

Evolutionary Theory of Mate Selection and Partners of Trans People: A Qualitative Study Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Despite much research into mate selection, non-heterosexual populations are often only included for comparison purposes, while trans people and their partners are overlooked. This study attempts to address this using qualitative methodology to explore the mate selection of the partners of trans people. Six participants were recruited from online communities and interviewed via instant messaging, the results were then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The author organised the results into four themes. Theme one: Identities/relationships which defy categorisation, Theme Two: Attractive traits and mate selection, Theme Three: Impact of past romantic relationships, other relationships and life changes and Theme Four: The self as a source of strength. These results challenge the traditional conclusions of mate selection studies, emphasising the need for more qualitative research. Key Words: Mate Selection, Evolutionary Psychology, Sexual Identity, Transgender, Relationships, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

The present study focuses on the mate selection behaviour of six people who are each in a relationship with a trans person, examining whether mate selection theory accounts for their behaviour and also investigating the experience of choosing a partner who is trans. It is important however, to understand what the theory of mate selection is, how it has been studied and what the flaws are in the extant literature. This introduction will attempt to provide relevant background material before moving on to introduce the research questions.

The evolutionary theory of mate selection is a fascinating attempt to explain attraction. From Darwin's 1871 theory of sexual selection, all the way up to Wood and Brumbaugh's (2009) study on mate preferences published a couple of years ago, aspects of this theory have intrigued psychologists and other scientists for hundreds of years. In the theory of sexual selection, adaptive characteristics are thought to include the ability to choose a mate capable of effective reproduction, thus ensuring the survival of offspring long enough for them to also reproduce and so pass on the genotype (Buss & Barnes, 1986).

Males and females typically have differing levels of parental investment, leading to different reproductive strategies being most effective. This has led to a multitude of studies into whether men and women demonstrate different mate selection behaviour. Both older papers and recent research in this area tend to support the sex differences found by Buss and Barnes (1986) – that men have a stronger preference for attractive mates than women and that women value good earning potential and education more than men do, as well as women's preference for taller men (De Sousa Campos, Otta, & de

Oliveira Siqueira, 2002). It must be noted however, that many studies are not based on real relationships and as such often reduce complex feelings and relationships to a list of traits.

An interesting development in the last 10-15 years is research into sexual orientation differences. From an evolutionary perspective, non-heterosexual relationships do not appear adaptive because they reduce opportunities to reproduce. Instead of confronting this challenge to sexual selection theory, many researchers have focused on what homosexual mate selection can tell them about heterosexual mate selection. The following is the typical stance taken by researchers:

...studying the mating psychology of homosexual persons has the potential to distinguish between several broad developmental and etiological hypotheses regarding the mating psychology of heterosexual persons. (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994, p. 1084)

Such studies focus on sexual orientation – the sex of the partner a person prefers – rather than sexual identity, which is a much more personal and social definition of oneself.

Darwin's theory of sexual selection has been used by some theorists to back up universal stereotypes of sex differentiated behaviour, which has blinkered researchers to the fact that even among non-human animals these stereotypes are simply not universal (Roughgarden, 2004). This background has led some researchers to be biased in their treatment of non-heterosexuals in research on mate selection, as deviation from heterosexual behaviour is not easily explained by sexual selection. Lippa (2007) clearly demonstrates one of the drawbacks of the "comparing homosexual people with heterosexual people" approach, in that the only way he can attempt to understand his results is by saying that gay men are feminized and lesbian women are masculinized in some respects, but they are sex-congruent in others. Without accompanying qualitative research there can be little insight into the mate preferences of non-heterosexuals and gender variant people. Although Lippa's study initially seems inclusive thanks to its large number of participants from different countries and backing from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), closer examination of Lippa's work and that of his associates suggests that his approach may be biased.

In 2007 Lippa also used data from the BBC internet survey to publish a paper with Blanchard (Blanchard & Lippa, 2007). Blanchard, head of a Canadian gender programme, is notorious within the transgender community as he insists that all transsexuals are either homosexuals who wish to transition from male to female in order to have sexual relationships with men, or "autogynephiliacs" who are sexually excited by the thought of themselves as women (Conway, 2003). This theory does not account for the existence of any trans men or lesbian trans women. Blanchard's controversial views were not shared by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA, now known as the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, WPATH), and Blanchard resigned from HBIGDA in 2003 following the dissemination of a letter from their president, criticising a book based on Blanchard's theories (James, 2003). The author of that book is J. Michael Bailey – who also wrote the paper previously discussed, (Bailey et al., 1994). Bailey also believes that homosexuality is evolutionarily maladaptive and has published papers suggesting that bisexual people are

liars (Conway & Kiehl, 2004) one of which was sensationalised by the New York Times (Creager, 2005).

These issues suggest that some researchers in the field of mate selection have very negative views about variation in sexual behaviour and identity. It seems that these researchers are using non-heterosexual participants in the hope of finding support for their firmly held beliefs about mate selection in heterosexuals. It could be that dealing only with quantitative data has made researchers lose sight of the individuals the data is coming from, potentially leading them into ethical difficulties and methodological issues. Other researchers are simply not interested. As Roughgarden (2004) puts it:

Evolutionary psychology is in denial about same-sex sexuality... Homosexuality is a valid color in the human gender/sexuality rainbow. It needs explanation, not dismissal (p. 234).

Bisexual people do not fit easily into the heterosexual/homosexual comparison and so are often excluded from studies on sexual orientation differences. Indeed bisexuality is seldom researched in the area of biological psychology as it presents a problem for dichotomous viewpoints (Barker & Langdridge, 2008). However, when studies do include bisexual participants, the results are sometimes distinct from those of both heterosexual and homosexual participants. For instance Schmitt (2006) found that bisexual women report higher unrestricted levels of sociosexual behaviour, even after controlling for openness and masculinity. Such results suggest that bisexual participants should neither be excluded from research, nor equated with homosexual or heterosexual participants. Although a few studies of mate selection do include bisexual participants, the present author could not find any that even acknowledged the existence of the multitude of other sexual identities that exist or that considered the challenges posed by gender variant people. The term *gender variant* describes people whose expressions of gender do not conform to cultural norms and therefore includes transgendered people, cross dressers and many others, without necessarily implying someone undergoing surgery or other medical treatment.

