

Abstract

ASHTON, KASEY. Self-Authoring Gender Outside the Binary: A Narrative Analysis of (Trans)gender Undergraduates. (Under the direction of Alyssa Rockenbach).

This narrative inquiry explored how transgender college students construct, experience, and make meaning of gender. Gender is not constructed or understood in isolation; it is therefore essential to consider how personal cognition intersects with and is influenced by an internal sense of self and relationships with others when exploring how transgender college students understand gender. Self-authorship theory and queer theory were used in conjunction as theoretical lenses for understanding gender meaning-making. For the purposes of this research, constructing gender relates to the epistemological dimension (how do I know?) of meaning-making. Three primary research questions guided this study: 1) How do transgender college students construct and interpret gender? 2) How does a transgender college student's internal sense of self inform gender construction? 3) How do relationships with others inform transgender college students' construction of gender?

A qualitative study using narrative inquiry methodology was conducted to explore how transgender college students in a southeastern large public institution make meaning of gender. In-depth interviews were the primary form of data collection and each was digitally recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Document analysis of a reflective prompt and campus documents were also a part of the data analysis. Emergent themes evolved from thematic coding.

Three overarching themes emerged from the data analysis: power in self-definition, navigating gender roles, and negotiating connections. The emergent themes weave together as the participants self-author their gender. For the participants in this study, their gender

identities are not static, but are continuously evolving as they age and navigate new life experiences. Self-authorship theory and queer theory were used in conjunction to analyze the deconstruction and reconstruction process of interpreting gender. The participants' stories reveal that the gender meaning-making process is a constant cycle of breaking down external formulas, recognizing the shortcomings of universal truths and absolutes, cultivating personal values and beliefs, and redefining personal expressions of masculinity and femininity. The participants' understanding of themselves and their gender identity becomes more complex over time, enabling them to deconstruct external formulas about gender and determine for themselves what to integrate into their lives. The participants' experiences also reveal that, similar to gender identity, gender expression is fluid and changeable. In facing negative stereotypes, strict gender expectations, inadequate language for self-definition, and strained relationships, the students within this study all faced 'catalytic' moments that have added to their complexity of thinking and meaning-making processes. This study demonstrates that transgender college students have distinct gender identities and that a homogenous trans experience did not exist. The participants' stories reveal that the gender meaning-making process involves breaking down gendered social norms and reconstruction. The participants daily take the disparate components of deconstructed gender messages and redefine and construct them into gender identities that are an accurate reflection of their inner self concepts. Pairing these two theories together expands both our understanding of how gender-diverse students interpret and experience gender, but also imbues subjective experiences into the abstract concepts of gender identity and expression.

Self-Authoring Gender Outside the Binary: A Narrative Analysis of (Trans)gender Undergraduates

by
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the participants of this study. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. Without you, this study would not have been possible.

Biography

Kasey Ashton currently resides in Raleigh, NC and is the Assistant Director for the Women in Science and Engineering Living and Learning Village at North Carolina State University. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a Bachelor of Arts in Recreation and Leisure Studies with a specialization in event programming. She began her student affairs career working as a Student Life Instructor at the North Carolina School of Science and Math in 2002 where she was a ‘dorm mom’ for 31 teenage women. In 2005, she continued her work in residential life and became a Residence Director at Meredith College. She greatly enjoyed working with college students and decided to pursue a Master’s degree in Higher Education Administration at North Carolina State University. She began her academic career at NC State in the fall of 2006 and graduated with her masters in the spring of 2008. Later that year, she began working towards her Doctorate of Education in Higher Education Administration. As she prepares to graduate, she hopes to continue to work with the WISE program and eventually become a director of a living learning village.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Transgender college students are often an invisible minority on college campuses. This invisibility occurs for myriad reasons that are both systemic and personal. University and college campuses are gendered systems, built around and consistently reinforcing the gender binary (male/female) through housing assignments, gender-specific bathrooms and locker rooms, institutional forms, and countless other ways (Bilodeau, 2007). On a personal level, many transgender students choose not to express their gender identity because they fear being targeted, harassed and discriminated against (Bilodeau, 2007; Rankin, 2005). Students who are out on campus note that they are often viewed as objects of curiosity, making them feel less than human and undervalued (McKinney, 2005). Gender diversity is a concept that many campuses struggle to understand (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). *Transgender* is an umbrella term that refers to individuals whose gender identity, “and expression do not match the traditional gender norms assigned to their sex at birth” (Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011, p. 144). A number of gender identities are encompassed beneath the transgender umbrella and Hines (2007) stresses that a homogenous trans experience does not exist. As we progress further into the second decade of the twenty-first century, transgender college students are more frequently becoming visible on campuses nationwide and are demanding that their needs be met. In order to effectively meet those needs, colleges and universities must transition from reactive to proactive responses. An essential element of this process involves broadening gender concepts and increasing understanding of gender experiences outside of the binary.

Higher education scholars are working to add transgender college student voices and experiences into student development research and literature. In years past, the T in GLBT higher education research and literature has been mostly implied, less often addressed; the assumption is that transgender issues are the same as sexual orientation issues (Beemyn, 2003; McKinney, 2005; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Pusch, 2005). As transgender students slip the mantle of invisibility and challenge the gender binary, they are more often becoming the focus of higher education studies. Much of what has been published in the last decade has focused on beneficial policy and procedural changes institutions can and should make in order to make their campuses more welcoming and safe (Beemyn, 2003, 2005; Carter, 2000). While empirical research is still lacking, what does exist illustrates the challenges transgender college students face on campuses across the nation (Bilodeau, 2007; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005, Rankin, 2010).

While weaving transgender college student experiences into higher education literature is imperative, Driver (2008) warns against casting queer student experiences only in terms of “doom and gloom” (p. 4). By concentrating only on statistics related to drug use, suicidal tendencies, homelessness, and as victims of discrimination and assault, LGBT youth are cast into the role of a victim role and as individuals who are in need of rescue. Ramussen (2004) argues that this kind of continuous victimization objectifies and dehumanizes queer youth, turning them into objects that need to be addressed and fixed. She warns that this objectification infantilizes queer youth and provides the, “rationale for adults to act in their best interests rather than to work with them” to address negative experiences (p. 141-142). When authority figures ‘do what is best’ for queer youth, their actions can be perceived as

being both “patronizing” and imposing “normative ideals,” pushing students further into the role of “other” (Driver, 2008, p. 5).

This study sought to infuse transgender student voices into higher education research, as well as to explore how transgender college students self-author gender. The focus of this research was less on how college students intersect, interact, and experience campus climate and policies/procedures, and more on their personal journeys and development related to gender. Without an understanding of how individual transgender college students construct and make meaning of gender, either within or outside of the gender binary, programmatic interventions and support programs are less likely to meet the needs of the whole student. A deeper look into how gender is constructed and self-authored may help to illuminate how gender privilege negatively impacts the students who do not fit easily within the gender binary. Policy and procedural changes will be more effective if faculty, staff, and other students can begin to see transgender identities as not existing in opposition to gender, but merely as points along a spectrum of gender.

Constructing Sex and Gender

The medical community views sex and gender as being two separate categories. Sex is determined by biological components such as genitalia (appearance of), chromosomes (XX, XY), and presence of ovaries or testes (Hubbard, 1998). Gender, on the other hand, equals masculine or feminine attributes and behaviors, which are shaped by societal and cultural norms, upbringing, interactions with peers, religious ideologies, and media influence (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011; Hines, 2007; Hubbard, 1998; Namaste, 2000, Wilchins, 2004). While sex and gender are defined as two separate categories, the

terms are often used interchangeably, blurring the distinctions. Outside of medical definitions, the concept of sex and gender are enmeshed in societal and cultural norms, bound together in such a way as to become nearly indistinguishable from one another; sex is gender (Diamond, 2002). In common vernacular, gender is often used as a synonym for sex. A current trend in baby showers is to have a ‘gender reveal’ party, where the biological sex of the child is shared with family and friends. In this case, it is the child’s sex that is being revealed, but the term ‘gender’ is being utilized. Western culture, in general, allows for a range of masculinity and femininity. There can be masculine women and feminine men, but there is little to no room for those who seek to challenge and traverse the binary.

Implicit in western understandings of sex and gender is the understanding that there are only two sexes and two genders; male/female, masculine/feminine. It is a binary system that divides individuals into polar opposites and leaves little room for those who do not fit neatly within the binary (Hines, 2007; Hubbard, 1998; Feinberg, 1996; Wilchins, 2004). Kessler (1990) argues, however, that the sex dichotomy found in western culture, “is not mandated by biology” (cited in Hubbard, 1998, p. 49). Rather it is a societal construct, as is the need for gender to match an individual’s genitalia. Namaste (2000) argues that, “our binary conception of gender produces sexed,” male and female bodies (p. 25). Viewed this way, society’s conceptions of gender existing as a binary are directly responsible for the sex binary, leaving no room for subtleties or ambiguities.

Ekins and King (1998) use the term *gender-blending* to describe the intentional, “mixing of various aspects of male and female gender” (p. 99). Transgender individuals who traverse the gender lines and seek to blend together both feminine and masculine attributes

are viewed as a threat to the gender binary (Ekins & King, 1998; Feinberg, 1996; Hines, 2007; Wilchins, 2004). Western culture tends to pathologize those who disrupt and challenge gender stereotypes, seeing these individuals as having a medical condition that needs to be “corrected” (Ekins & King; Hines, 2007). Gender dysphoria, which entered the medical vernacular in the 1970s, suggests that those who defy gender binaries are seeking to transition from one sex/gender to the other (Hines, 2007). There is no room within this concept for those who choose to see gender as fluid. Gender-blending, while considered taboo in the west, is often used as a comedic foil, something to be laughed at, not something to be done in “real” life (Ekins & King, 1998; Wilchins, 2004).

What is lacking in these conceptions of sex and gender as a construct is *how* an individual constructs both an internal sense of self and of gender. If a transgender individual exists outside of the gender binary, how then does that person come to understand and make meaning of gender?

Transgender College Students

For most college students, gender is something that is taken for granted; it is not considered; it simply, “*is*” and exists as an integral sense of self. Gender privilege allows for a lack of self-reflection that transgender college students cannot afford; gender is something that must be considered on a regular, if not daily basis. Gender, as it is experienced and constructed by those who do not fit within the gender binary of masculine and feminine (male/female), is a poorly understood phenomenon. Transgender college students, in particular, face numerous challenges surrounding gender on campus (Beemyn, 2003; 2005). Higher education literature focusing specifically on transgender college students is limited,

but growing; the research that does exist concentrates on transgender college student perceptions of programmatic interventions, campus climate, and support (Beemyn, 2003; Carter, 2000; McKinney, 2005; Miner, 2009; Nakamura, 1998; Pusch, 2005). A tacit assumption within programmatic interventions is that transgender students want to transition from one gender to another: male to female or female to male (Bilodeau, 2007).

Programmatic support that focuses solely on the gender binary of male and female leaves transgender students who are not seeking to transition from one recognized gender to another without support. In order to ensure student success, administrators and faculty need to have an understanding not only of transgender issues, but how their campuses are contributing to the challenges faced by transgender college students (Young, 2003).

In a case study focusing on transgender identity development, Bilodeau (2005) finds that transgender students who actively participate in trans-inclusive programming feel a greater sense of connection to their campuses. These kinds of interactions help students to gain a more positive sense of self (Bilodeau, 2005; Pusch, 2005; Sausa, 2005). Transgender students note, however, that the burden usually falls to them to push for programming that is related to their particular needs and experiences (Bilodeau, 2005; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005). Students express frustration that they must consistently push for inclusion, indicating a desire for more proactive steps from their campuses (Bilodeau, 2005; McKinney, 2005).

A troubling misconception is that a common transgender experience exists. Hines (2007), however, argues that the transgender community is composed of a “range of competing discourses” (p. 187). Assuming that all transgender college students are seeking to transition may lead to one-dimensional programming and policy changes that do not meet the

needs of the whole student. Focusing on procedures and other surface-level interventions creates an “othering” effect which limits transgender experiences to a “fixable” realm and discourages delving deeper into their personal journeys. This study did not seek to understand how to better “fix” campuses in order to support transgender college students, but rather looked past procedural changes to explore the meaning-making process of gender construction. By broadening our understanding of how gender is self-authored, we can begin to examine how gender is impacting the way transgender college students interact with their campuses.

