

## NOT MAN, NOT WOMAN: PSYCHOSPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A WESTERN THIRD GENDER

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**ABSTRACT:** The lives and experiences of 30 North Americans who experience themselves as neither man nor woman but "more like a third gender" were explored using in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis based on grounded theory. Parallels suggested by third-gendered roles of non-Western cultures include a significant number (93%) reporting experiences of transcendent spiritual events or unusual abilities, inclination to work as artists and/or healers, and performance of mediating and leadership roles. Different forms of Western variant gender, as well as distinctions between sex, gender, and sexual orientation, are delineated along with a variety of non-Western established third-gender roles.

As deconstructionist gender theorists (e.g., Butler, 1990) and sociological and anthropological social constructionists (e.g., Collier & Yanagisako, 1987; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981) have pointed out, culture plays a significant role in the construction of gender—what it means to be a man or a woman. Nevertheless, the belief that gender is something based in incontrovertible biological "fact" is so entrenched in Western thought that it is difficult to understand the ways in which many non-Western societies conceptualize gender differently.

Removed from the cultural assumption that biology creates the being, that sex equals gender, other possibilities begin to suggest themselves. Might it be possible that the source of gender is something other than biology, even something other than social construction? The perspectives of a variety of non-Euro-American cultures, where people who cross gender lines often hold honored spiritual and shamanic roles (Bradford, 1983; Colman, Colgan, & Gooren, 1992; Eliade, 1964; Herdt, 1993; Jacobs & Cromwell, 1992; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Murray & Roscoe, 1998; Nanda, 1986, 1993; Piedmont, 1996; Roscoe, 1991, 1993, 1998; Roscoe & gay American Indians, 1988; Tafoya, 1992; Williams, 1992; Wilson, 1996), suggest that there is a strong component of spirit—a calling, one might say—involved. Even the force of the fear, fascination, and repulsion that accompanies many responses to transgendered and other gender-deviant people in Western cultures hints at something awe-some: toward an inevitable "something else" beyond culture.

This article explores the psychospiritual characteristics of a group of North American individuals who experience themselves as neither man nor woman, but "more like a third gender." Participants were chosen from those for whom the integration of masculine and feminine polarities was not only an inner exploration, but a lived, embodied experience. Rather than investigating the phenomenon of crossing genders—something that is already recognized in the Western world—this

study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by looking at people who hold both ends of the polarity at once, and visibly so. After teasing apart the definitions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation, which are commonly conflated as a result of the dualistic view, a variety of non-Western third-gendered roles will be presented, as well as some of the ways in which gender difference has arisen within Euro-American culture. This will be followed by a description of the study, with a focus on the ways in which characteristics ascribed to third-gendered roles in non-Western cultures are mirrored in this North American "third-gendered" sample, and what the presence of these people among us at this time suggests.

#### DEFINITIONS: SEX, GENDER, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

What is it that makes one a man or a woman? Evidence from non-Western cultures, as well as subcultures within Western societies, reveals that gender is not an inevitable polarity, but more fluid. The question of what it is that makes one a man or a woman has been grappled with throughout Western history, with explanations ranging from Plato's concept of an original whole being sliced into two halves, one male and one female, eternally in search of the missing other half, to the Biblical and medieval origins of the notion of the paradigmatic male, in which the female was a lesser, incomplete rendition of male (Laqueur, 1990, Tannahill, 1980/1992). Although in pre-Enlightenment Europe gender was seen as real, with physical sex considered the epiphenomenon (Laqueur, 1990), in contemporary Euro-American culture, biology is taken as the starting point. Designation as "male" or "female" is assigned at birth, based upon genital appearance. In ambiguous cases, other biological factors—inner reproductive organs, gonads, hormones, and chromosomes—are called upon to solidify determination. Biological designation is referred to as sex (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). Gender, on the other hand, refers to the corresponding social role: man and woman (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972).

That the terms sex and gender are so often confused shows how deeply the notion that biology is destiny is entrenched within the culture. Despite the existence of those who have intermediate bodies—intersexedor "hermaphroditic" individuals—duality continues to be held as the reality of biology and, by extension, social gender; those for whom nature builds bodies that are in between are seen as mistakes. Rather than recognize the variety even in nature, the usual response to the birth of a child with genital ambiguity is to treat it as a medical emergency, for which the only appropriate response is surgical and hormonal alteration, despite evidence that such interventions cause irreparable psychic and physical harm (Burke, 1996; Chase, 1998; Fausto-Sterling, 1993). To be born in a female body denotes a girl who will grow into a woman, who will then behave in certain ways deemed to be "normal" feminine behavior; to be born into a male body is synonymous with being a boy who will grow into a man, who will act in manly ways. Clearly, many people find the fit with cultural gender norms to be uncomfortable and at odds with what feels most authentically true about themselves. It is understood that there are feminine men and masculine women, but in these cases, still, "masculine" and "feminine" are seen as adjectives, descriptors that simply modify the existing two categories.

A third concept—that of sexual orientation—is also frequently confused with sexual or gender identity. *Sexual orientation* (also called sexual preference') refers to object choice: the sex/gender of desired partners. Homosexual variations are often confused with gendered or biological difference. This goes both ways: a person whose desired object is someone of the same sex may have his or her own gender called into question, as in questions of whether a homosexual male is a "real man," or whether a lesbian may in fact not be quite female. On the other hand, those whose gender identity is at odds with their birth sex, for instance, transsexual and some transgendered people, are automatically assumed to be homosexual also, although this is often not the case.