The exclusion of gender variant people and those with complex sexualities has allowed researchers to perpetuate a dichotomous concept of gender and sexual identity and to continue using homosexual participants in an attempt to prove their theories on heterosexual mate selection. Ultimately, this weakens the power of sexual selection theory to explain behaviour. As Roughgarden (2004) comments:

Sexual selection theory is inaccurate in its claims and unable to account, even by extension, for the diversity of bodies, genders, sexualities and life histories (p. 172).

Outside of evolutionary psychology, some research has been done with gender variant people. In the past, many of those interested in this area pathologised the people in question, approaching them from the standpoint that they should be “cured” by psychotherapy (Bullough, 2000). Even much more recent studies such as Samons (2009) are very much based on a clinical population—Samons is a Clinical Social Worker and all her participants were clients at her clinic. This does not reflect the many gender

variant people who either do not seek out therapy or who have finished this element of their treatment.

Even fewer researchers have investigated the partners of gender variant people. One exception is a study by Ettner (2007) but this paper only discusses relationships in which both partners were transsexual. All participants were also in therapy. There is also a growing body of literature written by and for women who marry men who subsequently reveal they are cross-dressers or trans women (for example see Erhardt, 2007). This contribution is to be applauded; however there is also a need for work in this area which is both more inclusive and more scientific. An initially promising paper on the partners of trans men (Kins, Hoebeke, Heylens, Rubens, & De Cuypere, 2008) is revealed to place a heavy emphasis on surgery—it was stipulated that all the trans men had a mastectomy and phalloplasty, despite the latter surgery being a procedure that many trans men do not ever have. This results in a small sample size for a quantitative study. Even worse, the main aim of the study is to make a rather patronising comparison between satisfaction experienced by women in relationships with trans men and women in “traditional heterosexual” relationships. Kins et al. (2008) also try to draw conclusions from a result which they admit was not significant.

In the current study, the term *trans* is used as it covers both transsexual and transgendered people. Transsexual refers to people who are/have/plan to transition from one sex to the other. Transgendered is meant as an umbrella term for anyone whose gender identity is incongruous with the sex they were assigned at birth, however some transsexuals object to the word’s radical connotations. The less specific word *trans* is often favoured in the Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) community as it is less likely to offend. It is also used by many of the participants in this study. This will be partnered with “non-trans” to indicate when a person’s gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. Some participants have also used the term “cisgendered” which is a term gaining in popularity among the trans community. It is thought to derive from the Latin prefix *cis* meaning *on this side*, placing it in opposition with *trans* meaning *across, beyond* (Brookes, 2003).

The current study investigates the mate selection behaviour of the partners of trans people. In studying this population it is hoped that the findings move beyond simply investigating whether the participants’ mate selection tactics differ from those found in traditional research. The researcher also examines the experience of choosing a mate who is trans. The qualitative nature of this research gives participants the freedom to produce their own answers, without being constrained by concepts from previous research based mainly on heterosexual people in traditional relationships. This is a small population whose needs can often be overlooked; therefore it is especially important that they be given the opportunity to express their views and experience. This study makes an important contribution both because of its qualitative approach and because this population has not been included in mate selection research before.

Reflexive Considerations

A research diary was kept during the interviewing phase in order to encourage reflexivity. As the partner of a trans man, I believe I am uniquely qualified to conduct research with participants who are themselves the partners of trans people. Hopefully the participants felt more comfortable discussing personal issues with me than they would have with a researcher who had not experienced a similar situation. Indeed as a researcher, I found that the participants' responses were remarkably honest and detailed, in response to quite personal questions. I was also surprised by the level of introspection the participants engaged in during the interview or had independently engaged in. This awareness of, and willingness to examine, the reasons for one's behaviour made the interviewing process easier and generated richer data.

Identifying so much with the participants could also be a disadvantage though, as I found out during the recruitment stage. My feelings about my own relationship had led me to write the plain language statement (Appendix C) in such a way that it suggested relationships with trans people were not traditional. Some potential participants strongly objected to this suggestion as they felt I was implying their relationships were abnormal. This was an important reminder to me that I should not make assumptions about how other people might view their relationships and that I should aim to bracket off my presuppositions. I tried to keep this in mind while analysing the data.

My research diary noted more than one difficulty with terminology, which only increased my confidence in qualitative research as an important contributor in this area because participants were able to choose their own words to describe sexual and gender identities and relationships.

Method

Inquiry and Design

As this is an attempt to understand the theory of mate selection in a new way, from a different perspective, qualitative research seemed appropriate. There is no attempt to explain or predict mate selection behaviour as there would be in quantitative research in this area (Langdrige, 2007). This research takes a phenomenological approach to the topic. The researcher chose this approach because of its focus on understanding the lived experience (Langdrige, 2007) – an aspect of mate selection which is missing from the previous research discussed in the introduction. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. The researcher deemed semi-structured interviews an appropriate way to gather data as this provides both consistency between interviews and flexibility within the interview (Langdrige, 2007). The researcher then analysed the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis ([IPA], Smith, 2003).

Participants

Six participants took part in this research. In IPA sampling is often purposive and homogeneous – the participants share the experience to be investigated but do not vary much across demographic characteristics (Langdrige, 2007). In the current study,

sampling was purposive as participants had to have the experience of being partnered with a trans person. However, the sampling for the current research was not homogeneous. As previous mate selection research has made claims with regards to how sexual identity and gender affect mate selection strategies, it seemed important to include participants of different genders and sexual identities.

Participants were recruited from three different online communities. The plain language statement was posted to an internet support forum for trans people, an “email – based” communication facility for partners of trans people and an internet support forum for the partners of trans people. The researcher was already a member of all three communities and asked permission from moderators before posting the research invitation. An online environment was the only place a sufficient number of participants could be found, as offline support groups and resources for this population are virtually non-existent and potential participants are often geographically spread out. The diverse sexual identities, relationship types and lifestyles of the partners of trans people also mean that recruiting participants from a more visible group, for example the LGBT community, would have presented an unbalanced picture. Similarly, recruiting from a face-to-face support group attached to a gender identity clinic would have only found participants whose partners were currently undergoing treatment – excluding those whose partners had finished treatment, had yet to seek it out or did not intend to seek treatment. The partners of trans people are in effect a “hidden” population, as issues surrounding their partner’s gender status or history may prevent them from disclosing details of the relationship. Internet communities are one place where the partners of trans people can safely discuss issues relating to their relationships with a reduced chance of “outing” their partners.

