ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Where Have All the Tomboys Gone? Women's Accounts of Gender in Adolescence

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Abstract This study was designed to investigate accounts of tomboyism cessation and continuation in adolescence in the narratives of a small sample of adult, working and lower-middle class, New Jersey-area lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women who identified as childhood tomboys. Study participants discussed several reasons for ceasing and continuing tomboyism in adolescence, including maturation, heterosexual interests, parental and peer pressures, athletic participation, and sexual desires for girls or women. Several participants questioned the tomboy label by highlighting discrepancies between behavior and identification. Women's relationships to the varied gendered meanings referenced in the "tomboy" label, the salience of women's adult sexualities in their narratives of gender in adolescence, and the dangers for scholars of presuming conformity and heterosexuality are discussed.

Keywords Tomboyism · Retrospective narratives · Gender in adolescence · Sexuality

Although scholars have produced several retrospective studies of childhood tomboyism, they have offered few studies of women's recollections of tomboyism and cessation of tomboyism in adolescence. Where "tomboyism" is defined as "cross-gender," "masculine," or "androgynous" identification or behavior in girls, social scientists tend to assume that most girls cease tomboyism in adolescence. There is little empirical analysis of why

they do so, why they do not, or the relationships between women's adult sexual statuses and their narratives of tomboyism cessation or continuation. Women's stories about what happens to their tomboyism at adolescence are important to social scientific understandings of gender identification; in the absence of this information we may presume conformity and heterosexuality.

In the present study I investigated accounts of adolescence within the life history narratives of a small sample of adult lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women who identified as childhood tomboys. The following research questions were asked: What are the stories women tell about the tenacity or temporariness of tomboyism in adolescence?; What reasons do they give for continuing or ceasing their tomboy ways?; Do women's reports of cessation of tomboyism represent behavioral change or merely rejections of the "tomboy" label?; How do women's recollections of gender conformity and resistance vary by their adult sexual identifications?

Assumptions of Tomboyism Cessation in Adolescence

Both scholars and lay persons commonly believe that when it comes to policing gender, parents, peers, and others control boys more rigidly than girls (Halberstam, 1998). Thorne (1994, pp. 111, 116) suggested that whereas "tomboys" are viewed as "girls who claim some of the positive qualities associated with the masculine," "sissies" are seen as "failed male[s]." Kimmel (2004, p. 254) asserted that, compared to being a tomboy, "being a sissy is a far more serious offense to the gender order." Several scholars have theorized that tomboys are granted more social and parental acceptance than their "sissy" counterparts because of the "more rigid...role construction" of masculinity than of

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femininity (Kimmel, 2004, p. 132), because tomboys display socially rewarded "masculine" traits or behaviors (Burn, O'Neil, & Nederend, 1996; Devor, 1989; Martin, 1995; Thorne, 1994), and/or because of beliefs that tomboyism is transitory (Hemmer & Kleiber, 1981; Martin, 1995). Some have suggested that tomboyism may only be "tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 6). Once they attain adolescence, "young women are pressured to conform to dominant ideals of femininity" (Currie, 1997, p. 462) by parents, teachers, and peers (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000; Shakib, 2003). Brown and Gilligan (1992) depicted adolescence as a time in which girls exchange rambunctious voices and self-confident assertions for timid conformity and quiet depression. Due to increased parental and peer pressures (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000), physiological changes (Burn et al., 1996), and/or popular conceptions of the transitory nature of tomboyism (Martin, 1995), most girls are believed to renounce their tomboy ways in adolescence.

An increase in pressures on girls in adolescence to conform to conventional femininity is not evidence of girls' compliance with such pressures. For example, several studies of girls with backgrounds that were not White and/or middle-class have illustrated alternative pictures of girlhood (Brown, 1997; Denner & Dunbar, 2004; Duke, 2000). Brown (1997, p. 696) described how a group of White, rural, working-class girls enacted "femininity" with "expressions of invulnerability,...raucous behavior,...[and] swearing"—a manner distinct from middle-class, suburban ideals of cheerful passivity. Denner and Dunbar's (2004, p. 301) qualitative examination of Latina girls "challenge[d] assumptions that girls experience a linear loss of voice." Similarly, Hemmer and Kleiber (1981) suggested that during adolescence tomboys (or "ex-tomboys") merely conceal their "tomboy" skills and traits.