As the two-sex, two-gender, reproductively based system has been assumed inevitable, the heterosexual pairing of men/males with women/females is taken for granted. It is through looking at variations on the assumed heterosexual male man and female woman that the distinctions between these concepts is most clearly understood, while, simultaneously, the inevitability of and the boundaries between the categories of each of these polarities begins to blur.

Although biology is taken to be the starting point and referent for cultural notions about gender, biological arguments, including those about chromosomes and genitals, are not actually how individuals ascertain whether someone is male or female; normally these markers are not visible. In a study using a series of plastic overlays on which were drawn various gendered characteristics (long or short hair, wide or narrow hips, breasts or flat chest with body hair, penis or vagina, and unisex shin or unisex pants), Kessler and McKenna (1978) showed that decisions about whether someone is male or female are made through a process they called *gender attribution*, using a variety of cues to decide which of the two labels fits. Among their findings was the discovery that in ambiguous cases, people tend to attribute male gender, even when genitals were included as cues (so that figure with a penis, breasts and wide hips would be more often assumed male, as would a figure with a vagina, narrow hips and a flat chest.). These findings were echoed in Devor's (1989) work on gender-blending females and Bolin's (1988) study of male-to-female transsexuals: it takes more signs to mark oneself as female in a culture in which the male is still held to be paradigmatic.

Yet this mode of gender attribution is by no means universal. While biology is considered definitive in Western societies, in other cultures the method of attribution may as easily be occupation (Roscoe, 1993, 1998) or social or spiritual role. Thus, as Kessler and McKenna (1978) note, "What we consider a correlate of gender may be seen by others as its defining feature" (p. 40).

### *Intermediate Gender Roles in Non-Western Cultures*

In contrast to the binary thinking of Western society, in which any step outside the bounds of one gender equates with the desire or intention to cross over to the (only) other option, many non-Western cultures have socially established roles that recog-

nize a third entity, *neither* male nor female. In numerous African tribes, women may become men through the institution of "female husbands," an economically based kinship arrangement in which they are recognized as men, with all the attendant privileges that men enjoy (Oboler, 1980; O'Brien, 1977). A female husband achieves her status (the only way in which a woman may own property and participate in community politics) when she pays bridewealth for and names a woman for whose children she then becomes the legal and social father. She usually qualifies for this status when she is of advanced age and has failed to produce any male heirs. In some instances, the female husbands may still be married to men themselves, in which case they function as wives with their husbands and as husbands and fathers with their wives and their children. Although the fact of their femaleness is not openly acknowledged, it is not forgotten (Carrier & Murray, 1998; Oboler, 1980; O'Brien, 1977). Their change in gender is not predicated upon the form of their bodies but rather upon their having taken up the duties associated with men.

Likewise, in the Balkan highlands of Yugoslavia and Albania, some women step outside the strictures of a highly gender-polarized culture by becoming "sworn virgins," dressing, working, and living as men, although they are simultaneously understood to be "not-men" as well (Gremaus, 1993; Young, 2000).

In India, dual-gendered roles are built into the fabric of the society in several ways, including through prominent, widely known bigendered gods such as Ardhanarisvara, who represents inert, latent consciousness (Siva, the male aspect) on the right, united with active, immanent life energy (Shakti, the female aspect) on the left (Piedmont, 1996).

In northern Indian culture, the *hijra* (Nanda, 1986, 1993) and in southern India, the *jogappas* (Bradford, 1983) are classes of sacred female men who are "captured" into the service of mother-goddess figures primarily through impotence with women. They are seen as "not men" because they have a "defective" male organ (incapable of impregnating), but they are also seen as "not women" because they cannot bear children. Although less common, females who do not menstruate may also become hijras (Nanda, 1986), while in southern India, *jogammas* are an ascetic female counterpart to the jogappa (Bradford, 1983). The hijra also often undergo ritual castration; if they are discovered to be uncastrated, they are ridiculed as impostors, although omens must be right for the ritual to be performed. They earn a living by performing at weddings, births, and festivals, where their presence is believed to bestow good fortune upon the participants. If they are not treated with respect, they can just as easily bring misfortune upon the recipient.

In southeast Asia, the *acault* of Myanmar are men who are possessed by the spirit of the goddess Manguedon at a young age, which results in their taking on female behaviors and characteristics. The acault usually act as shamans and seers and are valued within the culture of Myanmar as agents of the goddess, able to transmit her gifts of good fortune and success to those who approach them in this mediating role (Colman, Colgan, & Gooren, 1992).

In the Society Islands of French Polynesia, Elliston (1999) found that mahu, which translates as "half-man, half-woman" was an accepted category, seen as particular to the Pacific islands, in contrast to various categories of same-sex lovers and transvestite or transsexual roles that are looked down upon and seen as Western imports. Besnier (1993) argues that rather than constituting a third gender category, "gender liminal" roles such as the Tahitian and Hawaiian miihii, Samoan fa'afafine, Tongan fakaleiti, and Tuvaluan pinapinaaine are more context-dependent within the structure of strongly gender-codified societies. Yet he also notes that they commonly function as esteemed carriers of artistic and cultural traditions and often as innovators as well, while frequently serving as mediators between island societies and foreigners. Although there is some historical evidence for linking shamanistic powers with Polynesian gender liminality, the connection is only clearly documented among the Hawaiian mahu who are clearly associated with bearing kahuna-like traits.