The only criteria for acceptance into the study was that participants be non-trans and currently in a relationship with a trans person. The six participants self-selected by contacting the researcher for more information and responding to requests to arrange an interview date within a reasonable time-frame. Four participants took part from the UK, one was in the USA and one was from Canada but travelling in Europe when the interview took place. Appropriate ethical approval was obtained from the University of Glasgow Faculty of Education Ethics Committee. To ensure they were able to give informed consent, potential participants received a copy of the plain language statement (Appendix C) before deciding whether to take part. To preserve anonymity, the participants are referred to as interviewee one, interviewee two, and so forth and partner’s names were also removed from any quotations. The relationships investigated were as follows:

Email interviewee – a non-trans man partnered with a trans man

Interviewee one – a non-trans woman partnered with a trans woman

Interviewee two – a non-trans woman partnered with a trans woman

Interviewee three – a non-trans woman partnered with a trans woman

Interviewee four – a non-trans woman partnered with a trans man

Interviewee five – a “mostly” non-trans woman partnered with a trans man

Gender and sexual identity of the participants and their partners were often complex and will be discussed further in the analysis and discussion sections.

Materials

The researcher constructed semi-structured interview questions prior to beginning the interviews (see Appendix A). The researcher designed the questions in order to elicit information about the participants' mate selection behaviour, both with their current partner and more generally. The questions are open and as neutral as possible, both to encourage the participant to go beyond yes/no answers and also to avoid gendered language which may offend or constrict the participants. Several key issues were identified which informed the interview structure (Langdridge, 2007). The researcher included the first two background questions in order to investigate how gender and sexuality mediated mate selection behaviour. The final background question encouraged interviewees to think back to how the relationship began, in preparation for questions about attraction. The initial attraction questions look at what participants find attractive in general and in their current partner, in order to reveal mate selection strategies. Comparison with previous partners looks at how the attraction in the current relationship is different from past relationships, attempting to find out if selecting a trans person as a partner is different from selecting a non-trans partner. Has anything changed questions attempt to take into account the transition of the trans partner and the effect this might have had on attraction.

The interviewer conducted the interviews through two different instant messaging programmes: Windows Live Messenger (Microsoft, 2011) and Google Talk Beta (Google, 2011). These programmes are freely available for download at no cost to the user. There are some possible negative aspects to using internet messaging programmes which will be discussed in the limitations section; however as Hinchcliffe and Gavin's (2009) study suggests, the benefits in some cases may outweigh any disadvantages. Instant messaging programmes were used because they matched well with the method of recruitment (through online communities). Participants were already internet users, comfortable with the anonymity and freedom of expression facilitated by technology (Langdridge, 2007). They were also a good option for practical reasons—the geographical distance of the participants from the interviewer made face-to-face interviews impossible. The choice of which programme to use was made by the individual participant in each interview. One interview was conducted over email due to lack of access to any instant messaging programme. This participant will be known as Email interviewee to distinguish this interview from those conducted using the instant messaging services. Interview transcripts were saved onto an encrypted USB flash drive.

Procedure

Data collection. After participants had read the Plain Language Statement (Appendix C), they contacted the researcher to arrange a time for the interview. At the appointed time, the researcher and the participant logged on to the instant messaging programme. The researcher was alone while conducting the interviews in order to preserve confidentiality. Instant messaging programmes provide a space for private two-way conversation, as unlike a chat room others cannot join without being invited. The researcher logged in under her own previously-existing log-in which is password-protected. Additionally, the researcher requested that if the participant was distracted by

an external event, for example a phone call or someone in the room, they would let the researcher know so that the interview could be paused. Before beginning, the researcher asked the participants if they had any questions and reminded them that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time. The researcher then proceeded to ask the questions one at a time. When all questions had been asked, the researcher invited the participant to make any further comments that they felt were relevant. The researcher also informed the participant that they could contact the researcher at any time to ask questions about the research. At the end of the interview, the researcher emailed a consent form (Appendix D) to each participant. Interviews took an average of 47.6 minutes to complete, with the exception of the email interview, which took place over seven days.

As the interviews were typewritten this removed the need for transcription from audio. The researcher simply copied and pasted the transcripts from the messenger programme to a word document.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis. The researcher analysed the interview transcripts using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2003). IPA is used to facilitate a detailed exploration of the participants' experience (Langdrige, 2007), which the researcher felt was important because of how previous research has ignored or misappropriated the experiences of the partners of trans people (for example see Kins et al., 2008). There is also an emphasis on acknowledging the role of the researcher (Langdrige), which is important given the sometimes biased approaches of researchers in this area, as discussed in the introduction. IPA is also suitable for a study where there is no research hypothesis but a general question for exploration (Langdrige); this applies to the current study as not enough is known about this population to form a hypothesis. IPA uses thematic analysis to facilitate the analysis of the participant's experience (Langdrige)

Before analysis, the researcher formatted the interview transcripts so that all contained the same font and layout; with line numbers and an extended right margin for notes. The researcher also color coded the transcripts for ease of identification. The researcher did not otherwise alter the transcripts so the transcripts include the interviewer's questions and the interviewees' answers exactly as they were typed during the interview – including punctuation, grammar and spelling. These transcripts constituted the data to be analysed.

