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## This Journey Is Not for the Faint of Heart: An Investigation of Challenges Facing Transgender Individuals and Their Significant Others

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THIS JOURNEY IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART: AN INVESTIGATION OF  
CHALLENGES FACING TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR  
SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

by

Emily Lenning

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Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
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Department of Sociology  
Dr. Susan Caringella, Advisor

Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan  
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AN INVESTIGATION OF CHALLENGES FACING  
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THEIR SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Emily Lenning, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2008

This study investigates the challenges imposed on transgender individuals and their significant others as a result of the deviant labels that have been used to stigmatize non-traditional expressions of gender. Using web-based surveys and an on-line focus group, the themes of language and its limitations, psychological trauma, and social challenges are explored and analyzed using discourse analysis. With a total of 311 subjects, 254 transgender individuals and 57 significant others, this research challenges the utility of gendered language as it is currently constituted, addresses the importance of significant others in understanding the transgender experience, and identifies the various social, psychological and economic needs of transgender couples living in today's world.

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Emily Lenning



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## CHAPTER I .

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increase in research and theorizing about the experiences of transgender<sup>1</sup> individuals, largely offered by sociologists and gender scholars (Butler 1999; Hausman 2001; Hines 2006; Lombardi, Wilchings, Priesing and Malouf 2001; Namaste 2000; Prosser 1998; Rubin 2003). Primarily through one-on-one interviews with transgender individuals, researchers have begun to investigate the intricate experiences of transitioning from one gender to the other, as well as investigating how the individual deals with his or her own feelings, and how transgender individuals cope with the challenges of the outside world. Because of the recent nature of work in such areas, this body of research is considerably underdeveloped. Nevertheless, “trans” research is promising insofar as offering new ways in which to consider how gender shapes the personal and social experiences of individuals.

What is almost completely omitted from this body of research, however, is the exploration of the shared experiences of trans couples (meaning couples in which one or both members is transgender) and/or the personal experiences of the significant others of transgender individuals. Few studies have ventured towards the significant other for insight, despite the obvious possibility for a deeper understanding of transgender identities and lives. By omitting the significant other from transgender research, we are not only missing out on potentially broadening current knowledge, we are perpetuating

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term ‘transgender individual,’ as opposed to ‘transgendered individual’ is very purposeful. Just as a natal-born woman is not ‘female-ed’ and a natal-born man is not ‘male-ed,’ a transgender person is not ‘transgender-ed.’ Thus, the decision to use this term is out of respect for those that consider ‘transgender’ to be their sex and/or gender identity.

the social stigma attached to being transgender. If significant others aren't a part of transgender research, when in fact many trans people have partners, we are adding to (or at the least, not dispelling) the stereotype that trans people are undesirable and ultimately alone.

Trans people do have significant others, and those partners can provide considerable insight into the transition process, specifically in terms of how "others" deal with the changes that occur in their own lives and identities as they accompany trans individuals through their metamorphosis. By including significant others in trans research, we can begin to theorize about the fluidity of sexual orientation, reveal which services are still needed to support healthy relationships during and after transition, and how we might begin to make society more welcoming of trans individuals and their partners. While the transition process is profound in and of itself, the challenges that transition brings upon relationships are tremendous. Those challenges are key to understanding the unique experiences associated with gender transition. Hence, my research will expand upon the existing literature, and add a dimension that has been largely ignored, i.e., the lived experiences of trans couples in general, and the experiences of significant others in particular.

At the most basic level, this research asks, *what challenges do transgender individuals and their significant others face in relation to the transgender identity of one or both partners, and how do they cope with them, both on a personal level and in their relationships to one another and the outside world?* This question, however, implies a myriad of more specific questions, in that these "challenges" are broad and multilayered. Gender transition imposes economic, psychological and social challenges to both the

transgender individual and their significant other, with further effects on the relationship itself. For example, the economic challenges that face couples in transition reach beyond the cost of surgical procedures. They also include the cost of new wardrobes, potential job losses, the costs related to changing one's name on legal documents, and possibly the need to relocate. Psychological challenges not only include the internal struggle of the transgender individual before, during and after gender transition, but the transition of sexual orientation that the significant other goes through as well. Additionally, psychological challenges include dealing with a number of considerable losses in both the trans individual's and the significant other's life, including the loss of their respective identities. Essentially, "transition provokes discomfort, anxiety-both for the subject in transition and for the other in the encounter; it pushes up against the very feasibility of identity" (Prosser 1998: 3). Moreover, the changes that occur within the relationship as a result of this strain on identity, e.g., changes in roles and relationships with children, also impose psychological trauma. Socially, many trans individuals and their partners face rejection from friends, families, coworkers, and a myriad of social institutions. Thus, in order to fully understand the effects of gender transition on relationships, all of these challenges must be considered, and hence, are a pivotal part of my investigation.

As I will discuss in the methods section of this work, my research and, consequently, the methods that guide it, are reflective of a feminist epistemology. Many feminist researchers have made it a habit to include a reflexive statement in the methods sections of their articles, books, dissertations, etc. Appropriately, feminist researchers pointedly recognize their own life experience, and the resulting domain assumptions that guide the manner in which they conduct studies. The frequently accepted, or at least

implied, notion is that the influence of one's self begins once the research methodology is contemplated. Rather, though, the researcher begins her (or his) manipulation of the project the moment they begin to consider a topic of study. I am no exception, which is why it is necessary to situate myself in this work at the outset. I suspect that proceeding in this manner will save you, the reader, the task of trying to figure out how my interpretations of the data are reflective of my own world view, particularly as this relates to trans individuals, their partners, and the broader trans community.

The word transgender had no meaning or significance to me until 1996, when I met my current partner. I had just "come out" as a lesbian and thought I had met the "woman" of my dreams. What I thought was a handsome lesbian approached me in a bar, and I immediately fell head over heels. In the beginning stages of our relationship I slowly realized that my new partners' gender identity was a lot more complex than I had assumed it to be. In fact, her close friends called her "she" and considered her a "butch" lesbian, while strangers, and even her formal associations (e.g., employers), called her "he," a label which she never contested and sometimes even insisted upon. To say the least, this confused me tremendously. Not only did I find myself negotiating her identity, I was negotiating mine. Was I really a lesbian? Did this mean I was really heterosexual? How in the world do I explain this to people?

In short, my partner is what you would call "two-spirited," meaning she embraces both the feminine and the masculine characteristics that she was bestowed with at birth. You see, trans-men loathe my partner's luck. She has an Adam's apple that defies explanation, muscle tone that would make a biological male jealous, and a voice that telemarketers respond to with a "Good evening, sir." I cannot count how many people I

have witnessed address her as “he” over the past ten years. In terms of her own preference of gender identity, she is ultimately indifferent. If people perceive her to be male, then she encourages them to use male pronouns, if they perceive her as female, she assures them that female pronouns are fine. Obviously, I refer to my partner as she, which is simply a matter of my own gender attribution. Needless to say, her gender ambiguity has challenged my own assumptions and those of anyone who encounters her.

Throughout the years I have been challenged from a myriad of vantage points in regards to our relationship. Heterosexuals are sometimes threatened, but most often comforted, by the fact that our relationship looks so much like theirs. Lesbian couples are frequently confused and sometimes even angered by our relationship, arguing that we are simply trying to benefit from heterosexual privilege. In fact, lesbians have often discredited me for not being a “true lesbian,” because my partner is not the epitome of femininity. In short, my partner’s unconventional gender identity has caused me to spend the last ten years justifying both myself and the relationship we share to others. It should be underscored that she has spent even more time and energy justifying her personal identity throughout her relatively young life. As a result of these experiences, I have found myself drawn to the trans community because I feel that trans individuals are the only people who truly understand the challenges and experiences that we undergo time after time, encounter after encounter, relationship after relationship.

I decided, as both a feminist and the partner of a two-spirited person, that I had an obligation to embrace anyone who challenged normative gender and, more importantly, to be an activist in the trans community. In 2006, I was co-organizer for the first Female-to-Male (FTM) North Conference held in southwest Michigan. It was a humbling and

liberating experience. I was given the opportunity to hear first-hand the true experiences of trans individuals at various stages of transition, who represented a variety of gender expressions. This is not to say that the trans community embraced my partner's gender ambiguity. Although most people were warm and inviting, we were still faced with the typical barrage of questions. Are you lesbians or a heterosexual couple? Is she a butch lesbian or a trans-man? Why, if you or your partner aren't in gender transition, are you here?

I was given several contemptuous glares by trans-men when I referred to my partner as "she," an indication that they felt I was disrespecting an individual that, to them, was clearly in the process of gender transition. When it was revealed that, in fact, she was not taking testosterone and had not had "top" surgery (nor did she intend to do so), it was still presumed that because she was so masculine in appearance, she must be transgender. It was then that I realized the trans-community was just as reliant on dichotomous gender identities as the larger culture. It also became quite clear that the experiences of significant others must be as revealing to the larger understanding of gender identity and construction as the experiences of their transgender partners.

So, it is in the context of these experiences that this research was borne. Indeed, this project is not value-free. It privileges the transgender experience as valid and relevant to our understanding of gender. Moreover, I do have personal interest in this project, as it is significant in my own life and in the fields I have chosen to investigate, understand, and embrace. It is significant to the field of Sociology, in that it broadens our understanding of gender as an important aspect of social stratification, and further as it



interrogates how technology can create spaces for alternative communities and new venues for conducting social research.

Second, this research is an important addition to the growing body of theoretical literature that concerns itself with gender as a social construction and its essentialist opposition (Butler 1999). I hope this study will inform feminist theory and broaden the scope of feminist inquiry to include consideration of the broad range of identities that challenge the current binary gender system, e.g., such as cross dressers, transgender individuals, transsexuals, and those who are simply genderqueer (androgynous).

Third, this work speaks to Criminological theory, inasmuch as it investigates the process by which deviant labels are socially constructed and enforced and, consequently, how individuals cope with the stigma and marginalization caused by deviant identities and labels (Becker 1963; Gusfield 1963; Lemert 1967). Critical criminologists in particular have long argued that understanding deviance and disadvantage are core components of the field of criminology (see Arrigo 1999; Braithwaite 1989; Taylor, Walton & Young 1973; Quinney 1970). Moreover, the legal discrimination and institutional and physical victimization that trans people are subjected to on daily basis make their experiences especially poignant to the understanding of deviance, crime and society.

Last, and most importantly, this research holds considerable implications for both trans individuals and their significant others, inasmuch as it has the potential to educate the public and identify areas where there is a need for greater support in terms of social services and public policy. Most importantly, this research seeks to identify injustices that face the transgender community and intends to influence progressive social change.

In the following chapters I will review the contemporary literature that exists on the transgender experience and the Sociology of deviance (Chapter 2), describe the methods used to conduct this investigation (Chapter 3), highlight the significant themes from my findings (Chapter 4), offer a discussion of what implications these findings have for the future development of gender research and theory and understanding the lives of transgender couples (Chapter 5), and address the limitations of this study and directions for future research (Chapter 6).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

While transgender individuals experience acceptance and are even celebrated in other parts of the world (Greenberg 2006), the U.S. has consistently been an alienating and downright dangerous place in which to challenge traditional (i.e., dichotomous) gender norms. Unfortunately, even those of us in the scientific community and members of society at large, still commonly define gender as being in relation to one's presumed biological sex (Namaste 2000), which severely limits the recognition and acceptance of a variety of gender expressions. This sort of classification (gender as a function of sex), as other cultures have recognized, is extremely problematic, inasmuch as there have been many more than two biological sexes identified (Greenberg 2006). In fact, estimates suggest that as many as 1 in 2,000 individuals are born intersex, which is a blanket term to describe over 70 variations of biological sex (Haynes 2001), including Turner's Syndrome<sup>2</sup> and Klinefelter's Syndrome. Clearly, then, relying on only two classifications of gender (male and female) is not sufficient to make the assertion that one's gender is a function of one's biology. The fact that there is a growing population of transgender individuals, with little to no evidence of intersex conditions characterizing them, is further corroboration that gender, as it is currently defined in our culture, is inadequate to describe the various possible identities that exist.

Despite the problems related to rigid (binary) conceptualizations of sex, the U.S. continues to rely on male and female genetic codes to characterize gender which, as

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<sup>2</sup> Turner's Syndrome and Klinefelter's Syndrome are both genetic variations of biological sex that deviate from our traditional genetic classifications of male and female. For a complete description of these and all other known intersex conditions, visit "Intersex Conditions" at [www.isna.org](http://www.isna.org).

feminist theory has illuminated, is a social construction (as opposed to a biological fact). In fact, it can be said that, while sex is a noun that describes a genetic body, gender (though also technically a noun) should be considered a verb, in that it is defined by actions. Specifically, gender describes the ways in which we perform our perceived (or even preferred) sex. For example, feminine gender can be performed by acting out those behaviors that are socially acceptable for females, such as crossing ones legs at the knee when sitting or applying makeup skillfully. It is in these actions (and how they are reacted to) that gender is socially constructed. In other words, gender is attributed to an individual (by an audience) based on how well she or he acts out appropriate gendered cues. Accordingly, "Individuals engage in artful impression management in order to warrant the attributions of gender" (Weigert, Teitge & Teitge 1986: 71). Sex, on the other hand, cannot be performed in this manner; simply, it is what it is.

Though I tend to believe that gender is socially constructed and, therefore, not essential, it must be recognized that this is a rather privileged position to take, particularly as a non-trans person myself. Post-modern social scientists have argued quite successfully that gender is to some extent dramaturgical, however this notion implicitly requires an audience and, further, it suggests that "without this interaction there would be no need for gender" (Green 2004: 63). For someone who is conflicted about her or his own gender, this assertion might seem absurd; to that individual, it may seem ridiculous (appropriately so) that one's gender is determined by "someone else's interpretation" (Green 2004: 63). Thus, as Green (2004: 63) argues, "Non-transsexual interpretations of transsexual and transgender expression, both in physical space and in language, often reflect an easy dismissal of transpersons' agency, if not their very existence." In other

words, a trans individual may not feel that gender reassignment surgery, for example, is a means of changing their gender at all. Conversely, they are changing their bodies to make them match the gender that is already inherent within them.

The debate over the differences between sex and gender as descriptive terms precedes and illuminates an even greater challenge to this study. In specific, the way in which language is used and manipulated is particularly significant to this work because, as stated by Namaste (2005: 2), “questions of language are deeply political,” including and especially relating to the language that surrounds gender expression. At the onset of this study, I had no idea just how intricate the issue of language would become. It was not long before it became abundantly clear that perhaps language was just as important to address as the messages it produces or, rather, that one (language) must be critically analyzed before the other (the resulting discourse) could be understood. Thus, the obvious place to begin is with a description of how I have conceptualized the language that is the foundation for this study.

For the purpose of this research, the term transgender refers “to individuals who have undergone hormone treatment or surgery to reconstruct their bodies, or to those who transgress gender categories in ways that are less permanent. The term thus includes people who are at different stages of gender transformation: physically, emotionally and temporally” (Hines 2006: 353). It is important to note that this research includes those individuals who cannot afford surgical transition or that may not want to surgically alter their bodies; transgender, then, refers to a range of individuals, from those that simply reject normative gender roles to individuals that undergo a complete gender transition. This broad conceptualization of the term transgender is quite intentional. It is a rejection

of the classist definition of trans-individuals as only those who can afford the expensive process of physical transformation. Beyond the fact that surgical transition is a luxury that few can afford, it must be recognized that sexual reassignment surgeries (especially those for female-to-male transsexuals) are less than perfected and often have debilitating and sometimes fatal consequences (Rubin 2003). Consequently, “FTMs pursue surgery less vigorously than they do testosterone” (Rubin 2003: 58). Given these facts, a study that defines transgender by one’s decision to undergo surgery would yield an unrepresentative sample (Rubin 2003).

It is also inappropriate, as Serano (2007) points out, to define an individual based upon how well one does or does not perform gender. In discussing the term “trans woman” and one who fits that particular description, she argues that,

No qualifications should be placed on the term ‘trans woman’ based on a person’s ability to ‘pass’ as female, her hormone levels, or the state of her genitals – after all, it is downright sexist to reduce any woman (trans or otherwise) down to her mere body parts or require her to live up to certain societally dictated ideals regarding appearance (Serano, 2007: 11).

Agreeing wholeheartedly with Serano’s sentiment, I maintain the belief that transgender is a term where surrounding boundaries have not yet been fully appreciated. As the term ‘transgender’ is still being appropriately developed and understood, I have chosen what, at present, is the best definition available for the purpose of exploratory research.

Though my choice in language attempts to capture a broad range of research participants, it is necessary to mention that the term transgender is not always embraced by individuals who I might otherwise consider an important part of my population. As Namaste (2005: 2, emphasis in original) argues, “It needs to be pointed out at this stage in

history that increasingly, transsexuals<sup>3</sup> object to being included under a catch-all phrase of *transgender*.” The term transgender has become so associated with the gay and lesbian communities that transsexuals who do not define themselves in relation to that community may resent the use of the term to describe them. Moreover, it should be noted that not all of the individuals who might describe themselves as transgender have the same social and health service needs of someone who is transsexual (Namaste 2005). It should be expected, then, that using a broad term such as transgender to yield a research population will amass a broad range of identities and experiences. Indeed, it did; my final sample ranges from self described “cross dressers” to fully post-operative transsexuals. I think that, given the relative paucity of transgender research, that using this term “transgender” is easily justified, and was an appropriate term to use for an exploratory study such as this.

In addition to the word transgender, I will also be using the terms male-to-female (MTF) or trans-women to refer to those individuals who were biologically born male but that embrace a female gender identity. Similarly, female-to-male (FTM) or trans-men will be used in reference to individuals who were born biologically female but that embrace a male gender identity. You will also note that I, at times, will use the terms transgender and transsexual synonymously, which some may criticize as a false comparison (Green 2004), though it must be recognized that many the participants in this study also use these terms interchangeably and don’t always choose to describe themselves with the same language as, for example, researchers would. It is true that transgender can sometimes be used to refer to those who reject normative gender but that

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<sup>3</sup> Namaste (2005) is referring to individuals who undergo (or intend to undergo) complete sexual reassignment surgery.

do not necessarily desire a full gender transition, whereas the term transsexual is almost exclusively used as a label for those individuals that pursue a complete gender transition. However, as these findings will reveal, many individuals who would be clinically labeled a transsexual because of certain decisions they have made (e.g., to undergo hormone therapy) do not intend to have full sexual reassignment surgery.

Moreover, given the overwhelming emphasis that our society places on the presentation of “proper” gender roles, I contend that the titles of transgender or transsexual are much less significant than the experiences that both identities share. Gender attribution, or the way outsiders place labels on individuals as a result of their perceived gender, “is important because the way we perceive another’s gender affects the way we relate to the person” (Bornstein 1994: 26). Given the social stigma attached to the transsexual label, I believe that we are not equipped to argue that there is in fact a considerable difference between the two classifications. Moreover, as Matt Kailey (2005), a transman, points out so beautifully, the label is more an artifact of what the individual has chosen to identify with, as opposed to some rigidly defined biological explanation of one’s current gender status. He notes:

We’re a society of labels, and I was having a hard time finding one that fit. Was I a man? A transman? A female-to-male transsexual? All or none of the above?...It took me a while to decide, but now, several years later, I still use the label I selected in the beginning-transman (Kailey 2005: 26).

