

Study To Compare Transgenders, Gender Radicals, and their Siblings

BY STACEY HORN

"Gender," UVM Ph.D. candidate Rhonda Factor explains, "is not a dichotomous variable. There are people who don't identify as either gender, an emerging population of individuals who don't experience themselves as one or the other, aren't interested in being one or the other ... what does that mean about how they relate to their body?" Further, asks Factor, what does it mean for how psychology will relate to them?

Factor is currently working on a dissertation titled "Exploring Gender Diversity: A Comparison of Transgendered Adults and Their Conventionally Gendered Siblings." In her study, she uses the term *transgender*, or *trans*, as "an umbrella term referring to a heterogeneous group of individuals who do not fully identify with the sex and/or gender to which they were assigned at birth." This group includes those who describe themselves with the terms "transman" or "transwoman" as well as "gender radicals ... individuals who experience themselves as neither male nor female."

Factor explains that her interests in "gender expression, gender diversity, gender as a construct" led her to pursue research about transgender populations. She adds, "I don't identify as trans, but I do feel connected to these issues in a personal way and that [all] people are harmed by gender reinforcement. Looking at gender constructions, we bring into question the facts of male and female that are so reified by culture."

As she gathered information for her research, Factor found that the limited available literature in the field of psychology provided "little knowledge and insight into the experiences of trans individuals," so when clinicians encounter trans individuals in therapy, they do not have access to trans-affirming information to inform their therapeutic practices.

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to sit and act" in order to *pass*, for one gender or another, or they might diagnose transgender individuals with Gender Identity Disorder or Transvestic Fetishism. Those two terms are the psychological labels used to describe individuals whose experience of gender causes "clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" according to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

"In terms of the way the DSM regulates sex and gender," Factor says, "I don't feel that's useful or about real health or illness. It's about cultural norms." She identifies one role of psychology as "policing the borders" of gender divisions, leaving transgender individuals "totally marginalized" and frequently pathologized when they seek support from the psycho-

logical establishment.

Out of her work, Factor hopes to see psychology's view of gender move "away from defining" toward a "much more contextual understanding." She hopes "to show the variation of experiences that people who identify as trans have; female to male, male to female, and those who identify as neither." In addition, Factor would like to see "improvements in legal protection" for trans individuals who frequently experience discrimination, harassment, and violence, yet are accorded little or no legal recognition and raised public awareness about seemingly mundane experiences of gender such as the designation of *male*, or *female*, on drivers' licenses and other official documents as well as separate bathrooms for *Men* and *Women*.

Factor recognizes that new methods and new ways of understanding must fuel

research with transgender populations.

"Anything that's hard to quantify," Factor explains, "poses challenges to scientific understanding. Transgender bodies, as sites where cultural perceptions of male and female are challenged, refuse to be quantified, categorized, or defined by traditional psychological theories." For a psychological researcher like Factor, this lack of quantifiable data presents a unique opportunity.

Out of interviews she conducted with transgender individuals, Factor developed a survey, prefaced with a paragraph explaining, "I have tried to include choices that describe a wide range of experiences. However, some of the items will not describe you exactly. By choosing the response that comes closest to describing you, you are helping to broaden the ways in which our society understands gender."

From her surveys, Factor seeks to learn about respondents' demographic characteristics (such as level of education, occupational status, and income) as well attitudes and experiences of the body, social support systems, and experiences of violence, harassment, and discrimination.

Factor has designed two versions of her survey: one for individuals who identify as trans and one for their "conventionally gendered" siblings. Factor's use of siblings as a control group mirrors a 2001 study titled "Lesbians and their Sisters as a Control Group" she worked on with Dr. Esther Rothblum, also of the UVM Psychology Department. Lesbian mental health was Factor's original research interest when she came to UVM in 1997 and began studying with Rothblum. As her research interests shifted, Factor sought ways to evolve methods she was familiar with in her work with transgender populations. She plans to defend her dissertation in September of 2004. After earning her doctorate, Factor hopes to work as a clinician, to engage in "healing work with individuals and to speak more qualitatively to these issues." ▼

UVM Celebrates Academic Coming Out

BY STACEY HORN

UVM's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Allies Center hosted events throughout National Coming Out Week. Events on Monday and Tuesday evening, facilitated by LGBTQA Center coordinator Dorothea Brauer, brought students and faculty together to discuss LGBT issues in the classroom and curriculum.

Monday night's "Coming Out as a Scholar" panel featured Valerie Rohy, Assistant Professor of English specializing in queer studies, 19th and 20th century American literature, critical theory, and women's studies; and UVM scholars Peter Blackmer, Assistant to the Dean for Administrative Services, completing

his doctorate in leadership and policy studies; Glen Elder, Associate Professor of Geography, specializing in race and sexuality and urban geography; Rhonda Factor, a Ph.D. candidate in clinical psychology, completing her dissertation on gender diversity; Clinton Nichols, a doctoral student in geography; and John Sama, a Ph.D. student in educational leadership.

In front of a small, responsive audience, scholars discussed LGBT studies as a field of research. Panelists addressed the question of whether scholars in this field must identify as queer, agreeing that the answer varies across disciplines. Sexual orientation might be more relevant for social science researchers than for scholars who study constructions of queerness in literature and culture. Rohy cited a line she remem-

bered from Tom Robinson's song, "Glad to Be Gay": "You don't have to be gay to sing this song, but it helps."

Members of the panel expressed comfort with the LGBT-affirming climate at UVM. Audience members raised the question of how scholarly LGBT research works to affect social change. Panelists agreed that the classroom is an important place to raise these issues, foreshadowing Tuesday's faculty/student forum.

Brauer called Tuesday's "fishbowl discussion" about LGBT issues in the classroom and curriculum "the most powerful event of the week." Sixty-three students and faculty attended, including President Fogel and his wife, Rachel.

Brauer explained the event's format but did not introduce

the participants. Instead, she asked the students, who sat in a circle surrounded by faculty, to begin. Students discussed hetero-centric ideologies they often face in the classroom, such as the assumption that marriage and children lie in most students' futures. In addition, transgender students have not been able to change their names on class rosters, so they must choose between answering to their non-preferred name, or outing themselves to professors, often in front of an entire class. As the conversation shifted toward the question of being out in the classroom, students noted significant differences across disciplines, observing that some classrooms are more comfortable than others and asking, "Is it as relevant for students and faculty to be out in math as it is in social work classrooms?"

Students then traded places with faculty, who emphasized that UVM is not a place where people endanger their jobs by coming out. Faculty asked, "How do we come out in the classroom?" Some faculty said they choose to come out at a particu-

lar time in the course such as the first day, the last day, or National Coming Out Week. Others said that coming out "just happens." Faculty discussed the issue of losing credibility by coming out in the classroom. Will students interpret the class through the lens of the professor's sexual orientation?

Some faculty who identify as straight allies said they choose to "come out" as heterosexual in their classrooms in order to raise students' consciousness about assumptions of sexual norms. Discussing the question of students, coming out, faculty said they have the power to control the climate of their own classrooms, but they cannot protect students outside of class, and coming out has serious implications in academia as well as in the larger world.

After the discussion, students and faculty lingered to continue talking with one another. Brauer said, "The universal response from faculty was 'I'm so glad I could be there. I'm so glad I could hear what the students had to say.'" ▼