and thought of himself as a lesbian as a result. However, he never felt quite at ease with a lesbian identity:

I always played the male role in the relationships. As time went on, long story short, um, I got married. And my wife was a therapist and she ended up with her first client that was transgender, female to male. And, um, as she researched more and more about this, she told, I think she told me, 'I think you're transgender.' And I thought, ah, 'Excuse me,' and I was really offended and, um, I definitely denied it for a long time. And then I went to a gender odyssey conference, and I went to a meeting, and I thought 'Oh crap, no, that's me, that is definitely me,' and I understood the difference between sexual orientation and gender. And everything started to fall into place because I never felt like a lesbian.

Ethan and his wife were together for nine years at the time of the interview. When he and his wife married, they entered a same-sex marriage since Ethan had not yet legally changed the sex designation on any of his documents. He has since done so. He reflected on the current state and "fit" of his marriage by noting that his wife's heterosexual identification was helpful because "a lot of people were in lesbian relationships when they transitioned, and for

their partners: it didn't work out because they were lesbian and wanted to be with a female not a male. But, for us it was perfect, like 'Oh good, now we're going to fit even better than we already do.'" Thus, although their marriage was initially a same-sex marriage from a legal standpoint, it is clear that he and his wife, who are heterosexually identified and differently gendered, very much see their current marriage as a different-sex marriage.

Hunter and his wife also entered into a same-sex marriage despite the fact that he had begun transitioning prior to their marriage. While Hunter had legally changed his name at the time of the interview, he had not changed the sex designation on any of his documents. Because of the time period in which they were married and the sex assignments on his and his wife's birth certificates, same-sex marriage would have been the only option legally available to them at the time of their marriage.

Hunter is a 29-year-old White man who describes his current marriage as his second relationship and as "a really vanilla story." Neither he nor his wife identify as straight or consider themselves to be in a straight relationship. Hunter says that he had broken up with someone else about six months after he began to transition and met his wife shortly thereafter through a queer organization at their university. He continued:

We were just seeing each other, we just started hanging out with each other more. It's not a very exciting story really. *(Laughs)* Ah, and after about a year of seeing each other we moved in together. And after about a year of living together, we took a trip to Europe together. It was really fun. We sort of kicked around *(city)* working, paying rent, living together sorts of things. We got married, like I said, a couple of years ago. We just decided to have a kid. We just have a month-old daughter right now. It's, I mean, I don't know, maybe she would have a different take on it, it just seems like a really vanilla story really. We met, we saw each other for a while, we got married, we have a kid, you know. We probably saw each other for three years, got married, been married for two years, so I've been with her for five years sounds about right.

Hunter's labeling of his relationship story as "really vanilla" and the noted lack of emphasis on legal challenges or hardships around the marriage exemplify the importance of historical time and place as his experiences were shaped by growing up in a more LGBT-accepting era. While LGBT people continue to experience discrimination, the fact that Hunter and his wife met through their campus LGBT group is indicative of the broader set of opportunities available to LGBT people at the time he was forming his relationship, transitioning, and considering marriage. His insistence that their relationship is not a straight relationship (something which echoes Brenton's assertion that his marriage was not mimicking heterosexual norms) challenges popular conceptions of same-sex marriage as "gay marriage" and

different-sex marriage as "straight marriage." Although Hunter identifies as a man and his wife identifies as a woman, neither identify as straight, and they do not want their marriage perceived as a straight marriage.

## Discussion

What makes a marriage a "same-sex" or "different-sex" marriage? Legally, the idea of same-sex marriage assumes that sex is both something that is knowable and fixed. Culturally, "same-sex marriage" is often used interchangeably with "gay marriage." The fact that a marriage is same-sex is meant to signify the sexuality of the participants and their exclusion from legal marriage when marriage was limited legally to a man and a woman. However, the category same-sex marriage invokes the notion of "sex" and renders invisible the ways that sex assigned at birth, current sex, gender, and sexuality might not align in the lived experiences of the individuals involved in the marriage.

For transgender people, and those whose lives are linked to them, transition can fundamentally shift roles and aspects of identity that are created through relations with other people. Someone who was formerly called "son" is now called "daughter." Someone who was formerly called "husband" is now called "wife." Marriage is about the linking of lives, and when lives are linked, things that impact one individual often impact the other as well. In our interviews with married transgender individuals, it was often clear that their marriages were impacted by their transition because of the impact that transition had on the identities and roles of both members of the couple. The complex stories our participants told at the nexus of gender transition, sex assigned at birth, current sex, legal marriage, and sexuality suggest that categories like "same-sex" and "different-sex" marriage do not adequately encompass the lived experiences of married transgender individuals.