Alternative gendered roles have been documented in over 150 Native North American tribes (Roscoe, 1998; Tafoya, 1992). In which either men or women who (usually) evidenced cross-sex tendencies early in life assumed cross-gendered occupations and wore either opposite-sex clothing or a modified third alternative. Known by a third (and in some cases, also a fourth [Roscoe, 1998]) gendered term, they were understood to be intermediate beings, mediating not only between the worlds of men and women but also between the spirit and mundane worlds. Attitudes towards these berdache<sup>z</sup> varied, running the gamut from being held in high esteem and regarded as carrying great, sacred power to being the butt of jokes. However, they were always seen as an intrinsic part of the culture, not deviant but an established third-gender category. Thought to be born "in balance" (Wilson, 1996), they were seen as "'bridge-makers' between male and female, the spiritual and the material, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous American" (p. 305). The role was not seen as one of choice, but of calling, summoned through childhood leanings or vocational dreams or visions by spirit, and which would be refused only at great peril. In line with the Native American worldview, in which all beings are spiritual and have their place in the whole, anthropologist Williams (1992) wrote, "If a person is different from the average individual, this means the spirits must have taken particular care in creating this person." (p. 32).

#### VARIETIES OF WESTERN GENDER VARIATION

The Western attitude toward those who veer from strict gender norms is typified by the definition of gender dysphoria (pathology code 302.xxi) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.; DSM-IV) which lists as criteria two things: "a strong and persistent cross-gender identification" and "persistent discomfort about one's assigned sex or a sense of the inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex" (p. 537). DSM-IV notes that "for clinically referred children, onset is usually between 2 and 4 years and some parents report that their child has always had cross-gender interests" (p. 536). This parallels the early childhood appearance of cross-gender inclinations reported in other cultures, but the difference lies in how the information is codified and treated—in this case, as pathology.

Gender variance appears in a number of different forms, although *transsexuals* reveal perhaps most poignantly the questionable verity of the cultural insistence that biology is destiny. These individuals experience an overwhelming desire to live their lives as a member of the opposite sex (Israel & Tarver, 1997), often conceptualized as being "born in the wrong body," and undergo hormonal and surgical alterations to achieve a body that is more in line with their sense of themselves (Bolin, 1988). At the present time, transsexuals must accept the DSM-IV definition of themselves as sick or damaged in order to obtain access to the body-altering technologies which may bring their outer, physical manifestations in line with their inner, spiritual, mental, and emotional self-understandings. Studies such as Bolin (1988) and Devor (1997) have begun to counteract the prevailing equation of pathology with cross-gendered identification.

In contrast to transsexuals, *transvestites* are (primarily heterosexual) men who cross-dress for the pleasure it affords them, out of a variety of motivations, but who have no desire to give up their male identities or change their bodies. (Bolin, 1988). Gay male *drag queens*, on the other hand, constitute a specific, institutionalized subcultural role of female impersonators whose cross-dressing is part of the "camp" genre, with a focus on glamour, artifice, and exaggeration (Bolin, 1988; Garber, 1992). Although all three groups share cross-dressing in opposite-sex attire, their motivations are very different. For transsexuals, "cross-dressing" and identity as a transsexual is a phase on the road toward their final identities as men or women, opposite the bodies they were born in; transvestites see their cross-dressing as a hobby; drag queens are artists whose performances are part of communal expression.

Not all who transgress the boundaries of gender intend to cross, either permanently or for temporary purposes, nor do they necessarily think of themselves entirely in the terms of the opposite sex. *Transgender* is a more recent term that is often applied to those who clearly and visibly transgress gender norms without necessarily crossing. But the assumption dies hard that to step outside the boundaries of the gender assigned to one's sex means a desire to *be* the other sex. While much recent work on transgender (Cromwell, 1999; Feinberg, 1996; Israel & Tarver, 1997) recognizes that the range of gender variance includes far more variety than just those who wish to cross from one sex and gender to the other, the term transgender, intended to be an umbrella designation that includes the whole range (Israel & Tarver, 1997), is still, often, both colloquially and among researchers, misapplied as a synonym for transsexual (e.g., Mason-Schrock, 1996).

Other forms of blurring gender have longer histories. An institutionalized role is that of the sub-subcultural lesbian *butch*. Butch refers to the identity of women who are comfortable with their femaleness yet experience themselves as embodying a male sensibility, or as being more at home in "male" characteristics. The dividing line between transgender and butch identities is not clear; they exist along a continuum that is also not linear. At the other end, there is also no clear distinction between butch and "androgynous" women. Androgyny (as used in the lesbian com-

munity, as opposed to the Jungian sense implying integration of projected attributes ascribed to the opposite sex) may be understood to imply that an individual possesses relatively equal amounts of masculine and feminine characteristics. As one study (Devor, 1989) showed, masculinity in women is clearly not limited to lesbians, although the butch lesbian is a subculturally institutionalized role with a rich history in Euro-American lesbian communities. Butch and the counterpart *femme* evolved from underground roles in the mid-20th century, went through a period of vilification during the height of 1970s lesbian-feminism, and have reappeared as self-aware gendered self-expressions based on inner experience of authenticity (Faderman, 1991; Inness & Lloyd, 1996; Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Butch involves not just the taking on of characteristics or roles which are culturally coded as masculine, in a manner similar to taking clothing on and off, but involves a deeply felt sense of identity, one in which the hazards of transgression, including harassment and violence, are only too real (Halberstam, 1998).

