

Reimagining Gender and Sexual Normativity in Pastoral Formation

Joretta L. Marshall

Over the past 30 years, I have been fortunate to teach courses that engage pastoral theology and sexuality. Some of these studies are basic as they focus on broad notions related to sexuality, orientation, gender identity, and ethical decision-making while also tending to theological understandings and pastoral implications. Other courses have a narrower scope, such as queer theory and pastoral theology. I suspect that the students in my classes are much like students everywhere: eager to wrestle with theological and pastoral implications of self-identities in themselves and in others. The students are diverse in gender and sexual orientations and perspectives in ways that were most likely present but unnamed in the dominant culture a decade or more ago. They include women and men who are invested in traditional heterosexual relationships, those who clearly self-identify as gay, lesbian, bi, or ace in orientation, those who are in various places on the journey in gender transition or who self-identify as genderqueer or non-binary, those queer-identified who live in relationships with transgender partners, and many others. A significant change for faculty

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

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members over the last decade has been the need to keep up with the ongoing fluidity of language and understandings in order to pay attention to the intersections of identity formation and re-formation. The implications for the formative practices that mark theological schools and training programs in pastoral and spiritual care are many and varied.

As a discipline, pastoral theology has been intentional about staying close to the concrete, lived realities of people's lives. By doing so, we believe that theological claims and practices are reshaped, deepened, and broadened in our work as theological leaders, teachers, pastors, and clinicians. Meta-narratives, meta-theologies, and meta-theories always live in tension with the realities of those whom we encounter in the hospital, seminary, church, or community. Those in training programs, seminaries, and pastoral leadership remain ever-mindful of the diverse ways humans engage one another, leading us to challenge our theories and theologies as we reshape and reformulate the best of our assumptions and perspectives about what is normative. Unfortunately, at times we use theories as diagnostic tools, not recognizing how the best of our thinking can sometimes complicate and visibly damage the people with whom we engage in care. For example, to assume that there is a linear path from childhood to adulthood that informs authentic sexual and spiritual identity can put undue pressure and judgment on the many people for whom that journey is more complex, highly individualized, and unpredictable. Our love of psychological and developmental theory can sometimes lead us to premature judgment of what appears as non-normative.

This article invites a rethinking of gender and sexual normativity while also exploring implications for teaching and training pastoral care specialists. As always, my own theological underpinnings guide this reflection. I want to highlight three aspects of our work as teachers and supervisors in pastoral theology and care: (1) the importance of fluidity in theological and conceptual thinking, indicated externally by our language; (2) the need to challenge binaries in our formative work; and (3) some ongoing questions and implications for those of us who teach specialists in pastoral care and counseling, particularly as we participate in formative practices that shape our collective thinking and our being.

Before moving forward, however, one other comment might help the reader understand what I am up to in this article. In this particular writing, I am less invested in providing a re-examination or apologetic that sets forth our need to expand our understandings of pastoral formation in light of sexual and gender justice. There are many others who have written, and

are writing, about these issues.¹ In this article, I assume that those in the field of pastoral theology and care, particularly in teaching and educating, are eager to welcome the diversities of perspectives and life experiences that we see in the world.

FLUIDITY IN THEOLOGY, CONCEPTS, AND LANGUAGE

Students who enter pastoral care training and educational programs are as diverse as the people whom we encounter in our work as caregivers. In contemporary settings, this means they draw on multiple kinds of language to self-identify. The diverse language, in turn, points to a fluidness in theological self-understandings that challenges traditional normative beliefs about orientation and gender. If we are to be good mentors, teachers, and co-participants in formative practices, we must be willing to challenge—and be challenged by—less traditional language so that we might expand our notions of human beings, of God, and of relationality.