The researcher read the transcripts through several times before beginning the analysis. The researcher analysed each case individually, one at a time. The researcher penciled initial comments on anything which seemed significant to the research question or especially important to the participant in the margin. These initial comments stay close to the transcript and are quite descriptive, for example:

Transcript

*Always seen myself as straight, then when P transitioned
I saw myself as a reluctant lesbian but now shifted to accidental lesbian
(Interviewee one Line 39)*

Comment

straight –
reluctant –
accidental –

On the next reading, the researcher converted these comments into lower order themes written in the margin. These lower order themes reflect broader levels of meaning beginning to emerge from the transcripts (Langdridge, 2007), for example:

Comment	Theme
Straight – reluctant – accidental	Complex identity

The researcher arranged the themes and appropriate quotes in meaningful clusters and named the clusters to create super-ordinate themes. These clusters are constructed in a more analytical way than the lower order themes, but the transcript must frequently be returned to in order to avoid becoming too removed from the data (Langdridge, 2007).

The researcher completed this process for all the transcripts. The themes from the first transcript were used to help organise subsequent analysis (Smith, 2003). Having read and commented on all the transcripts, the researcher could now see some commonalities between the participants and some differences, as well as links between themes within each transcript. These links and commonalities were used to create a final themes table, incorporating data from all interviews. For example, the researcher clustered the above theme from interviewee one’s transcript (with accompanying quote and comment) with other lower order themes such as “gender binary” and “undefined relationship”. The researcher then named this cluster: identities and relationships which defy categorisation. At this stage, a cluster named *relationship maintenance* was dropped as it was not rich in evidence or particularly relevant to the research questions. Any essential lower-order themes from this cluster were subsumed by other clusters, for example the theme *communication* was moved into theme two: getting together— attractive traits and mate selection.

An abridged version of the final themes table with themes and examples of lower order themes can be seen in Table 1 below, the full themes table is available in Appendix B.

Table 1: *Themes and examples of lower order themes*

1. Identities and relationships which defy categorization	
Complex (sexual) identity of self	3.53-54 “I’d describe my gender/sexuality as kind of glittery and faggy, and I like to date girls who look like boys who look like girls”
Seemingly less complex identity of self	2.37 “Female. Basically hetero”
2. Getting together - attractive traits and mate selection	
Met in real life	5.59 “We were both at Michigan Womans Music Festival”
Met online	e.27-28 “We met first on a community for queer and trans people on [website name]”
Initial attraction	2.59 “Yes we were attracted”

Gradual attraction	4.62 “Eventually the friendship evolved sleeping together”
3. The impact of past romantic relationships, other relationships and life changes	
Past Relationships	3.140 “most people I’ve dated in the past”
Introspection into relationships	e.59 “I have a history of being attracted to people with problems in their lives”
4. The self as a source of strength in the relationship	
I could cope	2.149 “if anyone could cope with it, I could”
Self as provider	1.197 “career-ambitious”
Key: 3.53 = interview 3, line 53 e.12 = email interview, line 12	

Results

The data resulting from the six interviews were analysed in order to investigate the research question: How is mate selection theory relevant for the partners of trans people? and also to investigate the experience of encountering and choosing a partner who is trans. As a result of the analysis, the researcher organised the data into four themes, intended to capture how mate selection theory is relevant for the partners of trans people and to reveal important issues in the experience of encountering and choosing a partner who is trans. These are discussed below. In IPA, themes are introduced with quotes which should clearly link the data and the analysis. The themes are then discussed with reference to appropriate literature (Langdridge, 2007).

Theme One: Identities and Relationships which Defy Categorisation

Questions regarding the sexual and gender identities of participants and their partners were initially asked to find out if the present author had been successful in recruiting people from a variety of different relationships. Given the sex and sexual orientation differences found in previous studies, it seemed pertinent to explore whether the participants’ responses differed from each other in ways that might be expected based on their sexual and gender identities. Analysis of the data, however, showed a more complex picture than was first envisioned. Participants’ responses to these questions were complex and interesting enough to develop into an independent theme.

The participants identified a number of sexual and gender identities for themselves, often using terms which were outside of the options which would have been offered in a survey such as Schmitt’s (2006) which offered the categories of heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. Sometimes sexual identity was clearly linked to the gender identity of their current partner:

Always seen myself as straight, then when my partner transitioned I saw myself as a reluctant lesbian but now shifted to accidental lesbian (Interviewee one, lines 38-39).

This suggests that this participant does not consider her sexual identity fixed, instead it has changed in response to her current relationship. Other participants had a strongly developed sense of their sexual and gender identities that was not directly related to the gender identity of the current partner:

I identify as a cisgendered gay man. I also identify as femme and genderqueer, and I present as a femme gay man (Email interviewee, lines 17-18).

I'd describe my gender/sexuality as kind of glittery and faggy, and I like to date girls who look like boys who look like girls (Interviewee three, lines 53-54).

Some participants identified themselves and their partners as having sexualities which seem to be incompatible. Interviewee two described both herself and her partner as heterosexual females (lines 37 and 44-45). Interviewee four, who described herself as a lesbian in a relationship with a trans man, commented on this situation:

It feels good that other women are in this slightly surreal situation of identifying as gay but the world seeing us as straight women in relationships with partners that pass (and quite rightly) as bio-men (Interviewee four, lines 156-159).

Interviewee four acknowledges that her sexual identity might seem strange in the context of her current relationship, yet she asserts her right to identify as lesbian whilst respecting her partner's gender identity as male.

Interviewee three demonstrates that the sexual identity of a trans person can be just as complex as that of a non-trans person:

She's [Interviewee three's partner] a trans woman (male to female [mtf]) who is primarily attracted to women. So a queer trans dyke. Also she isn't girly or particularly feminine—she IDs as a woman, but also as genderqueer/androgynous (Interviewee three, lines 42-44).

Interviewee three states that her partner is queer. Although this is occasionally used synonymously with gay, interviewee three further explained that she was referring to a sexual identity which resists a fixed definition.

Although the participants themselves are not trans, their own gender identities are not always as simple as might be assumed from the fact that they are the non-trans person in the relationship:

Finding out that my partner had gender issues was in some ways a plus for me because I suffer from polycystic ovaries and therefore have some masculine features. It seemed to me that this blurred gender was something we had in common rather than "us and them"... (Interviewee two, lines 119-123).

Taken together, these complex sexual and gender identities create relationships which defy categorisation. For the email interviewee, even defining the person he was in a relationship with as his partner was uncomfortable:

First I should say that [name] and I don't really describe ourselves as partners, for the present, for a bunch of reasons; I just usually call him "the boy I like" (Email interviewee, lines 12-14).