Scholarly assumptions of tomboyism cessation in adolescence may promote notions of gender that neglect human agency (Carr, 1998). In contrast, contemporary theorists tend to view gender as accomplishments of individuals acting within particular social situations (Connell, 1987; Gerson & Peiss, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to these understandings, individuals *actively* "do" gender within the limits of specific social constraints. If scholars presume that girls act in accord with social convention we lose the opportunity to understand fully their resistance and the complexities in their life experiences.

Definitions of tomboyism

There is no scholarly consensus on the definition of "tomboyism." Some have defined tomboyism as "masculine," "male," or "cross-gender" identification or behavior in girls (e.g., Bailey, Bechtold, & Berenbaum, 2002; Green, Williams, & Goodman, 1982; Jones, 1999; Martin, 1995).

Others have asserted that tomboys are better viewed as "androgynous" performers of both "masculinity" and "femininity" (e.g., Hemmer & Kleiber, 1981; Plumb & Cowan, 1984; Safir, Rosenmann, & Kloner, 2003). Different definitions produce different results and normative conclusions. For example, Rekers (1992) dismissed "androgynous tomboyism" as a normal variant of the "feminine role," and pathologized "masculine tomboyism" as a "gender identity disorder." In contrast, Burn et al. (1996, p. 426) regretted having operationalized tomboyism in terms of "masculine play activities" instead of in a way that might result in stronger correlations between childhood tomboyism and a prized adult androgyny.

Social scientific definitional debates on tomboyism originate in the influential work of Hyde, Rosenberg, and Behrman (1977), who challenged the findings of Saghir and Robins (1973). The latter connected tomboyism to abnormal gender development, lesbianism, and confused gender identity. Hyde et al. (1977, p. 75) replaced Saghir and Robins' definition of tomboyism—that included "persistent aversion to girls' activities and girls as playmates"—with one that focused on a preference for boys' company and activities, and found that tomboy behavior and reported tomboyism were both statistically normal. Later research with women from the U.S., Australia, Israel, Brazil, Peru, and the Philippines confirmed that large minorities or majorities of women recalled having been "tomboys" in childhood (Morgan, 1998; Phillips & Over, 1995; Plumb & Cowan, 1984; Safir et al., 2003; Whitam & Mathy, 1991).

Scholars who studied women's retrospective accounts have suggested that narratives of childhood tomboyism vary by women's adult sexualities. Several researchers found higher frequencies of recalled childhood tomboyism and/or gender non-conformity in lesbian and/or bisexual women than in heterosexual women (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Dunne, Bailey, Kirk, & Martin, 2000; McConaghy & Zamir, 1995; Phillips & Over, 1995; Safir et al., 2003). In an earlier study (Carr, 2005), I distinguished lesbian and bisexual from heterosexual women's accounts of childhood tomboyism by noting different definitions applied to tomboyism. Women who discussed their childhood tomboyism in terms of both "preferring masculinity" and "rejecting femininity" were more likely to be lesbian or bisexual than women who defined their tomboyism as "preferring masculinity" alone. Singh, Vidaurri, Zambrarano, and Dabbs (1999) complicated any simple association of sexuality and recalled childhood gender by demonstrating higher reports of childhood gender-atypical behaviors among "butch" than among "femme" lesbians.

Scholars have not applied similar focus to the relationship between women's sexuality and their narratives of tomboyism in adolescence. Nevertheless, Cooper (1990) theorized that tomboyism was a common aspect of lesbian women's

gender role orientation in adolescence. Safir et al. (2003) found significant differences among women of different sexual orientations concerning rates of reported tomboyism between the ages of 12 and 17. In my earlier study (Carr, 2005), women's accounts of tomboyism in adolescence were more strongly connected to their adult sexual orientation than to their adult gender role identifications.

Because "tomboyism" is defined within contexts of socially-constructed notions of gender appropriateness, specific meanings of the term differ over time and among social groups. Thorne (1994) suggested that use of the term differed among White and Black children in the U.S. and that it was decreasing among contemporary children due to social changes—especially the increased acceptance of women in sports (Thorne, 1994). Morgan (1998) reported that U.S. women of different generations defined tomboyism in slightly different ways, and Moore (2003) found that varied racial contexts are connected to different meanings applied to children's crossings of gender boundaries. Shifting social contexts further complicate tomboy definitions.