Other terms will also emerge in the findings section of this work, such as genderqueer, transboi, butch, female man, queer FTM, transmasculine, trannyboi, transdyke, multigendered, and cisgender (i.e., non-trans individual). These terms are not as easily described as those mentioned above, primarily because (unlike transsexual or transgender) they did not come from the medical or the gay/lesbian communities. Rather,



these labels were created by the individuals who embrace them and, therefore, are preferable. While the terms transsexual and transgender are institutionalized descriptions of individuals who reject normative gender, the others are rejections of the clinical and/or limiting nature of the two terms.

In addition to considering transgender and/or transsexual subjects, this research also investigates the experiences of the significant others of trans individuals. Significant others, in this context, are defined as the partners of trans individuals with whom they share a committed emotional relationship<sup>4</sup>. I chose not to limit my sample to monogamous couples, only those that considered themselves to be committed. Indeed, several of the respondents in this study reported being in triadic relationships. Significant others are not often included in trans-research, but can potentially provide just as much, if not more, of an indication of the true challenges that face trans individuals. Despite the fact they are not personally undergoing a gender transition, the significant others that follow their partners through transition (or join them after a transition) face changes in the way that they view themselves and the way that society in general views their sexual orientations. Those significant others that join their partner after some sort of physical transformation has occurred are still faced with the fact that they are with someone who society may view as threatening normative gender roles. In either case, the experiences of significant others are valid and important to our understanding of the social implications of gender non-conformity.

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<sup>4</sup> You will note that in my call for participants the specific terminology was a “committed, monogamous relationship,” which suggests a sexual relationship. However, many of my participants admitted that they are no longer engaging in sexual activity and some of my participants revealed that they were monogamous with two partners as opposed to one (which is what we often presume to be the situation described by “monogamy”).

## Sociology of Deviance

*“Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders.*

From this point of view, deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender’”

~Howard Becker (1981: 11, **emphasis in original**)

Perhaps the **current work** is best situated **alongside other** inquiries of deviance because, unfortunately, rejecting the gender that “corresponds” to biological sex has, with the exception of some Native American communities, been considered deviant in the United States (Nanda 2004), which is the point of reference in the present study. In fact, **transgender and transsexual identities** have long **histories of pathologization**. So, while I may not personally see transgender identities as deviant, they are clearly considered deviant within this **larger cultural** context. Therefore, the sociological literature on deviance is useful in understanding how the label of deviant is applied to transgender individuals and their significant others and, in turn, how the transgender individual and their partner cope with that label.

The application of the deviant label to transgender individuals can largely be attributed to the medicalization (read: pathologization) of trans identities. As noted by Conrad and Schneider (1980), the medical community has played a significant role in shifting the view of deviant identities from being moral or legal violations to being understood as medical problems. As the medical profession has been slowly afforded more legitimacy by the larger culture, it has played an important role in constructing the supposed connections between biology and deviance. Behaviors running the gamut from homosexuality to theft have been at some point or another deemed “sicknesses” requiring medical intervention. In regards to understanding how certain behaviors or groups come

to be seen as deviant, i.e., the origins of deviant labels, Conrad and Schneider (1980: 20) argue that we must “attempt to locate their origins in history and identify the social groups and activities that generate and support them.” Much of the literature that does exist on transgender issues documents the history whereby the medical community has come to see transgender people as mentally ill. Such diagnoses have resulted in treatments similar to those used to “treat” homosexuality, such as shock and aversion therapies.

This work does not intend to do what has already been done, i.e., trace the history of the medicalization of transgender identities. Instead, I would like to shift our focus to the more significant issues of present, namely the social consequences of these deviant labels. Nevertheless, in order to understand the current experiences of trans individuals, one must consider them in relation to a history of medicalizing deviance like that just noted.

Even today many transsexuals must undergo psychiatric treatment before being “allowed” to transition, if they choose to do so in a legally and medically-sanctioned way. Often, the transgender individual must prove that “their gendered identity is at odds with their physical morphology, a game which presumes male-female and sex-gender binaries” (Haynes 2001: 2). In addition to counseling, trans individuals are subject to a laundry list of tasks which he or she must complete before being given “permission” to engage in a complete sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). Despite the fact that many doctors who treat transgender patients require that the individual meet certain criteria (e.g., therapy) before SRS, there are no sanctioning agencies to oversee the manner in which trans patients are dealt with by the medical community-at-large. Ultimately,

doctors are left to their own devices when it comes to making decisions about their patients' care.

Though the actual requirements of gender transition are determined on a case-by-case basis by the individuals' health care provider, most physicians refer to the Harry Benjamin<sup>5</sup> Standards of Care, which is a set of guidelines meant to aide professionals in steering their patients (who fit the description of having a gender identity disorder as outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV, published in 1994) through gender transition. This is not to say that the Standards of Care do not have the best interest of the transgender individual in mind, but it is necessary to note that the medical community still considers trans individuals to be in need of diagnosis, treatment, and guidance. Sadly, the autonomy of the individual is superceded by the "expert opinions" of largely unqualified medical practitioners. The transgender individual has even less say over his or her own body than, for example, a teenager seeking breast enhancement for the sake of repairing her "self esteem." As a result of this and related issues, e.g., the cost of legal transition and the general lack of physicians with an interest in aiding trans patients, some transgender individuals take transition into their own hands, so to speak, by purchasing illegal hormones and/or traveling out of the country for SRS. These issues were discussed frequently by my research participants, and will be discussed further in the "findings" section of this work.

In addition to coping with the loss of control over their own bodies and the medicalization of their personal identity, transgender individuals face an enormous amount of discrimination in social situations and from social institutions, particularly in relation to employment. Several studies have found that the overwhelming majority of

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<sup>5</sup> Harry Benjamin coined the term "transsexualism" in 1953 (Johnson 2001).

transgender individuals report some sort of gender discrimination on the job, including failure to be hired, harassment on the job, and employment termination (Broadus 2006). On a positive note, some great strides have been made towards more transgender equality. Currah, Juang, and Minter (2006: xiii) note that, “More than two hundred employers, including some Fortune 500 companies, and more than 60 colleges and universities now include gender identity in their non-discrimination policies.” In fact, in 2004 it was decided by a federal court of appeals that transgender individuals are protected by Title VII of the Federal Civil Rights Act, “which prohibits discrimination based on sex” (Currah, Juang & Minter 2006: xiii). Unfortunately, though, many of these gestures are symbolic, and it does not mean that gender inequality (of any sort) in the workplace has been completely eradicated. Genuine positive social change in the arena of employment, or in any other area mentioned here, cannot occur until trans identities no longer carry the stigmatic labels that have been applied to them.

For many young transgender individuals, school is where they are introduced to the types of discrimination that they will face as adults. Dress codes and limited bathroom options are oft-cited as barriers to a comfortable learning experience for transgender teenagers (Currah 2006). Currah (2006) describes several cases in which transgender teens were found to be in violation of school code for dressing in clothes that didn’t match their biological gender. In one case, a female-identified individual in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade was forced to report to the principal’s office every morning so that he could approve of her clothing choices. Inevitably, the humiliating ritual led to her dropping out by the 8<sup>th</sup> grade; though the young woman had made the decision to drop out, it can be

argued that (as was described in legal proceedings) she was “constructively expelled” (Currah 2006: 7).

Similarly, Nikki Youngblood, a senior from Hillsborough County, Florida, was denied the opportunity to be pictured in her high school yearbook because she refused to wear the *required* “revealing, velvetlike, scoop-neck drape” (Currah 2006: 7). When she showed up for picture day wearing a shirt and tie, as the boys were *required* to wear, the photographer refused to take her picture. Ultimately, both of these cases were taken to court. While the first case concluded in the teenager’s favor (a judge determined that she was a victim of sex discrimination), Youngblood’s case did not. Like many other cases involving school dress codes, the court ruled in favor of the educational system, deciding that Youngblood did not have a constitutional right to wear the clothing of her choice. Both cases underscore the importance of situating issues of transgender rights within the larger framework of civil rights in general.

The children of transgender parents face even more discrimination than, say, those of gay or lesbian parents, though the same red tape that strips gay and lesbian parents of their rights is used to undermine the rights of transgender individuals, i.e., heterosexist custodial laws. It seems, though, that when deviant gender identities (as opposed to sexualities) are involved in a custody case the courts have found even more ways to deny individuals their parental rights. When transgender individuals enter the legal system, for any reason, they “face the possibility of a systematic obliteration of their personal identity, a legal shredding of self” (Flynn 2006: 32). Often the transgender individual’s identity becomes more central to the case than whatever the original offense or claim was.

Consider the infamous case of Michael Kantaras, who underwent SRS before he spent ten years in a marriage with a woman named Linda (Flynn 2006). Michael adopted the child that Linda gave birth to just before they married and during their marriage they had another child by artificial insemination. The sperm donor was, in fact, Kantaras' brother. During the custody battle that ensued after their divorce, Linda used the court's history of discriminating against gays and lesbians to her favor. She claimed that, because Michael was once a woman, he was a lesbian and, therefore, had no legal rights to their children. Amazingly, the Florida Court of Appeals agreed. Not only did this strip Michael of his rights to custody, but because he was essentially declared a woman by the court it also had the power to prohibit him from future marriages with women. All this was allowed to happen despite the fact that Michael had identified as a male, both emotionally and physically, for well over a decade. The only solution to this blatant breach of one's right to self-determination is to define legal sex based upon an individual's gender identity (Flynn 2006) or, more appropriately (as I will discuss later) an individual's gender *orientation*. This approach is only a partial solution, however, because it still presumes dichotomous gender categories, which is, in and of itself, problematic.

One would think that if there were any safe haven for transgender individuals that it would be within the gay and lesbian community. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Though all major gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) organizations in the United States now include transgender individuals in their titles (GLBT) and mission statements (Currah, Juang, & Minter 2006), many would argue that adding the "T" to the "GLB" is merely a symbolic gesture and not necessarily reflective of how trans individuals are treated by the

GLB community. In fact, some lesbian feminists in particular have downright attacked the trans community. According to Minter (2006: 155),

Janice Raymond and Mary Daly, among other lesbian feminist theorists, demonized transsexual women as the epitome of misogynist attempts to invade women's space and appropriate women's identity. Describing transsexualism as equivalent to necrophilia and rape, Raymond and Daly launched a full-scale political attack on clinics that provided medical services to transsexual people and played a significant role in the closing of many of those clinics in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In this context, it is not surprising that even today feminist women-only events (such as the annual Michigan Women's Music Festival) refuse to allow transgender women to attend and participate. Counter movements, such as Camp Trans (which is now held each year across the street from the Michigan Women's Music Festival) demonstrate exactly how marginalized the trans community feels from both the GLB and feminist movements. At the same time, such events reflect the trans community's willingness to take a stand against discrimination and their desire to be accepted.

What is worse than all of the discrimination mentioned here, however, is the violence that transgender individuals constantly face. Unfortunately, hate crimes against trans people are not protected under federal hate crime laws, which means that national measures such as the Uniform Crime Reports do not account for such crimes in the same way that they account for the rate of crimes against sexual minorities, racial minorities, religious minorities, and those with disabilities. However, it is estimated that trans individuals are the victims of 213 hate crimes per year, which is higher than the average number of hate crimes that have been committed against Muslims per year post 9/11 (Stotzer 2007). In a study of 402 transgender individuals, GenderPAC (Public Advocacy Coalition) found that 59.5% of individuals reported experiences of violence or



harassment (Lombardi, Wilchings, Priesling, Malouf 2001). Despite such daunting statistics, research that includes trans subjects rarely considers the variations or consequences of these experiences committed against trans individuals. In fact, some research instead focuses on the violent behavior of trans individuals that can be caused by hormone therapy (e.g., Rubin 2003). While this is an important area of study, it can serve to minimize or obscure the violence that trans individuals are experiencing at the hands of others.

No doubt, all of the issues raised here are the direct result of the deviant label that has been applied to the transgender community. Erikson (1966: 25) argues that “the critical variable in the study of deviance, then, is the social audience rather than the individual actor, since it is the audience which eventually determines whether or not any episode of behavior or any class of episodes is labeled deviant.” While this seems logical, any study of deviance in which the primary focus is on the “labelers,” so to speak, would fail to uncover how such labeling truly affects those that have been branded as deviant. Moreover, as the aforementioned history of pathologizing gender non-conformity, discrimination, and violence against transgender individuals clearly demonstrates, a constructed and/or applied label of deviant is securely affixed on trans individuals. Therefore, the resulting consequences of labels are that which should be pivotal to any scientific inquiry of trans individuals and/or their significant others. If Sociology is to make progressive social change, then we must understand the consequences of labeling, not just the process by which it occurs. Thus, I argue that the individual or the group that has been defined as deviant should constitute the appropriate primary target for study.

Fortunately, there has been some research on transgender individuals beyond the medical literature but, as a field, transgender studies is extremely young and, therefore, severely underdeveloped. Almost no research has been conducted on the significant others of trans people, which makes part of this study a venture into uncharted waters. Before I offer a review of the research literature that is available, it is necessary to explore the theoretical underpinnings of transgender literature, which is to say feminist theory, queer theory and then, more recently, transgender theory.

### The Emergence and Current State of Transgender Theory

Theoretical discussions surrounding transgender identities and transsexuality are generally concentrated in two “camps,” so to speak (Johnson 2001). One “camp” tends to focus on the clinical or medical aspects of transsexuality, while the other is more sociological in nature, concerning itself with gender as a social construction and transsexualism or transgender identity as an indicator or a variable of that phenomenon. While the medical literature has arguably had more of an affect on the experiences of transsexuals, inasmuch as it dictates the climate of treatment and sexual reassignment surgery, it tends to be attached to the notion that transsexuality is a syndrome that *requires* treatment and observation (Johnson 2001). In other words, it considers the transsexual as if he or she is suffering from a biological disease, illness or pathology, as opposed to suffering from the unfair application of deviant labels placed upon him or her. This approach, of course, would denote any negative experiences reported by trans people as being social (not biological or psychological) in nature. The sociological literature, on the other hand, tends to focus on describing the transgender experience in lieu of attempting to explain why some people are transgender.

Consequently, the theoretical literature that considers the cultural or social significance and experience of transsexuality (i.e., the non-clinical literature) is more appropriate to consider for this project, as I am specifically interested in how transsexuals and their partners cope with the challenges that are primarily forced upon them by outside (social), as opposed to internal (biological), forces. Thus, I do not deny the significance of the medical literature, but consider it to be less relevant to this particular study. As such, I offer some of the important contributions that have been made in terms of our sociological understanding of transsexuality, which is best illuminated by feminist theory, queer theory and the newer development of transgender theory. Transgender theory, though embedded in broader theoretical frameworks (i.e., queer theory), emerged as a *reaction to* the limitations of feminist, queer, and even transsexual theories (Namaste 2000). In particular, transgender theory, “not only attempts to question many of the assumptions about the gender system that transsexualism relies on but also tries to provoke its readers to political and social activism” (Hausman 1999: 190).

The greatest contribution that feminist theories have made to the current studies concerning transgender individuals was the introduction of standpoint theory. Standpoint theory, an inherently postmodern view of the world, argues that, “the standpoint of women offers a privileged vantage point for knowledge” (Heckman 2004: 227). Traditionally, standpoint theorists argue, social research has focused on male subjects, thus producing work that reflects only the experiences of men (Harding 1987). This, of course, is problematic if in fact the goal of social research is to explain the social *world* and *all* of its agents. Accordingly, feminists have strived to situate the multiple experiences of women within social research.

Standpoint theory, in the sense that it privileges multiple perspectives, is central to transgender studies in general and this study in particular. Where it fails, and where subsequent work (e.g., Butler 1999) has been critical, is in the fact that standpoint theory is limiting in much the same way that male-dominated theories have been. While it recognizes the problematic nature of ignoring women's voices, it operates within the assumption that gender is dichotomous and that we can offer a complete picture of the social world by simply including women in research. So long as trans identities exist, this is not the case. Consequently, we have not, as of yet, revealed all of the standpoints from which we can explain the social world. This is the quagmire that queer theorists attempted to tackle.

In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler (1999: 5) argues that traditional feminism has been limited by its focus on "woman" as a subject and, consequently, is insufficient because it fails to "understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought." It is this sort of criticism towards traditional modes of thinking that has, relatively recently, come to be known as queer theory (Turner 2000). While queer theory is not yet renowned for offering alternative intellectual models, it has succeeded in calling out the presumption by traditional theory that "woman," "man" and "heterosexual" are natural categories of being, as opposed to produced, reinforced, and manipulated social constructions (Turner 2000). In particular, a central goal of queer theory has been to question the ways in which sexual categories (particularly the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy) and gender identities are shaped and imposed textually, through various forms of media and

institutionalized values (Namaste 2000). In other words, queer theory considers the ways in which we have been socialized by the media and various social institutions to accept traditional gender roles and sexual categories as natural.

The word “queer” was chosen to describe this particular body of theory because it was recognized by queer theorists that the use of other language (e.g., GLBT theory) may be too limiting (Turner 2000). Take, for example, a couple in which both partners are transgender but not completely transitioned. How does one define that relationship? As of now we still don’t have language that suits such relationships but queer theory is still hypothetically inclusive of these situations. Though the intent of queer theory was to be inclusive, its primary focus has nonetheless been on gays and lesbians (Namaste 2000). When transgender or “gender-bending” individuals are included in queer theory they are often considered only in their relationship to the GLB community (e.g., drag queens/kings), such as in Butler’s work (1999). In fact, in an entire book dedicated to the development of queer theory (*The Genealogy of Queer Theory*), the word transgender is only mentioned nine times, and even then it is used most frequently as an afterthought or addendum to the G, the L, and the B distinction (Turner 2000).

More recently, some queer theorists (under the guise of “transgender theory”) have shifted their focus from gays and lesbians to consider the significance of transgender subjects, a phenomenon that “involves the reconceptualization of a certain problematic previously characterized by feminism as the ‘woman question,’ and then later as sexual difference, in the current guise of transgender” (Hausman 2001: 465). Transgender individuals pose an interesting dilemma for researchers and queer theorists, inasmuch as transgender identity “potentially subverts the notion of two naturally fixed

genders; the presence of people with ambiguous sexual desires potentially subverts the notion of naturally fixed sexual orientations” (Gamson 1996: 407). While feminist theories have addressed the social construction of gender (particularly the category of woman) and queer theories have challenged the ways in which dichotomous gender categories and sexualities characterize traditional research, neither have fully considered the effects of such constructions on individuals who had transgender identities. Thus, although these binary categories of gender were first accepted and then challenged, they were still presumed by even queer theorists to be exclusive, as opposed to two extremes on a continuum of gender identity.