Despite this, the email interviewee's contribution to the study was invaluable.

Theme Two: Getting Together—Attractive Traits and Mate Selection

Given the research question, it was important to ask participants what they found attractive in a potential partner and in their current partners. Participants mentioned a wide range of traits as attractive. There were some commonalities—for instance several of the participants found intelligence attractive. Sense of humour and ability to communicate also featured in several of the interviews. Several participants referred to a trait that is unlikely to ever be offered in a typical trait preference study:

It's not really that kind of analytical process, though; it's whether I feel good being with them (Interviewee five, lines 76-77).

For interviewee five at least, this element was more important than any individual characteristic when it came to choosing a mate.

There were no obvious differences between the male participant and the female participants, or between participants of different sexualities. Women did not show any particular interest in wealth or status, as might be expected from evolutionary mate selection theory. Interviewee one mentioned that she became attracted to her partner after seeing her at her parents' house, however when further questioned about this she dismissed the idea that this was a symbol of wealth:

Don't think so. Because at the time she was having a nervous breakdown and dropping out of uni and totally without hope of a job in the foreseeable future. (Interviewee one, lines 124-127)

Interviewee one also commented that she found her partner's "scruffy clothes" particularly appealing at the time of initial attraction.

Evolutionary theory suggests that men seek more attractive and younger partners. The male participant did comment on the importance of physical attraction, but it was only one in a list of traits he felt were important:

In general, I really demand kindness as well as a certain intellect along with physical attraction (Email interviewee, lines 36-37).

Many of the female participants were not indifferent to physical attraction either:

I thought she was very cute because she had red hair with awesome streaks in it and those sexy red librarian glasses. (Interviewee three, lines 107-108)

Interviewee two however, felt that looks were “unimportant” (line 78). No participant commented that age was important.

An interesting commonality emerged between interviewee two and interviewee three. In both cases, initial attraction was mingled with feeling scared and intimidated about the prospect of a relationship with the other person:

Yes we were attracted... We were also somewhat scared of each other for different reasons. (Interviewee two, lines 59 and 61-62)

I was super attracted to her at first, but I was also scared about dating someone so “cool”. (Interviewee three, lines 155-156)

This highlights the complex nature of attraction. Interviewee four also revealed something interesting. She met her partner when he replied to an advert she placed in a magazine. When questioned further about what she was looking for when placing the advert she said:

I think it was roughly looking for new friends, possibly a relationship with butch woman who is interested in reading, the arts and bull terriers... it was kind of a light—hearted thing I did on the spur of the moment (Interviewee four, lines 79-81).

This is salient in light of the way research has often focused on personal adverts as a way to access mate selection strategies.

The final important element in this theme is whether, for these participants, the trans identity of a partner was in itself attractive. Evolutionary theory would suggest that a trait which will most likely damage one’s chance of procreating should not be appealing. This is something of a delicate subject, as some trans people, particularly transsexuals, are offended by the idea that someone would be attracted to them as anything other than the gender they identify as. This is made worse by the fact that some non-trans people seek out trans people in a predatory or fetishistic fashion. People who behave in this way are often referred to as “chasers.” For the genuine partner of a trans person this term can be very upsetting, as the email interviewee explains:

In a previous relationship I had had with a trans guy who had very poor self-esteem, the fact that he felt so bad about himself and his gender ended up being taken out on me a lot—a lot of suspicion of me and my motives. I’m hideous and unattractive and not a real man, so no gay guy could ever be attracted to me, ergo if you’re a gay guy and you’re into me, you must have some ulterior motive like being a creepy fetishist or chaser or something (Email interviewee, lines 105-110).

This being the case, the interview questions did not specifically ask whether a trans identity was an attractive trait or not. However several participants identified gender variance as part of what made their partners attractive, whether that be physically or emotionally:

I think it was partly his massive vulnerability and the paradox this posed which was at huge odds with this large, masculine-looking butch woman. I have always been attracted to the androgyny of butches too... His physical strength was attractive and his emotional strength in surviving a disability and his gender dysphoria issues (Interviewee four, lines 98-100 and 104-105).

I tended to be attracted to men who were able to be more like a woman friend in conversation or interests (Interviewee two, lines 167-169).

Certainly none of the participants suggested that their partners' gender variance was a negative or off-putting trait. Interviewee two was the only one to comment negatively on her partner's transition:

Our relationship has lost some aspects which I valued (on the physical side particularly, Interviewee two, lines 150-151).

However, interviewee two went on to say that her partner's trans identity would never cause her to end the relationship.

Theme Three: The Impact of Past Romantic Relationships, Other Relationships and Life Changes

The participants were able to offer surprisingly insightful comments about how their current mate selection strategies were informed by past experiences. The email interviewee in particular seemed to have engaged in a significant amount of introspection on this topic before being asked about it:

Actually one of the reasons we're taking it so slowly is that I'm sort of concerned I might be attracted in too much the same way. I have a history of being attracted to people with problems in their lives and trying to be a saviour or nurse (Email interviewee, 57-60).

Not only was the email interviewee aware of his past behaviour, he was taking steps to avoid repeating it in his new relationship. This suggests a level of awareness of mate selection strategies that does not seem to fit in with evolutionarily driven theories of attraction. It also suggests that mate preferences might change over a lifetime.

Interviewee two demonstrated the impact of non-romantic relationships on mate selection. When asked why she considered trust such an important element of relationships she replied:

My background is of being in institutional care as a baby and then being adopted. My adopted mother was emotionally abusive and manipulative some of the time, so I find it hard to trust people, especially women (Interviewee two, lines 84-86).

This underlines the importance of attachment relationships formed during childhood and how they affect adult relationships. This factor is not taken into account in evolutionary mate selection theory.

Interviewee five commented on how a major life change altered what she looked for in a relationship. When she had a child, her previous partner's appealing trait of being fun to be around was subordinated by her need for someone reliable:

I needed more stability, and someone who was willing to put other people's needs before their own entertainment (Interviewee five, lines 120-122).

