

CHAPTER 5

Wider Society

Introduction

In many senses, nonbinary and genderqueer people represent a snag in the fabric of society: gender is a thread that reaches far and wide, affecting nearly every aspect of our lives. Pulling on the thread anywhere will disrupt the fabric as a whole. Existing as genderqueer or nonbinary affects a person's life in innumerable little ways, and the interstices of gender identity, culture, race, class and sexuality multiply the variations infinitely.

The sheer diversity of the nonbinary community is far larger than a single book chapter is capable of conveying, but this chapter will talk a little bit about what it's like to exist as nonbinary and genderqueer in a wider, largely cisgender, society. I'll discuss what it takes for us to come out and live openly, and some of the obstacles we face in navigating the complex social relationships – familial, romantic, professional – that texture our lives.

Coming out, transitioning and living as genderqueer in a cis world

Coming out, in a transgender context, means letting other people know about one's trans status. It has to do with whether or not other people understand us as nonbinary, and how comfortable we are with other people knowing. This can be done in a targeted way, when a genderqueer person tells someone that they're genderqueer or asks that the other person use certain pronouns for them, or it can be more passive, for example when that person dresses in a mixed or gender-ambiguous way, or undergoes medical treatment to perceptibly change the gender other people perceive them as.

To live as openly genderqueer is a rebellious act, and doesn't happen all at once. There are grades of being 'out', for example, to one's friends but not one's family, or to friends and family but not at work. Nowadays I personally am out to everyone who knows me for more than about half an hour (indeed, anyone who gets to know me has to deal with me talking about all of this stuff pretty incessantly), but I came out to different friend groups at different times, to my friends and even some professors before I came out to my family, and to my father before my mother.

Coming out to one's family can be a difficult experience, especially because coming out to older relatives involves negotiating generational boundaries. Trans people are at high risk of domestic abuse, family rejection and homelessness.⁷³ We're taught that family members, blood relatives, are supposed to stand by us no matter what, and for many people familial bonds are more important than any other. So when something happens to test those bonds, if an underlying prejudice is revealed and familial support is withdrawn, it can be devastating. Most trans and genderqueer people are not financially independent enough to be able to live on their own. To live everyday with people who don't accept or even know the real you – and to face the threat of violence, abuse or homelessness should you try to be more open about your identity – can be stressful, if not unbearable.

Even if abuse doesn't result from coming out, a curious blindness often manifests itself in our family members and relatives. A number of the nonbinary, genderfluid and genderqueer interviewees I spoke to over the course of writing this book told me that they repeatedly had to come out to family members who would conveniently 'forget' about their gender identities. This is connected to the larger mainstream unwillingness to validate or even acknowledge the existence of genderqueer identities, and a tendency that parents of transgender people often have to think of their children as static, unchanging and defined entirely by the parent's perception.

I have vivid memories of a rather fraught nighttime car ride, driving from Los Angeles to Orange County. It was the first time I explicitly came out as nonbinary to my mother. Perhaps I did it then because we were both trapped in the car with each other; I wanted to get it over with while there was no escaping for either of us. My mother cried. She said 'but you're my little girl'. I'm sure I cried as well. But, to my surprise, after this sentiment had been expressed aloud, it wasn't too difficult to tackle. She'd said what I was afraid she would – that my assigned gender was inextricably tied, in her mind, to who I am. But once it was said aloud we were able to analyse it, and we began to move past it together.

I asked her why I couldn't just be her child. I asked why my gender – something that I considered vestigial to my personhood, that I wished to be rid of – was essential. And to my relief and no doubt my mother's surprise, we found that it wasn't, not really. My mother decided that my wellbeing was more important to her than her own mental concept of me. She realised that I would still be her child no matter how I thought of myself, and she realised that my gender – my belief in and adherence to a set of social norms that she and my dad had imposed on me without conscious thought – was unimportant in the grand scheme of the things that made me who I was.

Ego can be a powerful force with parents, who often find that their idealised version of their child does not match who their child actually is. This can very quickly create conflict between parents and

trans children, and though I was lucky enough to have two parents clear-eyed enough to put my own autonomy first, I am painfully aware that most of us are not so fortunate. According to the 2017 Stonewall Trans Report,⁷⁴ 24 per cent of nonbinary survey participants were not open about their gender identity to anyone in their family (compared to one in seven binary trans people). I have a few theories as to why this might be, and why it might be easy for the parents of genderqueer people to reject their coming out, to invalidate and ignore their identities.

Nonbinary people whose families reject their identities must walk a fine line: any aspect of their expression which is in accordance with the gender they were assigned at birth is tacit permission to think of them as such, to gender them as man or woman and call them by a rejected birth name. On the other hand, expressing themselves as they really are often comes with a cost of physical or emotional violence.

The variable here, speaking very generally, is the difference between a crossing from one familiar binary option to another and from a binary gender to something that isn't so easily understood for a person who hasn't experienced it, and which may not always be the same. This creates an extra layer of mental adaptation which a genderqueer person's family must do in order to accept them.

Not all of the people I spoke to to research this book are 'out' to everyone in their lives.

The process of coming out, which has historically been heavily associated with social ostracism and the threat of physical violence, is both easier and less clear-cut than it used to be.

Coming out is as much a political statement as it is a declaration about oneself, one's past and, to an extent, one's personal life.

For many trans people, there is a constant give and take between coming out, passing and transitioning. Because our identities have not yet made it into mainstream understanding, there's a certain amount of explanation that a genderqueer person is expected to do if they want to live openly as genderqueer and have their identity

respected. Rather than simply declaring that they are genderqueer and being done with it, they will be asked to explain themselves to their cisgender friends, family and colleagues, decide when entering demographic forms whether they want to go to the trouble of specifying their gender, and even sometimes justify their presence in trans spaces.