A first step toward reflecting on formative practices for pastoral care is to recognize that our language both invites us to reconsider theological and theoretical commitments but also can function to confine our perspectives. Over the past several decades, new languages have evolved to describe those who self-identify, behave, or perform in ways that the culture would describe as non-normative.² For years, people referred to the gay community as if it were a monolithic culture that could be represented by one term. The presence of strong women in the liberation movement necessitated a change to lesbian and gay persons, with language of bisexual and transgender following chronologically close behind to create the popular LGBT designation. More recently, people have picked up the positivity of the terms queer and trans to refer to individuals and communities of gender and orientation diversities. Allies draw on queer language as a self-referent in ways that both broaden and complicate its usage. In addition, terms are entering common usage, such as cisgender, ace, nonbinary, non-gender-conforming, genderqueer, and others, that point to ever-expanding understandings. Although some continue to use the pronouns he and she, a growing number of people prefer they, zie, hir, or some other form of self-reference. For some in theological education, this ongoing change in language points toward disconcerting notions. At the same time, a growing number of leaders in

Christian pastoral theological traditions relish the God-gifted creativity that is emerging as we find new ways to describe the multiplicity of identities. The fast pace of change in our language is matched only by the creativity of God's people.³

The misguided attempt to settle on one language to describe individuals or a group of people who share common traits misses the deeper theological appreciation for both complexity and multiplicity. Queer communities are teaching us that there is no singular language that can encompass the wholeness of individuals or communities. The different words we use to describe ourselves and those with whom we are in relationship represent complex realities that cannot be confined to one or two descriptive adjectives. As we know from our experience, each of us constantly negotiates self-identities, somewhat dependent on situation and context.

These complexities of identities and language intersect with race and ethnicity in ways that name and challenge white supremacy in thought and action. Understandings of gender and sexuality, behavior and identity cannot be separated from the very deep racism that many—even those within the LGBTQ communities—ignore at their own peril. Theologians and ethicists invite us to consider how we navigate the politics of identities, claiming new spaces for imagining ourselves and the concrete experiences of others. Phillis Sheppard notes that her womanist pastoral theological method “privileges the ‘case’ and thereby demands that we relinquish the privilege that theory and principles have held in our scholarship as pastoral theologians.”⁴ In exploring the case of a client whom she first knows as a lesbian and later as a clergy person's heterosexual spouse, she notes: “Gendered bodies are also racial bodies situated and experienced in racial religious contexts, and the racial self, unlike gender and sexuality, is less changeable. The sense of unchangeableness of race and racial embodiment” has a direct impact on our interpretation of this woman's experiences. Sheppard notes that, for this woman, “Race was treated as a biological given, and therefore, her understanding of her racial self-identity could not change” in the context of the multiplicity of her experiences.⁵ Sheppard attends to the realities of intersectionality, complicating what others might see as non-normative and perhaps even as pathological. Formative practices must include a careful examination of how power dynamics and structures of privilege and oppression work in our conceptualizations and in our real and lived experiences. We need to resist the temptation to see only one part of identity as significant

or one aspect of embodiment as critical in the lived realities of our students, supervisees, and co-care specialists.

In a similar yet distinct vein of expanding language and understanding, theologian Pamela Lightsey points to the helpfulness of self-consciously using the word “queer.” As she suggests, “Queer is ambiguous not simply because it is being reclaimed in new ways but because it proposes that while sexuality is real, it should not be construed as necessarily taking one permanent form. To identify as queer is to assert a type of fluidity in life, particularly in sexuality.”⁶ Drawing upon womanists and queer theorists and theologians, Lightsey provides a broad and rich way of imagining our relational, sexual, and gender selves. Of importance is the way that Lightsey attends to intersectionality in order to remind her readers that race, sexuality, and gender are not simply additive components to our core identity; rather, they are dynamics that are integrative and that matter deeply to our experience of the world, God, ourselves, and one another. If we are to participate in formative pastoral practices, we must not be afraid to explore multiple languages, to carefully deconstruct the power of those languages that shape our normative thinking, and to be wary of narrowly defining ourselves or others.