Theme Four: The Self as a Source of Strength in the Relationship

Although the final theme to emerge from the data was only demonstrated in three of the participants, nevertheless it seemed important. The common feature between interviewee one, interviewee two and the email interviewee is that all three designated themselves as a source of strength in the relationship. Interviewee two felt that she was uniquely able to deal with a trans partner, partly due to some cross-gender features she herself had:

I suffer from Polycystic ovaries and therefore have some masculine features. It seem to me that this blurred gender was something we had in common (Interviewee two, lines 120-123)

If anyone could cope with it, I could. That has proved to be the case (Interviewee two, line 149)

Interviewee one was not put off by the difficulties her partner was experiencing when they met as she intended to be the breadwinner:

I thought at the time I was going to earn the money in the relationship and here was someone happy to do the laundry (Interviewee one, line 140-141).

This is interesting from an evolutionary standpoint, as although Interviewee one and her partner were initially engaged in a heterosexual relationship, Interviewee one was keen to take up the role of provider.

Further, interviewee one also felt that she could rescue her partner from the difficulties she was experiencing:

I'd lost my grandmother to a nervous breakdown so perhaps there was also save a life to make up for a life I didn't manage to save. (Interviewee one, lines 142-144)

Interviewee one puts herself in a position of strength in the relationship, both in a practical sense and in an emotional sense. Rather than seeing her partner's trans issues as a negative aspect to be avoided, interviewee one gains a sense of purpose from supporting her partner.

The email interviewee had previously had negative experiences in which he provided a lot of emotional support in a relationship:

I was all too willing to play therapist, and actually I probably made a lot of things worse by doing so... In the end he went into a tailspin and our relationship never recovered. I was pretty ruined emotionally after that (Email interviewee, lines 86-88 and 91-92)

This led to him being cautious in his current relationship, but he was able to identify himself as a source of strength in a more positive way:

He feels like he's working on his issues and benefitting from the support I give him, rather than just leaning on me and feeding off me like an emotional vampire (Email interviewee, lines 101-103).

Discussion

The four themes will now be discussed with reference to appropriate psychological literature.

Theme one: Identities and Relationships which Defy Categorisation

These participants clearly demonstrate that, for them, sexual identity is more than behaviour and gender identity is more than being simply male or simply female. Interviewee two felt that she was heterosexual, despite the fact that her partner had a female gender identity. Some participants used the words *queer* and *genderqueer* to describe their identities. Genderqueer is an identity which rejects the gender binary imposed by society. A genderqueer identity does not necessarily mean someone is trans. Theorists, such as Wilchins (2002), argue that anyone who does not conform to gender norms is genderqueer and that this term therefore includes people with a wide range of sexual identities and gender expressions. A queer identity may also suggest radical views on gender politics. Barker and Langdrige (2008) describe queer theory as "concerned with disrupting binary categories of identity" (p. 391). This challenges the notion that trans people present stereotypes of their preferred gender and reminds us that there is just as full a range of gender and sexual identity expression in trans people as in non-trans people. For these participants, their sexual identity is part of who they are. It may also be a complex identity which has been personally explored in some depth—or which has been arrived at with some difficulty.

Bolin's work with trans women (cited in Nataf, 1996) suggests that complex combinations of sexual and gender identities are not unusual in relationships with trans people:

Of my sample, only one person was exclusively heterosexual, three of the six exclusive lesbians were living with women who themselves were not self-identified as lesbian, one bisexual was living with a self-identified lesbian, and two male-to-female transsexuals were living with one another (cited in Nataf, 1996, p. 33).

It seems likely that the negotiations implied by interviewee four between the sexual and gender identities of partners take place in many relationships where a partner is trans.

It would be difficult to label any of these relationships for a study such as VanderLaan and Vasey's (2008) research into mate retention behaviour in heterosexual and homosexual relationships. These participants also counter the suggestion by Samons (2009) that every trans person must ask themselves "Exactly who is the opposite sex?" (p. 107). For some of these participants and their partners, the whole notion of an *opposite* sex is nonsensical. As well as the complex nature of gender and sexual identity, the status of the relationships involved is not restricted to married couples—the email interviewee was reluctant to define his relationship at all, whilst several other participants were in relationships without legal recognition. This brings up questions of what a relationship is and what kinds of relationships should be included in this type of research. Clearly traditional research including only married couples such as Buss and Barnes's (1986) study is not sufficiently inclusive to capture the full range of human relationships.

Theme Two: Getting Together—Attractive Traits and Mate Selection

There were some surprising findings for this theme. For example interviewee one commented that she found her partner's scruffy clothes an attractive feature when they first met. This raises questions about the validity of studies such as Townsend and Levy's (1990) rating of photographs with different costumes denoting different socio-economic statuses. For interviewee one who was interacting with a real person rather than looking at a photograph, not only did her potential mate's socio-economic status not matter, she even found the scruffy clothes an endearing trait.

Interestingly in view of human body odour studies such as Martins et al. (2005), interviewee one stated that her partner's smell was initially attractive to her. However, the smell was affected by hormone suppressors when her partner began receiving treatment. This issue might be relevant to studies investigating the effect of pheromones on attraction.

Interviewee four met her partner through a personal advertisement in a magazine. Compared to studies such as De Sousa Campos et al. (2002) research on personal advertisements, it seems that interviewee four was not looking for any of the traits that would be expected from an evolutionary theory standpoint—such as an older or taller partner. Interviewee four's description of her advert does not suggest any of the desperation implied by De Sousa Campos et al. (2002) adverts in which women offer youth, attractiveness and interest in sex in order to attract mates. It should be noted

however that interviewee four was a lesbian advertising in a lesbian magazine and might be expected to look for and offer different traits from a heterosexual woman.

Theme Three: The Impact of Past Romantic Relationships, Other Relationships and Life Changes

The previous research discussed does not seem to take these elements into account, as mate preferences are treated as fairly fixed, based more on sex and perhaps sexuality than on an individual's life history. In light of the way participants in the current study reflected on their past relationships and sometimes made changes accordingly, this appears to be a serious omission brought about by quantitative research techniques which can only capture mate selection strategies at one moment in time.