A counterpart among gay men, the *queen*, or effeminate man, is perhaps less institutionalized, although a clearly recognized phenomenon. One group that has capitalized on this is the Radical Faeries, a loose-knit network of gay men that evolved out of gatherings focused on earth-based spirituality, and which celebrates colorful self-expression, including playful creative dress.

Clearly, gender difference seems to be a nearly universal phenomenon, although its appearance is not dependent upon the existence of culturally sanctioned roles. It is notable that in Euro-American societies, where polarities are assumed to be natural and inevitable, gender crossing is easily recognized (if not embraced), while intermediate forms are not. The experience of third-gendered people in this regard parallels that of people with other types of intermediacy, such as those of mixed race (Iijima Hall, 1992; Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995; Nakashima, 1992; Root, 1994) and those who are bicultural (Stephan, 1992).

## METHODS

The phenomenon of intermediate or third-gendered identity in North Americans, although not entirely new, is still novel as a research topic. Thus, a qualitative research method was used, consisting of semistructured interviews combined with qualitative content analysis, with strategies drawn from grounded theory, to allow for the fullest introduction possible to the condition. Open-ended interview questions honor respondents' expertise on their own lives (Miller & Glassner, 1997). In addition, as Reinharz (1992) points out, access to the ideas, thoughts, and memories of research subjects through their own words offers an antidote to the biases and misconceptions that commonly arise when researchers from a dominant group speak for those from marginalized groups without recognizing how their preconceptions might color their perceptions. As grounded theory draws analytic categories directly from the data, rather than from preconceived hypotheses (Charmaz, 1995), it is an approach especially suited to the study of unrecognized phenomena and marginalized populations such as this group of intermediate-gendered Americans.

## *Participants*

Participants were solicited through the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered (LGBT) communities, as this is the place within American society with some established roles for gender nonconformity. Although some nontransgendered heterosexual respondents may have been missed this way, soliciting in this community was the only way to ensure reaching a sizable number of participants in the limited time available. Participants were originally sought in Boston and San Francisco, as one city is on the East Coast and one is on the West Coast and both are medium-sized cities with active LGBT communities. The final sample clustered primarily around these two areas, although participants hailed from around the United States as a result of snowball sampling and posting the call for participants on internet listservs. Participants were specifically sought who identified as neither male nor female (or as both) on both inner and outer levels. Transsexuals and intersexed individuals who had been living as and identified as solely one gender, even though they had a history that included the other gender, were excluded.

Thirty individuals participated in the formal study, and data were also used from three pilot participants and two controls. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 77. Racially, 26 participants (87%) identified themselves as Caucasian, three (10%) as Native American, two (7%) as Latina, and one each as Asian and African American. (Numbers add up to more than 100% due to several participants' multiracial identities.) Eighteen (60%) participants were born and raised female; 12 (40%) were born and raised male. Half the participants identified with the term "transgender"; half did not, other than very loosely. Seven had altered their bodies through hormones and/or surgery, one other was seriously considering it, and several others were adamantly opposed to the idea of altering bodies.

## *Instrument*

An interview schedule and written demographic questionnaire were developed and tested on three pilot participants who matched the study criteria. The schedule and questionnaire were also tested on two controls in order to ascertain whether the questions were able to elicit information specific to the experience of gender intermediacy. Controls consisted of a 55-year-old heterosexual female of nontraditional but established femininity and a transsexual woman whose experience of gender intermediacy described only her transition from male to female rather than her ongoing sense of identity. Their responses to the interview questions were often qualitatively different from the pilot participants, confirming the usefulness of the questions.

Questions explored life histories, experiences with others in relation to their gender, development of gendered self-concepts, relationship to others, and attitudes toward bodies and making physical changes. Several questions were designed to inquire whether any of the traits that mark people in third-gendered roles in non-Western cultures, such as artistic abilities, mediating roles, and initiatory illnesses might cor-

relate with gender intermediacy here as well. Also, in keeping with the literature on non-Western third-gender roles, participants were questioned about evidence of paranormal abilities or any significant transcendent spiritual experiences (near-death, out-of-body, or other nonordinary experience) they might have undergone.

### *Procedure and Data Analysis*

Interviews were conducted in person, or over the telephone when live interviewing was not feasible, and lasted an average of 1 1/2 hours. Interviews were taped and transcribed after the interviews by the researcher in order to maintain closer contact with the data. Participants were given pseudonyms to mask identity.