Studies of tomboyism cessation

Two studies have focused empirically and directly on the question of cessation of tomboyism in adolescence. Burn et al. (1996) and Morgan (1998) both reported that U.S. women recalled ceasing tomboy behavior at an average age of 12–13. Both studies employed written questionnaires that presumed that women had ceased tomboyism. Burn et al. (1996, p. 422) asked women college students "If you consider yourself to have been a tomboy as a child, at what point or age did you stop behaving like one?" Morgan (1998, p. 792) asked women from three generations (Generation X, Baby Boomers, and Senior Citizens) "At what age(s) did you 'stop' being a tomboy?" Despite the wording in the questionnaires, participants in both studies claimed to have persisted in tomboyism. Seven percent of participants in Burn and colleague's study and "several" in Morgan's study reported never having ceased tomboyism. Had the researchers allowed for the possibility, it is possible that more women would have reported having continued tomboyism beyond childhood.

Burn et al. (1996) and Morgan (1998) reported several reasons that women gave for stopping tomboyism: peer pressures, interests in boys, physical maturation, transitions to a new school, and family/parental pressures. Morgan (1998, p. 790) noted that "it is not clear whether girls cease the [tomboy] behavior or [merely] stop claiming the label." In-depth qualitative examination of whether, how, and why women report having ceased tomboyism may provide insights about: (a) whether reports of cessation of tomboyism are semantic or behavioral; (b) women's relationships

to the "masculinity" or androgyny referenced in the tomboy label; and (c) how women's recollections of gender resistance and conformity in adolescence vary by their adult sexual orientation statuses. Although they provide a start, neither of the existing studies was designed to accomplish these ends. Research that explores the above questions must: (a) allow participants to report tomboyism continuation beyond childhood; (b) provide in-depth analysis of women's reasons for tomboyism cessation and continuation; and (c) include women's adult sexual identification in the analysis.

Method

Sample

As part of a larger study of women's gender and sexual practices, identifications, and consciousness (Carr, 2002), I recruited anonymous female participants through two separate "snowball" samples. I began the first in a related study (Carr, 1998) of women who identified as "tomboys" ($n=12$). I recruited the majority of participants through another endeavor with members of a labor union local ($n=15$). Participants from both efforts were U.S. citizens between the ages of 25 and 45 who were working class or lower-middle class according to at least two of three criteria: education, income, and occupation. I excluded women who did not identify as childhood tomboys. Inclusion criteria were: no more than 2 years of college, incomes of no more than $35,000 annually, and occupations below upper management or the professions. In addition, participants could not own businesses with employees other than themselves (Gilbert, 1998).

The 27 participants averaged 33.5 years of age and 14 years of education. Seven (26%) reported African ethnicity; 2 (7%) reported Hispanic ethnicity; 1 (4%) reported Arab ethnicity; and 17 (63%) reported only European ethnicity. Eleven (41%) participants identified as lesbian, 8 (30%) as bisexual (or as a combination of bisexual and other identifications), and 8 (30%) as heterosexual.

Sample 1. The first sampling effort proceeded from two main contacts in New Jersey. I chose these contacts and successive ones on the basis of their childhood tomboy identification, and asked them to refer other women who identified similarly. See Carr (1998) for additional details.

Sample 2. The second recruitment process commenced with three contacts at a large union local in New Jersey: two were employed in predominantly men's occupations (package loading); 1 in a

predominantly women's occupation (data entry). I targeted women with both predominantly men's and women's occupations to increase chances of locating participants of diverse gender role and sexual orientation statuses. Previous studies (Jones & Lamke, 1985; Luhaorg & Zivian, 1995; Sztaba & Colwill, 1988) suggest that women's gender and sexual identifications influence their occupational and educational choices. I asked each source to refer other women in similar job categories.

Procedure

I performed life-history interviews in participants' homes, or when a quiet and private space was not available, in my office. Instead of depending on a close-ended schedule of questions, I employed a more flexible format. The questions varied with each interview. I often asked questions about certain times or relationships in participants' lives (e.g., familial relationships, career aspirations as children, heroes in adolescence, dating in high school). I asked certain types of questions about gender and sexuality of most participants when the information was not volunteered spontaneously, for example: "Have you always been bisexual?"; "Were you still a tomboy in high school?"; "What kinds of things do you do that are 'masculine'?" Given the lack on consensus on the definitions of the "tomboy" label and other gendered terms, I allowed participants to define "tomboy" and other gendered terms as they understood them. Interviews ranged in length from 90 minutes to 8 hours, although most were 2.5–3.0 hr long. I conducted and audio-taped all interviews.

