SOCIAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN TRANSGENDER YOUTHS: NARRATIVES FROM THE *LAUNDA* COMMUNITY IN KOLKATA

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Abstract: The deep and intimate feeling of being male or female is not always congruent with the individual's anatomical sex and some people experience some discordance between gender identity and sex assigned at birth on the basis of anatomical features. To indicate this identity condition, many terms exist. Across the globe, *transgender* is generally used as an umbrella term to indicate all those people living such discordance, though not perceiving the need to undergo surgical interventions and/or hormonal treatments aimed at adapting their body to the perceived gender. Throughout the paper, except where specified, we will use *transgender* as an umbrella term. Prevailing research on teenage youth notes a trend in which self-identification as lesbian, gay, or bisexual happens at increasingly earlier ages.

The term *gender identity* has been used to describe an individual's internal sense of self as male, female, or an identity between or outside these two categories (Wilchins, 2002). Individuals whose biological sex assignment matches male or female gender identity and the range of related behavioural expressions deemed acceptable by societal norms may be referred to as "traditionally gendered." Genderism is pervasive and acts in every institution, starting from families, schools and workplaces. Thus, transgender people face social stigma at different levels, not being often able to find a support even in birth family. Transgender people encounter difficulties in virtually every aspect of their lives, both in facing the substantial hostility that society associates with those who do not conform to gender norms and in coping with their own feelings of difference. Considerable verbal harassment and physical violence accompany the powerful social stigma faced by transgender people. A main source of support and identity recognition originates from peer groups and/or transgender communities, especially for young transgender people.

This paper explores the process of social identity formation among *Launda* dancers in the city of Kolkata as expressed by them. Narrative analysis is an interpretive method that emerged in the 1970s from a rather innovative 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences.

Key words: Transgender, social identity formation, Launda, narratives.

1.1 Introduction

A persons feeling of being male or female is not in congruence to the biological sex he/she is born with and may feel discordance to it. Identity is concerned with the basic question of 'who am I?' and denotes the conundrum of dimensions and factors which are reciprocally interconnected and provides individuals' with a sense of self. Identities can be understood to be a sense of self and is a result of a process of reflection and choice and an empowering expression of beliefs, tastes and values. Conversely, identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. Identities may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority. While each human is a unique individual with an explicit sense of self, we are insistently social and can only understand ourselves in relation to others. The reason for this being that we do not exist in isolation and are social beings, our identities are thus shaped by the groups to which we develop a sense of belonging. The term *transgender* is generally used across the globe as an all-encompassing term to indicate all those people living a life of discordance, though not perceiving the need

to undergo surgical interventions and/or hormonal treatments aimed at adapting their body to the perceived gender. Contrary to transgender people, a *transsexual* person is someone who has undergone surgical interventions and/or hormonal treatments to modify sexual and anatomical features in line with perceived gender. Essentially, gender variance is extremely complex and it is not possible to trace definitely so distinct borders.

Marginalized groups like transgender persons often face complex choices in defining and enacting their own identities. They are often forced to choose, or feel compelled, to assimilate to the norms and values of the dominant group, thus abandoning alternative identities. Transgender communities are either segregated communities or exist as part of the normative heterosexual identities due to prevalent violence and social exclusion. In their work, Hill & Willoughby (2005) assert that the causes of anti-transgender violence need to be traced in the action of genderism, which consists in it an "ideology that reinforces the negative evaluation of gender non-conformity or incongruence between sex and gender. […] a cultural belief that perpetuates negative judgments of people who do not present as a stereotypical man or woman" (p. 534). Discrimination of sexual minority groups start in their families. The Indian family does not give an individual the space to express a non-heterosexual gender alternative. Proscribing to a gender variant form of living in an Indian family is a dysfunctional process. The individual is obliged to create a false sense of self identity because disclosure is often met with a violent denial or negative reaction from the family.

The term *gender identity* has been used to describe an individual's internal sense of self as male, female, or an identity between or outside these two categories (Wilchins, 2002). Individuals whose biological sex assignment matches male or female gender identity and the range of related behavioral expressions deemed acceptable by societal norms may be referred to as "traditionally gendered." Gender identity starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other, though as one develops, gender identity becomes much more complicated, so that, for example, one may sense himself as not only a male but masculine man or an effeminate man or even as man who fantasies being a woman. Glover has supported Stoller's definition and explains that it is quite possible that a man's 'inner and outer life' does not harmonize. Stoller continues to explain that a man who is playing the defined and expected **gender role** in front of others can never be understood and judge by the others, about how that man feels/thinks of himself.