Interviewee five's contribution is particularly interesting here; given the focus on procreation mate selection theory often takes. When she had a child, interviewee five found that her priorities for mate selection had changed. This is somewhat consistent with evolutionary theory, in that interviewee five was seeking a father who could provide a stable environment for her child. However, it is interesting that she did not feel this was important until after she had her child. She did not seek out a reliable and unselfish man for the genetic father, but she sought out a partner with these traits after the child was born. This is important in a society where many children are cared for by men who are not their genetic fathers.

Theme Four: The Self as a Source of Strength in the Relationship

The need to successfully pass on one's genotype is at the root of evolutionary theories of mate selection. Theme four demonstrates the complex dynamics of a relationship, suggesting that mate selection for at least three of the participants was less about procreation and more about providing support to another adult. Reasons for being able to or wanting to provide the support varied between participants. Interviewee two sympathised with the "blurred gender" of her partner and felt that she was able to deal with a relationship with a trans person better than others might. Interviewee one willingly took on the role of provider and of emotional support in the relationship because she was career-ambitious and wanted to help someone she saw struggling. The email interviewee had previously identified a problematic tendency of his to take on a saviour role in a relationship. However, with his current partner he had managed to provide more positive and healthy support.

Despite these differences, ultimately all three participants saw themselves as a source of strength in their relationships. This may be an important factor in the longevity of relationships as a trans partner may endure distressing periods of gender dysphoria, various surgical procedures and social issues, therefore requiring significant support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolutionary theory of mate selection does not seem to be appropriate to explain the mate choices of the participants in this study. Although these results cannot be generalised to the wider population, the present author does believe that

they challenge the theory of sexual selection—which should be universal. Gender and sexual identity of the participants did not seem to be linked to any clear differences in mate selection. Instead there were some commonalities between all or most of the participants—while numerous other aspects were deeply individual. Evolutionary theory does have something to add to the explanation of mate selection. However, relationships cannot be taken out of context by focusing on simplistic distillations of attractiveness such as personal ads or vignettes. Participants' complex responses are not reducible to a simple list of traits that differ for men and women. Although these participants were in relationships which might seem unusual, they are surely not unique in searching for partners with intelligence, a sense of humour and ability to communicate. Perhaps if the participants from traditional quantitative research in this area were invited to take part in qualitative studies, we might find that they are not so different from the current participants after all.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study used the fairly unusual method of interviewing over the internet. Whilst the experience of using instant messaging services for interviews was positive, there are some concerns with using this technology. The present author shares the concern of the participants and researchers in Hinchcliffe and Gavin's (2009) study that tone of voice and body language signals are lost from the interview process. Future researchers could consider using webcams to overcome this difficulty; however this may be detrimental to the perceived anonymity which seems to encourage people to participate in research.

On the other hand, using this method of interviewing has several advantages. Most importantly, it is a practical and convenient way to interview people all over the UK and internationally. It simply would not have been possible to interview all of these particular participants face-to-face. Telephone interviews would have been expensive to conduct with participants outside of the UK and require recording equipment. In addition, as the interviews are already in a typewritten form, time-consuming transcription is avoided. A particularly useful aspect for novice interviewers is that both instant messaging (IM) programmes let you know when your conversational partner is typing a message—reducing the likelihood of interrupting a participant before they have said all they wanted to say. Overall, the present author agrees with Hinchcliffe and Gavin's (2009) conclusion that “the substantial gains of online interviewing using IM outweighed the losses” (p. 333) and recommends this method as suitable for further research in this area.

There are some limitations to this study, mainly regarding the type of participant recruited. The method of recruitment reduced potential participants to those with internet access who joined communities for support or whose partners joined a support forum. Future researchers might consider recruiting participants at trans events or by advertising in gender identity clinics. Although an effort was made to achieve gender balance, only one male was recruited. This may be because fewer men are in relationships with trans people, or because men are less likely to join online communities for support with their relationships. Additionally men might have been less willing to discuss their relationships for the purpose of research or less willing to speak to a female researcher. Future studies

should attempt to ensure sufficient men are included, perhaps by targeting support groups specifically for men or by using male interviewers.

Due to ethical concerns about interviewing trans people themselves, the current research did not include any relationships in which both partners were trans people. At least one trans person was keen to take part in the research and in fact was offended that trans people were being excluded. This person or another trans person could have made a valuable contribution to the study.

Unfortunately the wording of the plain language statement (Appendix C) might have selected for people who viewed their relationships as non traditional. Future studies with participants in this population should take care to keep language neutral in order to be as inclusive as possible.

Most importantly, the qualitative nature of this study unearthed data which varies widely from that of traditional quantitative research. The present author suggests that qualitative research be carried out with people who are not in relationships with trans people. People of all sexualities and in different types of relationships should have the opportunity to give in-depth responses regarding their mate selection behaviour.

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Appendix A

Semi- Structured Interview Questions

Background:

How would you describe yourself in terms of your gender identity and sexuality?

How would you describe your partner in terms of his/her/hir gender identity and sexuality?

How did you and your partner meet?

Initial attraction:

What is important to you when you think about choosing a partner?

What features, physical or otherwise, attracted you to your current partner when you first met?

Comparison with previous relationships:

Do you think this is different to what attracts you to other people or to what attracted you to previous partners?

Has anything changed?

Do you feel that the initial features which attracted you to your partner have changed, and if so, in what ways?

Are different characteristics important when it comes to maintaining a relationship?