In the present study I focused on accounts of gender role transitions and continuities from childhood to adolescence. In seeking patterns within participants' accounts I built loosely on the findings of two prior studies (Burn et al., 1996; Morgan, 1998). In addition, I sought women's reasons for continuing tomboyism, as well as their definitions of the term.

Results

Of the 27 women in my sample, 11 (41%) reported having continued tomboyism in adolescence, 10 (37%) recalled having ceased tomboyism, and 6 (22%) provided ambiguous answers concerning their tomboy status in adolescence.

Tomboyism cessation

Nine participants explained their cessation of tomboyism as due to physical and/or emotional maturation, four to

interests in boys, and eight to pressures by parents and peers.

Growing up—"puberty stepped in." The most common reason women gave for having ceased tomboyism in adolescence was physical and/or emotional maturation. Natalie,[1] a bisexual identifier, was raised in a small "rednecky" town in a biracial (Black and White) family. As a child she "really liked hiking and camping and tree climbing and scientists." She recalled purposely getting herself dirty "because [she] wanted to be a tomboy and was like trying to look like" one. However, she spoke of tomboyism as something she outgrew:

> I think my interest in the outdoors and things like that didn't stop. It was just...[that] once you're more of a teenager, or at least for me, I didn't need to define myself that way....I was just doing other things. I didn't really think of it that way....I would say that my interests changed, or pretty much got overshadowed by music from that point forward.

As Natalie matured, so did many of her interests. As a result, childhood labels no longer fit.

June, a heterosexual identifier, described surrender of tomboyism as gradual, natural, and inevitable. Raised in a Black, working-class family in densely-populated New Jersey suburbia, June depicted tomboyism as something she predictably jettisoned as physiological growth progressed. When I asked her what had changed in adolescence, June discussed having relinquished tomboyism as if it were inescapable: "Puberty stepped in basically....At that age you don't have no place for ball no more....Whether it's a boy or a female, you just stop doing a certain thing. I don't think you really notice it but it just happens gradually." For June, the loss of tomboyism was part of physical maturation, as predestined as developing breasts and hips.

Latonia, a Black, heterosexual identifier raised in an urban neighborhood with her mother and younger sister, told a similar story. She recalled a tomboy childhood, "climbing fences, jumping in ditches, beating up the boys." Latonia described having discarded childhood tomboyism as part of her developmental process: "The tomboy part of me was there but it didn't interfere with anything because I was growing out of being a tomboy—looking more to the professional. You know, like getting a job and things like that. So...that tomboy part of me... gradually left." Like Natalie and June, Latonia referenced popular ideas that tomboyism is something girls transcend as they mature.

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[1] I have changed participants' names to protect the confidentiality of the interviews.

Other participants portrayed their tomboyism as the predecessor of adult lesbianism or "butchdom." Manuela, a White lesbian with Irish and Mexican heritage, spent her earliest years in a small town in Texas. She claimed always to have been a tomboy, at least until she later became a jock, a butch lesbian, and then a butch top. Manuela viewed her progression as different forms of "tomboyness" or "maleness" at increasing degrees of maturity. She struggled to delineate a universal model of development from tomboy to butch lesbian, yet acknowledged that heterosexual women are often tomboys too. Becky, a lesbian/bisexual identifier, the oldest of four children, was raised in a White, suburban neighborhood in New York. She summarized a similar understanding of tomboyism as incipient lesbianism: "You don't call a 25 year old a tomboy. You call her a lesbian or a dyke." Thus, narratives of gender maturation included accounts of having relinquished tomboyism both for something different and for upgrades on similar models.

Interest in boys—entering the "time warp." Another common reason women offered for having ceased tomboyism was (actual or expected) sexual or romantic interest in boys. In these narratives tomboyism was generally seen as incompatible with heterosexual success. Eileen, a White, heterosexual woman raised in the suburbs of a medium-sized New Jersey city, claimed to have been a "tomboy"—playing war, climbing trees, catching frogs, and building forts—but also to have been "girlish"—playing house, Barbie dolls, and choosing fantasy husbands with the girls. Eileen attributed her gradual rejection of tomboyism to escalating "opposite" sexual desire. Her reason for having abandoned "tomboyish" comportment when she was 12 was that she became "more aware of boys."