Using grounded theory methods, I noted themes that arose from the data. As a result of emerging themes in early interviews, several questions on creative abilities, major illnesses or accidents, and influence of partners' gender on their own—were added and retroactively applied to completed interviews (in some cases this necessitated recontacting the participants). When all transcriptions were complete, data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis methods, including themes suggested by the literature (Boyatzis, 1998), participant comments (Bloor, 1983) noting frequency of themes and those that match general discourse within the **LGBT** communities (Merriam, 1988), and those suggested directly by the data (Charmaz, 1995). As this study deals with a previously unstudied population, the opinions of participants were used to check validation of aspects of the study, both immediately following interviews and again near completion of the study. Bloor (1983) suggests that member validation, a procedure more commonly employed by anthropologists and social scientists, serves to verify the relevance of the researcher's understanding of participants' lives, which was particularly worthwhile for this project as the researcher is not, herself, a member of the group under study.

## **RESULTS**

### *Life Histories*

Twenty-seven (90%) participants felt very different than their peers in terms of gender from an early age, on average by age 5. Female-born participants invariably were tomboys as children and were not significantly bothered by others for their gender presentations until puberty. On the other hand, male-born participants were usually made aware quite young that something was "not right" about their presentations through the angry, dismayed, or mocking responses of peers and adults.

Participants had employed a variety of coping methods to deal with the ostracism, pressure to conform, and lack of mirroring they experienced: deliberately spending a lot of time alone, assuming leadership roles in order to pre-empt teasing or being overpowered, cultivating a tough and angry exterior presentation, developing abilities in the creative arts, and excelling in school. One third of the participants had experienced problems with substance abuse, although at the time of the study all but one of them had been in recovery for at least 2 years.

Its, participants related that pressure to conform to gender norms varied according to how well each "passed" as one or the other gender (not necessarily the one related to their birth sex). Those with the most ambiguous appearances reported the greatest amount of difficulties in navigating the world. Problems included harassment, stares, and verbal hostility directly related to their appearance. Butch female-born participants also reported frequently being intensely scrutinized or even chased out of public women's restrooms, where they are taken to be male intruders.

Four study participants were cross-living: three female-born participants lived full-time as men, and one male-born participant lived full-time as a woman. But they were clear that they did not intend to cross genders; it was others who placed that expectation upon them. Three others, who were using hormones, were deliberately cultivating or allowing ambiguous presentations. One of them, Sasha, pointed out, "I have never considered myself as a woman trapped in the wrong body. . . . I am merely augmenting my natural 'femaleness' and putting it out front via female hormones."

Andre, who was born female and is living as a man, recently began using hormones to lower his voice. He explained,

I prefer that people read me as male. I'm okay with people reading me either way. I know most people only have two choices, so of those two choices, I prefer to be read as male, because I feel that it speaks to most of who I am.

Several study participants felt very strongly that physically altering bodies was something that was only appropriate in a small minority of cases and that the treatment of bodily dissatisfaction through surgical or hormonal alterations was not only a mistake, but a disservice to other third-gendered people. Joanie argued:

I end up feeling like people like me are actually even more invisible in the context of this trans movement. . . . [Body alteration] tends to support the idea that there are two different genders and that. . . if in your mind your gender doesn't fit in the body you were born with, then the thing to do is to become the other one.

Lou felt that

It saddens me that we have a society and a culture that forces people to choose looking one way or looking the other. That there is no in-between, and the torture that people go through when they are physically in-between like that. . . . I wish there was more acknowledgement of that, of the sacredness of that.

Most found pressures to conform to gender norms in the LGBT communities more disturbing than any from the mainstream. This pressure takes such forms as gay men being told not to behave in a "queeny" or "limp-wristed" manner, and lesbians being told not to be so "butch" or "male-identified," and facing threats of exclusion if they should disclose their self-identifications as "not entirely women" in settings such as

lesbian organizations. On the other hand, many participants also experienced pressure within transgender groups to "go all the way," with the assumption that their not crossing genders completely was a sign of indecisiveness or lack of courage to complete the process, rather than the legitimate expression of an intermediate identity.

### *Characteristics*

Despite the lack of cultural context and having to carve out a sense of themselves without role models or mirroring--often in the face of abuse and denigration, and frequently while continuing to experience considerable pressures to conform to cultural and sub-cultural norms—as adults, the participants in this study led full, vibrant lives. Even without mentoring and guidance, they exhibit many of the characteristics and signifiers of vocation associated with established third-gender roles in non-Western cultures.

***Resilience and Authenticity.*** Many were clear and firm about who they were from an early age. When Lynda was in fifth grade, her school instituted a dress code requiring girls to wear dresses. She refused so strenuously that she was ultimately pulled out of the school. "It was, even then, that important to me not to be forced to dress like a girl," she said.

Through the careful self-examination that is required as a result of being different, participants invariably developed an authenticity and inner strength that they considered to be one of the true gifts of being third gendered. Some found that they could never really lie about who they were, which made life more difficult initially, but which resulted in a more genuine presence in the long run. Douglas is an example:

Being in the world as who I am, has in fact proven all those things that people were afraid of wrong. . . . If I were to try to be something other than who I am, I would have doomed my life to a miserable fate. . . . Part of the reason that I am where I am now, is because I have accepted my effeminate nature, and have even paraded it. And that the bravery that it took to do that is admired and revered, and not just by gay people. And it is respected. Because when I walk in the room, I am exactly who I say I am.