The term *transgender* focuses on individuals whose gender identity conflicts with biological sex assignment or societal expectations for gender expression as male or female. Research on adolescents and sexual orientation supplements the stage models with information specific to youth and college students. Research on teenage youth notes a trend in which self-identification as lesbian, gay, or bisexual happens at increasingly earlier ages (Troiden, 1998). Devor (2004) in his work confirms that the formation of transsexual or transgender identity is entirely crossed by two essential functions: being seen for what we are (*witnessing*) and being mirrored in the same way we see ourselves (*mirroring*). Similarly to the above mentioned concept of the *looking glass self* (Cooley, 1902), these functions have the role of validating and confirming the sense of self. If these processes are dysfunctional, the most damaging outcomes can be psychosis or suicide attempts.

Launda dance as a traditional dance form had gained popularity during the times when women were not allowed to become public performers and the sequestered presence of women made men take up the role of entertainers. A parallel grassroots alternative for the economically backward groups became the Launda naach. Laundas (young boys) have been engaged by poor families who are unable to meet the expense of costlier women dancers. Gradually *Launda Naach* became very popular and an intrinsic part of marriage ceremonies especially in feudal areas of Bihar and UP. In previous studies by Dey (2013) and Dasgupta et al (2009) among *Launda* dancers in Kolkata experiences of discrimination and violence has been reported. The culture of *Launda* dance exposes young effeminate homosexual boys to organized patterns of exploitation which includes prostitution, violence, sexual assault and HIV risk. In the period of their youthful life they engage themselves in *Launda* dancing having no other alternate opportunity of income generation. As they are exploited mentally, physically and sexually at an early age and faced a lot of discrimination in society they find support from their peer groups. It is this association and identification of self as a *Launda* is the point of enquiry of this paper.

1.2 Methodology

This paper is a narrative enquiry into social identity formation among *Launda* dancers in Kolkata. Narratives are understood as stories that include a temporal ordering of events and an effort to make something out of these events: to render, or to signify the experience of person-in-flux in a personally and culturally coherent, plausible manner. Narrative research can be categorized as descriptive and explanatory (Pollinghore, 1988). Narrative inquiry is an umbrella term that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). It is a means by which researchers systematically gather, analyze, and embody people's stories as told by them, which defies the outdated interpretations of truth, reality, knowledge and personhood of the group as indicated by outsiders.

This paper uses narratives of four *Launda* dancers collected through intensive interviews who have been actively involved in the trade and tries to assess the peer relations and its effect on their social identity formation.

1.3 Peer Groups and Identity

Social identities are associated with the social groups to which individuals belong (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, political affiliation) as propagated by the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identities apprise the self-concept of individuals who are members of a group. There are two sources of support that have the greatest influence on the individual: family and peers. While families stimulate and support the development of distinctive points of view; peer groups offer models, diversity, and opportunities for exploration of beliefs and values (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001).Transgender people habitually experience rejection from their family because their gender nonconformity is not accepted and understood. For this reason, one of the main sources of support becomes peer groups (Mizock & Lewis, 2008). In understanding the life story of M* the importance of peer association after rejection from family can be understood. *M* is Muslim boy from a joint family with four elder brothers and two elder sisters. He was very weak physically and preferred to play with girls. During his childhood his brothers treated him like a girl. It was soon after that he started emulating girls and dressing up like them. This was met by resistance from my family members. At the age of 12 he had his first sexual relationship with another boy. It was during this time that he realized that he felt disconnected from his biological body. His elder brothers on getting to know of his relationship with a boy beat him black and blue, shaved his head and locked him up in a room. At the age of 14 he ran away from home to Kolkata and started living with runaway boys at Sealdah station.* Peer groups thus take on an important role in the general identity development, and even more with respect to transgender people because of the lack of support in other relational contexts. . *M* identified with the Kothi boys and started travelling to different states to perform as a Launda. It was in association with these young boys that M* realized and confirmed to the identity of a cross-dressing dancer.* Membership to a group for *Launda* youth was a medium for sharing common features, norms, values, interests and activities.

Erikson (1950) was the first to establish identity formation as the major task for adolescence. He suggested adolescents typically experience an identity crisis as they attempt to negotiate this task. This crisis is characterized by a period of distress as young people explore their souls and experiment with options before they determine their beliefs and values. Adolescence and young adulthood for transgender and gender nonconforming people typically include age-appropriate periods of self-exploration, social exploration, and experimentation. However, puberty and the associated changes in social expectations are often times of extreme crisis for gender nonconforming youth due to unwanted physical maturation into adult bodies misaligned with their gender identities. *K*, a 32 year old Kothi from Kolkata has been a Launda dancer for a few seasons during his teens. K* first realized his sexuality when he had a major crush on a school mate in class 5. By 12 he had identified kothis near his locality and started hanging out with them. He grew his hair, started wearing women's jeans and explored with complete cross dressing in private.* Especially in adolescence, peer groups represent a *reference set* where adolescents can explore and test possible organizations of self and identity (Sherif & Sherif, 1964).