Heterosexual Tamara related a similar story of maturation due to heterosexual interest. Raised by White, suburban, immigrant parents in a family that was "90 percent boys," Tamara recalled a childhood full of fishing and sports. She attributed her cessation of tomboyism to a growing interest in boys: "Kind of like sixth, seventh to eighth grade, around that time frame...I was more into being a girl. Because at [before] that point guys wouldn't look at you like I want to go out with you." Susan connected heterosexual expectations to gender role change in adolescence. As she recalled her childhood in a working-class, White suburb in New Jersey, heterosexually identified Susan recounted riding bikes with her best boyfriend, exploring in the mud at a nearby river, and playing sports with boys. In her account, heterosexual and "un-tomboylike" expectations were linked and foisted upon her unexpectedly:

When I came back to sixth grade it was like—wait a second, what happened?...All the sudden, girls weren't

really buddies with boys anymore. They were talking about, you know, going out with them...and everybody was all worried about how they were dressed...and what their hair looked like. And you know, how much they weighed. And I sort of felt like I had been in a time warp.

Susan explained that when girls began talking about liking boys, she felt required to exchange her friendships with boys for concerns about fashion.

Dana, a White lesbian who grew up in a "tough," working-class suburb of Philadelphia, described a similar shift from playing ball with the boys to attempting to attract them: "At the end of the year everyone was interested in a boy. So I thought, 'Well, I should be interested in a boy too.'"

Social pressures—parents and peers. A third reason participants gave for having ceased tomboyism was pressures from parents and peers. Several participants described gender role alterations that were instigated by maternal warnings in adolescence. Dana recalled that her mother told her that if she "didn't act more like a girl, look more like a girl, dress more like a girl, [that she] wouldn't be accepted by society,...wouldn't find a husband." Lesbian identified Tamika reported that she stopped playing sports when her "breasts started coming in" due to her mother's importunity. Her mother cautioned: "You can't do that, 'cause you're developing now. If you get hit [by the ball in your chest], you could get cancer. You could get sick." Terry, also a lesbian, explained that her mother prophesied that her younger sister would get a boyfriend before she would if Terry didn't behave in gender-appropriate ways. Terry, who was the eldest of four children in a White family in suburban North Carolina, recounted an idealized tomboyish childhood, followed by unwanted change due to parental and peer pressures: "I used to go out without my shirt on....I used to love going around naked. Then I wasn't allowed anymore." Like Terry, several participants credited their cessation of tomboyism to expectations and intimidations by parents and peers.

Star—a Black lesbian raised primarily in a small city in New Jersey—shared a story of maternal insistence to explain why she was no longer a tomboy in her adolescence:

When I went to Texas I just got yelled at so much, it just wasn't worth it anymore....[My mother] said, "Stop that. You're a girl and you'll get hurt." But, I won [at wrestling with the boys] all the time. I'm like, "I'm winning. How can I get hurt?...I can beat any boy in the neighborhood!" And she would get so mad, "That's not the point; you're not supposed to be fighting"....And, at one point we were playing in the clubhouse, and I still have a scar on my back. The

boys didn't want the girls in their clubhouse, and they put a nail down. And so when I ran in the nail went across my back. And she said, "That's it. You're not running around playing with boys anymore. That's it." So, that was pretty much it.

Due to her mother's demands, Star reluctantly shelved her saucy comportment, "straightened up and went to church and wore dresses and bought pretty shoes and acted like a girl." Like Terry, Star abandoned tomboyism under protest.

Tamika's account of cessation of tomboyism similarly credited parental pressure, yet she depicted herself as a willing participant. She was raised in a large Black family in a small city in New Jersey, and claimed to have been a tomboy from a young age, who proudly and physically protected "the nerds" in her neighborhood. One day Tamika's mother told her that she couldn't be a tomboy anymore. As she had "always listened to [her] parents," she simply desisted her tomboy ways.

Tamara related a similar story of gender role change due to her mother's persistent prodding. Tamara had been raised largely among men, and she claimed that she didn't understand that she was a girl until her mother shared the news ("My mom was just like, 'You're not a boy. You are a girl.'") and laid down the law: "When I was like 9 my mother was like, 'That's it. You're taking dancing lessons. You're taking piano lessons, etiquette lessons, everything. You're not hanging out with boys anymore.'" Despite initial resistance, Tamara recalled that she complied with her mother's demands and grew to like things she categorized as "girly" such as ballet and wearing mini-skirts.