Personal appearance, that is, gender presentation, can do a bit of this explaining. Pin badges with preferred pronouns, and pronouns listed on Facebook, Twitter and email signatures can do a bit more, but there is still a great deal of work involved in coming out and, possibly more importantly, *staying* out as genderqueer. A person who is out as nonbinary cannot just ‘come out’ once and begin living as their affirmed gender, because there’s no such thing as ‘passing’ for our affirmed genders. A genderqueer person must be continually explaining themselves, justifying their existence, ‘coming out’ again and again each time they meet someone new or enter a new environment or have their identity questioned.

Passing

When a trans person decides to come out and live visibly according to their gender identity they risk everything from public mockery to physical violence. Passing, or attempting to pass, as cisgender is the only option for a great many trans people, for example those who live in cultures or areas which are hostile to gender and sexual minorities. My ability to be both safe and open about my gender identity is a result of privilege which many people do not have, and I try to be mindful of this fact as much as possible. For trans people who don’t ‘pass’, that is, who don’t present conventionally as their affirmed gender, the danger is even greater, as they cannot control who knows about their trans status.

The concept of ‘passing’ is itself the subject of much debate within the trans community. The entire concept is tied up in an ability – or inability – to hide one’s membership in a minority group, and for that

reason many people consider it problematic. A great many trans people, both binary and not, consider the whole concept of 'passing' to be a flawed goal, dictated and enforced by an oppressive majority. They argue that rather than trying to adhere to a normative and very often unattainable ideal, trans people should try to challenge the system that creates the gender norms we are pressured to approximate. They argue that as long as there is pressure for trans people to 'hide in plain sight', as it were, then we will continue to be oppressed.

On the other hand, passing as cisgender is *not* an option for many people. Aside from people whose bodies react to hormones in unexpected ways, or people whose health makes surgery impossible, for many nonbinary and genderqueer people, to present as their affirmed gender precludes the possibility of passing at all. For many nonbinary, genderqueer and genderfluid people, identity and expression are intimately connected. We express our genderqueer status visibly through our bodies, hair, makeup, clothing and mannerisms. For these people there is no question of 'passing': there is no conventional idealised appearance for us to aspire to, and no commonly accepted ideal of what a nonbinary person should look or act like. For nonbinary or genderqueer people, to be visible is to be visibly nonconforming, alternative or non-normative. In order to present as nonbinary we have to forge our own path, as it were, and constantly battle between facing transphobic harassment and dysphoria and having our identities denied.

On the flip side, many nonbinary people are open about their identities to the people they know, while still presenting as binary-gendered in daily life: these people maintain the core of their identities in their self-image, but are perceived as binary, sometimes because the environment they live in makes it dangerous for them to be perceived as trans, and sometimes because presentation – and the way their gender is perceived by others – is unimportant to them. Other people may maintain a consistent and cis-appearing gender presentation even if their actual gender identity is fluid. Indeed this

may be the safest option for many people who aren't out to everyone they know. For these people the question is of passing as fixed-gendered at any given time.

I believe that in the long run there is little to be gained from conformity: striving to imitate a normative ideal can end up a tacit acceptance of that ideal. I believe that the definitions of what is male and what is female can and should be expanded: inclusivity is the only way we can create a society in which binary trans and cis people can be equal. At the same time I also feel that there is room for flexibility in these definitions, and that the institutions of binary gender will still stand up if not everyone in the world fits into them. But for many trans people there is no choice but to pass or attempt to pass, and it's my hope that someday the pressure to do so will no longer be there.

Dating, relationships and sex

I could tell in talking and meeting in person with cispeople that ultimately they weren't sure if they could be with someone who wasn't also cis, or someone whose gender and appearance might change. I'd gone on several dates with cis gay women, and could tell my genderfluid, masc presenting self didn't fit exactly into who they were interested in. I also felt that the way I present (as NB trans, very transmaculine) limited who was interested in me, as I was often interested in other NB people, men, and transmen who did not share that same attraction.

Interviewee XX2

Relationships, sex and dating are a huge part of our culture. The expectations associated with dating are based on a set of cultural norms, conventional behaviours and assumptions based on a largely heterosexual, binary-gendered majority. Being genderqueer while dating can throw a wrench into the works, so to speak, in many

respects. There are a number of basic assumptions that we can disrupt or subvert by our very existence:

- the assumption of attraction to the opposite sex, or the idea that there even is an opposite sex
- the assumption of sex being the same as gender, or that a person's genitals look a certain way based on their outward appearance
- the assumption that a person is interested in sex, or will be after a certain amount of time; that sex is the ideal end goal or outcome of a relationship
- the assumption of monogamy
- the assumption that 'matching' with someone based on a handful of surface-level characteristics can be the basis for a meaningful sexual or romantic relationship.

I've often heard the sentiment expressed, even from within the nonbinary community, that genderqueer and nonbinary people are 'undateable': that our gender identities – or more importantly the way these identities are perceived by other people – preclude us from taking part in conventional practices of courtship. Indeed dating and relationships are often framed by popular discourse in black and white terms of male and female, or of only being attracted to men, or only women, with no room for flexibility or the grey areas in between. The entire basis of the culture surrounding dating, sex and marriage is on a gender binary, in terms of romantic partners being on opposite or the same sides of it. Even the romantic ideal of 'matching' with your 'other half' is distressingly binaristic.