For the most part, transgender theory has emerged from psychological and sociological research that investigates the experiences of transmen and transwomen. Though studies into the lives of transpeople are still rare, those that are conducting research have begun to piece together a picture of what the trans experience is really like and what those experiences mean to our understanding of gender and the power structures that define it. The research that has been conducted has revealed that the experience of gender transition, for both the transgender individual and those around him or her, is a “lengthy, formalized, and normally substantive transition: a correlated set of corporeal, psychic, and social changes” (Prosser 1998: 4). Despite the limitations of the current research, there has been some discussion of the social, psychological, and economic challenges that this project considers.

Although we think of internal struggles when we hear the term “psychological challenges,” the psychological issues that face transgender individuals transcend their own personal struggle with gender identity. It can be argued that much of the internal

challenges that trans individuals deal with are the result of a world that medicalizes and stigmatizes gender non-conformity. Consequently, while I am considering the internal struggles of trans individuals, I am also interested in the outside factors that propel internal feelings of conflict, self-doubt and the like. The fear and shame that trans individuals cope with is “based in real violence, rejection, and discrimination” (Green 2004: 41). Thus, social and psychological challenges are not necessarily separate concerns, but rather are inextricably linked.

Literature about the transgender experience has emerged in two general forms; scientific, mostly qualitative, studies of transgender individuals (e.g., Bolin 1998, Butler 1999, Ekins 1998, Namaste 2000, Rubin 2003, Rudd 1999a), and memoirs, books written by transgender individuals about themselves or books written by spouses about their partners (e.g., Boyd 2003, Green 2004, Kailey 2005, McCloskey 1999, Rees 1996, Rudd 1999b). Both provide important insight into the transgender community which is why, in the discussion that follows, I will be referring to both. While the literature is diverse in precisely which issues each covers, there seems to be resounding agreement that the transgender experience is neither static nor completely systematic, i.e., the transgender experience is rather fluid as well as unique to each individual. Nevertheless, there are shared experiences that continue to emerge from both the scientific inquiries and the personal narratives, and these certainly deserve further elaboration and investigation.

Bolin (1998: 63) argues that, “As a political movement, the transgender community views gender and sex systems as relativistic structures imposed by society and by the privileged controllers of individual bodies, the medial professions.” While this may be true, it is far from the feelings that transpeople report as part of their

everyday lives. In fact, the language that trans people use to describe their gender identity suggests that, at least on a personal level, they do not feel that gender is imposed through socialization. Rather, essentialism abounds in transpeoples narratives, such as that of Jake, who said of his child hood, “I wasn’t a tomboy. I was a boy. I would rather just be called a girl than to be called a tomboy. Because that’s totally dismissing. That’s acknowledging what I’m doing, but saying it’s a phase and I’m going to grow out of it” (Rubin 2003:98). Or, as James puts it, “People want to refer to us as women who wanted to be men, or women who became men, but as women first. It’s true that we have had female bodies, but we were not women. It’s very important to understand that” (Rubin 2003: 143). So, while Bolin may be correct, evidence suggests that, at least on an individual basis, transgender people do not feel that gender is simply an imposed entity. To the contrary, the literature shows that many transgender people vehemently insist that they have a fixed, inborn, gender and that they were simply born into biological bodies that don’t match their true being.

Whether or not trans people feel that their gender is inherent or constructed, all seem to agree on one thing. Specifically, transgender research participants and authors reveal that the process of realizing that one’s gender is not congruent with one’s sex, and the subsequent quest for self-discovery, is downright frightening and painful. At the same time, however, the process is described as both exhilarating and liberating. Some describe their transition as a rebirth (Kailey 2005) and others say that, despite the painful journey of transition, the end result is peace of mind and the sense that, “After years of conflict between what I was inside and what I appeared outside, medical science had brought them into harmony” (Rees 1996: 37).



While struggling to reconcile changing identities, trans individuals and, hence, transgender couples, also face overwhelming economic hardship. In particular, the financial strain that results from gender transition is quite significant (Green 2004). Perhaps the best indication of this is Jamison Green's (2004) "laundry list" of his own procedures and their costs. The total cost of Green's four-year transformation from female to male was \$43,063, however, as he admits, this figure only scratches the surface of the actual price tag of gender transition. In addition to the cost of psychotherapy, hormone treatment, "top" surgery, and "bottom" surgery, are the costs associated with a wardrobe to accommodate his changing body, accessories for pre-surgical appearance (i.e., breast binder, prosthetic penis), and the legal fees for reissuing his birth certificate. Green also notes that he was on disability for a total of 13 weeks during recovery and that he continues to pay annual maintenance costs, including ongoing testosterone therapy. Since money is well recognized as a causal factor in all kinds of problems in all types of relationships, the financial burden certainly must have some affect on trans relationships too. Accordingly, in order to more fully understand the repercussions and experiences of gender transition, we must include the significant others of trans individuals in scientific research.

Brown (1998: 354) points out that, "Just as transsexualism cannot be fully addressed without an intimate understanding of transvestism and other forms of transgenderism, men who cross-dress cannot be understood in any three-dimensional way without appreciating their relationships with women." This is true not just for understanding cross-dressers, but any transgender individuals in relationships. After all, gender transition can be daunting not only for the trans individual, but for their partners

as well. This is particularly pertinent in terms of the significant others' own sexual identity. Take, for example, a study of 106 female spouses of male cross-dressers, perhaps the largest study of the partners of trans individuals thus far. The number one concern expressed by participants in this research was the question of whether or not they (the significant others) were now "lesbians" (Brown 1998). As Boyd (2003: 60) recognizes, "A lot of women are terrified of the implicit lesbianism of making love with their husbands en femme. Even if they feel attracted to the man under the dress, this desire throws them for a loop." Even though Boyd is referring to part-time cross-dressers as opposed to full-time gender non-conformists, the same feelings of insecurity over one's own sexual orientation are likely to occur for men and women whose partners begin transition, or accept a transgender identity after their relationship begins. Although one might believe that this is only an internal struggle, it is likely related to the social stigma attached to homosexuality and gender queerness in general.

In addition to fears about their own sexual identity, the women in Brown's (1998: 355) study indicated concerns which Brown divided into four broad categories; "meaning for (or impact on) her" (meaning the spouse being surveyed), "meaning for (or impact on) the family," "meaning for my husband," and "meaning for (impact on) our relationship." The first category, "meaning for her," includes not only the participants' questioning of her own sexuality but also concerns about her husbands cross-dressing as an indicator of a failure on her part somehow. Additional concerns were losing their partner, jealousy, and a lack of support systems in which they could talk about the issues. Other research confirms these sentiments, and goes so far as to suggest that "If she remains in the relationship, she will usually assume the largest, most comprehensive

responsibility for managing the “secret” (his, hers, and theirs)” (Cole 1998: 374). Cole (1998: 374) also notes issues with self-absorption by trans individuals and says that their partners may “experience a wide range of emotions which may go unnoticed by both her and her partner, who is primarily focused on his own gender complexities.” In terms of trans research, the avoidance of addressing the significant other verifies an overall preoccupation with male concerns again, as standpoint theory would argue, ignoring the voices of women.

In the second category, “meaning for the family,” Brown (1998) discussed fears about what (if anything) to tell the children, how sons (again, a focus on male concerns) might be adversely affected by their fathers cross-dressing, neglect of the family as a result of the cross-dressers focus on “herself,” possible legal ramifications, and the potential loss of family members. As the women in Brown’s sample suggest, children are an important consideration in terms of the changes that occur in family dynamics as a result of gender non-conformity. Despite this, the inclusion of trans people in sociological and gender-related studies of the family, partner and parenting are grossly neglected (Hines 2006). Not unlike traditional families, trans individuals and their partners do raise children, and the relationships that they have with their children should be of concern to trans and other research. Indeed, “the incorporation of transgender practices of partnering and parenting into analyses of contemporary patterns of sociality thus sheds further light upon the ways in which intimate relationships are subject to ongoing contest, negotiation and innovation” (Hines 2006: 369).

In category three, “meaning for my husband,” Brown’s (1998) participants indicated fears that their husband was gay or bisexual, that their behavior would progress

towards sex reassignment surgery, that support groups would provide a damaging amount of self indulgence, and that the urge to cross dress would never be overcome. Finally, in the fourth category, “meaning for our relationship,” the women indicated that they were resentful of the fact that their partner had essentially lied to them by hiding their cross-dressing, fearful that they may be hiding something else (including other ‘perversions’), apprehensive about potential changes in their sex lives (including the possibility that cross-dressing will become central to sex), and anger that they had “married a man” and were deceived. Ultimately,

The female partner’s reaction to the news of her partner’s gender issues can include a profound sense of betrayal, violation of trust, fear, competition with this ‘new female,’ shame, curiosity, anxiety, repulsion, embarrassment, fear, isolation, challenge, sexual arousal, eroticism, desire to be supportive, sexual dysfunction, aversion, increased self-imposed responsibility to the family, cooperative determination, and feelings of abandonment (‘You never really loved me or you wouldn’t have done this to me’) (Cole 1998: 379).

While Brown’s (1998: 363) was a rather impressively large sample, he only recruited from monthly support groups and national conventions for transgender men and their partners, which means that his sample is potentially limited to women “who are positively disposed to their mates’ cross-dressing activities.” It is impossible to know whether this is actually the case or, as Brown (1998) considers, the exact opposite. Conversely, it is possible that the women he recruited were attending the support groups or conventions in hopes of finding other women to provide them with support, answers, and/or simply to “vent” their emotions to. If any of this were the case, the women in his sample may actually be less accepting of their husband’s crossdressing than the average spouse. In fact, they may be downright angry about their predicament. Nevertheless, Brown’s findings are groundbreaking and deserve to be considered in directions for the

present and future research. Indeed, the findings of this study reflect much of the sentiment described in Brown's categories.

All of these issues are significant, but are only a small part of the overall agenda of this study. This work strives to address a variety of experiences, ranging from the acceptance or disapproval of family, friends, neighbors and co-workers, to the changes in family dynamics that occur when one partner undergoes gender transition or assumes a transgender identity. In order to capture such a variety of issues, I initially used a triangulated method, which I felt could advance the ways in which social scientists investigate the intricate lives of trans individuals and their partners. As I will later discuss at length, things didn't exactly turn out as I had planned. Nevertheless, this research did prove to raise several significant issues that should be considered when researching transgender populations.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

I must admit that developing the method for this project was beyond frustrating. In relation to, say, sexual minorities, trans populations are somewhat “hidden,” in the sense that there are not as many organizations that actively provide services in the same way that, for example, they are offered to gays and lesbians, which means that there are fewer venues through which trans people can be accessed. Additionally, as the number of trans people may be significantly smaller than other minority groups, there is less likely to be a concentration of trans people in one geographic area. Thus, to figure out how to reach such a population of people was hard enough in and of itself, but to figure out how to get to the heart of the trans couple experience was even more difficult. For most studies, the population from which a sample is drawn is clear as day but, in this case, there wasn’t even a consistent definition for the word transgender established. As I described earlier, my conceptualization of ‘transgender’ was purposely broad, but even that didn’t allow a clear way of reaching people who identified as transgender, not only for the reasons mentioned above, but because individuals that I may consider to be transgender may not choose that particular language to describe themselves. The method that I ultimately selected, which is described below, was only chosen after months of thinking about and revising my research strategy. Only one component of the final method that I chose remained constant from the beginning to the end of this research project, and that is the feminist epistemology (not method) upon which this study is built.

### Engaging a Feminist Epistemology

To say that there is a “feminist method” is misleading. “Methods” are the qualitative and quantitative ways in which we collect and analyze data for social research, such as interviews, surveys, or content analysis. Feminist researchers, in general, employ the same types of methods as other social scientists do (Harding 1987). What makes research distinctly “feminist” is the epistemology upon which it is based, and which guides our choices in terms of *which* methods we employ and how we go about conducting and analyzing our research (Naples 2003). Epistemology is a theory of knowledge; a theory of *what* we know, *how* we know it, *who* can be a “knower,” and how it is that knowledge is legitimized (Harding 1987).

Feminists began working in epistemology through the critique of how knowledge has historically been produced, that is, from the standpoint of (privileged, white) men, and through that critique began to re-envision epistemology as being inextricably linked to power structures (Alcoff & Potter 1993; Longino 1993; MacKinnon 1987). Thus, while traditional epistemologies ignore “the possibility that women could be ‘knowers’ or *agents of knowledge*,” feminist epistemology has “proposed alternative theories of knowledge that legitimate women as knowers” (Harding 1987: 3). I take this notion a bit further to suggest that *any* participant should be legitimized and seen as an agent of knowledge, including transgender individuals (no matter their gender identity). While feminist theorists were right in arguing that women were ignored and/or spoken for in traditional research projects, this is also true of most other minority groups. So, while I

embrace what feminist epistemology attempts to do, I am cognizant of its limitations and failure to consider participants other than biological women as central to social research.

What is most important about a feminist epistemology is that it provides social researchers with a perspective from which to understand the relationships between the participant, the researcher, and the purposes of research; which is of great significance to this project and why my interest in this project was discussed at the beginning of this dissertation. Feminist researchers recognize that domain assumptions guide research on every level, including which topics we choose to investigate, how we form our hypotheses, how we go about designing our research and collecting our data, how we analyze the data we gather, and how we choose to report our results (Harding 1993). Understanding that “the cultural beliefs and behaviors of feminist researchers shape the results of their analyses no less than do those of sexist and andocentric researchers” is an important part of the feminist research process (Harding 1987: 9). One of the ways in which feminist research differs from others, however, is that it strives for *reflexivity*, or making the characteristics, values, and worldviews of the researcher transparent so that they can be recognized as relevant to the research process, in place of ignoring these as though such views, values, etc., don’t exist.

Ultimately, this means that total objectivity is not possible in feminist research (and feminists believe it is not possible in any research). Moreover, total objectivity is not desirable or compatible with the goals of feminist research. After all, feminists can be credited for pointing out that, “objectivity was no more than a code word for the dominant male point of view, and that the ‘truth’ supposedly unearthed by male research was nothing more than men’s *construction* of reality” (Wilton 1995: 11, emphasis in



original). In feminist research, the option superior to a mythical 'objectivity' is *strong objectivity* (Harding 2004). Having strong objectivity is not a "step down" from total objectivity, but rather it is a recognition of the role of values, views, etc., in influencing any researcher. This is an aspiration in research such as mine. My reasoning was (and still is) that the larger the sample, the more obvious the emerging themes and shared experiences, thus, the less room for my interpretation in place of respondent's own words, views, values and experiences. The less room there is for my interpretation, the more likely it is that my findings will reflect my participants' actual experiences and not my interpretations of them.

Unlike other populations, however, the transgender community is relatively small and disconnected. Moreover, because of the stigma attached to transgender identity, openness and availability for research may be problematic. This can translate to mean that it is quite difficult to find concentrated groups of subjects for a study, such as the one being described here. This should illuminate why the Internet was an obvious choice for drawing my sample.

### Research Process

I chose the Internet as a forum for data collection for several reasons. First, it must be recognized that the Internet has transformed the ability of transgender individuals to network, to unite, and to find support (Riggle, Rostosky & Reedy 2005). As a trans-activist, and co-organizer of the first FTM North Conference in 2006, I can attest to the difficulty of gathering transgender individuals in one place. Compared, for example, to the population of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, the number of transgender individuals in the U.S. is relatively low and, therefore, organizing for any purpose is rather difficult.

Transgender individuals are, in many cases, separated geographically and, like other marginalized populations, are facing significant financial strains that may prohibit their ability to travel. Because the number of trans individuals in any given geographic location (e.g., a city) is small, face-to-face research is not ideal if the intent of this method is to reach a reasonable sample size. Consequently, I chose the World Wide Web as a means of “widening my net,” so to speak, in hope that I would reach a larger and possibly even more diverse segment of the trans population.

Second, as Rubin (1998) points out, it is impossible to truly understand the experiences of trans individuals if we only include those that are politically active and who are “out of the closet,” so to speak, about their gender identity. This would capture only those individuals who are publicly open about their gender identity and, hence, would be *most likely* to participate in a face-to-face research project in the first place. It is presumptuous to think that all trans people are, or wish to be, politically active “educators,” jumping at any opportunity to open themselves up to others for the sake of social progress. Quite to the contrary, some trans individuals may wish to simply live their lives peacefully, “passing” to the best of their ability. To exclude those trans individuals who wish to reject the “queer” label that others have adopted proudly is to sell ourselves, our research, and our participants, short. If we are to truly understand the transgender experience, then all transgender individuals should be of interest to researchers, not only those that are immediately available. By using the Internet to reach my subjects, I was attempting to include those individuals that may be accessing support or contributing in a more private setting and who may be more comfortable sharing their experiences from the safety of their own homes.

Upon human subjects approval (Appendix A), a call for research participants (Appendix C) was posted on various sites on the world wide web that were specifically designated for transgender individuals and/or their significant others (see Appendix B for a complete list of sites). Specifically, I sent the call to two Transgender Michigan board members, and they determined which websites would be appropriate for posting the call. Transgender Michigan is a Michigan-based non-profit organization that aims at providing education, advocacy and support for transgender individuals. Their website provides a variety of resources for trans individuals and their significant others, ranging from housing opportunities to information on gender reassignment surgeries. One research participant contacted me and asked if she could also post the call on a support site for significant others; I thanked her for contacting me and approved the venue, thus, posting of the calls occurred in a snowball fashion.

The call for participants included basic information about the study, contact information for myself, and active links which participants could use to access a consent document (Appendix D) which, upon the participants consent, would then lead them to one of two surveys. One survey was for participants who identified themselves as transgender (Appendix E) and the other was for those who identified themselves as the significant other of a transgender individual (Appendix F). Though separate surveys were used for the two groups, they were quite similar in content. Indeed, they only differed in the way the participant was addressed in the question (e.g., how has *your* transgender identity affected your relationship v. how has *your partner's* transgender identity affected your relationship?). The actual questions were constructed using past research. My aim was to include some questions that had been asked in previous studies

so that I could compare my sample to others, and to add original questions so that I might add new insight to the literature.

Once the survey was completed, participants were invited to join an online focus group, which was held on July 3, 2007 at 7:00 p.m. in the pre-existing chat room at [www.transgendermichigan.org](http://www.transgendermichigan.org) (see Appendix G for opening statements and discussion prompts). The organization's website was chosen as a forum for the on-line focus group for several reasons. First, the website has an existing chat room that already serves as a place where trans individuals and their significant others can meet to chat about a myriad of subjects, including the challenges they face as a result of transition. Second, I believe that using an organization that has already established itself as a safe and affirming place for transgender individuals and their significant others serves to signify my interest in conducting research that reflects and appreciates the needs of my research participants.

The use of a chat room for a focus group is a method that, to my knowledge, had not yet been attempted by sociologists and, consequently, I had no idea as to the effectiveness of the method in terms of collecting data that was pertinent to this study. In particular, I was concerned that, depending on the number of participants in the group, the conversation may have been too difficult to manage, participants may have been hesitant to speak in a group setting, or a focus group might have altogether failed to gather the interest of my participants. In case the on-line focus group was not a success for any of these reasons, the survey used for on-line subjects posed questions about the social, economic, and psychological challenges related to transition. Therefore, if my on-line focus group was unsuccessful, I could still be assured that I had gathered data of pertinence elsewhere.