Participants mentioned peer pressures less frequently than parental coercions, yet, for some, the former were more salient. Although bisexual identifier Barbara didn't cease tomboy identification until adulthood, during adolescence she described intense peer pressures to relinquish her active proclivities:

> I got just totally ripped apart by the boys with regards to me being active and being good at any of the sports. And...I was like, they're totally jealous....I'd get the soccer ball away from the boy, you know, and go and get a goal, and they'd call me every name under the book with regards to...sexuality. You know, they'd call me a butch; they'd call me a dyke; they'd call me a boy; they'd call me a man; they'd call me a bitch.

Like many women, Barbara found that the rules had changed in adolescence.

Tomboyism continuation

Despite widespread assumptions that tomboyism is temporary, several participants related reasons for having per-

sisted in tomboyism during adolescence. Nine women attributed their tomboyism continuation to an interest in active pursuits, and seven attributed it to sexual or romantic interests in girls or women.

Active interests—"playing as hard as the guys." The most common reason given by participants for tomboyism continuation in adolescence was an interest in active pursuits. Deanne, a Black, heterosexual woman raised by staunchly Baptist grandparents in a small Midwestern town, recalled a childhood with many active, outdoor activities. By adolescence, she noted,

> Wasn't very many girls in the community that went fishing, hunting, and hang out with boys and stuff like that. I used to. I had just as many boys, more boys at my house hanging around, sitting around talking, drinking, whatever....And, I used to wrestle and fight and all that kind of stuff too.

Deanna reported that her predilections for the outdoors and for "rough and tumble" play did not change as she grew.

Several participants equated tomboyism with athleticism; they often employed the term "tomboy" as synonymous with "jock" or "butch" status in adolescence. Ronnie, a Black and Native-American lesbian and bisexual identifier who grew up in an urban area of New Jersey, explained that "what made her a tomboy in high school" was her participation in sports:

> I was a jock....I was a naturally good athlete....I had this gym teacher....He was the wrestling coach. He used to call me butch....And he'd say, "Hey butch!" And I'd be like, "My name's not butch." And I didn't know what that was. I was just really into sports....I played just as hard as the guys. And it granted me the name "Butch."

Similarly, when I asked her if she was still a tomboy in adolescence, Barbara answered: "Oh yeah, definitely. By seventh grade I was very involved with sports. I was on the basketball team and the softball team....And I really excelled in sports." Despite her beliefs that certain recreations were more worthy of the tomboy label than others, Becky viewed athleticism as tantamount to tomboyism:

> I wouldn't say I stopped being a tomboy. I just don't know, looking back, where that cutoff would be. But I guess if I had to identify, tomboy would probably be the most accurate term for me during the junior high years, and probably into the high school years, even though I wasn't involved with the sports a tomboy would be in. I didn't do the soccer, basketball, softball

thing. I did the cross-country track thing. And so that's not as quote, unquote athletic.

In this way, an interest in active pursuits, and particularly athleticism, was a popular reason given by women for having continued tomboyism into adolescence.

Some participants discussed athleticism in adolescence as contiguous with childhood tomboyism. Manuela viewed her childhood tomboyism as ripening into "jock" status: "Yeah, I was a tomboy when I was in adolescence. But no, see. It changes. In adolescence you're a jock." In addition, for Manuela, "jock" status bestowed social acceptance upon tomboyism: "Yeah. That's what it's like to be a tomboy too. Cause there's more acceptance. 'Well, she's a jock. So that explains that masculine way that she has.'" According to Manuela, an athletic version of tomboyism provided more than a measure of social acceptance for "masculinity" in adolescence, it offered "cover" for lesbianism.

Like Manuela, lesbian identifier Lee viewed "jock" status as a tenable excuse for girls to continue "tomboyism" in adolescence. She was reared in a medium-sized Pennsylvania city, and dreamed of becoming the first professional woman baseball player:

> I used to walk around with a jean jacket and dark sunglasses in school. I looked more like a boy than I did a girl. But nobody ever said anything to me. And it was acceptable, 'cause I was a jock. So like all the athletic women, you know, like, "I don't have time to put on makeup and stuff if I have a game the next day."

Not only were active pursuits reason to continue tomboyism, but, for some, formal participation in sports was both the logical progression of tomboyism and a more socially acceptable version of it.