Rationale for this Study

This narrative inquiry explored how transgender college students construct, experience, and make meaning of gender. Self-authorship, understood as an internal capacity to define personal beliefs, identity, and relationships, focuses on the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of meaning making to understand how individuals construct and self-author their lives (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009a, 2009b; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004). Gender is not constructed nor understood within a vacuum; it is therefore essential to consider how personal cognition intersects with and is influenced by an internal sense of self and relationships with others when exploring how transgender college students understand gender. For the purposes of this research, constructing gender relates to the epistemological dimension (how do I know?) of meaning-making. Three primary research questions guided this study:

- 1) How do transgender college students construct and interpret gender?

- 2) How does a transgender college student's internal sense of self inform gender construction?
- 3) How do relationships with others inform transgender college students' construction of gender?

Theoretical Framework

Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship model (2001, 2009a, 2009b, 2010) and queer theory were used as theoretical lenses to guide and shape all aspects of this study from the research and interview questions to data collection and analysis. Queer theory, a postmodern and poststructuralist approach to understanding sexuality and gender, stands in opposition to binaries constructed by society such as masculine/feminine and heterosexuality/homosexuality (Abes, 2003; Wilchins, 2004). Gender is seen as fluid and challenges the concepts of "normal" (Abes, 2003). Queer theory deconstructs normative binaries to illustrate that universal truths are in actuality social constructs. In other words, gender is a construct rather than an innate or inborn quality (Butler, 1990).

Where queer theory deconstructs, self-authorship seeks to understand how individuals construct or make meaning of their lives. Self-authorship, the internal capacity to define for oneself values, opinions, and beliefs, is a holistic perspective on development focusing on the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of development (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). As transgender students do not construct gender within a vacuum, this model is helpful in seeing how epistemology, personal identity, and relationships are interwoven elements within the process of meaning-making.

Queer Theory

Queer theory refers to a body of literature that critically analyzes, “the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities, and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender” (Abes & Kasch, 2007, p. 620). With roots in language and literature studies, queer theory seeks to challenge and disrupt normative discourses (Gamson, 2000; Renn, 2010). As a poststructuralist approach, queer theory focuses on language and performance; Richardson (2000) makes note that language is the central element in poststructuralism. He notes that language, “does not simply reflect social reality, it produces meaning, which creates reality” (p. 928).

Poststructuralism argues that there are no universal truths or grand narratives. Sullivan (2003) states that, “particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become ‘naturalized’ in culturally and historically specific ways” (p. 39). Queer theory applies these ideas about language and the nature of truth to gender and sexuality, suggesting that they are social constructs (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Butler, 1990). Rather than being fixed and clearly defined, queer theory views gender and sexuality as a performance, fluid, ambiguous, and changing over time (Abes, 2003; Butler, 1990; Hines, 2007).

A goal of queer theory is to de-pathologize difference (Hines, 2007). Abes and Kasch (2007) note that gender norms are not static, rather they reflect the current, “time and place in which they exist” (p. 621). In other words, as an individual changes and impacts society, society influences and changes the individual, causing eventual shifts in societal norms. Butler (1990) argues that gender is performance; individuals create gender through daily behaviors and interactions with society. Transgender theorists such as Namaste (2000) and

Hines (2007) cautions, however, that understanding gender only as performance is limiting especially in regard to the subjective gender experiences of transgender individuals. Queer theory's focus on performance reduces transgender individuals to figurative devices and devalues subjective experiences (Hines, 2007). Namaste (2000) argues that queer theory views transgender individuals as objects to be deconstructed and does not take into account the lived experiences that impact performance.

This study utilizes queer theory as a broad lens to understand how transgender college students deconstruct the messages that they receive about gender. In the process of making meaning of gender, transgender college students work through external messages they have received about gender from society. Focusing solely on deconstruction, however, does not address how transgender college students construct and make meaning of gender on a personal and subjective level. Self-authorship theory is utilized to understand that meaning-making process.

Self-Authorship

Self-authorship, defined as an individual's ability to internally define personal beliefs, sense of self, and relationships, is a holistic approach to understanding the meaning-making process of college students and young adults (Baxter Magolda, 2010; Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010). Kniefkamp, Widick, and Parker (1978, as cited by Baxter Magolda, 2009a) note that student development research tends to fall into knowledge clusters with little attention paid to how the clusters intersect, creating knowledge silos (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009a, 2009b) stress the importance of focusing on the intersections of developmental constructs in order to break down silos and

create a holistic theoretical perspective. The intersection of the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal developmental dimensions into one model illustrates how each dimension informs and influences the next in the meaning-making process (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010).

The journey towards self-authorship is marked by several stages: following external formulas, the crossroads (acting as a catalyst), and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009a, 2009b). As an individual cycles through the each phase, three driving questions, each representing a developmental dimension, influence and impact the meaning-making process: How do I know? Who am I? What relationships do I want with others? As individuals progress towards self-authorship, they develop complex ways of knowing, personal identities, and relationships with others. Development in one dimension, usually the epistemological (how do I know?), encourages growth in the other dimensions. A more developed understanding of knowledge, enables individuals to examine and develop a more complex personal identity, and influences how relationships with others are negotiated (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010; Meszaros, 2007). However, encounters that challenge previously held beliefs can result in individuals retreating to an earlier stage of accepting external authority while they work through the various developmental dimensions.

Self-authorship theory, which builds upon Baxter Magolda's (1992) earlier Epistemological Reflection Model and Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructivist-developmental subject-object theory, illustrates that becoming a self-authored individual is, "more complex and nuanced than a simple linear trajectory" (Baxter Magolda, 2009b, p. 330). Rather, it is a cyclical journey which is informed and influenced not only by intersecting developmental

dimensions, but also by the personal and social contexts of an individual's daily life (Baxter Magolda 2009b). College students with marginalized identities, such as transgender students, experience another layer of complexity that influences the meaning-making process of self-authorship (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2009a). Personal characteristics such as race, gender, and sexual orientation impact how an individual approaches and interprets experiences which influence the meaning-making process (Baxter Magolda, 2010, 2009b; Parks, 2000; Pizzolato, 2003; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres 2010). While research on gender identity development of men and women is in abundance, there has been almost no focus on how transgender students make meaning of gender.

Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009a, 2009b, 2010) in collaboration with a number of different authors has expanded and refined the concept of self-authorship since first introducing it in 2001. Participants in Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2009b) original longitudinal study are predominately white middle class individuals who did not progress beyond the external formulas phase till after graduation. Multiple researchers, including Baxter Magolda, have applied self-authorship theory to marginalized and minority college student populations demonstrating the flexibility of the model (Abes, 2003; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Research demonstrates that catalytic events, such as encountering racism, negative stereotypes, or harassment, can push marginalized students to question and understand the limitations of external formulas prior to and upon entering college (Abes, Jones, & McEwan, 2007; Torres 2003; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Transgender college students, while largely invisible on campuses are a highly marginalized population facing negative stereotypes, assumptions about their sexuality, and harassment, both verbal and physical. Emotionally charged experiences such as these can act as “ruptures [to] key structures”, bringing gender issues into stark relief, acting as a catalyst for making changes (Hines, 2007, p. 55). Pizzolato (2004) notes that while high risk students may exhibit self-authored behavior upon entering into college, they may fall back onto external formulas of success while trying to navigate the university system, demonstrating the cyclical nature of the journey towards self-authorship.

Transgender students do not navigate gender in isolation. The process of claiming a gender identity outside of the binary directly influences and impacts how they construct meaning, their internal sense of self, as well as their relationships with friends, family, and faculty and staff. Self-authorship theory is an applicable approach because it provides a holistic and integrative approach to understanding this process of gender meaning-making.

Using queer theory and self-authorship theory in combination provides a unique analytical lens for interpreting gender experiences of gender diverse college students. Queer theory provides a critical lens for examining how transgender college students deconstruct external and internalized messages about gender. Self-authorship theory provides an understanding into how participants then take these deconstructed messages and use them to redefine and construct their personal gender identities. Deconstruction of societal norms and “universal truths,” such as the gender binary, goes hand-in-hand with the construction process of becoming a self-authored individual.

Research Design

This study was guided by a constructivist approach, which assumes that reality is subjective and that multiple realities exist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mertens, 2005).

Charmaz (2002) notes that a constructivist researcher studies how individuals, “construct meanings and actions, and they do so from as close to the inside of the experience as they can get” (p. 677). Constructivism allows for a more holistic understanding of gender meaning-making through the creation of relationships between me, the researcher, and my participants, which makes it an appropriate epistemological approach for this study.

Narrative inquiry methodology was used to explore how transgender college students make meaning of gender. Riessman (2008) notes that *story*, which is often used synonymously with *narrative*, is a collaborative process between the teller and the audience. The storyteller takes a lived experience and constructs it into a story, creating plots “from disordered experience,” and sequencing events to make sense of the experience for listeners (Riessman, 2002, p. 698). In doing so, narrators are able to “make sense of themselves, social situations, and history” (Bamberg & McCabe, 1998, cited by Riessman, 2002, p. 698). Narrative inquiry is especially well-suited for studying identity because stories provide a glimpse into how people construct and understand an internal sense of self (Abes, 2003). Transgender individuals have experienced the silencing of their stories both within gender research and GLBT research. Narrative inquiry, therefore, provides a powerful platform for marginalized populations by creating a safe space for storytelling.

For the purposes of this research, data was collected via in-depth interviews as well as a prompt to bring in a visual or textual representation of the participants’ gender. Riessman

(2008) notes that narratives are not found, rather they are constructed with the interviewer taking an active role in that construction. The goal of interviews in narrative inquiry is to “generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements” (p. 23). As individuals narrate their experiences, they are in the process of editing and reshaping those same experiences, which influences the meaning-making process of the individual and the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Significance

This study enhances and informs the knowledge base of gender studies by focusing specifically on how transgender college students construct and make meaning of gender. Gender studies and transgender studies are often separate; this study begins to bridge that gap and introduces a broader spectrum of gender issues into gender research. The traditional binary limits our ability to understand transgender experiences and creates biases that disadvantage those who exist outside of it. By focusing on how transgender college students construct and make meaning of gender, this research challenges homogenous gender constructs and expands the boundaries of gender identities.

Current literature on transgender college students focuses primarily on how to make higher education institutions more inclusive, welcoming, and supportive. While this is an important and vital step, the stories and experiences of transgender college students are only just beginning to enter into the conversation. Without these voices, higher education leaders may struggle to understand how gender impacts transgender students personally, socially, and institutionally. The gender binary is so deeply ingrained into the structure of higher education that it privileges students who neatly fit within it and punishes those who do not

(Bilodeau, 2007). This study challenges that binary and broadens the ways gender can be understood and experienced is an essential component of creating welcoming campuses.

Finally, this study presents transgender students as whole individuals whose stories are unique and worthy of being heard. Rather than focusing on how transgender college students intersect with and experience college campuses, the focus is on individual experiences in the construction of gender identities. Hines (2007) notes that a homogenous transgender experience does not exist; transgender individuals have wide-ranging experiences influenced by numerous variables such as socio-economic status, race, and religious background. Queer theory and self-authorship theory are utilized in this study to examine the individual process of gender meaning-making.

Definitions

Many outside of the transgender community express confusion over terminology and issues facing transgender students (Carter, 2000). To address this concern, the majority of authors writing about transgender students begin with a discussion of terminology in order to provide a foundation on which to build their arguments (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Carter, 2000; Lees, 1998, & Nakamura, 1998). Carter (2000) notes, however, that transgender research is a new and growing field and that terminology is still developing as transgender individuals create and define terms that better reflect how they see themselves. Fienberg (1996) stresses that language is not something that can be, “ordered individually, as if from a Sears catalog. It is forged collectively, in the fiery heat of struggle” (p. ix).

Ekins and King (1998) note that language and identity labels continue to expand and broaden by definition in an attempt to encompass all the variable ways to experience being transgender. Language, as a tool for understanding transgender experiences, lacks the finesse and precision to navigate the subtleties that exist beyond the gender binary (Wilchins, 2004). The term *transgender* in and of itself exemplifies the myriad identities that someone who identifies as transgender may possess: transsexual (someone who is actively seeking to transition from one gender to another); cross-dresser (someone who wears clothing of a different sex for personal fulfillment); intersex (an individual born with ambiguous genitalia); and gender queer (an individual who identifies as neither male nor female and sees gender as fluid), to name a few (Beemyn, 2003, 2005; Bilodeau, 2005, 2007; Hines, 2007; McKinney, 2005).