But sexuality and attraction are much more complicated than popular imagination may make them appear, and despite the trope of 'boy meets girl', attraction doesn't always follow clear gender lines. This can complicate things when it comes to finding a romantic partner. For a nonbinary person, it takes a bit more effort to find someone who is open to the idea of dating a person who is neither a man nor

a woman, or who might be both, or neither, or different genders on different days. Unfortunately this means that most conventional dating apps, which broadly sort their users based on discrete categories and pair them based on their desire for or compatibility with people fitting other categories – and practices such as blind dating or speed dating – don't work for the average nonbinary person. Even in terms of gender identity options available for users to mark themselves with, most apps aside from a select few, such as OkCupid,⁷⁵ are extremely limited. When asked if being nonbinary 'limits their options' when it comes to relationships, interviewee SG said, 'yes, I think when you don't fit into commonplace gender/identity categories people who may be attracted to you don't consider you, because of preconceived ideas of what they like.'

In the community there's also commonly held to be a certain level of danger associated with 'dating while trans'. Because so much of dating relies on outward signals of inward characteristics and preferences, having a gender identity and presentation that doesn't 'match' your genitalia can create a situation in which a potential partner's expectations, their interpretation of the gendered signals a person is giving off, don't match what they expect to see in that person's underwear. This mismatch between expectations and reality is the basis for the harmful and distressingly pervasive stereotype of the 'deceptive' trans woman, who 'lures' an unsuspecting man into bed and then reveals that – shock horror! – she has a penis. The reason this stereotype – and the idea that trans people are in any way *hiding* an aspect of themselves from potential partners – is harmful is that we can't control what gender we were assigned at birth. The suggestion that we should be forced to disclose the nature of our genitalia before dating is invasive and demeaning, but it has been suggested as a 'solution' to the trans dating 'problem'. The idea that we're purposefully misrepresenting ourselves to some nefarious purpose, aside from being not true, contributes to the perception of trans people as bad, aberrant and otherwise 'other'.

There is in some ways an inverse relationship between how much

of their identity a nonbinary person reveals to the world and their potential dating pool. For many of the genderqueer and nonbinary people I've spoken to, casual dating and using dating apps simply isn't on the cards, so finding potential partners can in many ways be a more laborious process. As interviewee JRF put it, 'most people are just looking to get their rocks off'. When asked if they use dating apps or websites, interviewee TP said, 'I usually don't. Because being demisexual, first impression "attraction" isn't how I work ever. But I've tried Tinder. I mostly use it to find queer friends in my area, and I make sure to state on my bio that I'm looking for friendship first and foremost.'

When you're nonbinary, especially if your presentation is very ambiguous or variable, it can be difficult to know where you stand with people. I personally present very ambiguously in my everyday life, and I've been asked out on dates by both cisgender men who identified as gay and who identified as straight. These instances have been difficult, not just because I'm not attracted to men at all, but because it's hard to know what aspect of my personality or appearance they were attracted to. What in my behaviour gave them the signal that I might be interested in them? What would they expect from me if we dated and what would that mean to my own gender identity?

Dating while identifying as nonbinary is a fraught process that requires both openness and trust on the part of both partners. Each of my interviewees seemed to navigate it in different ways. Interviewee EB2 says that they're open about their gender identity to the person they're in an open relationship with, but when going on casual dates they don't disclose that they are genderfluid. When asked how soon in a date or new relationship they would bring up their identity, they responded 'It hasn't come up yet and I am definitely too scared to acknowledge it yet or even approach the topic.'

On the other hand, interviewee XX2 says that their identity is not something they're willing to hide: 'When I was dating, both online and in person, I was upfront about my gender identity [after I came out], because I didn't want anything to be up in the air or have to deal

with the bull of prospective partners reacting negatively towards me because of my identity. If my gender disqualified people from being interested in me, so be it (as hard as a conclusion that was to come to).’ TP, too, makes their identity apparent from the start: ‘I make sure someone knows my pronouns the moment they learn my name. My gender identity is clearly stated on all of my social media bios, and I try to make it as obvious as possible.’ KR says, categorically: ‘If someone can’t respect your pronouns then they don’t respect you and don’t deserve to be in your life.’

The experience of dating varies heavily depending on a person’s mobility and what environment they live in. Not every area has an active trans community and for someone who isn’t able to connect in person with people who are genderqueer or open to dating genderqueer people, it can be incredibly isolating. Interviewee EB2 continues, ‘I feel like if I want to pursue any kind of relationships, especially in the town I’m in, I have to be closeted or I won’t have any options at all, honestly.’

Sex and attraction

Nonbinary gender identity can make a person very aware of the nuance of the way they experience attraction, and the ways by which their identity subverts expectation. Interviewee TP, on sexual attraction, says ‘I’m attracted to mostly femme cis women. I am attracted to men, but have trouble connecting sexually with them. I think some of that has to do with my gender identity and feeling like I need to perform more femininely when I’m engaging sexually with a man, and that makes me feel uncomfortable and not like myself.’

The fact of having an identity outside male or female can disrupt traditional gendered sexual roles. Sexual preference is not always something discussed in detail on a first date, and very often we’re not equipped with the vocabulary to talk about these things with subtlety, so a genderqueer person dating a cis person might not know how their partner will react right up until they actually have sex.

Sex can be strange, embarrassing or awkward for almost anyone, but for a person whose relationship with their body is strained the act can be even more difficult. Many nonbinary and genderqueer people experience gender dysphoria, or a discomfort due to the mismatch between their body and the gender they identify with. I'll explain dysphoria in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7, but for now it's useful to know that it can make the person who experiences it very aware of, and very uncomfortable with, their own body, especially their genitals and secondary sex characteristics. Because sex is a physical act, the way that sex is performed and the way that a nonbinary person's partner relates to their body can have an impact on the relationship.

Interviewee TP said that, in the early stages of dating, it's very important to lay ground rules regarding the language their partner uses to describe their body: 'It is important to me that when entering the phase in the relationship where we have to label each other or describe each other, or if we begin sexting, a conversation is required about what descriptive words my partner can use for me at which times, what parts of my body I do and do not want talked about during sex or sexting, and what I words I would be comfortable with my partner using for certain parts of my body.'