Despite the convenience and reach of the Internet, there is an obvious advantage to face-to-face research. This is why my original plan included face-to-face surveys and two focus groups to be conducted with members of the local group *Transcend*, which is a transgender peer support group facilitated by the *Kalamazoo Gay and Lesbian Resource Center*. To recruit subjects, I attended two regularly scheduled meetings of the group, describing the research in detail and distributing a “call for research participant’s” flyer. Two separate times were designated to conduct focus groups; one for significant others and one for transgender individuals. Just as there were online, there were separate surveys for both groups of participants. While attendees of the support group appeared to be interested in the research, the outcome was disappointing. While I had 499 individuals respond to the online surveys and 7 participants in the online chat group, no one showed up for the face-to-face surveys/focus groups. Therefore, part of my original research design was ineffective in gathering pertinent data for this study.

The data that did result from this study were quite dense, both in content and size. The surveys amassed several hundred pages of data, and the focus group, which was transcribed, amounted to 28 pages of text. Before attempting formal coding, I read through the data in its entirety, taking only mental note of the emerging themes. Then, I wrote out the additional themes that I found within the three broad preexisting themes that I centered my questions around (i.e., social, psychological and economic issues). Those additional themes were language (and its limitations), identity (both gender and sexual orientation identities), gender role dynamics, immediate and extended family issues, employment and school issues (which was further divided into discrimination, violence, and passing), legal issues, concerns related to unemployment, the cost of

transition and, finally, the cost of legal procedures. Once these themes were determined, I reread all of the data and coded it (using highlighters and color-coded sticky notes) in terms of how each response fit into one or more of these themes. Consequently, my findings are presented in a way that reflects these categories and how they relate to one another. While not every comment made by my participants is shared here, the quotes that are offered are representative of those sentiments shared by a significant portion, if not all, of the respondents.

Though my ultimate goal as I approached my data was to discover what commonalities and differences transgender individuals and their significant others reported in relation to the challenges they face, I found that an analysis of language would be of equal importance. The first time that I poured through the data it became clear that *how* and *why* certain language (e.g., labels) was used (both by the participants and by others, such as the medical and research community) proved to be of great importance to the individuals who completed the online survey. Thus, the significance of language became an important, yet unexpected, finding in my final analysis. The former approach to data analysis (comparative, or comparing similarities and differences between groups) is typical of social scientific inquiries and the latter (discourse analysis, or the analysis of written, spoken or symbolic language) is common among queer theorists when approaching transgender subjects. The problem with social scientific studies of transgender individuals is that though they “offer some valuable insight into the everyday social world of transgendered people...objectivist sociological approaches do not necessarily resolve the theoretical and political dilemmas present in queer theory” (Namaste 2005: 39). The theoretical and political dilemmas that Namaste (2005) refers

to, namely the application of language onto the trans community by so-called 'experts,' are inextricably linked to the limiting nature of common language and, thus, discourse.

While queer theory often employs discourse analyses,

It's exclusive reliance on literary and cultural texts and its representationalist conception of language, however, offer an underdeveloped account of the relations between discourse and society. This lack of attention to the social and institutional locations in which texts circulate erases the everyday experiences, bodies, and lives of transgendered people (Namaste 2005: 39).

In the analysis that follows I intend to explore the experiences of my subjects while simultaneously recognizing that these experiences are being conveyed through a language that is inadequate to describe the transgender experience and that ultimately reflects the very power structures that restrain transgender individuals and, thus, their full inclusion in society, both physically and in social discourse.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

As previously mentioned, the face-to-face component of this project did not pan out. Though I used a transgender-specific support group (*Transcend*, supported by the Kalamazoo Gay and Lesbian Resource Center) to recruit my potential sample, the local transgender population did not respond. I believe that it was a combination of the fact that the trans community is relatively small in my local area, that many of those in my local trans community are single, and that the fear of sharing in a group setting discouraged or did not allow for successful focus groups. Despite the disappointing results of the face-to-face endeavor, my online sample was very exciting, and I was blessed with hundreds of pages worth of data to work with.

Altogether there were 499 online respondents: 420 individuals responded to the transgender survey, and 79 individuals responded to the significant other survey. However, for the purpose of ensuring consent, only those respondents who clicked “Done” at the end of the survey have been included for analysis. Hence, the final samples consisted of 249 transgender individuals (59.3% of the original sample) and 55 significant others (69.6% of the original sample). This may mean that some individuals who intended to be included but, for example, exited their browser instead of clicking “Done,” have not been considered.

Of transgender respondents, 221 were Caucasian, 5 were African American, 5 were Hispanic, and 16 identified as “Other.” They ranged in age from 16 to 69 years old, with the average respondent being 42.86. Of significant other respondents, 50 identified



as Caucasian, and 5 identified themselves as “Other.” The age range for significant others was 17 to 61 years old, with an average age of 35. It should be noted that some of the people who responded to my call for participants were transgender individuals who had transgender partners, and they tended to respond to the “transgender” survey. So, while transgender individuals and significant others are mostly distinct categories, they at times intersect.

Seven individuals participated in the online chat group: 5 identified as transgender and 2 identified as the partners of others participating (one couple shared a computer and another couple logged in on separate computers). For confidentiality purposes, demographics were not collected for this small group. With a total  $n=311$ , the responses provided by these participants are a potentially rich and exciting contribution to the transgender literature.

Upon analyzing the data gathered for this project, I came to the conclusion that a discussion of language and, subsequently, its’ significance to the identity formation of the participants in this project, must come before any discussion of the social, psychological and economic challenges faced by transgender individuals and significant others. Thus, the following analysis will be divided into three major sections: language and identity, psychological challenges, and social challenges (which are inextricably linked). Though the responses received indicate that the economic challenges related to gender transition are quite significant, they will be discussed along with other social challenges, as they are largely related to gender discrimination in the medical community and the existing legal structure. Because of the consistency of responses from both trans individuals and significant others, the responses of each will be discussed simultaneously, with attention

to their similarities and occasional (yet important) differences. Though the online chat group produced slightly different responses due to the open-ended nature of discussion (versus question and answer) format, I will also discuss the results of it throughout the following three sections.

### Language and Identity

As previously discussed, it took quite awhile at the proverbial “drawing board” to decide what language (e.g., transgender v. transsexual) to use in my recruitment instruments. Though it was difficult, I was somewhat confident in my own understanding of the terms (and their significance) and felt that my choices of language were of more importance to my data than this would ultimately be to my participants. This, it quickly became clear, was not the case. The fourth survey question asked of transgender individuals and the third survey question for significant others, “What is your gender identity?” produced a more diverse collection of responses than I could ever have anticipated.

As I left the response possibilities open-ended, some respondents spent an entire paragraph naming, defining and describing their gender identity to me. Indeed, very few people answered the question in one word (e.g. male, female, transgender). There were, however, three trends in gender identity for transgender participants, and two trends for significant others. Generally, transgender participants either identified themselves as having a very particular identity (e.g., male, female, FTM), considered themselves multi-gendered or “queer,” or rejected gendered labels altogether. Significant others, on the other hand, tended to identify themselves with a specific gender (e.g., male, female,

cisgender<sup>6</sup>) or answered the question by stating their sexual orientation, ignoring gender altogether.

In light of the large number of transgender respondents, the number of individuals who described their gender identity in one or two words was relatively small, and the variety of words used was unexpected. Identities ran the gamut of male, man, transman, transsexual (TS), MTF, genderqueer, androgynous, FTM, female-bodied man, transguy, trannyboi, transdyke, transmasculine, queer, intergender, transwoman, ambigender, transvestite, transgenderist, Tgirl, crossdresser, bigendered, and woman. The more common terms (e.g. MTF, TS, etc.) were often offered with no additional explanation, but many respondents who used less common words took the liberty of providing me with their own definitions. For example, someone who identified as Ambigender, defined it as “(mixed gendered, both are good and expressed, neither repressed) Androgyne - ambigendered being a subcategory of androgyne, other words for androgyne: intergender, gender queer, other gender.” Some respondents’ answers were downright clinical, such as a biological male who stated,

I am a Dual Role Transvestite, as diagnosed by a Gender Identity Clinic.  
F.641 I assume the role of the Opposite sex and behaviour (sic) as well as dress in the clothes of the opposite sex on a full time or temporary basis.  
No desire for SRS or Body modification. I take female Hormones, and also have a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria.

Still others identified themselves with terms that even they struggled with, such as a respondent (“Male, but somewhat femme”) who said “I identify as intergender, as having a gender between male and female. I freely admit that I’m not sure just what this

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<sup>6</sup> Cisgender is a newer term that was coined by Dr. Nick Gorton, circa 2006, reflecting terminology used in genetics and organic chemistry, where cis is the opposite of trans. It is meant to specify that one is a “biologically born” female or male that identifies with the corresponding (and socially acceptable) gender. It is used, for example, as a substitute for labels like “real woman” or “bio woman.”

means.” Though I left gender identity up to my respondents to decide, one participant was angry at my choice to use the term transgender in my questions, i.e., “By the way, Transsexual Men and Women Don’t like to be classed in as Transgender, I’m NOT a cross Dresser (Transgender) I’m Transsexual there is a difference.”

Those who weren’t able to describe their gender identity succinctly often reported feeling multi-gendered, while still others rejected gendered labels altogether by insisting that they don’t have a gender, per se. It seems, however, that both options appear to serve the purpose of subverting binary gender norms *as we know them*, while simultaneously reinforcing them. For example, one respondent answered, “Multigendered: I figure if I am home in multiple ethnicities, why can’t I be in multiple genders? My gender is very fluid, and may change from minute to minute. I have been called ‘ma’am’ walking into a store, and ‘sir’ on the way out.” True, this description is restricted to a female/male dichotomy, but it rejects the either/or qualification that we have come to accept. Others, such as a respondent who claims, “Identity is multi-faceted,” also describes themselves within a binary gender system. This person continues by saying that the “Easiest way to describe it would be ‘male.’ I also identify with the following: man, guy, androgynous, progressive male, balanced male, man with a transsexual history, transgender, transsexual, ‘variation on a theme’.” While this person considers their gender to be multi-faceted, their many “facets” still remain generally within the boundaries of traditional masculinity.

Several respondents claimed to reject gender identification (or, at least, the male/female binary system) altogether. One respondent said that,

I have no gender identity. Gender is a construct I have never been able to consistently follow. My sexual identity seems to strongly feel ‘male’ and

this is a very critical distinction for me because I truly do not feel my gender has anything to do with my being transsexual. I'm not particularly masculine, so I don't know what makes me feel male other than feeling very sad I don't have a male body. I'm not very feminine, either...and I don't feel female except in the very realist sense of my body having female parts.

Another respondent answered the question, but felt the need to put her identity into context by saying that,

Given that the definition of gender is the social expression of one of our culture's two accepted sexes, Female or Male, then I would have to say that I generally fit under the Female category. However, being raised as a boy in a matriarchal family, free of the expectations of feminine passivity and 'typical' gender roles, I feel comfortable pursuing interests and activities our society frowns upon women participating in.

What these responses suggest is that even those respondents who are distinctly aware of and apprehensive about our current dichotomous system of gender struggle to define themselves outside of it.

Significant others had less trouble stating their gender identity, though they did provide a wide range of answers, including woman, female, genderqueer, queer female, genetic female, female-identified, genetic woman, femme female, cisgendered dyke/faggy boi bottom, shemale, male, and androgyne. Though some of the answers made the respondent's sex/gender unclear (e.g., genderqueer), the majority of the sample identified themselves as having a feminine or female identity<sup>7</sup> in some form or another. Some of the respondents were particularly sensitive to the excluding nature of some language, such as a female who answered that she was "female bodied, female identified, not a 'woman' (ie avoiding femininity/gender roles/performativity (sic) of gender)." Several others

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<sup>7</sup> While the transgender sample was evenly divided between individuals with masculine identities and individuals with feminine identities, the majority (though not all) of significant others were women in relationships with transmen.

used the term “cisgendered female” to describe their gender identity, presumably so as not to suggest that their partners gender identity was any less “real” than theirs.

Six of the 55 significant other respondents designated a term of sexual orientation<sup>8</sup> in place of their gender identity, or as a qualifier of their gender (e.g., “heterosexual female”). Though I intended for subsequent questions to uncover the challenges that face significant others, it seems as though a simple question about gender identity has uncovered a rather significant challenge. As transgender folks move through a gender transition, their partner potentially faces a transition of their own; the transition of their sexual orientation. For example, one woman answered the question by saying that, “I have always identified as a straight woman – until I met my current SO,” and another simply states, “Heterosexual now. Had experimented with women in college.” A “heterosexual female” clarifies that she is “straight with no bends,” and another says, “I like both mean (sic) and women. A shemale is what I desire most though. The best of both worlds, so to speak.” While it could be that the respondents didn’t know the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation (which is unlikely given their partner’s gender identity, the sophistication of responses, and that they received the survey through communities in which this distinction is common knowledge), it appears that significant others struggle with the relationship between their gender identity and their sexual orientation, and how that is affected by their partner’s transgender identity.

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<sup>8</sup> Language representing who they were sexually attracted to, as opposed to language describing their gender identity.

Though these respondents alluded to their sexual orientation in answering my question about gender identity, there was a separate question for both trans individuals and their significant others on sexual orientation (i.e., what is your sexual orientation?). This question, and the answers it produced, proved to be as complicated (if not more so) than the question on gender identity. Transgender participants reported being hetero-queer, bisexual, heterosexual, pansexual<sup>9</sup>, gay, queer, lesbian, bi-curious, omnisexual, lipstick lesbian, trans lesbian, hetero-male lesbian, asexual lesbian, asexual<sup>10</sup>, and monosexual<sup>11</sup>. The overwhelming majority of respondents reported being bisexual, pansexual, or queer. The latter two identifications, however, were often used as an alternative to the limiting nature of bisexuality. For example, “I identify as queer, or, to make it simpler for people, bisexual. But there are obvious problems with the term ‘bisexual’ and I’ve been attracted to/involved with people who don’t fit the two-gender norms.” Or, similarly, another participant answered, “pansexual (I used to identify as bisexual, but that implies two, and my sexuality is not limited to the binary).” Thus, while the (aforementioned) list of sexualities offered by my respondents seem long, it appears as though the various terms actually serve the purpose of correcting flaws in the traditionally understood meanings of more commonplace identities, i.e., heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual.

Despite the confident answers of many, some transgender participants revealed the problematic nature of sexual orientation labels. The quagmire of sexual orientation was illuminated both in terms of one’s changing preferences over the course of one’s life,

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<sup>9</sup> Pansexuality (also known as omnisexuality) is a sexual attraction to all people, regardless of their gender identity or biological sex. Whereas bisexuality implies a dichotomy, pansexuality suggests the possibility of attraction to a spectrum of gender identities.

<sup>10</sup> Asexuals report having no feelings of sexual attraction.

<sup>11</sup> Monosexuals can be heterosexual or homosexual, but are strictly attracted to only one sex or gender.

and in terms of finding a suitable label if one doesn't fit the traditional gender norms that have historically defined sexual orientation. One respondent went so far as to describe the fluidity of their sexuality over the course of 57 years; "Hetero curious since June of 1965 Married Hetero since June of 1972 BI curious since August of 1983 BI actual since March of 2001 Trans curious since August of 2001 Trans 3 ways sometime since October of 2002 Sort of asexual nudists at present at 66 & 56." Obviously, even cisgendered individuals can have a similar range of sexual orientations over the course of their lifetime, but the complicated nature of defining this is amplified when one must move outside of traditional labels to create an identity.

Clearly, defining one's sexual orientation when one's gender identity doesn't fit traditional language is a problem unto itself. A female-identified person, for example, angrily stated that she, "wouldn't have any way of knowing for sure, since womyn-born-womyn consider me a worthless freak, much less something they'd want to be in bed with. I know that I like guys and often guys go quite far in flirting with me before they realize I'm a trap." Presumably, this respondent feels as though her sexual orientation is questionable because those she is attracted to may not consider her a "legitimate" or "real" woman. Though it was common for participants to struggle with producing a label that appropriately described their sexuality, only one person said that they "have no sexual orientation." This pre-operative MTF admitted that she is "very disgusted by my male anatomy that I refuse to allow anyone to see or touch it. I feel that sex is not something that I would be interested in with anyone of any gender or sexual orientation."



Significant others responded similarly when providing their sexual orientations, identifying as straight, bisexual, pansexual, transamorous<sup>12</sup>, queer, lesbian, translesbian<sup>13</sup>, bi switch, and transensual. Again, bisexual, queer, and pansexual were the overwhelming majority of reported sexual orientations though, again, the latter two were often used to “make up,” as some participants explained it, for the limitations of the bisexual label. One participant described being both “pansexual and trans-amourous, more attracted to nontraditional gender representations.” Similarly, another woman said that she identifies as “queer. I also sometime self-identify as lesbian, but I think that ‘queer’ does a better job at more fully encompassing my attractions to FTMs, butch dykes and femme lesbians.”

Where significant others differed from transgender participants, however, is that they more often gave a response that reflected their partner’s transgender identity. For example, a cisgender female responded that she is “basically heterosexual, though since my partner has female breasts and I enjoy all of her, I guess perhaps bi leanings...though predominantly hetero.” Or another woman who said that “I am usually attracted to women and used to consider myself a lesbian, but since my (now) husband came out and we went through that whole process, my definitions have become much more fluid.” The relationship between one’s own sexual identity and the gender identity of her or his partner was best illustrated by a cisgender woman who said, “this could be pages long— simply put, I identify as queer. I often still refer to myself as ‘gay’ or lesbian,’ but my partner (now legally my husband) identifies as a straight man, so it’s too complicated for most.” The struggle that significant others face with their own sexual orientation can

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<sup>12</sup> Transamorous, also known as transensual, is having a sexual attraction to transgender individuals.

<sup>13</sup> A translesbian is a male-to-female transsexual (pre or post-operative) who is sexually attracted to females.

often lead to complete confusion; “I identified as a lesbian for many years, until my partner’s transition. I no longer identify by any label ‘bi, lesbian’ etc, because I’m just not sure!”

To say the least, I was overwhelmed by the myriad of unique responses received to what I thought were two simple questions (indeed, questions that sociologists generally think of as being simple demographic descriptors). What all of the answers have in common, however, is that they all illuminated the problematic nature of gendered language as it is currently constituted and sexual orientations as they are traditionally categorized. The multiplicity of responses also raises the question of whether more categories for naming gender identity and sexual orientation makes language more inclusive, or whether so many labels serves to complicate the issue and, consequently, makes language even more exclusive. It is this struggle with one’s basic identity, whether as a transgender individual or their significant other, that is the backdrop for the psychological trauma that some respondents revealed.