The following definitions are presented to provide the reader with a clear understanding about the use of specific terms:

Cisgender: Describes individuals whose gender expression and gender identity line up with their biological sex (Schoellkopf, 2012; Winter, 2010).

Gender: social construction of masculine and feminine attributes, characteristics, and behaviors of a particular sex (Hubbard, 1998).

Gender Binary: (binary gender system) social construction that includes only two genders, male and female (Hines, 2007).

Gender Expression: how an individual expresses gender identity through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, and body characteristics

Gender Identity: a person's internal sense of being male, female, both, neither, multi-gendered, and/or androgynous (Huegel, 2003; Winter, 2010).

Meaning-making: Linguistic categories that make up a participant's view of reality and with which actions are defined. Meanings are also referred to as cultural norms, understandings, social reality, beliefs, world-view, and/or stereotypes (Krauss, 2005, p. 762)

Out: Public disclosure of an individual's identity relating to gender and sexual identity (Winter, 2010).

Outing: An individual's gender or sexual identity being revealed without their permission to third parties (Winter, 2010).

Passing: Successfully appearing as and being accepted as one's chosen gender by others (Davidmann, 2010; Huegel, 2003)

Queer: Formerly a derogatory term used to describe homosexual individuals. The term has been reclaimed by many young GLBT individuals to describe deviation from social norms in terms of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression (Winger, 2010).

Self-authorship: the capacity to internally define one's own beliefs, identity, and relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2001); "internal identity that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions..." (Kegan, 1994, p. 185).

Transgender: an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender may include, but is not limited to transsexuals, cross-dressers, and gender-variant people (Kozze, Tylka, & Bauerband, 2012; Hines, 2007; Winter 2010).

Transition: The process through which a person modifies physical characteristics and/or manner of gender expression to be consistent with gender identity. This transition may include hormone therapy, sex-reassignment surgery, and/or other components and is generally conducted under medical supervision based on a set of standards developed by medical professionals (Winter, 2010).

Conclusion

This chapter provides a broad introduction to the research problem, the theoretical framework of the study, and the research questions that guided the data collection and analysis process. The significance of the study is discussed to illustrate how it will inform and potentially advance the current literature on transgender college students. The following chapter provides a solid research foundation based on a review of the current literature on and relating to transgender college students. Chapter three details the methodological procedures that were followed throughout the data collection and analysis process for this study. Chapter four examines the findings and themes that emerged from data analysis. Finally, chapter five discusses the findings and situates them within the literature. Recommendations for practitioners and future research are also put forth for the reader to consider.

Chapter Two

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature and the theoretical perspectives upon which this study is grounded. The chapter begins with an exploration of gender as a construct and a discussion of gender identity development. Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in adults and children is examined as both a viable treatment option and as a tool for social control of gender. The experiences of transgender adolescents and college students are then discussed in view of their experiences on college and university campuses. Current research on transgender college students and their perceptions of support on campus are examined. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of queer theory and self-authorship and their applicability for understanding how transgender college students make meaning of gender.

Gender

Gender roles and norms are an invisible part of our daily lives, delimiting our behavior without conscious thought (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio & Sandigorsky, 2011). Mired as we are in the day-to-day details of life, we often do not see or recognize the social contexts and constructs shaping the gender norms that so heavily influence how we dress, move, and interact with others. Unexamined, it can seem that gender norms are universal, that what denotes masculinity and femininity in the Western world is common across cultures (Diamond, 2002). The reality is that such norms are fluid, open to interpretation, and heavily influenced by multiple variables including race, socio-economic status, and geographic location. Diamond notes that what defines a man in, “technological Western society means different things than does man in a non-technological African society” (2002, p. 322).

For most, sex and gender are viewed as being two sides of the same coin; female is to feminine as male is to masculine. While each term has a separate and distinct meaning, they are often conflated and used interchangeably by medical professionals, therapists, and lay people alike (Diamond, 2002). Sex refers to an individual's biology and physical anatomy including reproductive structures (Diamond, 2002, Dragowski, Scharron-del Rion, & Sandigorsky, 2011, Rudacille, 2005). Gender, broadly defined, is a societal construct that delimits appropriate and expected masculine and feminine characteristics, behaviors, and attributes based on cultural mores, values, and beliefs (Saltzburg & Davis, 2010). Sex and gender, as represented in Western culture, are immutable and clearly defined. Implicit in this understanding is the belief that there are only two biological sexes with two corresponding genders. Sexual orientation is assumed to align with an individual's biological sex and gender and exists on a continuum with heterosexuality and homosexuality at opposite endpoints (Devor, 1998; Hines, 2007). Western stereotypes suggest that a biological female will be feminine and be sexually and emotionally attracted to masculine biological men; a feminine man or a masculine woman will be attracted to someone of the same sex/gender. Sexual orientation refers to whom an individual "is emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to" (Huegel, 2003). Individuals who express a sexual orientation or gender identity and expression outside of this binary model are viewed as being deviant and abnormal (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011). While the similarities between the sexes/genders outnumber differences, Western culture depicts men and women as being polar opposites, emphasizing the differences between the sexes as an almost unbridgeable gap (Perry and Pauletti, 2011). Individuals who question and traverse the gender boundaries are

viewed and judged harshly within Western culture. Boys and men, in particular, are held to rigid expectations of appropriate behavior relating to how they express and prove their masculinity (Lev, 2005). Biological male children who play dress-up and prefer to play with girls over other boys face ridicule, harassment, and referral to professionals for exhibiting gender atypical behavior (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rion, & Sandirgorsky, 2011; Lev, 2005; Manners, 2009; Sax, 2005). Transgender individuals have been described as gender rebels and warriors and as people who refuse to have their gender decided merely by biology and who step outside of the binary, proving through their subjective lived experiences that the sex/gender binary is not absolute (Fienberg, 1996). As an umbrella term, transgender encompasses a myriad number of identities including but not limited to transsexuals, cross-dressers, and gender queers. The sexual orientations of transgender individuals are just as varied as the identities represented by the transgender umbrella. A transgender individual may identify as heterosexual, gay, queer, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or even asexual. A person's sexual orientation may change as the individual progresses through the transgender journey (Devor, 1998). The common thread linking each of these identities is gender, specifically how transgender individuals move, "across, between, or beyond the binary categories of male and female" (Hines, 2007, p. 1). Those who challenge the binary by seeking to change or modify their sex and/or gender expression to better match their gender identity find their ability to do so greatly constrained, regulated, and proscribed by medical and psychiatric establishments (Lev, 2005).

Gender Identity Development

How do children come to know and understand gender? If sex and gender are inexorably linked then why do some children insist that their gender is different from the one assigned to them at birth? If gender is a social construct why do little boys and girls seem to naturally self-select gender appropriate toys? Gender identity development theories seek to understand how an individual becomes cognitively aware of personal gender, to answer the question, “is gender learned or innate?” (Diamond, 2002; Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011, p. 362; Rudacille, 2005; Tobin et al., 2010). While the majority of gender identity development theories tend to fall along the line of nature versus nurture, Diamond (2006) advocates viewing gender identity as a conglomeration of both. Theories focusing on nurture highlight learned behaviors and environmental influences (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011). Nature-focused theories examine hormones and brain patterns to explain how gender is a biological component congruent with sex (Diamond, 2002; Rudacille, 2005). In either instance, individuals who are “gender atypical” are viewed as anomalies.

Gender identity development begins before birth. The naming and labeling of biological sex characteristics establishes a foundation for, “a clear binary distinction” between two sexes, with gender paralleling sex (Bilodeau, 2007, p. 9; Hubbard, 1998). Biologically, sex development begins between six and twelve weeks of gestation. At this time the sex-determining gene (SRY), which is only present on the Y chromosome, will prompt the development of testes, which begin the production of testosterone hormones (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011). In the absence of the SRY gene the

undifferentiated gonads that all fetuses begin with develop into ovaries at approximately three months gestation. The medical model of sex and gender is based on the assumption that there are only two biological sexes, thus two genders (Hines, 2007). Intersex individuals, born with ambiguous genitalia, challenge this assumption (Hines, 2007; Hubbard, 1998).

Within the medical world, variations in biological development are often treated as conditions that need to be treated and corrected so that the child is able to grow up as a “real” boy or girl (Diamond, 2002; Hubbard, 1998; Wilchins, 2004). Beginning in the 1950’s, medical interventions came into common practice to successfully “correct” infant genitalia, which freed individuals from having to live a life of shame and fear (Hubbard, 1998). Wilchins (2004) defines these medical interventions as “intersex genital mutilation,” whereby cosmetic surgery is conducted on infant genitalia in order to “correct” ambiguous genitalia (p. 74). Such medical practices fit within the gender binary and assign an infant a sex, usually based on the appearance of the genitalia, not chromosomal or gonadal evidence (Hubbard, 1998; Wilchins, 2004). Both Wilchins (2004) and Hubbard (1998) note that because it is easier to construct a realistic looking vagina than penis, most children born with ambiguous genitalia are “made” into girls. In this way, the myth of the gender binary can stay in place and parents can raise their child as a “real girl” and not as, “an ambiguous boy” (Hubbard, 1998, p. 49). Kessler (1990) notes that doctors are quick to assure parents that their child is a “real” girl or boy, and that all they have to do is fix, “a minor mistake of nature” (cited in Hubbard, 1998, p. 49; Namaste, 2000). Diamond (2006) and Kenneth Kipnis were the first medical professionals to speak out against “fixing” intersex children’s genitalia, advocating for waiting until the intersex individual can decide personally whether

surgery is necessary. Diamond (2006) encourages parents to, “love and protect the child they have regardless of the gender path followed by the youngster” (2006, p. 597).

As gender parallels sex in Western society, once the biological sex of a child is known, parents, extended family, and friends begin purchasing clothes, toys, and decorative items deemed appropriate for the child’s sex and gender (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011). Female babies are swathed in pink and pastels and described as beautiful or delicate, whereas male babies are showcased in blue and primary colors and characterized as robust and strong. By the age of two or three, the majority of children are able to “correctly” identify their gender (are you a boy or a girl?), will self-select gender appropriate toys, and mimic “gender stereotyped behaviors” (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011, p. 362; Egan & Perry, 2001; Tobin et al., 2010). In terms of nurture, gender is, in part, learned via children watching and mimicking the behaviors and characteristics of parents, playmates, and role models. As children grow, they go through a process of questioning, am I the same or different? Like or unlike? (Diamond, 2006).

Gender identity development theories range in focus from psychoanalytic theories emphasizing early childhood experiences and identification with parents, to learning theories which stress the role of reinforcement, punishment, and reward in learned behaviors, to cognitive theories that highlight children’s meaning-making processes in regard to gender and gender-appropriate behaviors (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011). A solid gender identity is believed to be achieved during early childhood beginning around age two when children are able to correctly identify their gender and culminates in gender constancy around 5-7 years of age (Kohlberg, 1966, 1969 as cited by Dragowski, Scharron-

del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011). Children who exhibit cross-gender behavior such as self-selecting gender inappropriate toys, crossdressing during “dress-up” play, and preferring other-sex friends are viewed as being gender atypical. A number of theories attribute gender variant behavior in children to environmental instability, including unstable home environments, poor familial relationships with the mother or father, and poorly understood concepts of femininity and masculinity (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011; Perry & Pauletti, 2011; Tobin et al., 2010). Manners (2009) argues, however, that there is no one absolute truth or single explanation for gender variant behavior, gender identity disorder, or transgender individuals. The process of pathologizing atypical gender behavior is a mode of social control based on sex and gender stereotypes (Lev, 2005; Manners, 2009).