A number of the people I spoke to while researching this book said that they felt more comfortable in relationships – sexual, romantic or otherwise – with another trans or nonbinary person. Even for nonbinary people who don't experience dysphoria, the basic fact of sharing lived experience can make them feel safer in a relationship and make intimacy easier to achieve. If a genderqueer person chooses to only have sex with other genderqueer people, they are essentially choosing to only have sex with other people who know something of what they've gone through, and are more likely to understand the relationship they have with their body. XX2, when asked how their identity interacts with their sex life: 'I'd say if anything it's positive. I didn't know for sure until we had sex, but I'd rather be with someone/ have sex as a transperson with another transperson.'

Sexual identities within the nonbinary community

In today's highly sexual culture – a culture that is quick to leap to binary conclusions – being nonbinary can force a conversation in which one challenges the rigidity of categories like 'man' or 'woman', 'gay' or 'straight'. Because of the way that preconceived notions about gender and sex shape dating and relationships, many of the nonbinary people I've spoken to have indicated that they're most comfortable in a dating situation in which these preconceptions have been largely discarded. That is, they're most comfortable in an environment where the culture of dating and relationships has been broken down or *queered*.

Of the nearly 900 people who responded to the STA nonbinary experiences report, 53 per cent identified their sexuality as 'queer', with 'pansexual' and 'bisexual' close behind at 32 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively. There was also a high instance (19%) of asexuality among the participants. Around 20 per cent of participants described themselves as lesbian or gay, and only 5 per cent identified themselves as heterosexual. Only one of my interviewees identified with what could be called a 'binary' sexuality, and described herself as: 'homosexual, attracted to male genitals but people who lean toward a more feminine side.' Interviewee SG's take on their own sexuality was particularly nuanced: 'I generally describe myself as queer, naturally polysexual/polyromantic⁷⁶ (my love for emotionally significant people does not affect my feelings for others), on the asexual spectrum – I have a preference/particular attraction for people with traits that I interpret as gender non-conforming.'

Bi- and pansexuality

Seven of my interviewees described themselves as bi- or pansexual, meaning a sexuality that involves an attraction to multiple or all genders. There has been a certain level of debate surrounding the term 'bisexual', namely whether it should be distinguished from

‘pansexual’, or whether they should be taken to mean functionally the same thing. Some people who identify as pansexual claim that bisexuals are attracted only to *men* and *women*, and thus inherently trans- and nonbinary-phobic; this faction assert that by calling themselves *bisexual* rather than pansexual bisexuals are denying the existence of more than two genders, or at the very least claiming to be *attracted* to only two genders. But I’ve never met a bisexual person who considers their identity to encompass only male and female. The vast majority of bisexuals I’ve spoken to have said unequivocally that they don’t believe bisexuality precludes relationships with genderqueer people, and that they would consider dating a transgender or nonbinary person, even if they have not in the past. In any case, how do you measure or chart a person’s sexual attraction towards someone else? Towards a whole demographic? Sexuality is nebulous and intensely personal, and the precise definition of a sexual identity will be unique to each person who experiences it.

The issue then is one of semantics or nomenclature. Similar to the way that someone may variously identify as nonbinary or genderqueer because of the community in which they first began to explore their identity, many bisexuals simply call themselves bi- rather than pansexual because that is the term used in the community they interact with. The terms were coined at different times and there are different connotations associated with each. There may be a self-described bisexual person out there who is only interested in dating binary, cisgender women and men, but I have never met them. Most of the time in my experience, if a person is attracted to only a smaller subset of gender expressions, they will specify these when stating their sexuality, rather than calling themselves bisexual and assuming other people will know precisely *which* genders they mean.

Polyamory

Another pattern that seems prevalent in the transgender community is polyamory, that is, relationships involving more than two people, or a capability of being attracted to and forming a relationship with

more than one person at once. Interviewee MG says, 'I identify as pansexual and polyamorous. I tend to develop romantic feelings for people very easily but I also tend to get very worn out very easily.' 'I am currently with 4 partners, two AMAB people and two AFAB people. I also have one prospective partner, an AFAB person.' Again, polyamory isn't the same as promiscuity; lots of polyamorous people spend a long time in committed, consensual, stable relationships with the same group of people.

Again, there haven't been any studies specifically on instance of polyamory or polyamorous attraction within the genderqueer community – I doubt there's been much study of it in *any* community – but nonetheless I know several genderqueer people who are in polyamorous relationships, including three of my interviewees. I imagine that the reasons for this prevalence are similar to the reasons why so many nonbinary and genderqueer people seem so likely to form meaningful relationships based on attractions other than sexual, and to separate romantic, aesthetic and sexual attraction.

Asexuality

Six of my interviewees (and I myself) described themselves as asexual or a related term like demisexual, gray-asexual or aromantic. Asexual (often abbreviated 'ace') means that a person doesn't experience sexual attraction or seek out sexual contact with other people. Someone who identifies as aromantic may still want to have sex but won't form romantic relationships. Being asexual is not the same as being celibate: asexuals simply don't experience sexual attraction. This may be because they've experienced trauma in the past, but for most asexuals this is not the case: asexual and the terms under its umbrella are sexual orientations like gay and straight. Demi- and gray-asexual identities are characterised by rare instances of sexual attraction, or sexual attraction that occurs only in specific contexts, such as only after a deep emotional bond has formed.

Asexuality can be related to dysphoria: interviewee XX1 says, 'I'm not certain whether my gender identity interacts with my sex

life, but since my sex-repulsion often happens to directly link to my repulsion of genitalia, it probably does. I do not know who gets to decide if my lack of sex is positive or negative.' But there are plenty of asexual people who don't experience dysphoria, and many who aren't even trans or nonbinary. If someone identifies as asexual all it means is that they are asexual – no other conclusions should be drawn.