Lauren found that

Changing my identification from "lesbian" to "transgender butch lesbian" has felt like coming home to myself and finally being in the body I inhabit, sexually and otherwise. . . . When I started to accept more of the gender stuff, and actually feel like I was connected to my body, connected to my life, connected to other people in a way that meant something, then that kind of hooked into the spirituality stuff, and what I have now is . . . a constant sense of joy and peace and tranquility about it all.

***Leadership and Role Models.*** One third of participants specifically mentioned their skills or inclinations as leaders and community builders. Some, like Stan, figured out at a young age that "If I wanted to make something happen, I made it happen. I organized the games in the neighborhood . . . I went around to peoples' houses with

my baseball and bat to get a ball game started. . . . I guess I had a lot of initiative." Many participants were functioning in leadership roles, including running a support helpline for transgendered people, creating cross-cultural rituals, organizing intentional communities, and holding responsible positions in their jobs. At least 11 participants consider themselves activists, not only regarding gender issues, but also in environmental and public health causes.

For many, living openly as who they are serves as role modeling for others, as Brian relates:

It does a lot for other people, to see a man who can, on the one hand, not be . . . a caricature, maintain a sense of pride, a sense of dignity. . . and at the same time be completely, unapologetically androgynous. I think that a lot of men who don't even want to go that far . . . find that to be a very healing role model, because so many of them have been severely wounded around the ideas of effeminacy and sissydrom. . . . I've lost count of the number of men who have walked up to me at some point and hugged me and kissed me and said, "Thank you for being you, you've changed my life."

Aster, who was born female, has altered her body with both hormones and surgery, and is living as "neither male nor female—just me." As a nurse practitioner, working with public health patients in a very conservative area of the deep South, she found that:

After their initial shock (and I completely ignore their little bit of shock), I'm very real with them, and they respond accordingly to the person that I am inside, and I kind of like to think that I'm changing the world just a little bit, 'cause they can see that I'm different, yet I'm a good practitioner, and I look in their eyes, and I take care of them.

**Healers.** A number of participants worked in the health and helping professions: Aster, mentioned above, was a public health nurse practitioner; 7 participants were bodyworkers, 2 were therapists, 2 were domestic violence workers, 1 was a minister. Two others noted that they had always been sought out by others for advice: Brian said, "I was the Dear Abby of my high school class, which was amazing, because I had never even romantically kissed anyone before, and yet the women and the men would come to me."

**Artists.** Overall, this was a very creative group. Of the 30, seven were writers and four were musicians, and of these, at least two of the writers and three of the musicians earned all or a substantial portion of their incomes from their art. Three were professional visual artists, including a landscape architect, a graphic artist, and a fashion designer. Three others were performers, including a drag queen, an actor, and a performance poet. But even of those who were not at all professionally involved in the arts, almost all were, by their own definitions, "artistic and creative"; "an accomplished amateur photographer"; "sustained by . . . my own art, my writing, my cooking." Four were scientifically inclined; one of them was a professional research scientist, also a highly creative endeavor.

**Mediators and Bridge-Builders.** Many participants found that they naturally served

in mediating functions. Twelve pointed to their unique perspective—being able to see from a wider view, seeing things from all angles—as a distinct advantage. Twenty-three of the 30 reported being called upon to act as mediators between men and women. Andre pointed out that as a transgendered man with a female history, women are more open to hearing a male perspective from him:

They've told me, "I can hear it from you, Andre, where I can't hear it from men." . . . And I've had guys say the same thing. . . . I'll give them the female perspective or experience. . . . So I have insights to both, that is really unique.

Participants also found that they were mediating in other capacities. Several acted as a bridge between races, often finding themselves the sole person of color among white people. Two who are of mixed heritage found parallels between their multiracial and mixed-gendered experience. Billy described it:

I was born on the edge of race and gender. . . . I'm mixed heritage, and third-gendered, and I've always existed in the world sort of looking in, being part of something but also looking in from the outside.

Others mentioned bridging between age groups, between scientists and nonscientists, between American and European cultures, between the worlds of health and illness as a result of conditions that they lived with, and between the gay or lesbian communities and the transgendered community. One discovered a gift for bridging between the world of the living and beyond, which has proven useful now in hospice work.

***Survivors of Major Illness, Accidents, and Trauma.*** Participants were asked about any major illness or accidents they had suffered, in order to ascertain whether there might be any parallel to shamanic initiatory illnesses; 25 responded that they had or continue to experience at least one serious accident or condition. Four had experienced life-threatening events: one had survived a combination of meningitis, encephalitis, and pneumonia at age 4; one had survived a meningitis-type viral infection, also at age 4; one survived clinical death through illness; and another survived clinical death during surgery after being shot.

Nine suffered from chronic conditions, including asthma and allergies, chronic fatigue syndrome (2 participants), hearing difficulties, eye problems (for which this participant underwent a number of surgeries as a child), lupus, HIV, a blood clotting disorder, and severe diverticulitis (in one of the younger participants). In addition, 10 had struggled with alcohol and drug addictions and 10 had suffered from depressions severe enough to warrant clinical attention.

Three had experienced serious accidents: one a car accident at age 18, another almost drowned at age 20, and a third suffered a life-threatening motorcycle accident, in addition to being shot several times in the line of duty as a police officer, including the incident mentioned above which resulted in clinical death and revival.