A recent gender identity development model, the gender self-socialization model (GSSM), incorporates Kohlberg’s cognitive developmental theory, Gender Schema theory, and Multifactorial gender theory, into a cohesive model that highlights gender identity, gender stereotypes, and self-perception of gender attributes as essential components in the development of gender identity (Tobin et al., 2010). GSSM views gender identity development as a lifelong process, not something that is achieved during early childhood and then remains static over an individual’s lifespan. In addition to synthesizing these theories into a single model, the GSSM is also composed of three central constructs: gender identity (gender self-association), gender stereotypes (gender-attribute association), and attribute self-perception (self-attribute association). Gender identity, the cognitive connections one makes between self and gender, is a multidimensional perspective influenced by an individual’s knowledge of membership within a gender category, one’s level of contentedness/satisfaction

with that gender category, the felt pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, and one's sense of being typically gendered (i.e. similar to same gender peers) (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Gender stereotypes refer to the beliefs about how the genders (masculine and feminine) are different from one another. The GSSM model acknowledges that gender stereotypes are often contextual, dependent on multiple factors including public or private settings, mixed group versus single sex group, and setting (Tobin et al., 2010). Attributes self-perception are individuals' perceptions of personal characteristics and behaviors that associate them with a particular gender (I wear make-up, thus I'm feminine). The GSSM model offers a multi-dimensional approach to gender identity development, but it still adheres to the concept of gender as a binary. Those who traverse gender lines are not represented within this model or in gender identity development theories in general.

Theories of gender identity development abound in research literature, yet transgender, as a gender identity, is conspicuously absent from these discussions. Those who exhibit gender atypical and/or non-conforming behaviors and beliefs are diagnosed as disordered.

Gender Dysphoria

Within Western culture, the medical and psychiatric fields have set the standard for how transgender individuals are diagnosed and treated (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). This implies that a transgender identity is something that must be identified, diagnosed, and ultimately treated as a disorder. Gender Identity Disorder (GID) first appeared in the 1980 Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) and is described as an, "incongruence between biological sex assignment and gender identity" (Bilodeau & Renn,

2005, p. 30). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) expanded the definition and diagnostic standards for GID. The disorder was defined as a state of extreme emotional and physical distress relating to an individual's discomfort with biological sex. In the spring of 2013 the new DSM-V was published and revealed that Gender Identity Disorder has been removed as a diagnostic term, replaced by a new diagnostic class, Gender Dysphoria (Mohan, 2013). In order to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria an individual must demonstrate, "a marked difference between [one's] expressed/experienced gender and the gender others would assign him or her, and it must continue for at least six months" (APA, 2013, p. 1). The new classification reveals a change in how gender identity is understood and conceptualized within the mental health field; a perspective change that is similar to the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) decision to remove homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in 1973 (Parry, 2013). The APA states that the revision stems from a desire to, "better characterize the experiences of affected children, adolescents, and adults (APA, 2013, p.1). The change acknowledges the stigma attached to a GID diagnosis and stresses that, "gender non-conformity is not a mental disorder" (p. 1). Dr. Jack Drescher, a member of the sub-committee that formulated the criteria for gender dysphoria, noted that the name change seeks to de-pathologize gender atypical behavior, yet keep a structure for treatment in place for those who do wish to seek care (Moran, 2013). The impact of this change is yet to be known; it will take time and study to determine how the updated diagnostic criteria impact the gender journeys of transgender individuals.

Diagnosis for GID disorder in the DSM-IV depended on an individual's persistent cross-gender identification over time, extreme discomfort with traditional sex/gender roles associated with one's biological sex, and evidence that gender dysphoria is negatively impacting one's ability to successfully navigate through life both socially and occupationally (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011; Hines, 2010; Lev, 2005). Individuals who have been diagnosed as having an intersex condition did not receive a GID diagnosis (Bilodeau, 2007; Hines, 2010). Within the DSM-IV, GID was unique as it was the only psychiatric diagnosis where the recommended treatment is surgery (Manners, 2009). In the new DSM-V, criteria for gender dysphoria in adults include a, "marked difference between the individual's expressed/experienced gender and the gender others would assign him or her, and it must continue for at least six months" (APA, 2013). Gender incongruence, the feeling that one's gender is not reflected by biological sex, is now emphasized over behaviors such as cross-dressing (Beredjick, 2013). The new criteria remove the emphasis on the level of distress experienced by transgender individuals in recognition of the fact that not all trans identified people experience distress over their gender identity. Maintaining a diagnostic category for individuals who experience gender conflicts ensures access to care. Jack Drescher, M.D. explained that, "the name change to 'gender dysphoria' is an effort to reflect the individual's sense of incongruence with natal gender, as opposed to pathologizing gender atypical behavior" (Moran, 2013).

GID was a hotly contested classification within the DSM-IV. A GID diagnosis enabled transsexual individuals to gain access to hormone therapy and surgery, but it came with the high price of being labeled mentally ill (Lev, 2005). Critics of the inclusion of GID

in the DSM-IV argued that being diagnosed as mentally ill based upon a transgender self-identity was paramount to manipulating and controlling, “transgender people and their bodies” (Cooper, 1999, p. 118) in order to maintain and, “reify...traditional gender-based hegemony” (Lev, 2005, p. 43). To have access to the hormones and various surgeries that are a part of helping the body match the internal sense of self, transgender and transsexual individuals had to live with the stigma of mental illness. Without that diagnosis, however, the options for transsexuals and transgender identified individuals were severely limited. Denied access via the medical and psychiatric communities, transsexual and transgender individuals may look to obtaining hormones illegally (i.e. on the street) and traveling out of country to obtain surgeries (Namaste, 2000). Changing the classification in the DSM-V, which was advocated for by many groups, stirs up a different set of problems. For some, taking on the stigma of a mental disorder is a small price to pay in order to gain access to treatment and to have it covered by health insurance (Gherovici, 2010). Now that the diagnostic classification and criteria have been changed, it is possible that those who have received insurance coverage based on the GID diagnosis may no longer be covered (Beredjick, 2013).

Gender confirmation surgery, also known as gender re-assignment, is an expensive and long journey. Dr. Loren Schechter, M.D., describes surgery as gender confirmation, rather than reassignment, because it is a therapeutic tool that helps enable, “people to be comfortable with their gendered selve[s]” (Schechter, 2012). Changing one’s sex from one side of the binary to the other is not an immediate process. Rather, it involves a number of painful and expensive surgeries, along with daily hormone treatments. Committing to surgery takes time, money, flexible employment, and excellent health benefits to help offset the costs

and recuperation times between surgeries (Minter, 2000). Access to gender re-assignment surgery and the health authorities who regulate who can receive treatment is controlled by money; only some can afford the process (Namaste, 2000). Most insurance companies do not cover sex change operations, viewing them as elective surgeries, and government assistance does not currently cover gender reassignment surgery. Most candidates, then, are middle to upper-class white Americans (Romeo, 2004; Rudacille, 2005). As transgender identified individuals run the gamut in terms of race, age, socio-economic status, it quickly becomes evident that the medical and psychiatric policing of identity as a disorder cannot and is not effectively meeting the needs of an entire population.

Knowing the narrative and being able to tell the “right” story is, perhaps, even more essential than money in gaining access to treatment (Hines, 2007; Lev, 2005; Namaste, 2000). The “wrong body narrative” was central to the GID diagnosis whereby individuals seeking treatment tell psychiatrists and doctors the “right” story of growing up hating their body and assigned birth gender, and of being trapped with the wrong sexed body (Hines, 2007, p. 63). The accepted narrative, while it opens up opportunities for treatment and is thus shared throughout the transsexual and transgender communities, also silences the lived experiences and life-histories of those whose stories do not fit the mold (Lev, 2005; Namaste, 2000). It is unclear at this time if the “wrong body narrative” will continue to be a necessity in trying to get a gender dysphoria diagnosis.

The GID diagnosis and the resulting treatments assumed that all transsexuals and those who identify as somewhere along the transgender spectrum are seeking to transition from one sex/gender to the other (Beemyn, 2005). Gender dysphoria, as a classification,

continues to limit trans identities to the gender binary. Psychiatric and medical professionals struggle with the concept that gender variant individuals may seek hormone treatments and various surgeries to better fit their bodies to their sense of self, but may have no desire to completely transition and undergo sex reassignment surgery (Lev, 2005). The Transgender Committee (2013), a sub-group of the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, comments that changing the wording from dysphoria to disorder continues to pathologize trans identities. They argue that the gender dysphoria classification continues to suggest that, “the person’s gender is a source of disturbance (p.1). Transgender, as an identity and an umbrella term, encompasses individuals who may identify as trans men and women, gender queer, and gender neutral. They are individuals who desire to change and/or modify their bodies as a part of being mentally healthy, not disordered (Beemyn, 2005; Ekins & King, 1998; Lev, 2005).

Transgender Experiences from Childhood to Young Adulthood

Gender Dysphoria in Children

The use of GID as a mode of social control was nowhere more evident than when it has diagnosed in children (Lev, 2005; Manners, 2009). Children who exhibited cross-gender behaviors (rejection of gender appropriate clothes and toys) and express a close affinity to or a desire to be the “opposite sex” may find themselves referred to specialists and diagnosed as GIDC (Diamond, 2002; Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011; Manners, 2009). Indicators for GID in the DSM-IV included cross-dressing, a desire to grow up to be the opposite sex, and expressing disgust towards one’s genitalia (Gherovici, 2010). Specifically, markers for gender dysphoria in a young boy would be an absence of rough-

housing in play, a marked preference for stereotypical girl toys and games, playing dress-up, and seeking out friendships with girls over boys. Indicators for young girls include the desire to urinate standing up, rough and active play, dislike of stereotypically feminine clothing, and the strong wish not to develop as a woman (Gherovici, 2010; Manners, 2009). In the new DSM-V, the symptoms of gender dysphoria remain the same, but also stresses that the desire to be a different gender must be verbalized (APA, 2013). The updated manual also makes note of the fact that many children who display characteristics associated with gender dysphoria outgrow the ‘symptoms’ as they age (Parry, 2013).

Diagnosis of GID in children relied heavily on gender stereotypes and gender norms of what it means to be a “normal” male or female (Lev, 2005). In doing so, cross-gender play and behaviors are pathologized (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011). A little boy who likes to play with girls, then, is disordered and must be treated, i.e., “fixed”. A number of researchers believe that diagnosing children with GIDC stems more from a desire to treat them for homosexuality than to prevent them from growing up transsexual or gender variant (Lev, 2005). Zucker and Bradley (1995) found that the most common post-puberty outcome for children diagnosed with GID was not a transsexual or transgender identity but rather identifying as homosexual (cited by Lev, 2005). While homosexuality as a disorder was removed from the DSM in 1980, the use of a GID diagnosis in children seems to be a backdoor approach to pathologizing and treating homosexuality (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011; Gherovici, 2010). Some researchers, however, argued for the early diagnosis of GID in children so that treatments can begin at an earlier age, prior to the hormone surges of adolescence (Diamond, 2002). Similar to GID in adults, the criterion for

diagnosis of GIDC relied heavily on gender stereotypes, medical professionals' personal concepts of what is appropriately male and female, and strict adherence to the gender binary (Lev, 2005; Manner, 2009). Gender variant youth are left with few options in terms of exploring gender and challenging boundaries. To traverse the gender binary, to have a gender identity that is neither male nor female, masculine nor feminine, opens transgender youth up to extreme harassment and discrimination at the hands of others. It is possible that the change of classification from GID to gender dysphoria will help to better identify children who truly are gender diverse from children who are simply exhibiting cross-gender behaviors.

Transgender Youth

Gender-related harassment begins at a very young age in Western culture, and transgender youth face hostile campus climates throughout their K-12 academic careers. What begins as name calling (sissy, dyke) and exclusion in elementary school escalates to rumor campaigns, verbal taunts and attacks, and physical violence at the hands of their classmates (GLSEN, 2009; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; McGuire & Toomey, 2010). For a child or teen who is struggling with gender identity, navigating the playground and school hallways can be an intimidating and dangerous experience. In a national study, 90% of transgender youth (n=295) reported being the target of verbal harassment and more than half were the victims of physical violence including pushing, shoving, and beatings (GLSEN, 2009). McGuire and Toomey (2010) reported similar results with over 80% of transgender participants experiencing some form of harassment related to their perceived sexual orientation and gender perception.