### Psychological Challenges

In addition to identifying their own sexual orientation, all respondents were asked to describe their partner’s sexual orientation, and both groups of participants were also asked if their own sexual orientation changed as a result of their (or their partner’s) current gender identity. Both groups were also asked to share how they have struggled with their identities and how their relationship had been (positively or negatively) impacted by transgender identity; questions that proved to stir up quite a bit of emotion. Specifically, participants described issues surrounding sexual compatibility, identity, changes in the gender role dynamics between couples (or triads), and the near or

complete dissolution of any romantic involvement. The responses revealed confusion, apprehension, frustration and pain that, though a result of the social stigma attached to transgender and queer identities, clearly impart psychological trauma on many of the participants in this study. Thus, while I do not intend to undermine the social nature of these problems, the interpersonal nature (e.g., sex between partners) of many of these issues separate them from those that are more obviously related to the larger social structure.

When asked about their partner's sexual orientation, both groups of respondents seemed much more confident about labeling their partner than they had been about labeling themselves. A few of the transgender respondents revealed that their partner's sexual orientation was not congruent with their new gender identity, such as a FTM who said that, "She is a lesbian. And yes, this is where my relationship now has problems. She loves me, but she's a lesbian. As of yet, we have no answers to this dilemma."

Another participant, who identifies as a crossdresser, states that his partner is,

...all woman, and has no desire to be bi. She does not want me to be dressed at all as a female in the bedroom, and has admitted that she has problems becoming intimate with me once she knew I was a crossdresser. She says when she closes her eyes now, she sees me as a woman, not the man she wants and needs.

For some, this has caused sex to cease altogether. One respondent summed up what many said by noting that her partner is a "heterosexual woman who is now sexually inactive because of being with me. I have been sexually inactive with any one else for over a decade now." A few participants responded to the contrary, however, such as someone who mentioned (in relation to sex) that "we have a running joke at our house

that we never say never anymore, because the transition has taken us places we would have sworn we would never go.”

Significant others described similar experiences, many noting that their partner’s gender transition has changed their sex life to the point that it is non-existent or, at the least, complicated. For example, one significant other responded that their partner is “celebrate (sic) as I am not interested in sex at this point. The transition has changed things.” Along the same lines, a cisgender woman describes her MTF partner’s sexuality as being “in question at this time, her transition is new and having a new body part to play with, intrigues her a great deal. She says she still loves me?” What these answers reveal is the anxiety that trans couples feel as they struggle to reconcile not only their personal identities, but their shared identity as a couple and as sexual partners.

Adding to this understanding of anxiety were the responses participants gave to the question, “How has your (or your partner’s) transition or transgender identity affected your relationship the most, both negatively and/or positively?” The sexual struggles mentioned previously were described in more detail, and other tensions between couples were introduced. The majority of respondents (though not all) in both groups spoke about the negative repercussions of being in a trans-relationship, and both groups recounted very similar experiences. In describing the effects of her trans identity on her relationship, one respondent admits that,

I cannot say that I have noticed any \*positive\* changes between us, only negative. Our intimacy has suffered. We stopped having sex because he says he is not comfortable. We do still kiss (though not passionately), embrace, and cuddle. Emotional intimacy has fluctuated. Sometimes he seems cold and distant, sometimes not. If there has (sic) been other changes, he is not telling me about them or I have not observed them.

Similarly, a significant other reveals that, “sex is a minefield. The things I want to do with him bring about major dysphoria (sic) for him.”

Even more prevalent than issues of sex were admissions of identity struggles, both on the part of transgender individuals and significant others. Indeed, both groups indicated struggling with their own identities, as well as with their partners. In speaking of themselves, transgender respondents frequently mention the internal struggles they have dealt with over the course of their lives, especially as these relate to not feeling “whole” or at peace with their biological bodies. One respondent admits that, “I have been depressed for as long as I can remember. I feel like I am lying to the world every day when I am presenting as male. I wish I could show the world the real me, but I am too afraid of not being accepted.” In some cases, the depression caused by gender dysphoria has affected the ability of some to participate fully in social life, such as one respondent who told me that,

This has cost me my ability to attend classes (university) due to exacerbated anxiety and depression. To clarify: I tend to think that my depression (a lifelong issue) has been caused by the dissonance between my mind and body. My severe anxiety (since coming out to myself) due (sic) to the fear related to all the changes involved. I have also gone through periods of great self-doubt. Fears ranging from ‘this is a phase’ to making a mistake to total delusion – even if the presence of gender identity issues were there as some of my earliest memories – I still have had great self-doubt.

One participant confessed that this self-doubt had ultimately led her to start thinking about ending her transition from male to female. She admits that,

Nearly nine months into living full I am having serious difficulties with my own identity. I began immediately after going full time, doubting that transition was the right course for me. Each week that goes by this feeling seems to grow more profound. I feel incredibly guilty for uprooting my family and asking my wife and children to indulge this journey with their reluctance to it.

Many other respondents shared that they too were in doubt about their decision to transition or even just to “come out,” but also qualified their feelings by saying that their doubts were largely due to the guilt of “imposing” on the lives of others.

Indeed, many significant others spoke about their resentment towards their partner’s new gender identity. One significant other acknowledged that, “I find it hard to address my partner as She or Heidi. To me my partner is still a man (at least physically) It really puzzles and confuses me. I sometimes have difficulty with intimacy. Seeing my partner dressed as a female makes me want to run – I am very uncomfortable with it.” Another admits that, “I don’t want him to transition,” another feels like “I didn’t sign up for this,” and still another shares that, “I cringe when he passes – freak out at facial hair etc.” Nevertheless, many significant others say that since their partner feels more comfortable in their new gender identity, it has made their relationship stronger, e.g., “He’s been very comfortable in himself since his transition, and this has improved our relationship.”

Not surprisingly, five transgender participants offered that they had at some point wished they were dead, or had gone so far as to attempt suicide. A transwoman shares that she, “fought for decades to suppress the feminine self that was clammering incessantly to emerge. Finally, after my 3<sup>rd</sup> suicide attempt, I surrendered. Life has never been better now.” As suicide was never an implicit part of any question on these surveys, the fact that such details were offered suggests that suicidal tendencies may be a common reaction to the stressors related to having a transgender identity in a largely discriminatory and unaccommodating society.

Despite the psychological turmoil that transgender participants report, most point to their “coming out” as being the best thing that ever happened to them. One respondent says that, though it took many years to come to terms with gender identity, this individual is now “enjoying getting to know this thing called self esteem I’ve been hearing about all my life.” In fact, several people claimed that they didn’t struggle with their identity at all. Indeed, it was others who had the problem, e.g., “looking back, it seems I struggled more to get others to come to terms with me, than I did coming to terms with myself.” Another trans participant insisted that “I don’t struggle with it...but others do!”

In speaking about their partners, both groups seemed distinctly aware of how they were affected by the transition process and/or transgender identity. A transman notes that his partner,

identifies as a lesbian and we are seen by the outside world as a straight couple (and sometimes in the LGBT community as well). This is hard for her own identity. She feels like she has lost her individual identity as a lesbian even though (sic) we are very involved with the LGBT community.

This sentiment about rejection by the GLB community was common, and the rejection of the trans community from the GLB movement is well documented in trans and lesbian feminist literature (as discussed in the previous chapter). What is often overlooked, however, is the rejection of *significant others* from the GLB community. This rejection is particularly salient because many significant others considered themselves a part of this community prior to their partner’s transition. As one significant other describes,

I was really conflicted about my own sexual identity at the beginning of our relationship and bothered by the fact that my partner wished that I identified as heterosexual. That made me feel invisible given my strong history as a self-identified dyke. I felt like my identity was being elided and I didn’t like it.

Other participants reported feeling as though they didn't know how to behave within the boundaries of their previous identity, i.e., "I don't know how to be a lesbian with a boyfriend" and "How could I be attracted to a person with a penis?" Some trans individuals who have not opted for surgical gender transition processes report feeling estranged from other trans people, e.g., "I struggle with not really feeling like I belong in the trans community since I am not physically transitioning," while others claim that the trans community has embraced them and, ultimately, made coming to terms with their identity more comfortable.

Many significant others discussed their estrangement from the (mostly) lesbian community at length and, yet, some also reported that their public lives became somewhat easier as they came to be perceived as a straight couple. One participant used the term "legitimate" to describe how others now viewed her relationship with a transman. Though, while seemingly positive, this has to be understood in the context of the traditional ways in which legitimate relationships are defined in our society; these participants are describing a positive change *after they were perceived as being heterosexual*, not while they outwardly appeared to be part of the queer community. Those participants who don't "pass" in public, or whose partners don't "pass," face their own set of hurdles to overcome. "It is difficult being with a partner who doesn't pass because every time someone messes up on pronouns you feel like you have to fix the situation and protect him," shares one cisgender female. Another says that her partner "is not passable as a woman and both my daughter and I have been viciously attacked by neighbors for allowing this 'creep' to live with us."



In addition to changes in one's personal identity, respondents in both groups allude to changes in the "couple dynamic" that have adversely affected their relationship. Even though transgender individuals are seen as being antithetical to the gender binary, they are, overwhelming, reliant on traditional gender norms. In defining their relationships through our traditional understanding of masculine/feminine gender role dynamics, many participants struggle to reconcile their changing partnerships. Many trans individuals report feeling as though their new gender presentation is confusing to their partners, or alters the interactions that they typically had with their partners in the past. A transman admits that,

I was socialized as female and I think this kind of unnerves my girlfriend a little bit, because I cry a lot (thanks estrogen!) and I tend to 'play girl games' since that's what I was taught...like, I think I'm more manipulative and crafty than cisgender men she's been with. And sometimes I feel like she needs someone stronger, someone who is more confident about their masculinity, because I have good days and bad days.

A transwoman shares that her being transgender "adds a lot of stress to our relationship because it challenges everything my wife has grown to expect, the traditional heterosexual marital relationship." One woman, however, reported her partner's gender transition and, hence, change in gender role, as being positive. However, this "positive" shift was largely due to the fact that her transmale partner had retained some of the qualities that she identified as being stereotypically female: "Because he is biologically female, I believe he has better understanding of women and is overall more caring, considerate, and sympathetic than most biological men."

When transgender individuals spoke about their change in gender role, at least in terms of their own personal development and self realization, it was overwhelmingly positive and usually in the context of liberation, such as a transwoman who said that she

is “now free to express my ‘soft’ side without fear of what others think. I no longer have to be macho just because it is what society expects/demands of me.” In a few cases the gender switch was seen as “something that has bonded us,” as spouses or life partners. An FTM says that his partner “taught me how to shave, he got excited when I got my packy<sup>14</sup>, he calls me his boyfriend,” but also notes that, “we are both experiencing for the first time the stigma of being seen as a gay male couple. Kissing and holding hands wasn’t an issue before I started passing. It is now, however.”

Also in relation to their personal experiences, significant others similarly reported great strength and positive changes in their relationships, despite challenges with the larger community:

It’s been overwhelmingly positive for us. The transition was difficult; it challenged my identity and challenged my friendships, since many of my lesbian friends thought I should leave him. But finding a way to get through the transition together strengthened our relationship tremendously.

Indeed, many of the respondents recognize that many of their struggles are related to the stigmatization of non-heterosexual or traditional relationships in our culture, and report interpersonal growth as a positive consequence in their lives. Some participants specifically separated the personal from the social in terms of the positive and negative consequences of their relationships, such as a significant other who said, “positive – I appreciate her honesty and strength in living authentically, refusing to conform to a binary gender system. Learning to understand my own gender expression better. Negative – dealing with transphobia, fear of bashing.”

Many of the transgender participants indicated that they were in a relationship where both partners identified as transgender. A few even contacted me by email before

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<sup>14</sup> A “packy” is slang for a prosthetic penis that one wears inside their underwear to replicate the appearance of having a “real” penis.

completing the survey to see which one (trans or significant other) that they should fill out. Though I gave them the option of filling out either, most, it seems, opted to fill out the transgender survey. Their answers suggest that having a transgender partner largely helped them to cope with their own personal challenges. One participant noted that, “the fact that we’re both genderqueer makes it easier to relate to each other.” Another states, “we’re both trans, so it’s a point of relation,” but also revealed that “it’s stressful to be trans and not be seen for what you are and stress can impact relationships.” Thus, being transgender and having a transgender partner can both provide a support system and impart additional stress on one’s own transition.

Children, of course, can sense changes in their parent’s relationships, and certainly experience their own struggles and triumphs when one or both parents have a transgender identity. Though children weren’t the main focus of any of my questions, a few people took it upon themselves to describe their experiences of raising kids in a trans family. One significant other, a cisgender woman, shared that “our children know and are embarrassed to be seen in public with her,” meaning their MTF father. This sort of difficulty was also mentioned by a transwoman who sadly admits abandonment in that, “I have at this point lost my 24 year old daughter and she has had our first grandchild 4 months ago and I have not seen him since he was born.”

What was perhaps most disappointing about the responses I received was the number of individuals who did claim to be in a relationship, but also readily admitted that the romantic connection they had to their partner initially was practically non-existent now. In other words, they were “together” for all practical intents and purposes, but had no romantic involvement whatsoever. The number of individuals who reported being

married but yet “just friends” was overwhelming, and responses like, “my transitioning will be what changes this relationship from romantic to friendship (at best),” were common. A transwoman confesses that, “we are still very close and love each other. But she states she is no longer ‘in love’ with me. I still love her deeply.” For some, the rejection of their significant other has led them to the decision that transition is not in their best interest, such as a MTF that says, “her non acceptance has hindered my transition. I have backed off mones<sup>15</sup> and have reverted to mostly the male role unfortunately.”

For many, transition seems to be the impetus for separation and divorce. A self-identified cross dresser who decided to transition said that when he told his wife that he planned on having SRS “her only comment was would I start the divorce proceedings or did I want her to do it.” Others link the dissolution of their relationships to their partner’s sexual orientation, i.e., “we have separated as she considers me thinking as a woman and she is not a lesbian.” One respondent admits that they communicate with their partner mostly by phone, “as my changed appearance and presentation causes her extreme grief. She misses her husband.”

Much of these divisions seem to be related to resentment, such as a transman who says (of his partner) that, “I am resentful of him and rebellious (sic) against his rules of staying in the ‘closet.’ I believe that this will be the factor that causes a separation (sic).” A cross-dressing respondent says that his “wife thinks that crossdressing is a perverse, homosexual activity. She refuses to learn anything about it or to speak with a knowledgeable person about it. She doesn’t want to see or hear anything about it.”

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<sup>15</sup> “Mones” is a reference to hormone replacement therapy.

This statement taps into an issue that several significant others raised, i.e., the degree to which their partner's transition consumes their lives. As one woman put it,

Our lives have really revolved around his transition, getting the money to pay for surgery, dealing with anxieties about changing jobs, getting identity documentation changed. Also his family has disowned him, so dealing with that reflection has been difficult at times. It all takes up a lot of physical and psychic energy. It makes me realize how my life will never be 'normal' but that's not necessarily a bad thing. It sometimes makes me feel isolated from the rest of society though.

Many significant others report feelings of resentment, but not always to the point of wanting the relationship to end. For example, one participant said that, "I am confused, frustrated, and yet I still love this person – that hasn't changed I'm trying to figure out how to cope." Some significant others illuminate the fear they have in relation to their partner's transitions, e.g., "I am not sure what sex will be like with him and the prosthetic (sic)...so many worries about day to day living and his insecurities." Though many significant others suggest that they have a desire to learn to cope with these issues, still others admit that they simply "feel too guilty to leave."

Of course, healthy relationships are difficult for anyone to manage, let alone someone who has the added pressures of having (or being with someone who has) a transgender identity. Thus, it is especially important for trans couples to have a support network, beginning with a strong connection to family and friends. What these findings reveal, however, is that maintaining these relationships, when one is transgender (or the partner of a trans individual), is especially challenging. Though one transman says that he is "one lucky bugger. All of my family have stuck by me, some of them being very enthusiastic about embracing me in my male role. My youngest brother is actually

having fun teaching me how to ‘be a man’,” nearly all others (or at least those who have come out) report rejection from their extended and immediate families.

One transgender participant shares that, “My brother said that I should be shunned (sic) by the family – when I came out to him he gave me ‘The purpose driven life’ and told it was not too late.” Religion was often a theme in stories of rejection, such as a trans individual who said that, “Two of my paternal uncles have described me as being possessed by the devil and that I should spend more time praying about my deliverance.” Another says that “My mother is the only one who will talk to me and she just wants to know why I can’t be normal.” In some truly shocking cases, families went to great lengths to distance themselves from their trans relatives, such as one family who “put in the local paper my ‘male obituary’ saying that I died from complications from surgery” three days after her SRS. To avoid such fiascos, some have decided to remove themselves from the presence of extended family because, as one respondent put it, “I stay away from them in order to be able to be myself.”

Similarly, significant others report abandonment by their families as a result of their partner’s transgender identity. Responses such as, “I have lost complete support from both of my parents because they are unhappy that I am with my partner and hope that it is just a phase,” were sadly common. One woman even admitted that, “My sister refuses to have anything to do with me as long as I’m with my girlfriend....she has made threats to my girlfriend’s life.”

Conversely, those individuals who were once perceived as gay or lesbian by their families and are now considered “heterosexual” found greater acceptance from their parents. One woman mentioned that, “My parent’s found it much easier to deal with D’s

transition than to deal with us being lesbians! Once he transitioned, suddenly he was getting invited to family gatherings, receiving birthday presents, and things like that, that had never happened before.”

In some cases, participants described their family life with guarded sarcasm, e.g., “I was just recently outed at once to my entire immediate and extended family a week before I was to travel by car 2000 miles to be the ‘father of the bride’ at my daughter’s wedding. What a blast!” As in the case of Michael Kantaras (see pg. 20), some respondents mentioned the legal battles they had to undertake for their children as a result of being transgender. A MTF noted that “My ex wife used the fact against me in our divorce. She was going to tell everyone in open court if I didn’t give her what she wanted.” Likewise, a significant other confided that, “I almost lost my children because my mother cited the transgender/crossdressing as being detrimental to my children.” For some, the rejection has made them consider going “back in the closet,” such as a transwoman who said that the relationship with her wife and children might be “reparable if I go back to fully pretending to be fully male.”

In fear of facing similar rejection, many transgender participants admit that they haven’t told their families about their gender identity, which ultimately means that they are forced to live two separate lives; one in which they are themselves, and another in which they must suppress their true identity. One trans respondent said that, “I have not told anyone in my family about myself, because I know that they will not understand. They will probably not believe me, may get angry, and will never accept that I actually know what I’m doing.” Surprisingly, only two significant others reported that their families were not aware of their partner’s transgender identity. In one case, it was

because her partner is a MTF transsexual, and so her primary concern was making them comfortable with the fact that she was coming out as a lesbian. As she put it,

I've not told them she is trans-gender. It was very hard to tell them I was dating a woman seriously...and they're still not comfortable with that. They're embarrassed actually. So I withheld that information until they got used to the idea I am in love with a woman. That still hasn't happened.