As exemplified by the chapters in this volume, same-sex marriage is a socially constructed category that is widely used by researchers to demarcate a subpopulation of interest or variation in marital arrangements that is theorized to be associated with some outcome of interest. Our analysis suggests that researchers who focus on same-sex marriage need to interrogate who is included and excluded from that category and why, and ascertain to what extent "same-sex" is salient to the persons it may include or exclude. This interrogation will require researchers to grapple with a range of complex issues, such as the distinctiveness of sex assigned at birth, current sex, gender, and sexuality, and how those change across the life course in response to the constrained agency and choices of individuals. It will also require researchers to consider both participants in the marriage, life-long development, and the timing and sequencing of events and exposures in the life course since what happens later in lives is anchored in what happens earlier in lives. While challenging, doing this work is important because it will



foster transgender inclusion and increase the validity of the contributions to knowledge that are generated by researchers and used by others who draw on social science research to inform their understandings of the world.

## References

- Bryant, K., & Schilt, K. (2008). Transgender people in the US military: Summary and analysis of the 2008 Transgender American Veterans Association Survey. Available at: <https://www.palmcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/TGPeopleUSMilitary.pdf>
- Chaunee, G. (2004). *Why gay marriage: The history shaping today's debate over gay equality*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Connell, R. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Currah, P., & Moore, L. J. (2009). "We won't know who you are": Contesting sex designations in New York City birth certificates. *Hypatia*, 24, 113–135.
- Darzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive interactionism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Elder, Jr., G. H., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In J. T. Mortimer and M. J. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 3–19). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Elder, Jr., G. H., & Shanahan, M. J. (2006). The life course and human development. In R. E. Lerner (Ed.), *Theoretical models of human development* (pp. 665–715). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Hoy, A., & London, A. S. (2018). The experience and meaning of same-sex sexuality among heterosexually-identified men and women: An analytic review. *Sociology Compass*, 12, 1–17.
- Irving, J. M. (2003). "The sociologist as voyeur": Social theory and sexuality research, 1910–1978. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26, 429–456.
- Kessler, S. J. (1990). The medical construction of gender: Case management of intersexed infants. *Signs*, 16, 3–26.
- Kimport, K. (2013). *Queering marriage: Challenging family formation in the United States*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Lorber, J. (1993). Believing is seeing: Biology as ideology. *Gender & Society*, 7, 568–581.
- Lorber, J. (1994). Night to his day: The social construction of gender. In Judith Lorber (Ed.), *Paradoxes of gender* (pp. 13–36). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lucal, B. (2008). Building boxes and policing boundaries: (De)Constructing intersexuality, transgender and bisexuality. *Sociology Compass*, 2, 519–536.
- Martin, K. A., & Kazzyk, E. (2009). Hetero-romantic love and heterosexiness in children's G-rated films. *Gender & Society*, 23, 315–336.
- Meadow, T. (2010). A rose is a rose: On producing legal gender classifications. *Gender & Society*, 24, 814–837.
- Meyerowitz, J. (2002). *How sex changed: A history of transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Preves, S. (2001). Sexing the intersexed: An analysis of sociocultural responses to intersexuality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27, 523–556.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Settersten, R., & Gannon, L. M. (2005). Structure, agency, and the space between: On the challenges and contradictions of a blended view of the life course. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 10, 35–55.
- Stryker, S. (2008). *Transgender history*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.
- Swidler, A. (2001). *Talk of love: How culture matters*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, J. K. (2007). Transgender identities and public policy in the United States: The relevance for public administration. *Administration & Society*, 39, 833–856.
- Valentine, David (2007). *Imaging transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wentling, T. (2016). Trans gender embodied states of recognition: Fragmented citizenship and agency [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Syracuse University. <https://surface.syr.edu/uid/459>.
- Wentling, T. (2020). Contested citizenship: Remaining processes among people of transgender experience. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67, 1653–1674.
- Wentling, T., Elliott, C., London, A. S., Simpson, N., & Wang, R. (2021). "Every now and then I get flagged for a Pap smear": Gender transition, embodiment, and "sex-specific" cancer screenings. In A. J. LeBlanc and B. L. Perry (Eds.), *Sexual and gender minority health: Advances in medical sociology* (pp. 253–275). Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society*, 1, 125–151.
- Wilmoth, J. M., & London, A. S. (2021). *Life-course implications of U.S. public policies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Witten, T.M. (2009). Graceful exists: Intersections of aging, transgender identities, and the family/community. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 5, 35–61.
- Wolkomir, M. (2009). Making heteronormative reconciliations: The story of romantic love, sexuality, and gender in mixed-orientation marriages. *Gender & Society*, 23, 494–519.