While Ludeke (2009) stresses the importance of the administrator role in creating tolerant and safe environments in schools, McGuire and Toomey (2010) report that teacher and administrator interventions are uncommon; a third of study participants indicated that teachers and administrative staff were just as likely as the students' peers to make derogatory comments about and to transgender students. Fear of further discrimination at the hands of their teachers may explain why over half of transgender students (54%) did not report harassment or physical assaults to school authorities. Those students who did risk outing themselves by reporting harassment (33%) indicated that staff were less than effective in addressing the issues (GSLEN, 2009). Although more and more school systems are putting into place protections for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, most do not extend to gender identity and expression (Lendke, 2009).

By concentrating only on data related to drug use, suicidal tendencies, homelessness, and discrimination, and assault, LGBT youth are cast into a victim role in need of rescue. Ramussen (2004) argues that this kind of continuous victimization objectifies and dehumanizes queer youth, turning them into objects that need to be addressed and fixed. She warns that this objectification infantilizes queer youth and provides the, "rationale for adults to act in their best interests rather than to work with them" to address negative experiences (p. 141-142). When authority figures act in the 'best interests' of queer youth, their actions can be perceived as being both "patronizing" and imposing "normative ideals," pushing students further into the role of "other" (Driver, 2008, p. 5).

Transgender College Students

Transgender-focused student research is a slowly growing field in student development literature. Research with a specific focus on transgender college students is desperately needed because much of the current gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) related research focuses primarily on gay and lesbian students; the B and the T are often present in name only (Beemyn, 2003; Biledeau, 2007). Research without transgender participant inclusion and representation cannot be practically applied to transgender college students as it does not accurately represent their needs or experiences. Student needs in GLBT research are often framed in terms of sexual orientation and navigating homophobia, but gender identity and gendered experiences are not adequately examined (Beemyn, 2003; McKinney, 2005; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Pusch, 2005). Researchers note that while transgender individuals are often linked with the LGB community, many identify as heterosexual, and need resources and policies that support their gender journey while on campus (Namaste, 2000; Wilchins, 2004; Pusch, 2005; Sausa, 2005).

While there is currently no accurate measure of how many transgender college students are on campuses, a growing number of students are identifying as gender variant and/or exploring and traversing the boundaries of the gender binary (Beemyn, 2003; Broido, 2004). Bilodeau (2007) describes college campuses as gendered systems where the binary is consistently reinforced and those who do not conform are marginalized and viewed as deviant and disordered. Systemic *genderism* creates an environment that promotes, “the invisibility of gender non-conforming identities and isolation of transgender persons, making transgender identities inaccessible” (p. ii). Several campus climate studies have been

conducted in an attempt to gather data on the experiences and perceptions of marginalized student populations on a more national scale (Beemyn, 2005; Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Kelig, 2004; Malaney, Williams, & Gellar, 1997; Rankin 2003, 2005; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Results illustrate that transgender students experience chilly campus environments and are at the highest risk for harassment and discrimination, yet have the least amount of access to support resources (McKinney, 2005; Rankin, 2003, 2005; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). A hostile campus climate creates an environment that is non-conducive to transgender student success (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010).

Pusch (2005) argues that transgender student experiences cannot be fully understood until researchers look more closely at their lives, “and how they come to understand themselves as being transgender” (p. 46). Research indicates that transgender undergraduate and graduate students feel that faculty and administrators are uneducated on transgender issues, programs are trans-exclusive, and there is a lack of resources to address transgender issues (Bilodeau, 2005; McKinney, 2005; Rankin, 2005; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010). Participants note the lack of trans-inclusive programming by GLBT centers and/or student groups on their respective campuses (McKinney, 2005). The exclusion of transgender issues by groups that claim to be supportive and inclusive leave transgender students feeling that they do not belong (Beemyn, 2003; McKinney, 2005). In a case study focusing on transgender identity development, Bilodeau (2005) found that transgender students who actively participate in trans-inclusive programming feel a greater sense of connection to their campus. These kinds of interactions help students to gain a more positive

sense of self (Bilodeau, 2005; Pusch, 2005; Sausa, 2005). Transgender students note, however, that the burden usually falls to them to push for programming that is related to their particular needs (Bilodeau, 2005; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005). Students express frustration that they must consistently push for inclusion, indicating a desire for more proactive steps from their campuses (Bilodeau, 2005; McKinney, 2005).

Transgender students who are transitioning, either from one sex to the other or outside of the gender binary, stress that they regularly deal with disapproval from others, which leads to feelings of alienation (Hines, 2007; McKinney, 2005, Pusch, 2005). Also apparent is that not all support is considered supportive, particularly when they face an onslaught of questions from well-intentioned friends, family, or campus administrators. Students admit feeling more like objects of curiosity than people (Pusch, 2005). Many practitioners also assume that the majority of transgender students are seeking to change their sex, which is less than supportive (Alexander, 2009; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Pusch, 2005). Not all transgender students see themselves reflected in the gender binary, rather they see themselves as existing outside of it and being gender-variant (Bilodea, 2005, 2007; Pusch, 2005; Sausa, 2005). Student affairs interventions that focus primarily on providing support for those seeking to change from one sex to another are neglecting another population included beneath the transgender umbrella.

Transgender students face institutional discrimination throughout the journey of applying to, selecting, and attending institutions of higher education. Gender bias and privilege are immediately apparent in the majority of institutional forms that require students to identify their gender and only offer male/female as options (Alexander, 2009; Beemyn,

2003, 2005; Bilodeau, 2005, 2007). Gender information is required on college applications, housing applications, student health forms, campus-provided student health insurance forms, as well as applications for scholarships, internships, and work-study programs. Once a student's gender has been officially entered into the campus system, it can be extremely challenging for a transgender student to have those records altered (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005). As more trans identified students make their presence known, many campus administrators are beginning to look at and modify policies to better fit the needs of transgender students. Currently, 73 colleges and universities have policies in place that allow students to use a preferred or chosen first name in place of their legal/birth name on campus documents. Another 47 institutions have created policies that allow students to change their gender on campus records and ID cards without proof of medical intervention (Campus Pride, 2013). Once admitted to a college or university, gender-diverse students face many challenging situations. For some gender-diverse students at single-sex institutions, the process of transitioning can call into question their presence on campus. Women's colleges are currently grappling with their policies and procedures relating to transgender students. Institutions such as Salem College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and others are beginning to engage in discussions on how to work with students who are transitioning from female to male while on campus (Grasgreen, 2011).

On the majority of campuses, college students are assigned housing based on the gender binary; men live with men, women live with women (Bilodeau, 2007). Transgender college students, whether they are seeking to transition from one gender to another or identify as gender variant or gender queer, feel that they have little choice but to select their

biological sex (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005). This leaves them open to discrimination and harassment from students who have little to no understanding about transgender identities (Alexander, 2009). Students who seek to gain housing based on their gender identity, rather than biological sex, may find their housing requests denied unless they can provide proof of having completed sex reassignment surgery (Pomerantz, 2010). The Transgender Law and Policy Institute (2013) reports that 97 campuses nationwide provide gender inclusive housing where students can have a roommate of any gender. Campus Pride (2013) reports that 143 campuses nationwide provide some form of gender inclusive housing where students can have a roommate of any gender. For many of these institutions, the option for gender neutral housing is primarily available to upper class students and usually available in apartment style buildings. While more institutions are looking for ways to provide gender neutral housing options to all students, the Board of Governors for the University of North Carolina system, which has a total of 16 colleges and universities, voted in August 2013 to ban gender neutral housing system-wide (Grasgreen, 2013). The move to ban gender neutral housing options system-wide was an unusual move for a university system that is often viewed as progressive, but representatives of the board indicated that there are other ways to provide safe housing for all students without having men and women living together sharing bathrooms and living spaces (Owens, 2013).

Beyond institutional forms and uncomfortable (potentially dangerous) housing situations, transgender students also face challenges with student health and receiving adequate counseling. Grossman and D'Augelli (2006) note that access to health care is limited and health care professionals have little to no understanding of the unique medical

needs of transgender students. Transgender college students report that they avoid campus health when possible because the medical staff is uneducated about transgender issues and unable to meet their medical needs (McKinney, 2005). A student whose gender expression and outward appearance is male, yet needs to go to student health for a yearly pap smear, can face hostility, fear, even anger from student health staff who have not received training in how to work with transgender college students (Beemyn, 2005). Student health insurance provides yet another stumbling block in that it often does not cover medical needs such as hormone therapy or reconstructive surgeries (2005). Currently, out of nearly 4000 institutions in the United States, 21 have student medical insurance plans that cover hormone therapy and another 48 schools have plans that also cover transition related medical expenses including surgery (Campus Pride, 2013; Grasgreen, 2013). For schools such as American University and Duke University, offering inclusive health benefits to students is a natural progression towards providing for and meeting the needs of gender-diverse students (Grasgreen, 2013).

McKinney (2005) and Pusch (2005) indicate that transgender college students often find campus counseling staff to be interested in helping, but unsure how to counsel them. Students first have to educate the counselor on what it means to be transgender before they can begin receiving counseling (Beemyn, 2005). Goodman and D'Augelli (2006) stress that inadequate mental health care re-emphasizes to transgender students that they are alone, marginalized, and unimportant to society.

The goal of student affairs practitioners is to help develop the “whole student,” both cognitively and psychologically (Carter, 2000; Young, 2003). However, student development

literature is not providing an in-depth or holistic view of transgender college students. The predominant focus of the literature is on the intersections of campus policies and transgender college students. In other words, the primary concern is on how transgender students interact with the campus and the climate they experience. What has not been adequately explored is how transgender students progress on their gender journey while on campus. The campus climate, programmatic interventions, and campus support inform that journey, but they are primarily external factors. To have a better understanding of transgender students and how to best support them, it is imperative that the scope of higher education research be broadened to include student voices. By including the personal, internal journey along with the external interactions and intersections with the campus, higher education scholars can provide a more complete picture of transgender college students and their gender journeys. Enhancing our understanding about transgender college students helps to challenge the privilege imposed by the gender binary and stretches the social confines of appropriate masculinity and femininity.

Much of the existing literature focuses primarily on best practices and policy/procedural changes that campuses can make to better support their transgender students (Beemyn, 2003, 2005; Bilodeau, 2005, Carter, 2000). Common recommendations for policy changes and programmatic interventions include providing support groups, identifying gender neutral bathrooms on campus, allowing for multiple housing options, adding gender identity and gender expression to campus policies, and creating GLBT centers to provide programming and support for the GLBT population (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Carter, 2000; Lees, 1998, & Nakamura, 1998). Lees (1998) and Beemyn (2003, 2005) stress that including gender identity in campus non-discrimination

policies sends a strong message to the entire campus that transgender students are both welcome and protected. Since 2011 over 300 institutions have added gender identity and gender expression into their campus non-discrimination policies, bringing the total to 729 as of November, 2013 (Campus Pride, 2013; The Transgender Law & Policy Institute, 2013).

While the majority of transgender literature focuses on programmatic interventions, it is striking to note that the majority of articles offer little guidance in how to implement these strategies. Many campuses face strong opposition to the creation of GLBT-specific resources from student organizations, alumni, faculty, upper administration, and governing boards (Beemyn, 2003; Ritchie & Banning, 2001; Ryan, 2005). Resistance to providing support for transgender students often stems from a lack of understanding of gender-related issues. Gender privilege blinds many faculty, students, and staff to the challenges and discrimination experienced by transgender students on campus. Unfortunately, there is little mention in the literature regarding how to overcome such obstacles. The creation and implementation of programmatic interventions involves the work of multiple offices across campuses and, therefore, requires policy makers to have a strong sense of the campus political climate in order to be successful (Carter, 2000; Lees, 1998; Nakamura, 1998).

Theoretical Perspectives

In order to make recommendations for policy and practice, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the gender journeys and experiences of gender-diverse students. Self-authorship and queer theory are used in conjunction as analytical lenses to examine the meaning-making process as it relates to gender. Queer theory is a postmodern approach to understanding sexuality and gender and challenges social constructs and binaries such as

male/female and masculine/feminine (Abes, 2003; Wilchins, 2004). Self-authorship theory is a holistic approach to understanding how individuals make-meaning of their lives by interweaving the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal developmental dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). Deconstruction of societal norms and “universal truths,” such as the gender binary, a primary focus of queer theory, goes hand-in-hand with the construction process of becoming a self-authored individual.