Anyone who's spent time in either the asexual or the genderqueer community will notice a considerable overlap between the two. I've wondered for a while whether this was correlation or causation, but as nonbinary gender and asexuality are still both largely invisible communities there have been no studies of this connection, if it even exists. I'm sure part of the prevalence of asexuals in the genderqueer community has to do with dysphoria, but I also think the most likely explanation is that the genderqueer and nonbinary community is simply more tolerant of difference, and more open to the idea that maybe if you don't have to have a gender, you don't have to have sex. Potentially, those of us who are active in the community are more free of the normative expectations placed upon people in binary-identified society: the expectation to pair up, marry and have children. Regardless of whether genderqueer people are more likely to be asexual and aromantic, asexual and aromantic people are an important demographic within the nonbinary community.

It's important to note here that, though they may seem to be diametrically opposed, ace and bi- or pansexual identities are by no means incompatible or mutually exclusive. Plenty of people I spoke to said they identified as, for example, both demi- and bisexual. Bi- and pansexuality have a connotation of being somehow 'promiscuous', but this is a harmful stereotype: bi- and pan- refer to *who* a person may be attracted to, not how *much* sex a person has. A person might be sexually attracted to people of any gender but only after they've become good friends, for example. An asexual person might seek out romantic relationships with people of any gender.

I think that the milieu in which a person learns terms to describe

their gender identity with more nuance than ‘boy’ or ‘girl’, and to separate sex from gender, is also one in which a person can learn about different types of attraction – such as romantic, aesthetic and platonic – and to be aware that friendships and romantic relationships can be deep emotional bonds, and that sex is not the ultimate goal or validation of any ‘serious’ relationship. Because it entails fragmenting and analysing different parts of identity, starting with separating sex from gender, being active in the nonbinary or trans community may make it easier for us to separate out individual strands of attraction: physical or sexual attraction, emotional attraction, intellectual attraction and so on. In this way, being nonbinary or transgender can cause a person to question precisely *what* aspect of another person they’re attracted to. Our identities already often make it difficult for us to participate in the conventional expectations of courtship, so acknowledging different strands or types of attraction – and acknowledging them as valid and meaningful beyond questions of marriage and sex – is both validating and empowering.

Distinctions can be drawn between relationships based on romantic feelings (a desire for a feeling of closeness or contact with someone), sexual attraction (a desire to engage in sexual intercourse with someone), aesthetic attraction (an attraction to surface characteristics of a person, such as the way they look), even platonic feelings (the love felt between friends).

A person may find themselves attracted to different people based on one or more or even all of these metrics, and all these different forms of attraction interact and inform each other.

Many people I’ve spoken to talk about platonic and aesthetic attraction as the most powerful forces in their relationship lives, rather than romantic and sexual. Interviewee XX3 says, ‘I assume I am either pansexual or demisexual. At the end of the day it comes down to how I feel about the person emotionally. If I feel a strong connection with them that’s when I’m most attracted to them. It’s how I found out I was gay.’ Interviewee TP discusses the complex and sometimes fraught connection between sexual and romantic attraction: ‘I have

much difficulty engaging sexually with people I don't have romantic feeling for. Because of this, hook-ups and casual dating are nearly impossible for me. If I see someone who is aesthetically pleasing, and I become sexually aroused, it doesn't mean that sexually engaging with that person will actually give me any pleasure. I've received zero sexual pleasure several times when engaging with people whom I didn't know for very long or whom I found "hot".

Interviewee TP discusses how aesthetic, romantic and sexual attraction interacts for them: 'Romantic feelings are a hit or a miss with me. They just sneak up on me, and I can never understand how it happens.' 'All of my relationships have been with women that I wasn't aesthetically attracted to at first. Once the romantic feelings came, my sexual feelings for them followed.' Interviewee EB2 says that attraction can follow displays of affection, rather than those displays being the result of this attraction: 'there's a huge overlap between physical affection (hugging, hand-holding, casual touching) and development of romantic feelings.'

Gender and sexuality interact with each other in complex ways, and the social factors that influence a person's sexuality – or their conceptualisation and articulation of their sexuality – are surely affected in a person who belongs to the LGBT community, even if they don't primarily identify as L, G or B. It may be that only a person who knows sex and gender might not match is more likely to be aware of disconnects in other contexts.

In my experience, by far the most all-encompassing, and most prevalent, way nonbinary and genderqueer people describe themselves is 'queer'. The connection the term has with the queer theory that I discussed in Chapter 1, and the reclamative sense by which members of the LGBT community have begun to use it as it was once used as a slur for them, makes it uniquely suited to describe the way that we form relationships. In my mind *queer* implies subversion, complication, the questioning of boundaries and discrete categories. It's an extremely useful label, popular and growing. I've seen it said often by nonbinary and genderqueer people that, 'all my

relationships are queer relationships'. Queer is the best way that I've found to describe the idiosyncratic, blurry, inconsistent way that I personally experience attraction.

While entering a relationship can be complicated, and the fragmentation of our identities can make it both easier and more difficult to make ourselves understood to potential partners, what we generally look for in a relationship is the same things anyone would want: commitment, communication, emotional support, to feel desirable and loved.

Some of us feel no interest in dating someone who isn't aware or accepting of our gender identity, but at the same time, some of us aren't comfortable with that level of disclosure *a priori*. Gender identity is extremely personal, and many nonbinary people reject the idea that it's something we must 'disclose' beforehand, as if it were a communicable disease. This creates a tension between making assumptions about what a prospective partner knows and what we need to tell them.