Changes in language not only invite us to reimagine what it means to be human but also demonstrate the need to embrace fluidity in our theological anthropology. To be sure, it is not simply that our language around gender identity and sexual orientation is fluid; rather, it is that the very nature of what it means to be human, to be in relationship with self and others, and to be in relationship to God and the world is shifting our language. The deep connection between theoretical, theological, and practical understandings of sexuality and our temptation to see orientation and gender as fixed and static emerges through the language people draw on to talk about God in relationship to gender identity and sexual orientation. For example, it has been important in some theological circles to believe that God creates humans with a specific gender identity or sexual orientation, and as an extension of that logic we believe that our job is simply to discern what God intended and thus follow a path toward our genuine and authentic self. On the face of it, this does not seem like a problematic perspective, especially when it allows people to affirm same-gender-loving people or those who are gender nonconforming. However, in other ways, this notion that God ordains a specific way of being in the world that relies upon essentialism and

a fixed concept of gender distracts us from recognizing the complexities of human agency, choice, and social construction along the journey.

Moving away from theological essentialism about God's direct role in human beingness, new questions arise about our interpretation of the ways that people arrive at self-identities or how change occurs over time. The notion that people don't "choose" to be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender, or that gender is predetermined even when it changes over time, feeds our need both to overdetermine individual identity formation as well as to overstructure God's creativity. The complications of this line of reasoning are drawn out in an article by theologian Laurel Schneider in *Sexuality and the Sacred*. Schneider notes the fallacy of debating whether God predetermines our sexual orientation. Ultimately, Schneider argues that to debate the role of God in our identity ultimately "distract[s] us from the more pressing—and maybe more radical—question of how then we are to live in relation to what we really believe about God's freedom and intentionality for each of us."⁷ Turning the "why" of orientation on its edge, she encourages a different set of questions related to identity and questions of choice. Schneider's vision of God and humans turns to more theo-ethical questions about our relatedness to one another.

What is required of us as teachers and pastoral leaders is to see identity as a rich and complex entity, focusing less on the "core" of one's identity and more on the multiplicities that arise in our embodiment. Pastoral educators who remain cognizant of the changes in language and who try to understand the meaning that drives such changes will increase their capacity to understand pastoral identity and formative practices as diverse and complex. Such a shift around our training in pastoral care requires that we also resist the temptation to see people through binary categories.

DECENTERING BINARIES IN SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL FORMATIVE PRACTICES

Formative practices in pastoral care are intended to assist those engaged in the activities of care to shape our sense of self and our relationships with others around intentional theological reflection, skills that enhance well-being in others, and a profound awareness of God in the midst of care. Ultimately, such practices increase our sense of wholeness in ministry and life. This aspect of wanting to care with the whole person in our

formative practices leads us to a reflection on the role of binary thinking. Participating in life-giving and vocation-shaping practices requires that we pay attention to the way in which binaries function unconsciously in our theories and practices.

Binaries are built around the idea that there are two types of something, carrying the concomitant belief that there is an opposite concept for each word that is used to describe that thing. An extension of this thinking moves us to believe that human beings embody one or another of various binaries. For example, when we think of men, the binary opposite is women. Similarly, when we think of spirituality, the binary opposite is often physicality. In a binary, it is customary for one concept to be valued over another, encouraging us to make choices about which is most important to us. Illustrative of the way binaries work is the assumption that spirituality is more important for faithful living than tending to our physical lives. In fact, physicality is often depicted as a detriment to our spiritual lives. However, a more liberative approach is to imagine deeper integrations of physicality and spirituality, lives of action and prayer as well as of sexuality and faithful living. Many ethicists, theologians, and practitioners who work on body theology and genderqueer thinking carefully link spirituality and sexuality in ways that point to our yearning for deep connections with one another, with ourselves, and with the Divine.

Many binaries are so embedded in our culture and our training programs in pastoral care and counseling that it takes great intentionality to watch for them and to appropriately deconstruct them. For example, think of how we talk about the binary concepts of black and white or darkness and light, often reinforcing inherent racism. In a similar way, our impulse in pastoral care to emphasize internal processes over external realities are often at play in the backgrounds of our conversations with students and colleagues. Because of our historical connections to the fields of mental health and care, we have tended to put more emphasis on the way our internal sense of self develops, even while recognizing that our internal experiences are shaped by or are in response to the external social constructions of the world. As pastoral care specialists, we seem to be predisposed to imagine that the important things happen in our internal world, even while we are aware that external privilege and systemic injustice deeply shape our experiences and identities. This particular binary also favors the belief that peo-

ple can leave their orientation and gender identities at the door of pastoral care training programs in order to focus on theological reflection.