Queer Theory

Queer theory critically analyzes “the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities, and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender” (Abes & Kasch, 2007, p. 620). Authors of queer theory embrace ambiguities and seek to, “dismantle binary oppositions such as male/female, nature/culture, heterosexual/homosexual and so on” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 99). Wilchins (2004) claims that the heart of queer theory lies in politics where it challenges power dynamics, marginalized identities, “the othering” effect, and the immense power of language. Queer theory is not easily defined. Although it is recognized within academia as a legitimate discipline, queer theorists struggle against the confines and rigid structures expected of academic disciplines. Sullivan (2003) aptly describes queer theory as, “a discipline that refuses to be disciplined” (p. v). Queer theorists strive to challenge polarizing cultural norms, celebrate those identities that cannot be clearly labeled, and deconstruct the concept of universal truths (Sullivan, 2003; Wilchins, 2004).

As a poststructuralist approach, queer theory has its roots in language and literature studies and focuses on performance (Gamson, 2000; Renn, 2010). Richardson (2000) notes that language, “does not simply reflect social reality, it produces meaning, which creates

reality” (p. 928). Poststructuralism argues that there are no universal truths or grand narratives. Sullivan (2003) states that, “particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become ‘naturalized’ in culturally and historically specific ways” (p. 39). Queer theory applies these ideas about language and the nature of truth to gender and sexuality, suggesting that they are social constructs (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Butler, 1990). Rather than being fixed and clearly defined, queer theory views gender and sexuality as fluid and ambiguous (Abes, 2003; Butler, 1990; Hines, 2007).

Queer theorists seek to de-pathologize difference (Hines, 2007). A central approach in queer theory is the analytical deconstruction of “foundational, seemingly indisputable concepts,” (Turner, 2000, p. 3). The process of deconstruction, attributed to Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, is a critical response to the “humanist belief in absolute essences and oppositions” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 50). Queer theory attempts to deconstruct hard and fast absolutes accepted as universal truths and undermines oppressive norms (Sullivan, 2003, Wilchins, 2004). Deconstruction seeks to make clear that, “any given set of truth claims [is] only possible because of a prior set of assumptions that didn’t “show” once they were in place” (Wilchins, p. 44). A primary aim of queer theory is to illustrate that universal truths can be broken down into smaller truths and shown to be *culturally constructed* (Sullivan, 2003; Turner, 2000; Wilchins, 2004). Deconstruction does not equal destruction; rather it brings to light the instability of language and essentialist terms such as gender and sexuality.

Queer theory also calls into question the idea of authentic and concrete identity categories (racial, gender, sexual, etc) (Hines, 2007; Turner, 2000). While identity categories in one sense, “connote a sense of uniqueness” to an individual, they also fragment that same

individual into multiple, potentially conflicting, identities (Turner, 2000, p. 32). These identity categories can be severely limiting and often determine the power options available to an individual. In other words, the opportunities and power dynamics are very different when one compares a high socio-economic status (SES) White male to a low SES Hispanic American transwoman. Queer theory views identity categories as discourse, where some languages (identities) are more highly valued than others. Identity categories are criticized by queer theorists as most individuals do not fit neatly within pre-described and arbitrary identity distinctions (Turner, 2000). A danger of denying identities, which often anchor experiences, can result in also denying differences and the loss of subjective experiences (Hines, 2007).

Transsexual and transgender bodies are viewed by queer theorists as rupturing, “existing gender and sexual identities” as they traverse and challenge the binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine and outright challenge societal norms (Hines, 2007, p. 25; Sullivan, 2003). Abes and Kasch (2007) note that gender norms are not static, rather they reflect the current, “time and place in which they exist” (p. 621). In other words, as an individual changes and impacts society, society impacts and changes the individual, causing eventual shifts in societal norms. Gender as portrayed by queer theory is a performance; individuals create gender through daily behaviors and interactions with society (Butler, 1990). The body acts out internalized gender norms within accepted social structures (Hines, 2007). Gender is often assumed based on gender styles, the social characteristics, mannerisms, and personality traits associated with specific genders (Devor, 2004). Wilchins (2004) stresses that performance, as characterized by Butler (1990), is not simply putting on

an act; perhaps a better word choice would be *performative*, “a kind of speech that also qualifies as an official social act” (p. 132). Gender is performative in that when an individual applies make-up, wears a feminine wardrobe, and acts in a, “recognizably feminine way”, that person is “doing” gender, performing woman (p. 133). Wilchins (2004) calls this, “creating the social state of being a woman” (p. 133).

West and Zimmerman (1987) concept of ‘doing gender’ suggests that gender is not simply, “an aspect of who one is, but more fundamentally it is something that one does, recurrently and in interaction with others” (p. 126). Queer theorists discuss the performative nature of gender arguing that gender is a construct and not an inherent quality. As such, gender is something that is done, something that is acted out and performed (Butler, 1990; Kirsch, 2000). Butler (1990) argues that deconstructing societal gender norms demonstrates that gender is both a construct and fluid, not fixed and absolute. Drag performers, individuals who dress as the opposite sex for entertainment purposes, are utilized as a metaphor for how gender ideals and norms can be undermined and disrupted (Bilodeau, 2007; Butler, 1990, 1993). Performativity, then, “allows for subversive acts...going against the expected” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 87).

Transgender theorists such as Namaste (2000) and Hines (2007) caution, however, that understanding gender only as performance or performative action is limiting, especially in regards to understanding how gender is experienced by transgender individuals. Queer theory’s focus on performance reduces transgender individuals to figurative devices and devalues subjective experiences (Hines, 2007). Namaste (2000) argues that queer theory views transgender individuals as objects to be deconstructed and does not take into account

the lived experiences that impact performance. Queer theory is a valuable analytical tool, but it cannot be used in isolation, without the consideration and inclusion of the subjective lived experiences of transgender individuals (Hines, 2007, Kirsch, 2000).

Using self-authorship theory in conjunction with queer theory provides a window into the subjective meaning-making processes transgender students navigate as they author their own gender both within and outside the confines of the gender binary. This theory also provides a way to examine how students take deconstructed messages about gender and redefine them to fit their needs and personal understandings of gender. In this way, queer theory and self-authorship theory work well in combination.

Self-Authorship Theory

Krauss (2005) defines meaning-making as structures that make up an individual's, "view of reality and with which actions are defined" (p. 762). These meaning-making structures inform and influence how an individual sees the world (Baxter Magolda, 2009b). College students face a number of expectations from parents, faculty, and staff about their cognitive and personal development as they progress through higher education. Educators often assume that by graduation students will be able to construct complex ways of knowing, define an internal sense of self, and navigate successful and healthy relationships. The journey towards self-authorship, however, is long and circuitous and is often not completed during the college years, but is instead a work in progress. Self-authorship theory, a holistic approach to understanding meaning-making development (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010), is defined as, "the capacity to internally define [one's] own beliefs, identity, and relationships" (Baxter Magolda, 2010, p. xvi). Ultimately, an individual's journey

towards self-authorship is a gradual shifting away from “external authorities” toward an internal capacity to determine personal, “beliefs, identities, and social relations” (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010, p. 11). The Journey to Self-Authorship model described by Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009a, 2009b), which builds upon a foundation of her earlier Epistemological Reflection Model and Kegan’s (1994) constructivist-developmental subject-object theory, provides a conceptual basis for understanding how transgender students make meaning of gender. The model also demonstrates how knowing is impacted and influenced by external and internal values, beliefs, and relationships.

Epistemological Reflection Model.

Baxter Magolda’s (1992, 2001, 2009b) qualitative longitudinal study, which followed first-year college students into their early thirties, began with an initial focus on understanding how students constructed and understood the concept of knowledge. Beginning with 101 participants the first year, and finishing the five year period with 80 returning participants, Baxter Magolda conducted annual interviews focusing on the nature of learning, student assumptions about learning, the roles of the student, faculty, and peers in the process of learning, as well as the process of decision making (1992, 2001). With a narrow focus on how college students construct knowledge, Baxter Magolda (1992) developed the Epistemological Reflection Model. The model, based on her initial five years of research, outlines four stages of knowing: absolute, transitional, independent, and contextual (Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Students at the absolute knowing stage are dualistic and see knowledge as being certain and absolute (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Their role as students is to obtain information

from professors who are viewed as being in possession of and the authorities on knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The second stage, transitional knowing, is characterized by uncertainty and a growing comfort with ambiguities. Simply obtaining knowledge is no longer sufficient; students at this stage are seeking to understand it as well (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

The third stage, independent knowing, is characterized by a shift from seeing all knowledge as absolute to seeing it as open to interpretation and awash with uncertainties (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001). The role of professor shifts from giver of information to provider of context. Students begin to view both their own and their peers' opinions as valid and as having a part in constructing knowledge. In the fourth and final stage, contextual knowing, students seek to understand all sides of a situation or an issue before deciding what they think (Evans, Forney, & Guido Dibrto, 1998).

The Epistemological Reflection Model is narrowly focused on the epistemological dimension of knowledge construction. Realizing that individuals do not construct knowledge within a vacuum, Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009) broadened her scope to include the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of development as she continued to follow the students through their twenties into their early thirties. She uses Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructivist-developmental subject-object theory as a foundation to focus on how the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions intersect and influence the development of meaning-making. Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009) continued her longitudinal

study after the initial five-year phase, but shifted the focus from how the participants constructed knowledge to the process of becoming self-authored individuals.

Kegan and Constructive-Developmental Theory.

Constructivist-developmental theory focuses on the “how” of meaning-making and the structures involved in the process of knowing (Kegan, 2000). Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theory integrates constructivism, which argues that individuals are active participants in knowledge construction, and developmentalism, which explains that people progress through stages of increasing complexity, “according to regular principles of stability and change” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 16). Constructive developmental psychology, therefore, examines the evolutionary process of constructing meaning. This is accomplished via the integration of the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of development into a, “single mental activity, rather than separate entities” (Abes, 2003, p. 8; Abes, Jones, & McEwan, 2007). Baxter Magolda (2009a) notes that this integration of several silos of developmental theory allows for a more holistic student development framework.

Baxter Magolda’s Self Authorship Theory.

As a holistic approach, self-authorship weaves together three distinct dimensions of development: epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009a, 2009b, 2010) notes that each phase in the self-authorship journey is influenced and impacted by the integration of three driving questions representative of these three dimensions: How do I know? Who am I? What relationships do I want with others? The epistemological dimension (how do I know?) delves into how an individual not only constructs knowledge, but also how knowledge assumptions influence the thinking and

reasoning processes (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010). The intrapersonal dimension (who am I?) focuses on the processes of developing, “an internal, structurally mature sense of self” independent of, but influenced by, external expectations (p. 8). The third dimension, intrapersonal, illustrates how an individual moves away from relationships built upon external concepts of identity to ones constructed based on an internal sense of values and beliefs. Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009b, 2010) and Kegan (1982, 1984) both stress that the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal developmental dimensions are interwoven, each influencing and impacting the next in the progression towards self-authorship. This weaving together of developmental dimensions provides a more holistic perspective of college student development.

While presented as a linear progression, multiple self-authorship studies stress that the journey is cyclical (Baxter Magolda, 2010; Parks, 2000; Pizzolato, 2003; Torres, 2010). Baxter Magolda (2010) describes this cyclical progression as a journey where an individual is, “weaving back and forth, rather than taking a straightforward path to securing internal commitments” (p. 28). Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009a, 2009b) identifies several stages within the journey towards self-authorship: following external formulas, crossroads, and self-authorship. Research illustrates that individuals who are capable of, “complex ways of knowing often struggle to use them until they develop complex ways of seeing themselves and [their] relationships with others” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009a, 2009 b; Boes et. al, 2010, p. 10; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Torres, 2010). These developmental dimensions are interwoven throughout the journey towards self-

authorship. Baxter Magolda (2010) makes note that often growth in one dimension will spur on growth in the other dimensions.