For the most part, we tend to seek relationships with people who've gone through what we've gone through, that is, other gender-queer people. I personally find that I'm inclined to look for a partner within the trans or nonbinary community. Not only do I find it tiring to have to kill a relationship with a cis person before it begins by disclosing that I'm asexual, but I'm more likely to find someone who generally understands me, and who wants the same things out of the relationship that I want, from within the community. I also find that nonbinary and genderqueer people are generally less obsessed with pairing off and matching up: I value my cisgender friends very highly but, all of them being in their thirties, it can be difficult to always be playing second fiddle to someone else's partner or spouse.

Activism or community engagement of some kind also tends to be important, though not necessarily LGBT activism: interviewee BJS says that in a prospective partner, they look for someone who 'is aware of and actively working against social injustice'. Interviewee XX2 continues, 'openness with one's gender identity can be a political

act as well as a personal one, and many nb/gq people are active in their communities. As such, it can be important that a prospective partner is engaged with, or at least aware of, the social issues surrounding our identities.'

Overall when it comes to finding a partner, many of my acquaintances and several of my interviewees stressed the need for self-education and communication in dating. Some of the most common themes were open-mindedness and a willingness to learn and flexibility when it comes to labels and roles. As interviewee XX2 says, when seeking a new partner, 'I looked for someone who, first and foremost, accepted me for who I was, gender, sexuality and all.' Another interviewee said simply, 'a person who won't try to change me'.

Genderqueer in the workplace

The STA nonbinary experiences document found that only 4 per cent of participants were always comfortable being open about their gender identity at work, while 52 per cent were never comfortable.⁷⁷ Over 80 per cent of participants worried their identity wouldn't be respected at work, or that it would make their work life more difficult generally. Many cited existing bigotry in their workplace directed at other minority groups, as well as the potential for harassment, as a reason for keeping their gender identity hidden.

The majority of workplaces are not, by their nature, conducive to behaviour that defies convention. The culture that prohibits tattoos from being visible in the workplace, and that pressures women to wear skirts and heels to interviews, also creates an environment in which nonbinary people don't feel comfortable being out. Over half of the nonbinary experiences survey participants felt pressure to pass as male or female, or to adhere to a gendered role in their workplace. Over 60 per cent of participants who were applying for jobs felt pressure to hide their nonbinary status during the application process. Applications are also one of the places nonbinary people are likely to be required to gender themselves when providing personal

information. Eighteen per cent of survey participants had difficulty even securing employment because they had official documents that didn't match their birth certificates, or that demonstrated name changes that made it difficult for them to prove their identities during the application process.

Overall, survey participants cite several factors as contributing to their feelings of discomfort and unsafety in the workplace. These mostly stem from ignorance or hostility towards transness at the individual level, and preservation of traditional gender roles at company level, especially in terms of uniforms and dress codes, but also generally speaking in the enforcement of differing standards of behaviour when it comes to male and female employees.

Much of the difficulty that nonbinary people face in institutional settings lies in the fact that work environments can be some of the places where the last vestiges of traditional gender roles are reinforced. For example, one STA survey participant cited a double standard in terms of uniform, where men were expected to tuck their shirts in but women were encouraged not to. In many workplaces people perceived as women are required to wear skirts whether they want to or not. This may seem like a minor point to quibble over but uniforms are just one way in which professional environments reinforce dominant social structures. Further, in the same way that culturally coded clothing and hairstyles such as a turban, hijab or dreadlocks can sometimes unconsciously be perceived as 'unprofessional', unconventional gender presentations can also be interpreted as subversive or disruptive to a professional environment, even when the person presenting unconventionally is doing so because that is simply who they are.

The Scottish Trans Alliance has created a number of excellent resources, and is willing to work with employers and service providers to create more inclusive policies. The STA has created a set of guidelines for employers and service providers who wish to create an environment that is more inclusive of people with nonbinary and genderqueer identities.⁷⁸ Overall the guidelines make several basic suggestions for improvement in the following four areas:⁷⁹

- education, training and awareness
- redesigning forms
- names and pronouns
- gender-neutral facilities.

Many of the problems that nonbinary people face in the workplace and in public services come from ignorance rather than conscious hostility. Many nonbinary experiences survey participants ascribed their reluctance to be out at work to the fact that, often, nonbinary people are simply not acknowledged to exist. When a nonbinary employee encounters this attitude in a colleague it's often more trouble than it's worth to try to explain one's entire existence, especially to a relative stranger.

Colleague ignorance, which creates pressure to hide or self-police gender expression, can be a strain on mental health, and creating an environment in which the existence of trans people is acknowledged and understood is a first step towards creating one in which our identities are respected, even celebrated. A good way to start raising awareness is by including trans and genderqueer identities in workplace sensitivity training exercises. Make sure that anti-discrimination rules and posters are inclusive of gender identity. Consider actively seeking out nonbinary and genderqueer applicants when hiring.

A nonbinary employee's colleagues are likely to make mistakes sometimes, especially when they are still getting used to using inclusive language. Ensure that employees who misgender or misname a colleague apologise and correct their behaviour, but keep in mind in these instances that gender identity can be a private thing and that sometimes what a nonbinary employee who has been misgendered will want is for a simple, private apology and for everyone to move on. Try to treat instances of misgendering with discretion, maintain the privacy of the nonbinary person as much as possible, and refer to their preference for how the incident is to be dealt with.

In cases of harassment or bullying, deal with any incidents in the same way you'd deal with a case of harassment based on race or

sexuality, for example, and enforce these policies diligently. If you don't have any workplace policies against harassment of any kind, consider creating some. If you do, make sure they explicitly cover harassment or bullying of nonbinary individuals.