As we decenter binaries and make them less pervasive in our interpretation and understanding of reality, we give space for people who embody various multiplicities. Decentering the power of the binary provides a way for people to experience the in-betweenness of reality as it does not force choices between intellect and spirit or between pastoral identity and embodied gender identities and expressions. For those participating in pastoral formative practices, the ability to decenter our binaries opens up possibilities for relating to the wholeness of people rather than to one aspect of being that we have decided is significant, important, or penultimate.

Genderqueer people offer pastoral theologians an opportunity to rethink whether binaries, particularly those related to gender, are as meaningful as we once believed. The concepts and realities of gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and biological anatomy intersect and are complex. The diversity within communities suggests that there is, rightly, a lack of unanimity in thinking among those who self-identify as transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer. A good beginning place for conversation is to articulate clearly what one means by using the language of gender identity and expression. The work of Sam Killerman in *A Guide to Gender: The Social Justice Advocate's Handbook* describes the differences between gender identity, gender expression, anatomical sex, and sexual and romantic attractions. Killerman's definitions of gender identity and gender expression are helpful as a starting point for pastoral theologians. Gender identity is "the internal perception of one's gender, and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or don't align with what they understand their options for gender to be." As he notes, this is not to be confused with one's biological sex or sex assigned at birth. Gender expression, on the other hand, is the "external display of one's gender, through a combination of dress, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors, generally made sense of on scales of masculinity and femininity."⁸ Killerman's model clarifies that gender identity and gender expression are intimately connected yet distinct entities. Moving away from the spectrum model (binary opposites that appear on a scale for woman/man, femininity/masculinity, female/male), Killerman proposes a "ness" model where people consider how they might describe themselves without depending on the binary opposite. These re-

constructions resist the structural oppressions that serve to retain the binary of gender.

The complexity of defining gender is illustrated nicely in the work of trans theologian Justin Tanis. In his second edition of *Transgender*, Tanis warns readers that the binary of gender is not something that every trans person feels compelled to challenge. For some, the binary of gender functions as a way to understand one's transition from one gender to another.⁹ What is important to note is that understandings and experiences of gender differ widely across populations. As he notes, to think of gender as a calling is to "look at my experiences of gender as the following of an invitation from God to participate in a new, whole, and healthy way of living in the world—a holy invitation to set out on a journey of transformation of body, mind, and spirit."¹⁰ In this way, Tanis connects spirituality and wholeness to experiences of gender transformation. Tanis suggests that it is helpful to think of gender as a calling that "may last for a season of time or a whole lifetime," recognizing that in the process gender is an ongoing revelation and unfolds in unique ways.¹¹ Shifting the language to call also moves it from a more diagnostic category (gender dysphoria) to the recognition that many pastoral care specialists experience and express gender fluidity as a positive aspect of their pastoral identity.

Challenging how binaries have functioned in pastoral formation requires those of us in seminaries and training centers to continually reflect on our own experiences, biases, and interpretations of the experience of others. Modeling a wholeness that is integrative in scope suggests that we not overemphasize our spirituality as opposed to our self-understandings of our physical life, our sexuality, or our gender. Rather, it suggests that we allow people to claim who they are, recognizing the fluidity of our self-identities. We can assume that the person we meet in the moment is an honest, authentic, and genuine human being who is on a journey toward greater wholeness. We do not assume that the language they use as self-referent at the moment is the last word or the only word about them that is important. Rather, we capture a moment in time, knowing that there is much more than is visible or acknowledged about the person we are meeting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FORMATIVE PRACTICES

Formative pastoral practices attend to the cultivation of habits and skills that are necessary for the embodiment of pastoral identities in the context of care. The practices we encourage and develop in pastoral and spiritual care settings, theological schools, and training programs can enhance our commitments to gender and sexual justice, as can participating in the transformation of ourselves and others who embody diverse orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. I want to highlight four general suggestions for our engagement in formative practices, knowing that these only touch the surface of possibilities and imaginations.