Though losing one's extended family is difficult, the narratives suggest that it is the immediate family that is the most common and hardest to lose, especially the loss of one's children. While it is easy to hide one's identity from extended family, doing so among immediate family members is much less likely. Unfortunately, participants frequently reported rejection from their (mostly teenage and adult) children. Indeed, many trans individuals aren't talking to their kids, or haven't seen their children in years; statements like, "I haven't seen my three kids in over two years," "Teenage daughters not speaking to me after learning about a month ago," "My only child will have nothing to do with me," and "Lost my 38 year old daughter to her Mormonism," are only a few examples. The typical stories of losing children were painful, to say the least:

She won't come to our home, her and her husband don't want me down to their place. They have thrown away who I was prior to this, who I am now and what I mean to them or them to me and instead have worried about what others will think and choose to be embarrassed by me.

Though it is difficult to hear such stories, they must be also be considered from the point of view of those families who have rejected transgender members. Unfortunately, they live in the same discriminatory world, so it is no surprise that they are as scared of social rejection as the trans person. Moreover, such rejection is not surprising in light of the vigor with which we all (even trans people) express ourselves through stereotypical gender norms.



When family has rejected us for one reason or another (in this case, being trans or the partner of a trans person), we seek community and support in our friendship networks. This becomes complicated when one loses friends due to gender presentation, a theme that was all too present in my participants' responses. For many, it is a shock that being transgender is enough reason to lose friends, such as one participant who said that, "I guess I always thought if I was 'a good enough person' that my transition would not matter or make a difference to others in my life. The unfortunate truth is it did and I have been isolated by many of them because of it."

Largely, both trans participants and their partners report losing friends in the gay and lesbian and heterosexual communities, but gaining them in the transgender community. Indeed, it seems that the lesbian community is the most apprehensive of those who come out as transgender, especially of those who are female to male transsexuals. As mentioned in the first chapter, the lesbian community has a long history of alienating trans people, and these data suggest that rejection is still a common experience among those who at one time or another considered themselves a member of that community.

Likely due to the stigma that already faces lesbians they have been, and still are, largely excluding when it comes to trans people. Many FTM respondents suggest that losing the lesbian community made their coming out process and their transition all the more difficult. For example, "I lost a sense of community for a while when the local dyke community shunned me but I got over that," or, "I lost many friends, because before I came out, I was in a very tight, very feminist, anti-men lesbian community," or, "a few friends felt I was betraying the lesbian community by transitioning." For significant

others, this rejection is amplified, perhaps by their lack of choice in their partners' decision to transition. One cisgender woman felt that "I lost more friends as a lesbian than my spouse lost by coming out and transitioning." Another mentions that, "peripheral lesbian acquaintances have now segregated me from the overall dyke community." It appears that much of this denial (by the lesbian community) is centered around rigid and static definitions of sexual orientation, lesbianism in particular. As one woman put it, "some of my dyke friends insist I'm no longer a 'gold star' lesbian and I must 'really' be bisexual."

What all of these issues highlight is an extreme level of psychological turmoil experienced among trans respondents and their partners. It cannot be denied, however, that there is clearly a social impetus for these feelings of loss, rejection and self-doubt. In other words, even though an individual may feel trauma as a result of losing family, that loss is only made possible by a heterosexist and gender-obsessed culture that fosters a fear of the unknown or misunderstood.

Thus, I argue that the psychological issues that have been raised by this and other trans studies are inextricably tied to social issues and must be explored by sociologists in order to fully understand the social construction of gender and its consequences.

Nevertheless, there are some challenges that arguably may be considered more 'social' in nature due to the public realm in which they occur, such as problems in the workplace, in the legal system, and with the medical community, thus, I offer the following section as a consideration of those issues.

## Social Challenges

When asked about challenges faced in the workplace and/or school, some transgender participants indicated that they hide their transgender identity at work by presenting as their biological gender. Still more, however, stated that they were “out” in their workplace, meaning that they present and function in their preferred gender role. Either way, the overall consensus of participants in this study was that being transgender is a constant challenge in both their schooling and careers. Those respondents who are employed or enrolled in college illuminate several poignant issues related to employment and/or education, including discrimination, emotional pain, and physical violence. Perhaps the most glaring of the responses were those that recount actual instances of prejudice by their employers.

Some responses, for example, highlight the ambivalence and insensitivity of some employers, such as a transman who said that,

I risk losing my job when I transition medically. They know I’m transgender, but they refuse to acknowledge it. They make me wear a ‘girl’ uniform and a nametag with my birthname (sic) on it, and I comply because, in Michigan, they have every right to fire me for my gender identity, and I really need to work to support myself.

The respondent is referring to “at will” employment laws, which allow an employer to fire someone without any cause at all. Unfortunately, the state of Michigan is an “at will” state and, thus, the employer has every right to fire him. The issue of losing one’s job as a result of being transgender is presumably related to one’s ability to pass, which several participants mentioned. As one transman put it, “Not always ‘passing’ means I can’t be sure how others are perceiving me, and the presence of a female name and gender marker on official records has caused some awkwardness in dealing with legal/administrative

bodies.” Two participants reported losing their jobs for making other employees “uncomfortable.”

Others report equally humiliating stories. One participant admitted that,

I was forced by the HR dept to stand in front of the entire company of over 100 people to tell them that I was trans and I was transitioning. It was the lowest part of my life and is what caused me to take a bottle of pills to end the torture which came to head at this request....After transitioning at work I was fired 6 months later and that was after they removed me from the engineering dept and stuck me by myself on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor.

Many respondents recount similar instances occurring in school, such as a participant who said, “Unfortunately I go to a small school with only 3 profs in my major (social work) and to make it even worse the chair of the dept and the man who teaches all my classes has been giving me a hard time and I have gone to the dean about it and they are basically trying to sweep my complaint under the rug.” It’s not only students who report difficulties, but professors as well, e.g., “I am an adjunct at a community college, which means I have no job stability. My students often call me ‘Ms.’ which drives me crazy, but I just dissociate from it.” Presumably it is stories like this circulating through the trans community that leads others to believe they are at risk of similar discrimination.

Many who admitted that they *hadn’t* experienced discrimination mentioned that they live in constant fear of it, e.g., “I sometimes feel weird and worry that my classmates are plotting against me or they secretly want to hurt me, so it can be hard.” One participant reveals that, “I had to drop out of school because of depression/anxiety. I have been unable to work and unemployed since. I now feel a sense of dread about finding a job because I am afraid I will be discriminated against. That despite my intelligence, skills, and capabilities, that I won’t be hired because of assumptions they have about transgender/transsexual people.”

Though many participants recounted long stories of discrimination, others were short, to the point and, at times, quite sarcastic. For example, one person answered by saying “discrimination, death threats, teasing hostility, the usual, yknow (sic)?” Another simply responded, “I work for the U.S. Army. ‘nuff (sic) said?” Such sarcasm likely comes on the heels of a history of discrimination (or at the least, the constant threat of it), such as a transman who “was harassed off the track team, kicked out of church, and kicked out of ROTC. At my last job, I was harassed and effectively fired because I was forced to use the womens (sic) room where I was beat up by a lady.” Unfortunately, he was not the only participant to report being physically assaulted by a coworker.

For some, the answer to this discrimination is purposely seeking out employment at GLBTQ-friendly places. For example, one participant admitted losing jobs in the past, but is now running a center for “GLBTIQQA<sup>16</sup> youth.” Other trans-friendly jobs reported by participants include “writing a column about trans folk,” working “in Bangkok Thailand at the clinic where I had surgery,” and “in a LGBTQ friendly AIDS organization.” It is worthy to note, however, that even those who work in presumably LGBTQ-friendly space admit having problems. For example, the transman who works for the AIDS organization revealed that “In my office I work with two guys that only work with MSMs (Men who have sex with men) and it bothered me that when I came out, suddenly they were treating me better.” Several individuals also report being “self employed” to avoid problems in the workplace, though even those who were self employed in fields that were predominantly gendered faced problems (e.g., a transwoman in building trades).

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<sup>16</sup> GLBTIQQA stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, Ally

A smaller portion of respondents report being unemployed as a result of being fired, but those who did often attributed it to their transgender identity (a few others reported being disabled). One participant, who said they had no problems while attending graduate school, said that, "I outright lost one of my two jobs, and I'm currently unable to work the other job due to the stress testosterone has put on my vocal cords (I do interviews for the CDC)." Others lost their job as a result of the discrimination, such as one participant who "was harassed on the job to the point of mental break down. Took a medical disability retirement from a good career." Many of those participants who claimed they were fired associated it directly with the initial stages of their transition, usually taking hormones. Though it was the trans subjects who admitted their unemployment, it was the significant others who revealed the magnitude of struggling with the resulting poverty. The partner of a transman stated that, "He's been out of work for over a year & can't seem to get resolved with his old workplace and can't get hired anywhere else. Keeping the bills paid is increasingly difficult." Another cisgender woman called her partner "pretty much unhirable (sic) at this stage."

The participants in this study made it quite clear that being transgender, and especially going through a gender transition, consumes one's life. The constant attention that trans people pay to understanding and negotiating their gender can affect all aspects of one's life, including performance on the job. Several respondents admitted that their preoccupation with gender identity has affected how well they perform, e.g., "dealing with my gender issues have distracted me from work and clearly as a result have prevented me from performing my best work professionally." A crossdresser admits that, "At work I wear panties. But my obsession prevents me from being productive. I waste

hours and hours on the computer (sic) trying to find ways of dealing with this condition.” Still another said that they had difficulty “maintaining focus. Very, very hard. Gender issues consume my mind and time. What do you think I’m doing here?!”

Though responses about employment and school were overwhelmingly negative, a few participants insist that they have had positive experiences, such as a university professor who is “happily surprised at how my colleagues and students have responded to my changes in appearance. I really don’t feel that I’ve suffered professionally.” Another respondent, who works for a “VERY conservative aerospace and defense company” boasted that “they have made restroom accommodations for me so I will be comfortable (sic).” He advises that, “I think the most important thing for me was to be candid and proactive and give everybody plenty of time to process the information and do their own tasks.” While these cases are promising, they are quickly dwarfed by the number of individuals who haven’t been so lucky. On an interesting note, however, one partner told me of how her partner actually (if not artificially) benefited at work as a result of his transition, presumably because of his newfound male privilege. She recounted how, “at his old job (where he id-ed as a female) he made \$9/hr. when he changed his documents and applied for an identical job on the other side of town, he was asked how much he wanted to make, and started work at \$12/hr.”

Though employment is a significant part of most people’s lives, it can have additional significance to a trans person, specifically because of the financial burden that characterizes gender transition. How much gender transition (and/or simply presenting as the opposite sex) costs is certainly not a fixed figure. One’s access to treatment, degree of transition desired, insurance status, personal income, and geographic location can all

have an effect on how much money one invests in their transgender identity. Given the possible variation in experiences, I asked my participants the type and amounts of costs they incurred as a part of “Formal Gender Transition Processes (e.g., hormone treatment, gender reassignment surgery, “top” surgery, “bottom” surgery, facial feminization, etc.)” as well as “Informal Gender Presentation Requirements (e.g., new wardrobe, prosthetic devices, voice lesions, etc.)” The responses I received largely addressed the extreme costs associated with gender transition and/or with maintaining a new gender, but also (and perhaps more importantly) revealed the importance of such processes in terms of managing the impressions of others and in terms of maintaining one’s own mental health.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the fiscal “cost” of gender transition is nearly impossible to calculate. Even if one were to add up how much trans people actually spent on psychiatric care, hormones, surgeries, and the like, this still would not account for those things that are less calculable, such as time off of work (either while going through transition or as a result of unemployment) or everyday costs that even the most diligent of us don’t keep track of, such as personal hygiene products and clothing. Moreover, even if one did keep a meticulous record of accrued costs, it would be inapplicable to understanding anyone else’s experience, simply because of the myriad of ways that people have found to ascertain the things necessary to gender performance and/or transition. Nevertheless, the data do reveal that many participants are spending thousands of dollars in both legal and illegal sectors, simply to be comfortable in their own skin and, as the data suggest, so that others will be comfortable as well.

In some countries gender transition is covered by national health plans, such as in Austria, where



From the moment you are diagnosed as transsexual (ICD10/F64) the Austrian healthcare system bears the expenses partly for psychotherapy (50 hours) and fully for the HRT medication, the SRS, the BA and the Thyroid cartilage reduction. But only if its done in one of the public (not private) hospitals in Austria. If I do surgery abroad, they cover only about 5-10% of the costs.

In the U.S., however, gender transition is generally not even covered by insurance companies, let alone the federal government. Indeed, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Michigan is the only U.S. insurance company that will cover most (not all) costs related to sexual reassignment surgery, despite the fact that gender dysphoria is recognized by the American Psychological Association as a legitimate diagnosis that requires treatment. A few participants did report that their insurance companies have paid for some of the costs related to transition (e.g., therapy or hormones), but that they will not pay for the more expensive aspects, such as the surgeries themselves. Thus, many individuals are simply not able to undergo any medical form of transition. Those who do, however, are paying an exponential amount of money to do so.

The reported costs of gender transition vary from a few hundred dollars (for therapy only) to upwards of \$100,000 for all necessary, and sometimes cosmetic, surgeries. Of course, this is only scratching the surface of the true costs of gender transition. As one MTF put it, "I spent close to \$120K total on my transition (not counting the cost of the divorce)." Needless to say, most participants reported having completed only parts of their transition (most often hormones), saying that they were waiting until they could afford to proceed with a full transition.

Some who wish they could transition simply can't afford to, at least not through the traditional medical system. As one individual put it, "I have never had the money for the process as of yet. The cost of every step is often more than my annual income." As a

result of their inability to afford treatment legitimately, many participants admit obtaining services illegally. A transwoman who wishes she could afford treatment admits that “I am self medicating, buying brand name products from overseas sources. This is not wise but the only way for me to do this. We have no insurance cover for therapy, hrt<sup>17</sup>, consultation, whatever. I buy what I can, when I can. My wife doesn’t know.” One couple, in which both partners are transgender, admitted that one is taking legal hormones while the other is obtaining them “underground.”

Several respondents who have undergone breast reductions, breast augmentations, vaginoplasty, phalloplasty, and/or metiodioplasty report going outside of the U.S. to complete their transitions, primarily for the reduced costs and for physicians with more SRS experience. The reported cost of a vaginoplasty in Thailand, for example, is around \$12,000, a procedure that costs twice or three times that amount in the United States. One woman joked about the cost of her vaginoplasty by saying, “I needed to refinance my home so that I could get the funds to have SRS. So I guess that I have a 30 year mortgage on my vulva.” Still others, who have not yet resorted to illegal means, report coping in other ways, such as drinking. One participant said that “Other than meds, I can’t afford anything else, so I just drink. Perhaps we can count the cost of alcohol to make up for lack of health care.”

While MTF participants report spending the most on these formal gender transition processes, it was the FTM participants who spend more on informal gender presentation requirements, most notably prosthetic penises (which can cost as much as \$1000), devices to assist them in urinating while standing up, and chest binders. A typical account was highlighted by a transman who has “three different prosthetics, one

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<sup>17</sup> HRT: hormone replacement therapy

for sex, one for night time, one for daytime, and urination. The piss and packers cost like \$60 and deteriorate every 3-6 months. There are longer lasting versions but the (sic) cost several thousand.” A typical binder from a website that one of my participants mentioned ([www.underworks.com](http://www.underworks.com)) costs \$29.99 for one or \$159.99 for six. It should also be noted, unfortunately, that this particular participant complained that the binders were uncomfortable and often cut into him under his armpits.

The primary “informal” process for MTF respondents was voice lessons, the occasional breast forms, and feminine wardrobes. While some participants chose inexpensive routes to train their voices (e.g., an instructional DVD), others have spent thousands of dollars on lessons. A deaf participant mentioned that she will have to undergo surgery on her vocal chords, as she can’t train her voice in the same manner as hearing individuals. Overall, the general consensus was that gender processes, both formal and informal, are so expensive that they border on, or are, unaffordable. One participant simply said, “Expensive, my partner was not impressed.” It is no surprise, then, that significant others focused their answers primarily on the consequences of financial strain, rather than dollar figures.

Because of the number of trans people who are unemployed, their partners often reported being solely responsible for the financial stability of their family, including paying for gender transition procedures. The partner of a transman admitted that, “we have severe financial problems; the surgery was ‘out of pocket’ (mine) and since he has no health insurance, hormones, MD visits etc, are paid by me.” The partners of male-to-female trans people frequently mentioned their partner’s preoccupation with performing their gender and the financial consequences of that; “shes (sic) a shopaholic! Has more

clothes then (sic) anyone I know and yet always wants more,” “realizing all the avenues that one can get caught up in, such as make up or jewelry, shoes, clothes, wigs etc...it is rather expensive at times.” Despite the financial burden, the significant others I surveyed largely felt that any strain felt as a result of their partners transgender identity was well worth it, i.e., “Work of love knows no costs.”

For those of us who don't identify as transgender, it may seem outrageous that anyone is willing to spend so much simply to alter their appearance, even if we accept the fact that transgender individuals need to do so for their own mental health. However, what we fail to recognize is that all of these processes have as much to do with how others perceive them as they do with how the individual perceives him or herself. What is considered to be appropriate gender presentation in our society is so entrenched in our identities and social interactions that individuals who don't “pass” risk, at the very least, public scrutiny, if not physical violence and, in many cases, murder. Though participants in this study complained about the cost of their transitions and the cost of everyday gender presentation, there was a sense of necessity, not only for their own mental health, but especially for their own safety, e.g., “Some of these surgeries are necessary to reduce risk of becoming a target of hate crimes.”

If the burden of medical bills isn't enough, there are also legal costs related to gender transition. There are name changes, the reissuing of birth certificates and, in some cases, custody battles that one must contend with. Though the cost of changing one's name and reissuing a birth certificate are considerably less than the cost of surgery, they are still somewhat burdensome, costing several hundred dollars to, rarely, a few thousand (the actual cost depends on the state in which one lives). However, it is important to note

that many participants made a point to tell me that the process of changing one's legal identity is more tedious than it is expensive, and largely felt that, in the "grand scheme of things," it wasn't worth complaining about.

When asked if there were any additional social (or psychological) "costs" to their own or their partner's transitions, most participants took the chance to share some of their anxieties, highlighting how social challenges have taken a toll on their psychological health. Many trans individuals reported being in constant fear over their personal safety, especially as it relates to "passing" and "being found out." The bathroom seems to be one of the biggest concerns. As one person described,

I never know what bathroom to use. I've gotten to the point where I'm afraid I'm going to get harassed and beat up if I use a public restroom. I've had things thrown at me and doors slammed in my face when attempting to use the women's bathroom, and I have been chastised by employees and acquaintances for using the men's bathroom. It's rather upsetting.

In order to avoid "getting caught," as one individual put it, many participants go to extreme measures (including causing themselves pain) to hide their biological gender, such as binding their chest even in the extreme heat of Arizona. Such fear is certainly not unfounded; one individual explains that,

While driving truck to pay for surgery I was refused the use of restroom facilities in eight states. I have been beaten by groups of young men twice. Hospitals have refused treatment of my injuries even when I was delivered to the emergency room by ambulance. Shunning is common.