Fifty-eight per cent of participants in the Scottish Trans Alliance's 2015 report 'Nonbinary people's experiences in the UK',⁸⁰ said that, when engaging with public services like hospitals or the police, the forms they are given to fill out *never* allow them to represent themselves accurately. Examine your company's use of language. In terms of information collection, intake forms and ID cards, changes can start even before a nonbinary employee is hired. On application forms, allow applicants who wish to to select a gender option other than male or female, or allow them not to specify. A number of institutions (like my bank, for instance⁸¹) are now giving customers the option to use a gender-neutral title, such as Mx, instead of traditional Mr/Mrs/Ms. While I'm a bit sceptical of the need to use honorifics and titles at all, I'm still excited about this development and eagerly select 'Mx' on any form that offers it (in many cases I'm still forced to cheekily select 'Dr' or, my favourite, 'Rev'). Not only will this allow nonbinary applicants to avoid gendering themselves, it will also contribute to the normalisation of nonbinary gender and go towards creating an environment in which all employees recognise our identities as legitimate.

Ensure that names and pronoun choice are respected by allowing for pronouns and preferred title (for example the gender-neutral Mx) to be specified on application forms or upon a first meeting, and make sure that training materials and standard documents are inclusively worded, for example by replacing 'he or she' with 'they', and 'son or daughter' with 'child'.⁸² Consider reducing the number of instances in which employees are trained to gender other people. Forcing a situation in which all customers or service users *must* be gendered as male or female (for example, using a standard greeting like 'good morning sir/ma'am') is an excellent way to make a nonbinary person (and the service provider, for that matter) feel embarrassed and alienated.

During the application process and beyond, be mindful of the fact that some trans applicants may go by a name other than the one they were given at birth, or that an applicant's gender may not match that which is on their passport or birth certificate. There are all sorts of reasons why this might be the case, even outside of gender, and approaching these instances with an assumption of good faith, and allowing applicants to explain themselves, can go a long way towards making them feel safe and comfortable in the workplace.

Ensure that there are gender-neutral bathrooms and other facilities available for employees who wish to use them. Consider whether gendered facilities are even necessary: if the existing facilities are single-person and lock, why gender them at all? Consider labelling bathrooms by what they contain, i.e. a toilet, or a toilet and a urinal, and so on. Likewise consider re-evaluating any gender differences in employee uniform or dress code. Reducing gender-based divisions in employee dress will not only make genderqueer employees more comfortable, it will go a long way towards eliminating sexism in the workplace more generally.

Generally speaking, it's very good practice for employers and policymakers to simply be more mindful of their own perceptions about gender, and the way they make gendered assumptions about other people. Managers and supervisors should analyse the way they personally use gendered language, and think deeply about how their own assumptions may affect their trans employees.

Think about ways that you can actively make your company more inclusive, not just by reducing situations that cause people to be gendered, but also by celebrating the fact that you're an inclusive employer. Genderqueer and nonbinary people have a unique perspective that can enrich a workplace. Try not to think of genderqueer employees as defective or strange, and try not to exclude them – consciously or unconsciously – when seeking employee input or selecting someone to represent the company in an outward-facing role. Consider including images and examples including nonbinary people in promotional and training materials. Of course, there's no

single way for a nonbinary person to look, but increasing the diversity of these materials will go a long way to creating an environment in which nonbinary and genderqueer employees and customers feel included and valued.

Nonbinary at school

Most of what I discussed in the previous ‘work’ section, about re-evaluating gender in dress code, facilities and language use, also applies to schools, though there are a few caveats and extra points that should be addressed. The most important of these is that young people are often vulnerable: students, even college and university students, are going through a formative time. Adding a gender-identity crisis to the mix can only complicate things, and thus sensitivity and discretion are important when interacting with trans and nonbinary students. Experiencing harassment or bullying due to being nonbinary or genderqueer at this age can be incredibly damaging, and can have repercussions throughout adulthood. It’s very important to make schools a safe and supportive environment for trans and nonbinary students, if we want them to become confident, happy nonbinary adults.

A sentiment I’ve seen repeated often by politicians, parents and media personalities lately is the idea that gender-inclusive practices in schools are somehow ‘coddling’ our nation’s youth. This claim is usually backed by an argument that goes something like, *how will they function in harsh, gendered society if we hold their hands and let them use neutral toilets, uniforms and locker rooms? Why should we make accommodations for trans youth when the ‘real world’ will not?*

My first objection to this point of view is a simple argument for tolerance. The children of today are tomorrow’s parents, leaders, policymakers and service providers. The sooner we instil in them open-mindedness and acceptance the more likely they are to treat people different from them, such as nonbinary people, with respect, even if they themselves are not nonbinary.

The other, less obvious objection is that, quite frankly, school can

be one of the most gendered environments a person will ever encounter. The 'real world' (as if kids aren't exposed to all the attitudes and trials of 'real life' in high school) is in my experience a lot more flexible and tolerant of variation than cliquey, bully-ridden school. In my daily life I am not expected to shower in front of other people on a regular basis. I'm not at the mercy of roving gangs of 'popular kids'. I'm not forced to line up for exercise class on the same side as people who were assigned the same gender at birth as me. I'm not expected to wear a skirt because my birth certificate or ID says 'F'. School is where gender is taught, and by de-gendering schools, not only are we making life easier for nonbinary students and allowing those questioning their gender identity more room for experimentation, we're also creating a generation, or at least a cohort, of students who are themselves less concerned with gender.

There are a number of resources designed specifically for schools who wish to be more inclusive of transgender, nonbinary and gender-questioning students. Here are just a few:

- The Mermaids UK Trans* Inclusion Schools Toolkit:⁸³ designed for schools in East Sussex to help them more effectively support trans students and prevent transphobic bullying. This guide includes a 101 on trans umbrella identities, information on the Equality Act 2010 for schools to use to check compliance and suggestions for policy changes.
- A guidance document developed by the Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIRES) on preventing transphobic bullying in schools:⁸⁴ this document includes guidelines for governors, head teachers and teaching staff on how to prevent transphobic bullying from negatively impacting both trans students and staff.
- The National Student Council have created a video⁸⁵ featuring some nonbinary-identified students who talk about their experiences as students and what they'd like to see in schools in terms of policy and teacher behaviour. This video was created

by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), who currently maintain a nonbinary student council.