In the first phase of the journey, following external formulas, individuals determine what and how to believe based on “shoulds” and social norms (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009a, 2009b). Epistemologically, individuals accept knowledge from authority figures uncritically, assuming that teachers and professors are right (Baxter Magolda, 2009b; King & Baxter Magolda, 2007). In an attempt to be perceived as “normal” by peers and have successful relationships (the interpersonal dimension), individuals at this stage may adopt labels and identities that reflect their peer group (Parks, 2000; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Transgender individuals who are pre-transition work hard to conform to societal gender norms, understanding that to resist these norms is “socially unacceptable” (Hines, 2007, p. 52). Personal beliefs and one’s internal sense of self (intrapersonal) are largely unexamined at this stage. A sense of reality, morals, and values are composed from external sources such as the family or faith community (Parks, 2000). As individuals age and interact with an increasingly complex world, many begin to experience a dissonance between the external formulas and their internal voices, recognizing, “the shortcomings of external formulas” (Baxter Magolda, 2009b, p. 629). They find themselves at a crossroads, the second phase in the journey towards self-authorship.

The crossroads, a time of intense questioning usually triggered by a catalytic event, is marked by two phases: listening to one’s internal voice and cultivating the internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). Parks (2000) describes this catalytic event as a shipwreck which casts students adrift and forces them to question external formulas. Those with minority and

marginalized identities begin to question stereotypes and experience frustration with limiting labels (Abes & Jones, 2004). Pizzolato (2003, 2004, 2005), in her study of high risk students, identifies these moments as, “provocative experiences” that challenge students’ ways of knowing (p. 803). Students begin to move from passive to active learners, questioning the assumed authority of teachers and professors and developing their own opinions (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009). Delving into the intrapersonal dimension and learning to trust their internal voices, individuals begin to understand the importance of listening to their own values and attempt to bring their voices, “into conversations with external voices” (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, p. 4). In order to lend strength to their developing internal voices, individuals must work on cultivating their personal values, beliefs, and priorities. This cultivation allows individuals to begin to sift out others’ expectations and evaluate relationships with others (2009a). The crossroads is marked by inconsistency; the internal voice is still developing and is not always strong enough to withstand external pressures. Individuals start to seek out relationships that strengthen and support their newly developing internal voice (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009). The coming-out process, where an individual “comes out” as transgender, is often preceded by a “significant moment” that, “ruptures key structures,” bringing gender issues to the foreground and acting as a catalyst for change (Hines, 2007, p. 55). Traversing these turbulent experiences helps students in becoming critical knowledge consumers, strengthens their internal foundations, and influences the kind of relationships they seek out.

A self-authored individual is one who is able to articulate personal beliefs, identity, and relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Self-authorship, the final

phase, consists of a combination of three elements: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Trusting one's internal voice means understanding that while "reality" is beyond individual control, personal reactions to that "reality" are within an individual's purview. In trusting and using their internal voices, individuals are able to use them as, "a complex meaning-making filter to analyze the cultural messages coming at them from social contexts" (Abes et al., 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2009b, p. 631). In taking responsibility for how they interpret reality and how those interpretations influence the ways in which they interact with the world and others, individuals move towards forming and creating a life philosophy or internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2009b; Boes et al., 2010).

Building an internal foundation refers to the forming of a life philosophy, "within the context of their internal values, culture, and life path" (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, p. 86). This can be described as "consciously [creating] an 'infrastructure' for one's life from which an individual can build a life-path, a sense of one's self, and positive relationships with others" (Boes et al., 2010, p. 17). Individuals are able to integrate their disparate identities (race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation) into an aggregate wholeness which acts as a solid foundation for securing internal commitments (Baxter Magolda et al, 2008). The final element of self-authorship involves using one's internal foundation to guide all aspects of one's life. Baxter Magolda describes this as, "the difference between having the commitments in their heads versus in their hearts" (2009a, p. 9). This commitment to their internal voices provides individuals with a sense of security enabling them to navigate changes in their lives. At this stage, living out one's personal beliefs and convictions

becomes second nature. As self-authored individuals who trust their inner sense of self and are comfortable navigating challenges to their beliefs, individuals know that they can, “depend on others without fear of losing the power of self” (Parks, 2000, p. 87). Hines’ (2007) research focusing on transgender individuals reflects this concept of multiple dimensions impacting how an individual’s internal sense of self and cognition affect relationships with others. Transgender identities are constructed and formed within, “specific social and temporal contexts” (p. 54). What has not been a focus of self-authorship research is how gender is constructed and understood by transgender individuals, specifically college students.

While Baxter Magolda’s study was primarily based on the experiences of a White high-SES population, several authors have since demonstrated that it is an effective model for looking at marginalized and minority populations (Abes, 2003; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Pizzolato (2003) notes that self-authored ways of knowing generally arise from a willingness to resolve “provocative interpersonal experiences” (p. 797). Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) found that individuals who are able to construct complex ways of thinking were best able to move beyond limiting stereotypes to create, “positive images of their ethnicity” (p. 345). Their work demonstrates also that marginalized college students can exhibit self-authored behavior prior to or upon entering into higher education usually predicated by catalytic experiences, such as encountering racism, negative stereotypes, or harassment (Abes, Jones, & McEwan, 2007; Torres 2003; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). The work of these authors illustrates that marginalized student populations have catalytic experiences

prior to and/or upon entering into higher education and can exhibit self-authorship while in college rather than after graduation, as illustrated by Baxter Magolda's (2001) participants.

As transgender students construct and make meaning of an internal sense of gender, they must not only examine how they know, but also how that understanding is impacted by an internal sense of self and their relationships with others. Claiming a gender identity outside of the binary has a direct influence on how a student comes to understand and integrate personal values and beliefs with that identity. Relationships are altered as students claim a transgender identity; the cognitive and intrapersonal dimensions, therefore, impact how students will restructure those interpersonal relationships.

Theoretical Lens

For the purposes of this study, queer theory and self-authorship theory work in conjunction to help me examine how transgender college students deconstruct external and internalized messages about gender and begin to construct and define a personal sense of gender. As individuals progress through the stages of self-authorship there is a natural process of deconstructing external expectations and questioning of social norms. Queer theory was used to examine this breaking down of gender norms, throughout the self-authorship journey, but especially during the crossroads stage when individuals begin to question external constructs and look inwards for answers. Deconstruction of societal norms and "universal truths," such as the gender binary, goes hand-in-hand with the construction process of becoming a self-authored individual. An individual moves from the deconstruction of external expectations to constructing a personal sense of self via the integration of the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of development. The use of

queer theory and self-authorship theory provide a unique perspective on how transgender college students make meaning of gender outside the restrictions of the binary.

Conclusion

Gender norms and stereotypes influence our actions, dress, and mannerisms on an unconscious, yet daily basis (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, Sandigorsky, 2011). Individuals whose inner sense of gender and self does not match with their biological sex face fear, harassment, and discrimination from a Western society that does not recognize gender identities beyond the binary (Hines, 2007). Transgender individuals are diagnosed as being disordered and in need of medical intervention to bring their gender identity in-line with their biological sex (Lev, 2005). The number of transgender individuals coming out in high school and college is increasing, creating a need and a demand for support services on campuses (Beemyn, 2003, 2005). Current literature focuses on how transgender students interact with the college campus, but does not delve deeply enough into the gender experiences of these students. In order to create effective support services and warmer campus environments it is imperative that we look at whole students, not just how they are impacted by the implementation of policies (Baxter Magolda, 2009b). Queer theory and self-authorship theory provide a unique and useful lens to examine how transgender college students make meaning of gender on a cognitive, personal, and interpersonal level. The following chapter details the methodology of the study and how the theories will be woven into all aspects of the data collection and analysis.

Chapter Three

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the design process of this narrative inquiry. Elements of the research design are delineated in this chapter, including the epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, research methods, and researcher subjectivity. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the trustworthiness and credibility of the proposed study.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore how transgender college students construct, experience, and make-meaning of gender using self-authorship and queer theory as interpretive lenses. Self-authorship is understood as an individual's internal capacity to define personal beliefs, identity, and relationships. Self-authorship theory focuses on the cognitive (how do I know?), intrapersonal (who am I?), and interpersonal (what relationships do I want with others?) dimensions of meaning making to understand how individuals construct and make-meaning of their lives (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009a, 2009b; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005). Gender is not constructed nor understood within a vacuum; it is therefore essential to consider how personal cognition intersects with and is influenced by an internal sense of self and relationships with others when exploring how transgender college students understand gender. For the purposes of this research, constructing gender relates to the cognitive dimension (how do I know?) of meaning-making. Three primary research questions guide this study:

- 1) How do transgender college students construct and interpret gender?

- 2) How does a transgender college student's internal sense of self inform gender construction?
- 3) How do relationships with others inform transgender college students' construction of gender?

Study Design and Research Paradigm

Research Paradigm

Defined as one's worldview, or how one looks at the world, a research paradigm is composed of philosophical assumptions that shape how a researcher understands the nature of reality (Creswell, 2007; Mertens, 2005). Philosophical assumptions are formed based on the individual's stance towards ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (how the researcher knows), and methodology (methods used to reach an understanding) (Creswell, 2007). This study is guided by a constructivist approach, which assumes that reality is subjective and that multiple realities exist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mertens, 2005). Knowledge is socially constructed by those involved in the research process and the researcher's role is to attempt to understand the lived experiences of the participants from their point of view (Mertens, 2005). Charmaz (2002) notes that a constructivist researcher studies how individuals, "construct meanings and actions, and they do so from as close to the inside of the experience as they can get" (p. 677). The constructivist approach makes clear that the researcher and the research participants are involved in an interactive process, each influencing the other and creating knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Constructivism allows for a more holistic understanding of gender meaning-making through the creation of relationships between me, the researcher, and my participants, which makes it an appropriate

epistemological approach for this study. As knowledge is mutually constructed, it will be necessary for me to include my own perceptions and experiences with my participants and the data in order to provide a comprehensive illustration of the process of making meaning of gender.

Methodological Approach: Narrative Inquiry

This study utilizes narrative inquiry methodology to explore how transgender college students make meaning of gender. Narrative inquiry is unique in that it is both the phenomenon of study (storytelling) as well as a research methodology (the study of experience via storytelling) (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Stories are powerful; throughout history, they have been used to make sense of the world, create connections within communities, and build bridges between the past, present, and future (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Riessman (2008) notes that *story*, which is often used synonymously with *narrative*, is a collaborative process between the teller and the audience. The storyteller takes a lived experience and constructs it into a story, creating plots “from disordered experience,” and sequencing events to make sense of the experience for listeners (Riessman, 2002, p. 698). In doing so, narrators are able to “make sense of themselves, social situations, and history” (Bamberg & McCabe, 1998, cited by Riessman, 2002, p. 698). Narrative inquiry seeks to understand and honor those lived experiences, using stories as a conduit for meaning-making (Abes, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a methodology, narrative inquiry provides a holistic approach to presenting an individual’s lived experiences via rich and intimate detail.

One approach to understanding narrative is to view stories as ever evolving, influenced and informed by interactions and intersections with others, culture, history, and society (Riessman, 2002). Narrative inquiry is especially well-suited for studying identity because stories provide a glimpse into how people construct and understand an internal sense of self (Abes, 2003). Identity stories, such as sexual orientation or gender identity, are constructed, told, revised, and retold throughout an individual's lifespan. As individuals narrate their experiences, they are in the process of editing and reshaping those same experiences, which influences the meaning-making process of the individual and the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The process of telling one's story is empowering, especially for those whose voices have been largely silenced. Valentine (2008) argues that storytelling has the power to imbue confidence and a sense of identity to the individual. The process of storytelling also helps to connect an individual to a larger community (Crawley & Broad, 2004). When voices and stories are silenced, however, individuals are stripped of power, demoralized, and isolated. This silence leaves room for stereotypes, discrimination, and fear (Valentine, 2008). Atkinson (2007) notes that life stories, or *life narratives*, are influenced and impacted by culture and stresses that, "we need to hear the stories of individuals from culturally unheard groups" (p. 230). Transgender individuals have experienced the silencing of their stories both within gender research and GLBT research. Narrative inquiry, therefore, provides a powerful platform for marginalized populations by creating a safe space for storytelling.

Storytelling is an essential element in the construction of knowledge both for individuals and communities (Riessman, 2008). For example, GLBT coming out stories help

to, “forge solidarity between members [of the GLBT community]...and to contest the powerful ideologies that marginalize queer identities” and experiences (Zimman, 2009, p. 56). Coming out can be defined as the process whereby individuals share with others their journey to an identity which is often stigmatized by greater society (Zimman, 2009).