## *Spiritual Concomitants*

**Nonordinary Experience and Unusual Abilities.** Participants were asked about any nonordinary and transcendent spiritual experiences they might have had, in order to ascertain whether there might be any parallels between the skills of people in the institutionalized third-gendered spiritual roles of other cultures and abilities spontaneously arising in this group. Twenty-eight of 30 participants (93%) reported having experienced transcendent spiritual events or unusual abilities; 17 of these (57% of the total) had had profound and/orrepeated experiences. This compares with surveys that show 40% to 50% of the general population reporting similar experiences of any intensity (Haraldson & Houtkooper, 1991; Palmer, 1979; Thomas & Cooper, 1980). In the Thomas and Cooper (1980) study, which involved lengthy analysis of qualitative descriptions, a more detailed investigation than the tabulation of questionnaire responses in the other surveys, 34% reported what they called "intense spiritual experiences." However, 10% of these turned out on further investigation to be irrelevant responses based on poor understanding of the question. The remainder was broken down into two groups: 16% who experienced moving incidents involving spiritual faith and 9% who experienced states that Thomas and Cooper designated as either "psychic" or "mystical" and which more closely approximate the events reported by the participants in this study.

Guye described one experience:

It was the first Jewish service that I had ever been to, and I had a transcendental experience. I mean, I could speak Hebrew, I sang Hebrew songs, the woman next to me didn't believe that I had never sung Hebrew before. I sang one we didn't have the words to. I felt like I met God in that group. . . . [That is] a dramatic one, but it happens a lot.

Jan, who said "I see things. . . . I feel spirits that are caught," described a recent event:

This guy, George, died. . . . We go to a party for his son, who's now 2 years old. I walk into the house and go, "Oh, George is here." I never met him, but I felt him everywhere. So I sat down, and we're all having cake and everything and I hear him say, "Ask Sheila if she has any connection to 'Bubba'." And I'm going, "Are you kidding me? Bubba?" . . . So I said, "Anybody here,"—I wouldn't even put it directly to her—I said, "Anybody here got any connection to 'Bubba'?" And she said, "That's what they used to call George when he was a little boy."

Some experienced otherworldly connections when they were very young. Joshua related:

By the time I was 4, I knew that I was very different. . . . I was just very conscious of the fact that I came in with a whole host of memories of—I don't know if they are other lives or not, but I just know that at 2 ~~1~~ 3 . . . I just had all of these experiences of seeing other beings and hearing voices and doing other things that at first I didn't know that everyone didn't do. . . . By the time I was 4, I knew that I had a whole reality that I could not talk about with my parents.

Growing up in an intellectual, atheist-Jewish home, Joshua experienced a turning point when he was around 18; now he writes and leads gatherings on spiritual subjects:

I happened to be standing outside, and this energy came into me, for about 3 seconds . . . and utterly, in that time, transforming, because in that time I knew everything. If you had come up to me at that moment and said, "Joshua, how many grains of sand are there on the planet?" could have told you. And then it was gone, absolutely gone. But that experience really moved me. Because coming from a very political family, I was involved in SDS and it was . . . student riots and anti-war movement, it was the '60s and all that. It's like I made this incredibly sharp left turn on my journey . . . I mean, I watched my parents and grandparents and great-grandparents be various kinds of revolutionaries and . . . it was like, unh-uh, I'm going *this* way.

Several participants demonstrated paranormal abilities at a young age. Lenny unnerved others by

playing ESP games. They had the 5-card game, with 5 black images, and the sender sends one and the receiver gets one, and it was like, okay, if you get this right 5 times out of 25, it's just chance. . . . And I got 20 right in a row.

*Spiritual Practices.* Almost all participants were raised with conventional religious backgrounds: 15 (50%) in Protestant denominations, 13 (43%) Catholic, 5 (17%) Jewish, and 2 (7%) Buddhist. One was raised without a religious tradition, and two grew up in other faiths (one Rosicrucian and one Native American traditional). At the time of this study, none followed an exclusively traditional religious path. Of the 30, only two maintained connections to the religions they were raised in. One, a Latina, maintained a loose connection to Catholicism as part of her cultural expression. The other, raised in a combination of Catholicism, Rosicrucianism, Buddhism, and Judaism, maintained a deep Buddhist practice, continued her association with a Reform (Jewish) congregation, and considered her martial arts practice to be an integral part of her spirituality.

Most participants listed multiple, eclectic spiritual practices, including Tibetan Buddhism, Native American religion, pagan and Unitarian practices, Sufism, Taoism, creation spirituality, and shamanic work. Nine participants wrote "none" under "current spiritual practice" on the demographic questionnaire, but when asked about it, said that they were "spiritual but not religious" and followed a practice of their own, often connected to nature or relating to an informal, personal sense of connection with something bigger than themselves.

## DISCUSSION

Any number of the traits that seem to arise in conjunction with an intermediate gender identity—gravitating toward work as an artist, healer, or mediator; life-changing illnesses or accidents; and spontaneous experience with realities beyond bounded space and time—would mark a person in a non-Western culture as blessed (or cursed) to follow a shamanic-type path. But while such abilities and functions of

non-Western third-gender roles could be said to be culturally prescribed and expected, it can hardly be claimed that any movement of third-gendered Americans toward the same types of roles is based on the social construction of the position, as there is no third gender recognized in the United States.