First, at the broadest level we need to remember that students and supervisees come to us already shaping their lives in a variety of contexts. We are mistaken if we imagine that we are forming people as if they have never thought about their identities before they encounter our educational or training programs. In collaborative ways, we join people who have expertise about their own lives. The expertise we bring as educators and trainers is distinct in that it offers others a space to theologically imagine and craft a pastoral way of being. A student who is on the journey to honestly live into their gender expressions and identities deserves someone with a theologically discerning presence and wisdom to accompany them. The goal is not to remind persons about the many ways they don't "fit" into the normative understandings of pastoral identity and care; rather, the goal is help our colleagues discern how to faithfully live into their own pastoral integrity.

In this process, there are specific actions we can take to invite people into relationships with us. For example, because of the role of oppression in privileged systems, those on a journey marked by gender and sexual diversities are sometimes hesitant to self-disclose aspects of their identity without first testing the way in which they will be accepted and/or diagnosed. We should not see these tendencies as resistant to a formation process; rather, we can build on the wisdom of people who know that self-disclosure is not always safe, even when the responses are well-intentioned. In addition, inquiring about how they would like us to know them is a better starting point than requiring someone to share their faith or family or spiritual journey in a formulaic way. Asking our students and colleagues about preferred pronouns without assuming we already know what they are going to say is a sign of deep respect and acknowledgment that what we think we see may betray our own assumptions and not the realities of their experiences.

These seem like simple actions, but they carry profound examples of what it means to engage care-fully with a whole person.

Second, as specialists in educational and training programs we model how to remain open and genuinely curious about things that we do not fully understand. Embodying openness and honesty about our feelings, assumptions, and experiences related to gender diversities can model the redemptive practice of humility, vulnerability, and courage. Even as we invite people to share with us what they would like us to know about their journey, the attitudes we bring to invite (and not demand) that people share with us their narratives of coming to a preferred pronoun or self-identity is indicative of our comfort with not-knowing all things. We may or may not fully understand the meaning someone brings to their gender expressions or identities, but do we not have to know the multiple layers and meanings for people in order to thoughtfully engage them.

Educating ourselves, deepening self-awareness, and engaging in direct conversation with students signal our openness to change our minds, to be honest, and to be perplexed about what we don't understand in someone else's choices. As is always true, we should not depend upon our students to "teach" us about the diversities of gender identities and expressions. Drawing on self-assessment tools in our training programs, such as those found within *A Clinician's Guide to Gender-Affirming Care*, can be life-giving, not only for our students but for ourselves.¹² Staying current with the changes in self-identifications that our students and colleagues might use over time invites honest and direct conversation. These conversations, when not filled with underlying suspicion or theological judgment, model the importance of appropriate vulnerability and honest engagement around differences.

Third, inviting students and supervisees to expand their imagination concerning what it means to join communities of faith can be important for those with whom we work. In particular, helping people discern how best to relate to judicatories, denominations, or institutions ought to be part of pastoral formative practices. It is safe to assume that not everyone who enters our formative programs will have a community that supports them on the journey, even though that same community may have "called" them at some point in time into ministry. For students with diverse gender expressions and identities, this often means they need collaborators who have experience in navigating structures and systems, not people who instruct them on how to move into communities but conversation partners as they

make decisions about how they want to engage. We do not have to predict what a person or a community will do or predetermine the outcome for our students or colleagues; rather, we need to be willing to walk with them in the painful liminal spaces of being members of communities that shape the complexity of both calling and vocation while also, at times, denying someone's identity.