Appendix B

Table of Themes in Full

1. Identities and relationships which defy categorization	
Complex (sexual) identity of self	3.53-54 <i>'I'd describe my gender/sexuality as kind of glittery and faggy, and I like to date girls who look like boys who look like girls'</i>
Seemingly less complex identity of self	2.37 <i>'Female. Basically hetero'</i>
Complex gender identity of partners	2.110-111 <i>'I also seem to be attracted to men who have a feminine side'</i>
New/changing gender of partner	4.130 <i>'I expected his new gender would turn me off physically and sexually'</i>
Seemingly paradoxical relationships	4.44 <i>'I am a lesbian who is involved with a FTM transman'</i>
Undefined relationship	e.12 <i>'I should say that he and I don't really describe ourselves as partners'</i>
Gender and society	1.200-202 <i>'it really challenged society'</i>
The gender binary	1.198 <i>'the world demands a gender binary'</i>
2. Getting together - attractive traits and mate selection	
Met in real life	5.59 <i>'We were both at Michigan Womans Music Festival'</i>
Met online	e.27-28 <i>'We met first on a community for queer and trans people on [website name]'</i>
Initial attraction	2.59 <i>'Yes we were attracted'</i>
Advertisement	4.58-59 <i>'he answered the one and only ad I have ever placed!'</i>
Gradual attraction	4.62 <i>'Eventually the friendship evolved sleeping together'</i>
Got to know each other	1.83 <i>'we got to know each other for quite a while before I fell for her'</i>
Suppressed attraction	5.86-87 <i>'If there was initial sexual attraction on my part, it was kind of sublimated for a couple of months'</i>
Intimidated/scared and attracted	3.111 <i>'I was more intimidated but still attracted to her'</i>
Lacking wealth and status	1.127 <i>'totally without hope of a job in the foreseeable future'</i>
Attractive traits	3.99 <i>'intelligence, musicality'</i>
Traits not changed over time	4.122 <i>'I think these initially attractive features have held pretty firm over the time'</i>

Pattern/no pattern to mate selection	5.101-102 <i>'when I think about it, they're all pretty different'</i>
Attraction introspection	e.35 <i>'That's kind of something I'm working on right now'</i>
Communication	e.113 <i>'comfortable talking about it with me'</i>
3. The impact of past romantic relationships, other relationships and life changes	
Past Relationships	3.140 <i>'most people I've dated in the past'</i>
Introspection into relationships	e.59 <i>'I have a history of being attracted to people with problems in their lives'</i>
Patterns in relationships	1.101 <i>'Similar'</i>
Support	e.85-86 <i>'We both supported each other'</i>
Emotionally damaged	e.91-92 <i>'I was pretty ruined emotionally after that'</i>
Poor self esteem	e.105-16 <i>'a trans guy who had very poor self-esteem'</i>
Outside opinions	4.82 <i>'partly to placate friends'</i>
Trust	2.86 <i>'so I find it hard to trust people'</i>
Gender	2.86 <i>'especially women'</i>
Life change leading to preference change	5.114-115 <i>'Once I had a kid, it was less important than the fact that he's pretty unreliable'</i>
4. The self as a source of strength in the relationship	
I could cope	2.149 <i>'if anyone could cope with it, I could'</i>
Self as provider	1.197 <i>'career-ambitious'</i>
Breadwinner	1.140 <i>'I was going to earn the money'</i>
Saviour	1.143 <i>'save a life'</i>
Healthy relationship	e.102 <i>'benefitting from the support I give him'</i>
Key: 3.53 = interview 3, line 53 e.12 = email interview, line 12	

Appendix C

Plain Language Statement



The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

Plain Language Statement

1. Study title and Researcher Details

Title of Project: Can the evolutionary theory of mate selection be applied to partners of transgendered people and how is this mediated by sexuality and gender identity? A qualitative study.

Name of Researcher: Amanda Forde, postgraduate student
Email Address: 0107736f@student.gla.ac.uk
University: University of Glasgow
Department: Department of Educational Studies
Supervisor: Wendy Dow
Supervisor's email: w.dow@educ.gla.ac.uk
Degree: MSc in Psychological Studies

2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information on any aspect of the research.

Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to find out more about how people choose their partners – known as mate selection. Evolutionary theories of mate selection suggest that humans choose their partners on the basis of certain characteristics which give us the best chance of having healthy children and ensure that our children are provided for.

Most research has focused on the mate selection of people in traditional and/or heterosexual relationships. This particular study is interested in how and why people with transgendered partners choose/chose their partners. The research will also investigate whether the sexuality and gender identity of each person in the relationship has an effect on the mate selection.

The research will be taking place from May to July 2009.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to take part in this research because you currently have a partner who is transgendered. A maximum of six people will take part in this research.

5. Do I have to take part?

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

6. What will happen to me if I take part?

The research will be conducted from May to July this year. If you decide to take part, you will be interviewed through an online private messaging service. The interview will be arranged at a time convenient to you and will take up to one hour. I would ask that you be in a room free from distractions during the interview, if possible. The interview will focus on how and why you chose your current partner, rather than any details about your partner's transition. If at any time during the interview you become upset or do not wish to answer a particular question, please let me know. Hopefully you will feel that the interview gives you a voice and the opportunity to speak about your own experiences. After your interview, no further involvement is required; however you should feel free to contact me at any time if you have questions about the research.

7. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by an ID number and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.

8. What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be available at the Faculty of Education, St Andrew's Building at University of Glasgow after 16 July 2009. If requested, a copy can be sent directly to you from the researcher.

9. Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed by the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee.

10. Contact for Further Information

Name of Researcher: Amanda Forde
Email Address: 0107736f@student.gla.ac.uk

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project you can contact the Faculty of Education Ethics Officer: Dr Georgina Wardle at g.wardle@educ.gla.ac.uk

Thank you for reading.

Appendix D

Consent Form



The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

Consent Form

Title of Project: Can the evolutionary theory of mate selection be applied to partners of transgendered people, and how is this mediated by sexuality and gender identity? A qualitative study.

Name of Researcher: Amanda Forde

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand that my interview will be saved in electronic form and printed out for the researcher's use.
4. I understand that no one will be able to identify me by reading the final report of the research.
5. I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Researcher	Date	Signature

Author Note

Amanda Forde graduated with distinction in MSc Psychological Studies from the University of Glasgow, Scotland. She also has an MA in English Language from the University of Glasgow. She is currently seeking work experience in the mental health field with a view to training in Clinical Psychology. Amanda is the Families Administrator on the support forum for trans people at www.transgenderzone.com - a popular destination for chat, advice, health information, news and research for the transgender community. She is also a moderator at Depend - an organisation offering

free, confidential and non-judgemental advice, information and support to all family members, spouses, partners and friends of transsexual people in the UK. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to Amanda Forde: at E-mail: amanda.stone.forde@gmail.com

This research was conducted as part fulfilment of requirements for MSc Psychological Studies, University of Glasgow.

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