Not only is there no recognition in the United States of the existence of gender intermediacy, there is no system of apprenticeship or training to guide related special abilities into particular roles. The participants in this study have simply, in many cases, stumbled into the closest approximations that Western society offers to use their innate gifts.

Falling into the "gray area" of gender has its advantages, as many participants pointed out, including a greater freedom to change and reinvent oneself. Gender theorist Marjorie Garber (1992) sees "the third" not as a noun, a third *thing*, but a verb: a mode of action, "a range of things that disrupt the binary stasis" (p. 12). Performance artist Kate Bornstein (1994), herself third gendered, notes the distinction between ambiguity and fluidity: "If ambiguity is a refusal to fall within a prescribed gender code, then fluidity is the refusal to remain one gender or another" (pp. 51-52).

However, fluidity is not necessarily a characteristic of all third-gendered people, nor is it always desirable. Many third-gendered people develop identities that remain more or less stable for a lifetime, but they do recognize that the options for change are always present and available. Several participants in this study acknowledged this, allowing for the prerogative to be different in the future, while some envisioned the changes they had gone through as a process of unfolding, growing into a more and more authentic sense of themselves as they moved away from the constricting forces of others' expectations. This type of mature fluidity needs to be distinguished from the kind of fragmentation seen in the multiple personalities of pathologies like dissociative identity disorder or the defensive splitting in response to childhood abuse. Clinical psychologist Layton (1998) points out that "some kind of core identity seems to be a necessary prerequisite for the capacity to play freely with alternative identities" (p. 185). This can be compared to arguments in transpersonal psychology that a healthy, integrated ego is a necessary basis for ego transcendence (Boorstein, 1996).

Could it be said that those who combine male and female are transcending the duality of gender? Wilber (2000) places them at a postconventional ("transdifferentiated and transconventional," p. 120) level, having traced the "stream" of gender identity development from undifferentiated, through the differentiated stages of basic gender identity, gender conventionality, and gender consistency, into "transdifferentiated gender androgyny," positing the next steps as tantric archetypal gender union (at the subtle level of his spectrum) and, finally, causal/nondual "beyond gender" (Wilber 2000, pp. 198, 212).

The dual awareness of living in a body of one sex while experiencing a different or additional gender may be compared to the process of mind-body integration

described by Washburn (1995):

The mind-body dualism characteristic of the mental-egoic period is overcome and a higher mind-body whole is brought into being. . . . As [it] approaches integration, it begins to realize that, in a sense, it has *two* bodies: not only the physical body (which is now awakened) but also a subtle energetic body (the circulating power of the Dynamic Ground, which does the awakening). (pp. 231-232; emphasis in original)

Thus the integration of body and felt-sense of identity, as experienced by third-gendered people, could serve as a doorway, for themselves as well as others, into an understanding of trans-egoic realities as held within a material body.

In Wilber's evolutionary perspective, the West, as a culture, is in a position where greater numbers of people may be poised to move into "second tier" consciousness, which is characterized by being fully aware of a kind of whole-systems view that can appreciate the necessity of all levels of awareness (Wilber, 2000). Third-gendered people may well already be doing this, at least in the arena of gender. They may be, in the terms of Ferrer's (2000) nonlocal participatory view of transpersonal phenomena, one locus of cultural movement into a higher level of understanding. For people who in other respects bear considerable resemblance to shamans and mystics, it would not be surprising to find that this calling was to act as psychopomps who are here to help Western society evolve to a higher level of integration.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that gender deviance does not always mean a desire to be the opposite sex. The spontaneously arising similarities to traits of people in third-gendered roles in non-Western cultures suggest that there may be elements of third-gender-type difference that are transcultural and inherent to gender intermediacy.

This study also suggests that transpersonal theories may profit from the inclusion of an expanded view of gender not only to promote looking beyond deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about the inevitability of male/female duality and masculine and feminine norms, but also as a way of envisioning the healing of the mind/body split, following the example of those who live such reunification through the embodiment of (gender) paradox.

For most of us, who are more conventional men and women, the lives of the participants in this study reveal that gender is not an inevitable byproduct of the bodies that we are born with and suggest that there may be an element of spirit or "calling" to our being men or women. Beyond that, the participants in this study show that stepping outside the bounds of conformity—in whatever way—is likely to bring with it freedom; creativity; wider, more integrated views; and, possibly, greater spiritual opening as well. The result of heeding the call of authenticity is a life of greater freedom.

## NOTES

1. A finer distinction can be made between these two terms: for instance, a person's orientation might be bisexual, while his or her preference may be for women; that is, the individual experiences attraction to both men and woman but primarily women (Klein, 1978). This distinction is not often made; the terms are usually used interchangeably.

2. The term *berdache*, although useful as an umbrella designation and still widely used by anthropologists, has been disparaged by some (Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997; Roscoe, 1998; Tafoya, 1992), as it derives from a Persian term meaning "slave-boy," thus reflecting the negative attitudes of European colonizers, who generally approached the phenomenon with alarm and disgust (Blackwood, 1984; Williams, 1992). An emic alternative, "two-spirit" that has arisen more recently among Native American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people, encompasses these tribal third-gendered roles but extends beyond them to include identities more akin to Euro-American LGBT positions.

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