Flirting with girls. Another popular reason participants cited for tomboyism continuation in adolescence was sexual interest in girls or women. Alice was raised in a "multi-cultural, rough," urban New Jersey environment, the child of first and second generation Italians. Her parents encouraged her athleticism because they thought it would help her into college or the Olympics. When I asked Alice, a lesbian, about her tomboyism in adolescence, she seemed to equate it with homosexuality:

> *What about your teenage years? Were you still a tomboy as a teenager?*
> Oh yes. I mean, the older I got the more it progressed.
> *You became more of a tomboy?*
> Oh yes....The older I was getting the more I was like paying attention to what women were like....I would

not stare, but I would observe them more. And I thought that was pretty—I don't know, I don't want to say masculine, but I was looking at women as something else that I wasn't a part of them....I would just look at a girl and wonder what she was like, sexually, in my mind....Constantly. That's all I thought about.

Just as some women treated tomboyism as synonymous with athleticism, some viewed it as a euphemism for lesbianism or bisexuality. Consuela, a Latina lesbian raised in Chicago, provided a similar response concerning her tomboy status in high school: "Oh yeah. By then I was a good tomboy, or well on my way, you know, preparing for college tomboyness....I flirted a lot with girls in school." Similarly, bisexual identifier Clara, the child of a White traveling salesman and a bored, White, suburban mother, seemed to hear "bisexual" when I asked about her tomboyism in adolescence: "I would say I was more tomboyish. I didn't date. I didn't have an interest in it. At that time I was probably attracted more to females than males. You know, I've always been attracted to both." Whether equated with homosexual desire or manifestations of hidden "queerness," several participants perceived their tomboyism continuation in adolescence as connected with unspoken or acknowledged lesbianism or bisexuality.

Struggling with language

Of the six participants I classified as having provided ambiguous responses regarding their tomboy status in adolescence, approximately one-half discussed their uncertainties with the tomboy label. Latonia struggled with language when I asked her if she had remained a tomboy in adolescence:

> Sort of....Well, I didn't jump the ditches and climb the trees anymore. But, I guess I got labeled as a tomboy because—like I said—I like doing things, like fixing, you know, building stuff and things like that. And back in those days if you was a girl and you liked working on cars or whatever, you was considered like a no–no.

In deciding whether or not to characterize herself as "tomboy" in adolescence, Latonia weighed her contemporary gender conceptualizations against the designations derived from what she believed to be a more socially restrictive era.

Becky alternately tagged herself in adolescence as tomboy and not tomboy: "I don't think I stopped. I'm just not sure. Tomboy is something I identify—I think of as being a girl–child. And I imagine there's probably a different word as you get older." She was unsure whether

or not to call herself "tomboy" in adolescence because she associated the word with childhood, but had no better terms to describe her gender non-conformity.

Similarly, lesbian identifier Suha, who was born in Lebanon and relocated several times before settling in New Jersey, waffled when asked about her tomboyism in adolescence:

> *Were you still a tomboy?*
> Yeah. As soon as I got into high school, I started playing sports....
> *Did you identify as a tomboy when you were in high school?*
> No. I think I stopped identifying as a tomboy in high school. I didn't identify with anything.

Where Latonia wrestled with the baggage others attached to "tomboy," and Becky worried about the childish connotations of the term, Suha pointed to the disparities between "tomboy" behavior and identification.

Participants with ambiguous responses concerning their tomboy status were not alone in questioning the tomboy label. Several other participants shared reservations about the term. Some noted discrepancies between behavior and label or identification. Tamika explained that, although she had "femmed up" her appearance and posture in adolescence, she retained an assertive and even domineering personality: "I still was who I was. I was always aggressive. I was always not gonna be ordered around by anyone." Susan recalled a superficial surrender of tomboyism due to peer pressures in adolescence: "I guess on the outside I stopped being a tomboy. Like I was afraid of being identified as a tomboy." Susan differentiated the external and internal; she molded her outward behavior to "fit in," but she maintained the inner tomboy worldview of her youth. In these ways women rejected the tomboy label even while they continued many of the same assertive or rompish activities and attitudes that had defined their childhoods.

Discussion

In accord with popular and scholarly beliefs, many women in the present study reported having ceased tomboyism in adolescence due to maturation, heterosexual interests or expectations, and pressures by parents and peers. They lost interest in childhood games; they embraced "grown up" "femininity," "androgyny," "butch," or "jock" status; they viewed tomboyism as incompatible with increased heterosexual urges; and/or they acceded to harassment and warnings from parents and peers. However, the conventional depiction of cessation of tomboyism during adolescence tells only part of the story. Many women reported having persisted in tomboyism during part or all of their adolescence. They equated their tomboyism continuance

with their love of sports and the outdoors and/or their hidden or overt desires for other girls or women. In addition, many women described cessation of tomboyism that was temporary or partial. Some reported having bowed to social expectations and then reclaiming "tomboy" behaviors or identifications when the pressures lifted.