Fourth, as teachers and supervisors who are embedded in larger institutions and cultures, we may be called to be advocates for those who carry less cultural and religious power. Leading theo-ethical conversations about sexual and gender justice at our workplaces invites conversation about issues that make a difference to our colleagues and those whom we engage in care. It is not the supervisor's role to speak "for" LGBTQ persons, but it *is* the supervisor's role to support them and advocate on their behalf and encourage their own voices to come forth. Most people who self-identify as nonbinary in some form or as LGBTQ suffer multiple micro-aggressions and need support to discern how to navigate these experiences.

Instead of colluding with the systems and institutions to silence those who embody diversities of gender identity and expression, we can be the ones who work with individuals and institutions to think about such things as dress codes, gender-neutral bathrooms, safety of body and soul, or access to insurance and other benefits that many of us take for granted. Resisting the desire to create groups with "gender balance" or creating forms that have more openness for self-identification are simple but significant steps. Knowing how to access resources for going through transitions in a workplace can be instrumental to someone's process of transitioning, whether it is a pronoun identification or some physical transformation. Our willingness to step out on the edge for those who carry less institutional or cultural power might be part of our advocacy work as leaders in theological education and training programs.

CONCLUSION

Pastoral formation practices invite people into integrative experiences that lead to greater authenticity, increased compassion, and nuanced skills of care. These gifts are important not only for those whom we teach or supervise but also for those whom we encounter in our daily life. As we con-

tinue to decenter heteronormative understandings of sexual and gender diversities, we also open ourselves up to new imaginations about pastoral identities. The good news is that there will be more opportunities to learn and engage as the world and those who live in it continue to seek greater wholeness. Educators and supervisors who carefully journey with others and are open to new and challenging perspectives can foster a pastoral identity that carries integrity.

A passion for living into the fluidity of our language and thought and for deconstructing the binaries in our embodied lives leads us to broaden our theological understandings of God, self, and relationality. For some, this may begin by drawing on non-gender-binary references for the Holy One. At other times, it may result in deconstruction of some aspect of theological anthropology or reconstruction of theological discourses that have been present over time. Taking seriously the diverse embodied experiences of students, colleagues, and those whom we engage in care will change the way we navigate the very pastoral formative practices that we hope to engender.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example: Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008); Miguel De LaTorre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice between the Sheets* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016); Cody Sanders, "Queer Shifts in Therapy: Appropriating Queer Theory in Pastoral Counseling," *Sacred Spaces: An E-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors* 4 (2012).
- 2 Note that the many experts in sexuality challenge the separation of self-identity and behavior. This dichotomy is often used in negative ways against LGBTQ communities by suggesting that behavior is human and can be changed and/or transmuted whereas orientation or self-identity is fixed and God-given. One need only to look at denominational debates related to the ordination of lesbian and gay people to see the damage that occurs in these conversations.
- 3 Multiple guides to gender-neutral pronouns can be found on the internet, which allows for faster-moving recognitions than many of the resources that are in print. See, for example, the Trans Student Educational Resources at <http://www.transstudent.org/pronouns101/>; the LGBT Resource Center, Trans Center at <https://lgbtrc.usc.edu/trans/transgender/pronouns/>; and the Religious Institute <http://religioussinstitute.org/>.
- 4 Phillis I. Sheppard, "Womanist Pastoral Theology and Black Women's Experience of Gender, Religion, and Sexuality," in *Pastoral Theology and Care: Critical Trajectories in Theory and Practices*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 136.
- 5 Sheppard, "Womanist Pastoral Theology," 140.
- 6 Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), xxii.
- 7 Laurel C Schneider, "What If It Is a Choice? Some Implications of the Homosexuality Debates for Theology," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 203.
- 8 Sam Killerman, *A Guide to Gender: The Social Justice Advocate's Handbook* (Austin, TX: Impetus Books, 2017), 263.
- 9 Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 17–18.
- 10 Tanis, *Trans-Gender*, 147.
- 11 Tanis, *Trans-Gender*, 156.
- 12 Sand C. Chang, Anneliese Singh, and lore m. dickey, *A Clinician's Guide to Gender-Affirming Care: Working with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Clients* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2018).