A contradictory theory that has been reported by some studies highlight the negative effects of group affiliation, because often associated with higher rates of risk behaviors, (e.g. Kiesner, et al., 2002, such as substance abuse (Urberg, Degirmencioglu, & Pilgrim, 1997), unsafe sexual practices (Henry et al., 2007), general delinquency and school dropout. The positive or negative outcomes of a group association are subject to the ability of groups to implement and influence individuals to conform to certain explicit norms and conducts. *S* is also an alcoholic, a habit he picked up with his Kothi friends while he frequented other states for Launda dance. It was a group event where after a long day all the Laundas gathered and drank alcohol. He became so dependent on alcohol that presently he has to undergo counselling for depression and self-destructive behaviour like wrist slashing induced during his drunken stupor.

Phases of anxiety related to one's own gender, confusion, gender explorations, and comparisons between one's own gender identity and expression and that of others, leads to the emergence of the initial internal cognitive and emotional tolerance of a transgender individuals' sense of self, where one comes to believe that one is "probably" different. *K* developed his identity through his interaction with the Kothis in their surroundings. According to K* "I am not comfortable undergoing a complete sexual reassignment surgery but I like to dress up as a woman, especially when I go out in the evening". He is a MSM and has multiple sexual partners. Early on when he started sex-work, he was young and naïve. According to K* "I like to look and feel like a woman but I do not like the idea of mutilating my body. I had a steady partner who is also a transgender and he used to treat me like a wife at home and in bed".

N* started his narration talking of his early recollections of gender and sexuality. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Sexual orientation refers to an individuals' physical, sexual and emotional attraction towards another person while gender identity is intrinsically linked to a person's internal sense of being male or female and sometimes neither. According to N* "I feel like I have the mind of a woman in my masculine body. That is why my story will be different from the story of other men. I belong to a lower middle class family. I have an elder sister and a younger sister. I was the only son in the family so everyone had high expectations from me. But since childhood I was girly as you are seeing me now. I used to like dressing up like women, wear sari, do my hair - these were my fascinations". Adolescents often face bullying and homophobic epithets from peers in schools. This kind of bullying result in a diminished sense of self and belonging in that particular social setting. N* dropped out of school in the 8th standard because of harassment and bullying in school. It was at this time that N* had his first sexual encounter with an elder boy from the locality. His realization that he liked other men is his sexual orientation. It was his exposure to Launda dance and association with other Kothi boys that he realized his innate feeling of femininity.

In any case, the feeling of belonging to one or more groups provides the individual with a feeling of being loved and cared for, esteemed, valued, and safe, buffering negative effects of psycho-social stress (Amadeo et al, 2015). N* prefers to be identified as a Launda and practicing Launda dance gives him the freedom to dress up and express his felt gender identity. N* recounted his first encounter with Laundas in a cruising area and heard someone address him as, 'hey, this boy is also a Kothi!' (…) I did not understand what the person had said at that time; I went back and asked, 'what did you call me? What is Kothi?'(…) Since that day, I started learning this language (bhasha), noting down new words, and emulating the others in order to get included in the Kothi shomaj (society, circle or network)

1.4 Conclusions

Peer group influences are initiated as early on as preschool and continue as children progress through school. The periods of adolescence and emerging adulthood during the lifespan often signal a restructuring of the self. The sense of self is largely formed in association with others. Transgender groups similar to the Launda dancers are faced with numerous challenges and ostracisation since they start exhibiting gender non-conforming behaviour as early as in adolescence. A number of studies suggest that group identification may have an important role in protecting individuals from the negative consequences of group-based exclusion or discrimination they face.

A close relationship is present between peer groups and transgender identity. Transgender can be understood as a broad term that can be used to refer to individuals whose gender identity, or gender expression is unlike the traditional gender norms and/or transgresses these social norms assigned at birth. Transgender thus include those who identify as being transsexual, cross-dressers, androgynous, no-gender or multi-gender, and a growing population who do not identify as belonging to any gender category at all.

Indeed, peer groups take on the task of providing reinforcement and sustainment in the processes of identity definition, and in the case of transgender people, this role appears even more important because of the incessant and recursive social stigma experienced by these people.

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