I feel it's also important to point out a resource that I would strongly recommend *avoiding*. There's an organisation called Transgender Trend which sets itself up as a parents' organisation but which is in fact an anti-trans group with rather insidious tactics. Threatened by or disapproving of the rising number of people who are comfortable being out as trans, Transgender Trend have created a 'schools resource pack' which frames the rise in gender-questioning and trans-identified students as a 'trend' (as implied by the name), and advocates discouraging students from experimenting with their gender identity. This 'resource pack' is not based on evidence, and it has the potential to actually harm trans students. In response, LGBT advocacy group Stonewall have created an excellent page⁸⁶ on supporting trans students, which explains a bit more about why Transgender Trend are a dangerous organisation.

The resources listed above will go into more detail than I do but here are a few basic suggestions, geared specifically towards non-binary students, which can help schools and teaching staff more fully support them:

- Have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to transphobic bullying, and make sure it explicitly includes nonbinary and genderqueer people. In addition, make sure that counsellors are educated on, accepting and supportive of nonbinary identities. A zero-tolerance bullying policy is useless if nonbinary students aren't comfortable coming forward because they believe school authorities won't be respectful of their identities.
- Consider de-gendering or creating gender-neutral toilets, showers and other facilities. These are some of the spaces where trans students feel most vulnerable (I know I always did), so consider creating designated facilities for nonbinary students who wish to use them.

- Consider de-gendering uniforms and dress codes or allowing students to wear whichever uniform they are most comfortable in. Rather than creating a rule that only applies to trans students, consider allowing boys and girls to wear whichever uniform they are most comfortable in as well. Reducing the instances in which boys and girls are expected to behave differently can only create a more tolerant and equal environment, and serve students well during adulthood. In addition, since clothing is one of the most important ways in which we express gender, allowing for experimentation in clothing can make school a safer environment for students who are gender-questioning.
- Make curricula (especially sex education, history and social studies) more inclusive of trans (and LGBT more generally) identities. Acknowledging and celebrating our identities will enrich every student's education.
- Examine language use throughout the school. Respect individual students' pronoun preferences. Consider using more inclusive wording in educational materials. If titles are used for any students or staff, consider allowing the use of a gender-neutral one like Mx.
- Generally, ask genderqueer or gender-questioning students what they need from you. They'll be more aware of restrictive policies than you will, and may be able to help create more inclusive ones. Do what you can do accommodate them. Remember too that school students will be going through their formative years and many will be questioning their own identities and trying to find the right fit. Don't punish students for experimenting, for example by trying out new names and pronouns.

Recommendations

In general, the best way to learn about the lived experience of genderqueer people is by educating yourself on the issues that are important

to the people you're interacting with: many of us are more than happy to chat about our experiences, especially if we're already friends, but it's a good idea to first read up on nonbinary and genderqueer issues as much as possible, *rather* than asking nonbinary people to explain themselves. For one thing, the experiences of a single person won't necessarily be representative of the community as a whole. Aside from this, any member of a minority group can tell you how exhausting it is to have to constantly be educating outsiders.

Keep in mind that every person is an expert in their own experiences. When you encounter someone whose gender identity or presentation is ambiguous or inconsistent or doesn't make sense to you, remember that gender is a fluid, changing, complex entity. That person has had years and years to consider and explore their own gender and they may still be in the process of doing so. In addition, gender presentation is just the tip of the iceberg, as it were, of gender identity. What a person chooses to show you may not be the entirety of their identity, and each person will have different reasons for the way they present. Be respectful, remember that a lot of trans people are constantly interrogated about their genders and keep in mind how tiring this can be before you ask questions.

Generally speaking, be flexible and open to new ways of thinking about gender and sex – this should be the case with any new friend or partner, be they cis, trans or otherwise. Interrogate your own preconceived notions about what gender is and how you relate to it. What's your place in the gender system? If your concept of your own gender were different, how do you think that would change the way you relate to others? Think about the ways that your own gender identity informs the way you present yourself.

There are a wealth of blogs, videos, articles and a growing number of books that are written by nonbinary and genderqueer people who actively want to educate others. Rather than assuming a nonbinary person has the time and energy to educate you, seek out these materials. One of the best resources I've come across is the YouTube film series *My Generation*. The videos touch on a wide range of topics

and all are created by trans and nonbinary people. At least two of the creators of the series, activist and filmmaker duo Fox and Owl, identify as nonbinary. I'll include a few of these in the resources section at the end of the book, but any internet search can generally find you blog posts and articles that have been written by nonbinary and genderqueer people themselves, which will give you a good idea of our experiences from a diverse range of perspectives.

Exercises and discussion questions

The answers to some of the questions in this section may be sensitive for some people. If you are discussing the answers as a group, feel free to think about and answer privately any that you are uncomfortable sharing aloud.

1. The concept of 'coming out' doesn't have to just be related to gender and sexual identity: it applies to a lot of different identities, especially minority ones, which are often hidden. If applicable, think about a time when you've made a conscious decision to be open about an aspect of yourself you had previously kept hidden – this could mean illness or mental health status, religious or cultural background, or even what sports team you support. Did your openness about this identity change anything about your interactions with other people? How so?
2. How do you think your identities, hidden or otherwise, affect the way you interact with other people who don't share those identities?
3. How do the groups and categories you identify most strongly with, and signal most strongly to the rest of the world, affect the way you navigate a professional environment? An educational environment? When seeking out or interacting with romantic and sexual partners?