The results of the present study support prior research that highlights gender resistance as well as gender conformity within the highly pressurized years of adolescence (e.g., Brown, 1997; Denner & Dunbar, 2004). Scholarly attention to gender resistance helps to combat determinist conceptions of gender in which little girls always (or almost always) grow to be conventionally feminine, heterosexual women. When scholars presume that women reject tomboyism in adolescence they presume conformity and heterosexuality, and risk losing sight of girls' agency and diversity.

Yet the present study of women's recollections of adolescence offers more than another view of gender resistance. It presents snapshots of women's negotiations with conventional norms about sexuality, femininity, and masculinity that cannot be seen when scholars presume gender conformity. Like other markers connected with masculinity, "tomboy" is a problematic yet tempting identification for many women (Crawley, 2002; Halberstam, 1998). Some women's reports of cessation of tomboyism may be attributed to the lack of positive language for competent, active, "outdoorsy," muscular, assertive, androgynous, athletic, strong, and/or independent girls and women. This is especially true for heterosexual women, who are without the benefits of gendered identifications such as "butch" and "dyke," which have been reclaimed in some lesbian and bisexual communities. Indeed, at least five of the women in the present sample identified as "tomboy" adults. Ironically, it is perhaps because of its associations with (an allegedly asexual) childhood that "tomboy" is seen as a less pejorative term for girls' "masculinity" or androgyny than the alternatives.

Presumptions of childhood sexual innocence may protect the "tomboy" from the stigma of many other masculine or androgynous tags. But what then happens to girls who fail, as expected, to relinquish tomboy identification in adolescence? In the same way that childhood tomboys are "presumed innocent," tomboys in adolescence may be considered sexually suspect (Shakib, 2003). Indeed sexual rationale for cessation of tomboyism and continuation of tomboyism abounded in women's retrospective accounts of their gender roles or gendered behaviors in adolescence. Eleven (41%) narratives cited sexual/romantic interests in boys or girls as reason for gendered behaviors.

Women's adult sexual identifications are salient in their narratives of tomboyism cessation and continuation in adolescence. Some depicted tomboyism as incongruous with

heterosexual success. Others described tomboyism as connected to latent or actualized lesbianism or bisexuality in adolescence. Perhaps due to the increased importance of sexuality in adolescence, tomboyism is seen as synonymous with lesbianism for many women, whether they are themselves heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian. Moreover, narratives of "growing out" of tomboyism differed depending on women's adult sexuality. Heterosexual participants were more likely to describe having grown out of tomboyism, whereas lesbian women were more likely to describe having blossomed into older versions of their tomboy youth. On the one hand, Latonia's distinction between the "professional" and "the tomboy" implied a stigma attached to "masculine" or androgynous women. If maturity for women is associated with "femininity," then a "masculine" or androgynous woman may be seen as childish, and may thus have difficulty in the grown-up world of employment. On the other hand, Manuela's depiction of a linear progression from the childish tomboy to the adult butch lesbian was another rejection of the "tomboy" label—not for its masculine, androgynous, or active associations, but—for its connotations with immaturity.

The answer to whether reports of cessation of tomboyism are semantic or behavioral is not a simple one. Some participants recalled having rejected the tomboy tag for its connotations of immaturity or deviance rather than the specific behaviors or attitudes they associated with the term. Some participants continued many of the behaviors they defined as "tomboy" but found new labels for themselves. Other participants ceased some or all of the behaviors they had previously associated with tomboyism. The question about the tomboy label nevertheless highlights the term's dual associations with childhood and masculinity or androgyny.

In conclusion, this exploratory study of women's narratives of gender transition and continuity in adolescence provides implications for further research. Given that women's accounts variously equated tomboyism with lesbianism, immaturity, athleticism, and masculinity, it is important for social scientists to attend to how participants define "tomboyism." Given that tomboyism does not necessarily cease in adolescence, future researchers should offer women the opportunity to report tomboyism continuation. Should they do so, larger studies may reveal racial/ethnic, class, national, and generational differences in the ways by which girls continue childhood tomboyism into adolescence and the reasons they give for doing so. Given that narratives of tomboyism cessation and continuation appear to vary by women's adult sexuality, future researchers may benefit from acknowledging the importance of women's adult sexual identities for understanding women's gender narratives of adolescence.

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