Being transgender, as one individual put it, "is exhausting and a constant battle...it can be threatening sometimes on public transport or on the street when people stare at you...I spend a large amount of time talking about it, and it seems to have taken over my life."

For many trans respondents, their identity causes them to struggle with how to behave. Impression management is a task for anybody, let alone someone who doesn't fit society's definition of male or female. Some feel at a loss in terms of their own personal identity, and find it shifting from one social interaction to the next, e.g., "I feel like I can't just be myself because I have certain situations that require me to pretend to be the person people (thought they) knew for so many years." One individual describes the constant negotiation that occurs in one's mind; "I wonder whether I will 'come out' at church...I wonder how my neighbors will react when I begin to present as female...will my friends still want to be my friends? Will the people with whom I sing and play music still want to perform with me?" In many ways these sorts of testimony are reminiscent of negotiating one's place in the social hierarchy as a teenager, only the transgender individual must face such social game-playing all over again. Significant others, too, fear being "outed," which "makes us kind of walk on eggshells, not mix friends and keep our online presence very quite (sic) or filtered." For some, this results in self-destructive behavior, e.g., "I've dabbled lightly in self harm a time or two because I couldn't deal with the stress."

I do not want to end the description of these findings by giving the impression that the transgender experience is wholly negative. To the contrary, many of the individuals who participated in this study argue that, though they may face hardships on the path of gender transition, their journey is well worth it. Though the positive answers were somewhat guarded (e.g., "In general I take more joy than pain from my gender id"), they did occur and are important to these findings. The participants in this study did reveal reason to be optimistic. The pain of living in the "wrong body" is often so severe that it seemed as though most participants were willing to accept any of the challenges

that I asked them about; as one man put it, “None were greater than the costs I was paying living as a woman.”

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Though this study produced an immense amount of data, the responses of participants were surprisingly consistent. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, there were several significant themes that emerged through my analysis, each of which deserve attention. Thus, I offer this discussion in three parts: A) a consideration of language, its importance to understanding gender, and how we can more appropriately use it to describe gender, B) a reflection on the importance of significant others in understanding the transgender experience and gender in its broadest sense, and C) practical suggestions for positive social change, based on the common experiences of those who participated in this study.

#### Reconsidering Language

As was mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 3, language and how it is used can greatly affect how we communicate about gender, hence having an effect on how we understand it from a sociological perspective. In the technical sense, gender is a noun; it describes a person as being masculine or feminine or, more commonly, as biologically male or female. This definition, however, falls short of conveying the actual meaning of gender. In particular, it ignores the actions one must engage in to be described as masculine or feminine, or as male or female, and the way in which others attribute gender to us as a result of those actions. True, one is born with biological sex characteristics (such as genitalia), but those characteristics have little to do with what gender others attribute to us on a daily basis. We don't typically go about our daily lives without pants on, thus others use the gendered behavioral cues that we perform in order to attribute a



label to us. Likewise, we choose particular ways in which to act in order for others to perceive us as being one gender or the other. Hence, the noun gender does not envelop the concept that we wish to consider when, for example, sociologists attempt to study it.

Pointing this quagmire out, however, is not to say that we should abandon the word gender and simply create a new one that captures the physical actions required to maintain a gender identity. As demonstrated earlier, simply adding words to our vocabulary can sometimes make things more complicated than clear. What this is to say, though, is that we need to reassess the true meaning of the language we are already using. It is easy, if we understand that gender is a social construction, to dismiss its significance in our daily lives. The truth is that even someone who argues that gender is a restrictive, patriarchal construct (such as a radical feminist), goes to extreme measures to maintain their own gender identity. We are, whether we like it or not, extremely dedicated to the physical behaviors that characterize gender, even if we attempt to go about subverting them. For example, even a cisgendered female who has decided to reject the behaviors that characterize femininity (e.g., wearing make-up) is still adhering to gender roles, i.e., by adopting what has been defined as masculine behaviors. Since we have culturally attributed certain characteristics to femininity and masculinity, we are forced to work within those confines.

Thus, I argue that we need to envision gender as we do sexuality. It is commonly accepted that one has a sexual identity, i.e., that a person is oriented towards being attracted to people of one gender or the other, or to both or, as these data have revealed, to a spectrum of individuals, including those who do not fit the standard definition of femininity or masculinity. It is also commonly accepted (at least from a

social constructionist perspective) that one's sexuality is fluid and can vary from minute to minute, day to day, or year to year. I propose that we formally recognize that gender is an identity as well. To reconceptualize gender as an identity, we are privileging the notion that gender does not simply describe one's body parts, but that it describes the masculine or feminine behaviors and characteristics *that one prefers to present to others*. That is, it describes how one identifies their own gender, which may be as simple as male or female or as complex and non-traditional as genderqueer. Thus, gender identity, like sexuality, can (and often does) change from minute to minute, day to day, or year to year.

Gender, from this perspective, is a personal classification (like sexual orientation), and not a biological fact. If gender were a biological fact, then transgender individuals would simply need to undergo hormone therapy and sexual reassignment surgery to be comfortable in their own skin. To the contrary, as these data have suggested, trans individuals spend a lot of time learning to behave in ways that are representative of their preferred gender and, significantly, they do not feel "right" or self-confident unless they do so in a way that they perceive to be "correct" (that allows them to "pass"). Thus, one's gender *identity* is the first of three dimensions of gender.

The idea of passing brings us to another dimension of gender, specifically gender *expression*. While identity is simply the label that we give ourselves (e.g., the "box" that we check on surveys and forms), expression is how we actively present that identity to others. Though this expression may seem more "natural" or even easier for cisgendered individuals, it is something that all people engage in. As feminist theorists recognize, we "do" our gender by engaging in purposeful behaviors. For example, those who identify as women may wear makeup or feminine clothes and those who identify as male may

engage in stereotypically “macho” behavior to express their identity to others. Likewise, individuals who identify on the spectrum between or beyond male or female may choose alternative expressions of their identity, such as combining or rejecting traditional expressions of dichotomous gender to express androgyny.

As the participants of this study have illustrated, one’s gender identity can differ from the gender that others attribute to that person, primarily because we cannot always control all aspects of our expression. Indeed, while most of our expressions are intentional, some are not, and these unintentional expressions must also be considered in relation to one’s experiences. Take, for example, a male-to-female trans woman who, because of her masculine characteristics (e.g., tall height, pronounced Adam’s Apple, facial hair), is perceived by others to be male. This does not change her gender identity, as she can still feel that she is a woman in every sense of the word. Despite how she feels, however, she is expressing herself (even if unintentionally) to others as male, and is thus being perceived as male. So, while gender identity and expression are the first two dimensions of one’s gender, the third is *gender attribution*, or the gender that others attribute to us, which is of equal importance to understanding gendered experiences.

Thus, gender identity, gender expression and gender attribution are three very different, yet related, dimensions of the broader term ‘gender.’ They are interrelated in the sense that individuals (generally) wish for their gender orientation and their gender presentation to be congruent with one another, and for others’ attributions to coincide with these. Unfortunately, it is when the former two dimensions are conflicting that transgender individuals face the most hardship, both in terms of inner turmoil and in their interactions with others. This, however, does not make them any less (or more)

‘gendered’ than someone whose identities and expressions match the gender that others attribute to them.

Thus, before we continue to study gender sociologically or to develop more transgender theory, we must have a universal understanding of the true meaning and dimensions of gender. This requires us to recognize that gender, in and of itself, is not a description of anything. Gender, simply, is a set of masculine and feminine behaviors and actions that we engage in to manage the impressions that others have of us. It is a broad term that attempts to capture what are the true dimensions of gender, namely one’s gender identity, expression, and attribution; none of which can fully be described by the terms ‘male’ and ‘female.’

It is difficult to categorize some trans people as being (biologically) male or female for the simple fact that their gender identity and their gender expression do not match in the way that is socially acceptable. This does not make them any less ‘mān’ when they choose to use the term, or any less ‘woman.’ What it does mean is that they do not fit into the traditional definitions of male and female, because these terms, quite simply, are not sufficient to describe gender. Because our gender is a combination of our gender identity, our gender expression, and the gender that others attribute to us, which are sometimes at odds with one another, sociological research needs to begin considering these dimensions as separate, yet equally important, aspects of our research participant’s identities. By ignoring these multiple aspects of gender, we have limited our understanding of the transgender person and experience.

### The Importance of Significant Others

It is because of these three dimensions of gender that the significant other becomes so vital to understanding the transgender experience. When we describe our own gender, for example, we are likely to only focus on one aspect of it (e.g., identity), because we are not accustomed to seeing our gender as being multi-dimensional. This, of course, is expected in a society that views gender from a very narrow perspective. What the significant others in this study have shown, however, is that (even though they may not be able to name it) they are very aware of the multiple dimensions of their partner's identity, as well as of their own. The transgender participants in this study (whether or not their three dimensions were conflicting) were largely preoccupied with their gender identity, or the way they would prefer to be seen by others. The fact that they were obsessed with identity does not mean that their gender expression was of any less significance. Indeed, the significant others frequently identified their partner's gender expression (not identity) as being the primary concern in their relationship, because how their partners were treated by others was largely dependent on how well they were able to pass and, hence, the attribution of others. Wanting to be masculine or feminine, after all, are highly demanded and appreciated qualities or performances in our society. It is, in this context, only when your desire to be masculine or feminine doesn't match up with your perceived gender that you become an outcast. This is not to say that trans individuals don't recognize this, but that significant others are in many cases more aware of it (inasmuch as they raised the issue more frequently), perhaps because of the strong feelings they have for their partner and their "outsider looking in" perspective.

Moreover, the significant other is grappling with changes in their own identity, expression and attribution, as evidenced by the many who said they simply didn't know how to behave with their partner now that they (the significant other) admitted struggling with their own gender identity. Changes to the gender roles in the couple dynamic forced a lot of significant others to question not only their own gender identity and expression, but their sexual identity and expression as well. Those who at one time expressed themselves as gay and lesbian now have to face the issue of expressing themselves as heterosexual, and vice versa, thus causing them to question their own identities.

Consider a heterosexual couple that stays together after the male partner reveals a transgender identity and decides to undergo sexual reassignment surgery, as many of my participants did. The female partners' sexual identity doesn't necessarily change (at least not in action, as suggested by the number that chose celibacy after transition), but certainly their sexual expression (and the attribution of others) does. Now being seen as a lesbian, the cisgender partner must grapple with the fact that her identity no longer matches her expression, either. Hence, the significant other is providing us additional insight into the dimensions of both gender and sexual identity, expression and attribution.

Additionally, I must point out the obvious importance of significant others. Sociologists have long studied the traditional family unit and changes in it over time. Not only are there sociological studies of traditional families, but studies of non-traditional families (such as gay and lesbian families) have also emerged. Given this trend, it only makes sense that we turn our attention to the growing number of families that have trans parents and children. To ignore this new social arrangement is not only ignoring the transgender population, but it may also cause us to miss out on information that speaks to

traditional families as well, such as the pervasiveness of gender norms, even in families that do not fit our traditional understanding of male and female roles. As this study indicates, traditional gender norms define trans families in the same way that they define “average” families; thus, families with transgender members truly speak to the pervasiveness of traditional conceptions of gender. Finally, the significant others of transgender individuals lend us a great deal of insight when it comes to the needs of transgender people and, just as importantly, their families.

#### Practical Suggestions for Positive Social Change

Perhaps one of the things this study does best is echo the findings of other studies, insofar as it has identified significant needs in the trans community, specifically as they relate to employment discrimination, fairness in healthcare, and support in the family unit. These issues must be dealt with on a national level, which requires an understanding and compassion that has not yet been broached in our culture. Perhaps when we begin to discuss gender properly and, as a result, accept that it is more dynamic and broad than its current conception, trans people will start to find the acceptance that they deserve.

I see change as being necessary on three fronts<sup>18</sup>. First, change is needed in the development of appropriate therapies and medical treatment. Second, there must be changes in the law in terms of both institutional discrimination and the recognition of transgender individuals in hate crime laws. Third, and most importantly, it is crucial that

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<sup>18</sup> It must be recognized that the suggestions I make have been made time and again by transgender activists. The trans community has been actively pursuing social change for decades. Nevertheless, as equal rights for trans people have not yet been gained, these suggestions need to be offered as many times as it takes to affect social change.

trans individuals and their families gain more acceptance in the larger society. This, of course, is the only way for any of the changes I suggest to occur.

There is a thin line between pathologizing the transgender identity and a sincere attempt to address the obvious psychological needs that trans individuals have, so I offer this advice with some apprehension. It is not conducive to the health of the transgender individual (or their families) to treat them as though they have a condition that should be changed. This approach has only resulted in humiliating and life threatening “treatments” such as shock and conversion therapies, which still continue today.

Arguably, these tactics only cause the trans individual more psychological trauma than they experience as a result of the incongruence between their gender identity and others’ attributions. Clearly, however, the social stigmatization of challenging traditional gender norms can be damaging to an individual. Thus, there is a need for therapy that centers around building self-esteem and healthy relationships, not only for trans individuals but for their family members as well.

Beyond restructuring the current therapeutic approach to transgender identities, the medical system in general needs some serious adjustments in terms of how it approaches the needs of trans patients. It is clear that, beyond pathologizing trans patients, the medical community is ill-equipped to treat them. Treating trans patients does not mean eliminating their feelings of being “in the wrong body,” but instead appropriately assisting them in matching their gender expressions to their gender identity to whatever degree they feel necessary. For some, this may mean assistance in learning to engage informal gender presentation requirements, such as binders, packers and guidance in wardrobe, makeup and body language. For others, however, this may mean



hormone treatment, breast removal or augmentation, vaginoplasty or phalloplasty, facial feminization, hair removal, trachea shaving and a variety of cosmetic surgeries. As these procedures may be crucial to maintaining one's mental and physical health, they should be covered by traditional insurance plans. If insurance companies are willing to cover prosthetic devices for people who have suffered bodily injuries, even in cases where the patient could physically function without them, then they should also cover those procedures necessary for gender transition.

There also needs to be a number of changes in the legal treatment of transgender individuals, beginning with including trans people in anti-discrimination policies. States have already banned employment discrimination against individuals based on their sex (e.g., a construction company can't deny women a job), and these provisions should be extended to transgender individuals. It is antithetical to our cultural commitment to anti-discrimination to deny anyone employment simply because their gender expression does not match their gender identity, or because we are fearful of transgender individuals. Indeed, these discriminatory practices only serve to create additional social problems rather than to solve them. So long as the unemployment rate for transgender individuals remains significantly higher than for non-trans people, we will continue to feel the residual effects through an over-reliance on public assistance. Moreover, we already recognize a link between poverty and crime and, thus can expect to see the rates of crime and incarceration rise for trans people.

On a more immediate level, corporations and schools need to take steps towards embracing the needs of transgender individuals, both in terms of educating employees and students and in allowing individuals to use the bathroom in which they are most

comfortable. This does not mean simply creating additional unisex bathrooms<sup>19</sup>, but ensuring that trans people (or anyone else for that matter, e.g., “butch” lesbians) will be comfortable in the restroom of their choice. Just as we recognized in the 1990’s that separate bathrooms for individuals living with HIV/AIDS was inappropriate, we need to recognize that separate bathrooms for trans individuals has no social benefit either.

In order for any of these recommendations to be useful, there must be an overall shift in the way our society views transgender individuals. Accomplishing this will not be an easy feat but, just as racial minorities have gained greater acceptance and just as gays, lesbians and bisexuals are finding more acceptance in the larger culture, trans people can too. This will require an active movement towards social acceptance and, because of the relative size of the trans community, this will require allies to join in the fight. If we are to truly have a public Sociology (meaning a discipline that actively and purposely affects social change), then gender scholars must pledge to be a part of this movement, starting with getting the findings of our data in the hands of those who affect public policy (e.g. lawmakers and trans activists) and continuing with a commitment to involve ourselves in organizations that strive to affect positive social change for trans individuals and their partners.

The depth and breadth of the data collected in this study provide several contributions to the field of Sociology, particularly to our understanding of the social construction of deviance and to the continued development of transgender theory and

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<sup>19</sup> On an interesting note, at the time of this writing there is a controversy stirring in Gainesville, Florida over a proposed ordinance that would effectively ban discrimination against transgender individuals in employment, housing, and public accommodation (e.g., the availability of bathroom facilities). The fact that there is avid protest against the ordinance (especially as it relates to public bathrooms) demonstrates that we have a long way to go in terms of the public acceptance of trans individuals.

research. As discussed in Chapter 2, both deviance and transgender theories significantly informed the development of this study. Conversely, both theoretical perspectives have been expanded as a result of this research.

In addition to confirming that the label of deviant has been successfully applied to transgender individuals, this study adds the dimension of describing the social consequences of deviant labels and the resulting strain that they can place on one's own identity. As the participants of this study have revealed, embracing an identity that is deemed socially unacceptable imposes both psychological trauma and social barriers on transgender individuals and their significant others. Understanding these barriers allow us to go beyond simply describing identities that have been labeled deviant and to move towards offering suggestions for eradicating the negative incidents that currently characterize the transgender experience. The suggestions laid out here are a starting point for us to begin recognizing the potential we (as deviance theorists and public Sociologists) have to become agents of transformation in the public sphere.

Additionally, this work adds to and expands upon the existing empirical work about the trans experience and the literature that has been offered by transgender theorists. In addition to substantiating past findings about trans identities and experiences, this research has included the previously ignored voices of the significant others of trans people. As a result, the data presented here are unique, and represents the beginning of an important body of work. By broadening the scope of previous inquiries in this manner, this work has begun the development of a more complete understanding of gendered experiences and interactions.

It is because of these unique considerations that this work has been able to contribute to transgender theory and gender theories in general. The introduction of identity, expression and attribution as separate dimensions of gender signifies a paradigm shift that has the potential to radically change the way we think about, research and, consequently, explain gender and the experiences that relate to it. My own future research, and hopefully the work of others, will consider these new dimensions before, during, and after the development and implementation of method, which will broaden the scope of the data that can be collected. Thus, our research, and the resulting theories, may be as transformative as the change that our work has the potential to create.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Though this research has contributed to both our theoretical and empirical understanding of the transgender experience, it has its limitations. By understanding these limitations and considering them in future research, we can continue to develop this important body of work with a more complete understanding of how future studies should be conducted and what aspects of the transgender experience should be added to inquiries. Therefore, I conclude by offering the limitations of this study and my thoughts on the appropriate directions for future work.

#### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In addition to your typical, run-of-the-mill limitations (i.e., lack of generalizability and limited resources for data gathering), and your not-so-run-of-the-mill limitations (i.e., insufficient language) this project has raised a myriad of methodological issues that will forever impact the way I conduct research. They say that hindsight is 20/20 and, in this case, it proves true. To begin with, I severely underestimated the power of the Internet as a tool for conducting sociological research. As previously mentioned, the call for participants was posted by two Transgender Michigan board members and one research participant on a total of 34 transgender and SOFFA<sup>20</sup> specific websites. I crossed my fingers and hoped for the best, which I thought would be in the ballpark of 50 participants to complete surveys (at the most). I had that many responses in the first 24 hours that my survey was live on the web. By the end of the first week I had 420 responses and, by the end of the 28 days that my survey was available, I had 499 responses. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that I would get so many participants. While the size of my

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<sup>20</sup> SOFFA stands for Significant Others, Friends, Family and Allies.

sample makes for an amazing data set, it was also enough responses to make the limitations of my measure abundantly clear.

For starters, I failed to ask respondents where they were from. When I created the survey this was a decision based on the desire for confidentiality but, quite honestly, it didn't occur to me that any of my participants would be from outside the U.S. I was completely stumped when I started to see some of the costs of hormones and surgeries reported in pounds instead of dollars. The magnitude of my oversight was really revealed when someone in the U.K. emailed me to inquire about the time zone that my chat room focus group would be held in – the individual politely pointed out that I had failed to indicate it on the call for participants. When we are taught research methods it is oft presumed that our populations' location is always known and, with traditional methods, this is almost always the case. As the Internet becomes a more popular space for conducting research, we must begin to shed some of our old assumptions, particularly as they relate to gathering demographic information.

Another major limitation of this study was my inability to gather participants willing to take part in face-to-face research. Had the face-to-face focus groups been a success, the data would have undoubtedly been even more useful. As mentioned in Chapter 3, participants may have been hesitant to speak in a group or lacked the interest to participate in a study such as this. It is also likely, however, that the lack of participants had just as much to do with the small number of trans individuals (and, hence, trans couples) living in my area. Conducting one-on-one interviews may have been a more effective approach but, as the trans population here is small, the resources

necessary for the type of travel that such interviews would have required are currently not at my disposal.

Additionally, this work was limited in many ways by the requirements put forth by my university's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). I fully believe that the HSIRB had the best interests of my subjects in mind, but they can only consider the best interests of my subjects within the framework of their own understanding of transgender individuals and experiences. The trans experience (and sometimes even the existence of transgender people) is foreign to most people. As institutional review boards are meant to protect the vulnerable from threatening research, their number one priority should be to understand those populations that they deem vulnerable. It was quite clear that the HSIRB considered transgender individuals to be highly at-risk research participants (which is true), but it was also clear that the members of the board had very minimal, if any, understanding of what it means to be transgender, despite my efforts to offer them a comprehensive literature review.

For example, though I offered the same definition of transgender in my HSIRB proposal as I offered here (in Chapter 1), the board argued that, "this seems like a very broad definition to the HSIRB. For example, men who want to be stay-at-home-dads reject normative gender roles, but they are probably not appropriate subjects for your study." While it is true that stay-at-home-dads may reject normative gender, they also (presumably) would not identify as transgender or be spending a lot of time surfing transgender support groups on the Internet. Moreover, the explanation I provided (again, the same as in Chapter 1) describes in great detail the need to define transgender broadly in order to reach participants whose experiences are pertinent to this study. That the

board raised this particular issue suggests that either my proposal was not read thoroughly (which is probably not the case), or that they lack a basic understanding of what it means to be transgender.

Consequently, I argue that training for HSIRB members should include learning about vulnerable populations beyond prisoners, children and the disabled. If HSIRB members were prepared to deal with studies that considered non-traditional participants, less time could be spent on understanding the basic terminology that was used in my proposal and more time could be spent on assessing the value and limitations of the method being proposed. I believe if this had been the case for my study, the HSIRB could have been more effective in helping me to identify the aforementioned limitations.

In light of these limitations, and the findings of this research, I see several directions for future research. First and foremost, this study has revealed that our current methods for collecting demographic information (particularly as it relates to the gender of our participants) is not sufficient. The three dimensions of gender that I have offered (i.e., gender identity, expression and attribution) are not revealed by traditional means of collecting data on gender. Typically, when we gather data on gender we ask something to the effect of “What is your sex/gender?” Participants are then provided with boxes to check for “male,” “female” and, if the researcher is at all socially conscious, “intersex,” “transgender” or “other.” While this may be sufficient for work in which gender is not a primary variable, it tells us nothing about people’s experiences in relation to their gender. Consequently, research on gender and social interaction is still largely underdeveloped as a consequence of this oversight.



Presumably, when participants “check the appropriate box,” they are inclined to check their biological sex or, at most, their gender identity, not their gender expression or attribution. What this study has exposed is that one’s gender expression and the attributions of others may have more of an affect on one’s experiences than their identity alone. Thus, for example, if we are trying to understand the experiences of transwomen and we only provide gender boxes that denote two or three orientations, we haven’t really tapped into how that gender identity connects to their experiences. This hypothetical study (where participants only have two or three boxes to choose from) would likely produce a range of experiences, from positive to negative, giving us no understanding of what may have contributed to the differences in those experiences. If future work were to include multiple measures to assess one’s gender *and all of its’ dimensions*, then we would be better equipped to understand how one’s identity and expression affects one’s experiences in the larger society. This work suggests that the more one’s identity and expression conflict with one another, the more social challenges the individual faces (regardless of whether that person is transgender or cisgender). Accordingly, I would urge future work to investigate this possible correlation further.

Additionally, there needs to be a continued focus on simply understanding the transgender experience. Transgender research, as it currently stands, is too limited for us to establish a comprehensive literature, thus exploratory work must continue. However, this study, along with others, have given us an indication of some important foci for future work. In particular there should be a continuation of studies that address the process whereby trans people are labeled as deviant. Doing so means investigating those institutions that construct such labels more closely. While much work has been done on

how the medical community has contributed to the deviant labels applied to trans individuals, we must move forward further to consider the legal system that discriminates against trans people and, especially, the media that perpetuates negative images of transgender communities. I believe the media has been considered the least often in terms of the institutions responsible for the current climate surrounding the transgender experience, and cannot be ignored as an integral part of the construction of deviant labels. Semiotic analysis (meaning the study of signs – signals of behavior and culture – embedded in texts) of the media representation of transgender people can provide us insight into how a fear of transgender identities is perpetuated in the larger culture. Once the origins of these fears are better understood we will be more equipped to dispel them.

What this research has provided is a starting point for moving forward in our understanding of the experiences of significant others, and an addition to the base of knowledge we have begun to develop about transgender identities. As best stated by one of my trans participants (emphasis added),

It is a huge trauma to strip yourself of your ‘lifelong’ identity and introduce yourself to the world. *This journey is not for the faint of heart* as it is a very very painful process. I don’t think words can quite articulate what it is like to come out of prison after 42 years and suddenly be free and exposed.

The insight of this testimonial illuminates the importance of work in the field of transgender theory and research, and should be considered a challenge to social scientists to continue our quest to privilege these experiences as integral to our understanding of gender. By empowering transgender voices we can hopefully begin to articulate the complexity with which gender shapes our understanding of and our experiences within the larger social world. This work, the work yet to come, and the changes that may occur

as a result, are key components in transforming the transgender experience from one of pain and suffering to the liberating event that it should be when one chooses and learns to embrace their gender, regardless of how complex it may be.

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# WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

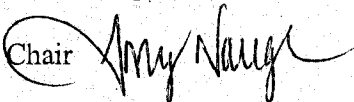


Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

## Appendix A – HSIRB Letter of Approval

Date: June 20, 2007

To: Susan Caringella, Principal Investigator  
Emily Lenning, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair 

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 07-02-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “Negotiating Gender Transitions: An Investigation of the Social, Psychological, and Economic Challenges Faced by Transgender Individuals and their Significant Others” has been **approved** under the **full** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 16, 2008



## Appendix B – List of Websites

### LiveJournal

Boigrrl1der  
\_ftm\_  
ftm  
ftmeverything  
genderfuck  
genderqueer  
latetransistion  
partners\_of\_tg  
tori-lynn-lives  
transenough  
transgender  
transmichigan  
transnews  
transparentes

### Myspace

Transgender Michigan

### Yahoo Groups

FtM-trans  
JustusGRMI  
LambdaGroup-Trans  
MidwestTGCrossroads  
MidWest\_Transgender\_Support  
MontgomeryGenderAlliance  
Peer2peertg  
TGMichigan  
Tgmi-SOFFAs  
Tgowm  
tgpartners  
Thegreatnorthernwilderness  
Transgender\_Michigan  
Trans\_cend  
Transmen  
Transmen-and-partners  
Trans-Men  
Transmich  
TS\_Menace\_Washtenaw\_MI

## **Call for Research Participants!**

**Are you in a committed, monogamous relationship?  
Are you or is your partner transgender?**

I am looking for individuals who are interested in completing a 20-30 minute on-line survey and joining me for a 1-2 hour on-line focus group on the social, psychological and economic challenges related to your or your partner's gender transition. The survey can be accessed at

(insert website)

The focus group will be conducted  
at [www.TransgenderMichigan.org](http://www.TransgenderMichigan.org)  
(Time and date to be announced)

**\*\*You do not need to be a member of Transgender Michigan to participate.**

If you and/or your partner would like to participate in this research sponsored by Western Michigan University and share your experiences of being in a relationship, please visit (insert web address) to complete the survey and find out more about joining our focus group.

Please feel free to email me (Emily Lenning) at [lizabethemily@aol.com](mailto:lizabethemily@aol.com) if you have any questions or need additional information.

## Appendix D – Consent Document

Western Michigan University  
Department of Sociology  
Principal Investigator: Susan Caringella  
Student Investigator: Emily Lenning

You have been invited to participate in a study entitled *“Negotiating Gender Transition: An Investigation of the Social, Psychological, and Economic Challenges faced by Transgender Individuals and their Significant Others.”* The purpose of this study is to understand the challenges that you and your partner face as a result of gender transition and to identify areas in which additional support services may be useful for transgender individuals and their significant others. This project is Emily Lenning’s dissertation project.

You will be asked to complete a 20-30 minute electronic survey about the social, psychological and economic challenges related to your or your partners gender transition. and then participate in a 1-2 hour online focus group with other individuals who have chosen to participate in this project. Your participation is completely voluntary and at any time you are free to terminate your participation.

As with any research, some unforeseen risks are possible, *such as emotional discomfort*. If you feel that you have been caused some discomfort as a result of the topics that we will discuss, please visit [kgllrc.org](http://kgllrc.org) or [transgendermichigan.org](http://transgendermichigan.org) for an extensive list of available medical, legal, social and psychological resources.

A possible benefit of this research may be that you will be provided the opportunity to discuss the issues that you feel are important to understanding your experiences as a transgender individual or as the partner of a transgender individual. The knowledge gained by this research may benefit others who are sharing similar experiences.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research you may contact Susan Caringella at 269-387-5279 or Emily Lenning at 269-324-1114. You may also contact the chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the vice president for research at 269-387-8298 with any concerns that you have.

By proceeding with this online questionnaire you are indicating your consent to participate in this survey and indicating that all information discussed in the focus group (if you choose to participate) is confidential and you will not discuss the contents of the discussion or information about other participants outside of the focus group. You may end participation at any time. Although you are not providing any identifying information, there are security risks with anything you do in an online format. Proceed to the survey by clicking the “continue” button. At the end of the survey you can decide to consent to have the answers you provide used as research data.

CONTINUE

EXIT

## Appendix E – Survey for Transgender Participants

Dear Participant,

Thank you for choosing to be a participant in this exciting new research! Your input is extremely important and I am so glad that you decided to share your experiences. Before you participate in our on-line focus group, I would like to collect some basic information that will help me later in my data analysis. Please understand that this information and the information gathered during the focus group will not be used to reveal your actual identity (real names will not be used in the presentation of my findings), but rather to describe the diversity of my participants. Basically, I would like to know about who you are and how you identify personally. Thanks in advance for your honesty.

What is your age in years?

What is your race/ethnicity?

What was your biological sex at birth?

What is your gender identity? (please describe as completely as possible)

What is your partner's gender identity? (please describe as completely as possible)

Are you now or have you ever gone through any formal gender transition processes, that is, hormone therapy, "top" surgery, "bottom" surgery, hysterectomy, gender reassignment surgery, etc.? (please describe as completely as possible)

If you have not opted for formal gender transition processes, why?

How long have you been in a relationship with your current partner?

At what stage of your transition or the realization that you were transgender did you begin this relationship?

What is your sexual orientation? (please describe as completely as possible)

Was your sexual orientation different prior to transition or the realization that you were transgender? (If yes, how so?)

What is your partner's sexual orientation? (please describe as completely as possible)

Was your partner's sexual orientation different prior to your transition or the realization that you were transgender? (If yes, how so?)

How has your transition or transgender identity affected your relationship the most, both negatively and/or positively?

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Identifying as transgender can have significant “costs,” such as economic costs, social costs, and psychological costs. Please select any of the “costs” you have incurred as a result of your gender identity, and use the space provided to describe them in more detail and to talk about how they relate to your relationship.

Social & Psychological Costs:

☐ Loss of Friends

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☐ Loss of Family

---

☐ Struggle with Personal Identity

---

☐ Struggle with your Partner’s Identity

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☐ Challenges in the Workplace and/or School

---

☐ Other

---

Economic Costs:

☐ Formal Gender Transition Processes (e.g., hormone treatment, gender reassignment surgery, “top” surgery, “bottom” surgery, facial feminization, etc.)

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☐ Informal Gender Presentation Requirements (e.g., new wardrobe, prosthetic devices, voice lessons, etc.)

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☐ Legal Costs (e.g., changing your name, reissuing birth certificate, custody cases, etc.)

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☐ Career Costs (e.g., loss of job, change in position, etc.)

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\_\_\_\_ Other

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. It would be greatly appreciated if you would join me for an online focus group on (insert date and time), to be held in the chat room at [www.transgendermichigan.org](http://www.transgendermichigan.org). If you are thinking about joining our focus group, please choose a username to identify yourself and your gender identity.

USERNAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Again, thank you for your time and honesty. Please be sure to write down your username so you can use it in our focus group!

By submitting this survey you are indicating your consent to have your answers used as data in this research study.

## Appendix F – Survey for Significant Other Participants

Dear Participant,

Thank you for choosing to be a participant in this exciting new research! Your input is extremely important and I am so glad that you decided to share your experiences. Before you participate in our on-line focus group, I would like to collect some basic information that will help me later in my data analysis. Please understand that this information and the information gathered during the focus group will not be used to reveal your actual identity (real names will not be used in the presentation of my findings), but rather to describe the diversity of my participants. Basically, I would like to know about who you are and how you identify personally. Thanks in advance for your honesty.

What is your age in years?

What is your race/ethnicity?

What is your gender identity? (please describe as completely as possible)

What is your partner's gender identity? (please describe as completely as possible)

Is your partner now or have they ever gone through any formal gender transition processes, that is, hormone therapy, “top” surgery, “bottom” surgery, hysterectomy, gender reassignment surgery, etc.? (please describe as completely as possible)

If they have not opted for formal gender transition processes, why?

---

How long have you been in a relationship with your current partner?

At what stage of your partner's transition or the realization that they were transgender did you begin this relationship?

What is your sexual orientation? (please describe as completely as possible)

Was your sexual orientation different prior to your partner's transition or the realization that they were transgender? (If so, how?)

What is your partner's sexual orientation? (please describe as completely as possible)

Is your partner's sexual orientation different than it was prior to their transition or the realization that they were transgender?

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How has your partner's transition or transgender identity affected your relationship the most, both negatively and/or positively?

---

Identifying as transgender can have significant “costs,” such as economic costs, social costs, and psychological costs. Please select any of the “costs” you have incurred as a result of your gender identity, and use the space provided to describe them in more detail and to talk about how they relate to your relationship.

Social & Psychological Costs:

\_\_\_\_ Loss of Friends

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\_\_\_\_ Loss of Family

---

\_\_\_\_ Struggle with Personal Identity

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\_\_\_\_ Struggle with your Partner’s Identity

---

\_\_\_\_ Challenges in the Workplace and/or School

---

\_\_\_\_ Other

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Economic Costs:

\_\_\_\_ Your Partner’s Formal Gender Transition Processes (e.g., hormone treatment, gender reassignment surgery, “top” surgery, “bottom” surgery, facial feminization, etc.)

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\_\_\_\_ Your Partner’s Informal Gender Presentation Requirements (e.g., new wardrobe, prosthetic devices, voice lessons, etc.)

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\_\_\_\_ Your Partner’s Legal Costs (e.g., changing his/her name, reissuing birth certificate, custody cases, etc.)

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\_\_\_\_ Career Costs (e.g., loss of job, change in position, etc.)

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\_\_\_\_ Other

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. It would be greatly appreciated if you would join me for an online focus group on (insert date and time), to be held in the chat room at [www.transgendermichigan.org](http://www.transgendermichigan.org). If you are thinking about joining our focus group, please choose a username to identify yourself.

USERNAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Again, thank you for your time and honesty. Please be sure to write down your username so you can use it in our focus group!

By submitting this survey you are indicating your consent to have your answers used as data in this research study.

## Appendix G – Focus Group Script

Welcome, and thank you for participating in today's focus group! My name is Emily Lenning, I am a student at Western Michigan University, and the goal of my research is to understand the challenges, if any, that you face as a result of you or your partner's gender transition or transgender identity. As a couple, I would guess that you and your partner have experienced some social, psychological or economic changes in your life that relate to issues of gender identity. The purpose of this focus group is to have a conversation about those changes and challenges, so I invite you to be as open and explicit as you wish, so long as you speak with respect to others in the group. By participating in this focus group/chat room, you are indicating your consent to be a part of this project. However, participation is completely voluntary so if, at any time, you wish to stop participating, feel free to do so. Please be aware that if the researcher feels that you are being disrespectful to others or disruptive to the group she will ask you to leave. As with any research, some unforeseen risks are possible. If you feel that you have been caused some discomfort as a result of the topics that we will discuss, please visit [kgllrc.org](http://kgllrc.org) or [transgendermichigan.org](http://transgendermichigan.org) for an extensive list of available medical, legal, social and psychological resources. Although I am interested in hearing about a few specific issues, this group is about your experiences, so feel free to take the conversation in whatever direction you feel is important. Let's start by talking about how others, such as your friends and family, have dealt with the news of you or your partners transgender identity or choice to transition?

### Topics for Prompts:

#### Family Issues

- Estrangement from extended family
- Changes in immediate family dynamics/gender roles
- Issues with children/custody
- Struggles with your new identity

#### Friend Issues

- Changes in relationships with friends
- Relationships with other trans couples
- Struggles with your new identity

#### Community Issues

- Experiences in church
- Experience in your neighborhood

#### Social Support

- What services have been helpful in dealing with issues?
- Significance of support from other trans couples

### Transition

- Health insurance
- Cost of formal procedures
- Cost of informal activity
- Changes in the individual
- Legal costs **incurred**
- Counseling

### Sexual Identity

- How identity **has changed** in relation to **transition**
- Dealing with others' perceptions

### Employment

- Loss of jobs
- Position changes – Promotions/Demotions
- Issues with **Co-Workers**

### Victimization

- By individuals
- By institutions