Research Methods

Sample Selection

Sampling helps to bound a study; it delimits the who, where, and why of the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this study, I constructed a sample based on criterion sampling, which involves selecting individuals who meet the predetermined criteria established by the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Undergraduate students were selected for this study because the majority of transgender student research focuses on the undergraduate experience. Several self-authorship researchers have shown that marginalized college students can exhibit self-authored behavior prior to or upon entering into higher education usually predicated by catalytic experiences, such as encountering racism, negative stereotypes, or harassment (Abes, Jones, & McEwan, 2007; Torres 2003; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004).

The original participant criteria for this study included the following: individuals (1) who self-identify as transgender; (2) are currently enrolled as undergraduate students (full or part-time) at one of the two university sites (described below); (3) are 18 or older and traditional age college students; (4) have variation in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class; (5) and have variation in age and class year. The original attempt at recruiting in November 2012 was unsuccessful. The initial call went out late in the fall semester and was

only in the campus GLBT center's newsletter and did not result in any interest. Students were potentially more focused on preparing for final exams than participating in a gender study. To increase the interest in the study, I made changes to the recruitment letter to include compensation in the form of a \$25 gift card. At the urging of the of my gatekeeper and with the permission of the institutional review board, I made the following adjustments to my criteria: individuals (1) who identify as transgender, (2) are currently enrolled as undergraduate students (full or part time) or have graduated within the past three years, and (3) who are 18 years of age or older.

Upon receiving IRB approval for the addition of compensation and criterion changes, I also met with the campuses' GLBT Center staff to come up with a detailed plan for recruiting participants. The Director and Assistant Director formulated a list of 16 students to whom to reach out and send a copy of my recruitment letter. I was also given permission to present my study and participant criteria at a meeting of the center's GLBT student organization. Finally, announcements for the study ran in the center's newsletter and were posted on their Facebook page. The outreach emails from the Center staff and my presentation at the student meeting were most successful in gaining participants and I was contacted by 10 potential participants.

Patton (2002) notes that there are few rules to determine how large a sample should be in qualitative research. Sample size is determined by what the researcher, "wants to know, the purpose of the inquiry... what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done" in terms of time and resources (p. 244). As the transgender population on college campuses is often an invisible or small population, I knew that my sample size would be

small and hoped to obtain 6-8 participants. Ultimately, I was contacted by a total of 10 interested participants. Two did not meet the criterion: one was already in graduate school and the other was attending a two-year institution. The third did not commit to an interview time and fell out of touch with me. A total of seven individuals were selected for the study, five current students and two recent graduates (within one year of the beginning of data collection).

The participants reached out to me via email and we then set up first interviews either by email or phone calls. Second interviews were set at the end of the first interview. The majority of the individuals who agreed to participate in this study were in their mid-twenties, making them slightly older than ‘traditional’ age students. Five had taken time off from school before re-enrolling, changed majors which delayed their graduation, or were transfer students, but were still undergraduates or recent graduates.

Transgender is an umbrella term which encompasses a myriad of identities including, but not limited to: transsexual, gender queer, gender variant, cross-dresser, trans man, and trans woman, (Feinberg, 1996). For the purposes of this research, participants who self-identify as being transgender include those individuals who move, “across, between, or beyond the binary categories of male and female” (Hines, 2007, p. 1). Potential participants had the opportunity to review the definition of transgender being used for this research and determine if they met the criteria. While the participants rarely used the label transgender to define their gender identity, the labels they do use all fell with the purview of the transgender umbrella.

Setting

Narrative inquiry, while focused on the individuals and their lived experiences, cannot ignore social and cultural contexts as these directly inform personal narratives (Riessman, 2008). The greater community outside of the university is research-oriented, has a large lesbian, gay, and bisexual population, and a growing and active transgender community. Southeastern Regional University is located in an urban setting with a population of over 400,000 residents. GLBT students at Southeastern Regional University not only have access to the campus GLBT center, but also to the city's lesbian and gay resource center located off campus in the city proper. The off-campus center offers a transgender support group that meets regularly both for transition support and social networking.

The study took place at a large public university located in the southeastern region of the United States. For the purposes of this study, the institution has been named Southeastern Regional University. This site was selected because it meets the following criteria: has an active campus GLBT center with transgender-specific programming; has out transgender students active with or known to the Center; and is within a 30 mile radius of the researcher. As this was a personally funded project, travel costs were a consideration. The university is large, with over 25,000 students in both undergraduate and graduate programs, with a focus on research and technology. The university's GLBT Center has been active for over five years and provides a transgender awareness training several times a year for students, faculty, and staff. Gender identity and expression are also covered in Southeastern Regional's non-discrimination policy.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the primary tool for data collection and analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). A common form of data collection in qualitative research is digitally recording and transcribing in-depth interviews with participants, which are then analyzed by the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). For the purposes of this research, data was collected via in-depth interviews, participant responses to a prompt for the second interview, and reflective journaling by the researcher. Riessman (2008) notes that narratives are not found, rather they are constructed with the interviewer taking an active role in that construction. The goal of interviews in narrative inquiry is to, “generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements” (p. 23).

Interviews for this study took place in two parts: the first interview which primarily focused on the participants’ perceptions of gender (societal and personal), their gender journey, and how their lives have changed. At the end of the first interview, the participants were given a prompt for the second interview. The participants were asked to bring a visual or textual representation that illustrates how they perceive and understand their personal gender. The item(s) that they brought in could be anything that felt most appropriate to them, including a photograph, drawing, quote, poem, or selection of prose. During the second interview we discussed why the item was significant to the participant. The questions were broader and fewer in number to allow the participant to tell the story of their personal gender via the prompt. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to share with the

researcher anything that they felt was important for me to know about themselves and their gender that had not been covered by the interview questions.

Stories emerge during conversation; one story leading into another, each tied to the other by a common thread. As storytelling is the desired outcome of narrative inquiry, it is vital that the researcher create space within the interview for stories to gather (Riessman, 2008). As stories emerge, the researcher needs to be willing to follow the path of the story and relinquish a certain level of control over the interview to the participant (Riessman, 2008). This study utilized an in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol in order to generate space for storytelling. The interviews were viewed as conversations rather than a fixed question-and-answer session. The questions were designed to offer participants, “an opportunity to reflect on their experiences in ways that are atypical in everyday life” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 505). The process of thinking of and sharing stories with me created a space for the participants to reflect on their lives and allowed for them to gain insights that they “may not have otherwise discovered” (p. 505).

Before interviews began, I spent 10-15 minutes chatting with participants to get to know them a little and to begin establishing rapport. Knowing that I was asking them to share personal and potentially emotional stories, I felt that it would be beneficial to share some of myself prior to asking them to divulge their gender journey to a perfect stranger. In addition to explaining how I came to my topic, I also shared my own gender identity and expression, as well as my sexual orientation and how it has changed over the years. Many of them found this interesting and it helped us to establish a rapport. Each interview was semi-structured, with an interview protocol that acted as a starting point for conversations about gender. The

interview protocol was limited to six overall questions with sub-questions to help clarify and encourage deeper conversation. Critical incidents were used as an exploratory tool to encourage participants to share stories about significant and empowering moments in their gender journeys (Butterfield et al., 2005; Keatinge, 2002). This allowed me the freedom to follow a participant's stories without worrying about completing a long list of questions.

As a final step in the data collection process I took brief field notes after each interview in order to capture the context, setting, and atmosphere. These notes helped mostly as a memory recall tool when reviewing the transcripts. All interviews were digitally recorded using two digital voice recorders as a precaution against technical difficulties. All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Every effort was made to ensure that interviews were transcribed as soon as possible. The voice recordings were saved to a password-protected external electronic storage system that is encrypted and password protected. Electronic copies were also kept in password-protected digital files on my personal laptop. The participant responses to the interviewer prompt were photographed and also stored as electronic password-protected copies.

Data Analysis

There is no one approach for analyzing narrative data (Abes, 2003). Riessman (2008) describes narrative analysis as a "family of methods" which may include thematic, structural, dialogic, and visual analysis rather than one distinct analytic process (p. 11). Each of these methods can be used individually or in conjunction with one another depending on the researcher needs. For the purposes of this study I utilized a thematic approach to data analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on the content of an individual's narrative (what the story

communicates) and less on the structure of the narrative (how the story was put together) (Riessman, 2008).

Consistent with the thematic analysis approach, the researcher develops codes, themes, and categories from the data in a two-step process: open coding and thematic coding based on the theoretical framework. Krathwohl (1998) describes coding as interpreting and, “making decisions about what things mean” (p. 307). The open coding process is iterative; themes and categories resulted from multiple re-readings of all interview transcripts, analyzing the participant responses to the prompt, and reviewing my researcher field notes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I assigned descriptive phrases and/or words to units of data that appeared similar and significant. To begin coding, I read each set of participant transcripts as a whole, completing one set before moving on to the next. Initial coding was based on these initial reviews. The next level of coding involved reading across, taking each set of transcripts into consideration across the range of transcripts. In this way, I was able to identify similarities between participants as well as counter-stories and develop more detailed codes and themes.

The second level of coding, thematic analysis, with an emphasis on theoretical coding, involves focusing on the content of the narrative, not who said what to whom or how (Riessman, 2008). In the analysis, each participant’s story was considered as a whole and as part of the larger story. The research questions based on Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2009a, 2009b) theory of self-authorship, were used as a starting point to create codes related to the theoretical model. Baxter Magolda and King (2007) note that coding self-authorship based interviews involves pulling out, “meaningful units of conversation,” and assigning labels

associated with themes revealed during the interviews (p. 504). Initial codes followed the three research questions, which stem from Baxter Magolda's three driving questions for each phase of the journey towards self-authorship: how do I know (cognitive)? Who am I (intrapersonal dimension – identity)? What relationships do I want with others (interpersonal dimension)? Sub-codes and categories were created for each primary code. Critical incidents, those moments that the participants identified as being significant and/or empowering in their gender journeys, were also examined during data analysis. This technique was used to be able to examine how the participants felt about these moments and how they impacted their perceptions about gender (Cheek, O'Brian, Ballatantyne, & Pincombe, 1997). These moments were interwoven throughout the resulting themes to describe and support the findings.

Document analysis was used in conjunction with thematic analysis to analyze the participants' reflective prompts. A common form of document analysis is content analysis whereby the researcher describes and interprets, "the artifacts of a society or social group" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The items brought in by the participants in response to the prompt were analyzed as part of their overall stories. As thematic analysis concentrates on the content of an individual's story, elements of the participants' prompts are reflected in the findings chapter. Also as part of the document analysis, campus policies and procedures relating to gender and transgender college students were examined. These helped to give a clear picture of the setting that the students interact with and navigate through when on campus.

Trustworthiness

As in quantitative research, it is imperative that the researcher address issues of quality and the trustworthiness of the study. Determining trustworthiness in a study entails a process of describing and explaining and asking if the explanation fits the description (Janesick, 2000). Are the descriptions and explanations credible? Janesick explains that, “qualitative researchers do not claim that there is only one way of interpreting an event” (p. 393). In other words, multiple interpretations exist. For the purposes of this study, I utilized Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) constructivist approach to determining the quality and trustworthiness of the research. This approach consists of four parts: credibility, transferability, dependability, and authenticity.

The goal of credibility is to illustrate that the researcher has “accurately represented what the participants think, feel, and do” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 77). Credibility can be achieved in a number of ways including: monitoring (and chronicling) researcher subjectivity and bias; prolonged involvement in the field and with participants; data triangulation; peer review; and member checks (Mertens, 2005). To ensure credibility for this study, I utilized member checks, and prolonged engagement with participants. Member checks allow participants to review transcripts and ensure that their words and thoughts are represented accurately. Regular discussions with my chair helped me be more aware of potential gaps in my analysis and strengthen the presentation of the findings. She also helped me navigate an ethical dilemma concerning what participant stories to include and exclude in order to maintain participant confidentiality. Several of my participants are well known and visible within the queer community at Southeastern Regional University, the inclusion of

certain stories would have increased the potential for them to be identified. The decision to exclude certain stories does not diminish the validity of the findings. In most instances, it was possible to utilize other participant experiences to illustrate and discuss a finding related to the excluded story. In this way, no potential themes were eliminated based on the absences of a single story.

Prolonged involvement with participants helps a researcher to gain an in-depth insight into the phenomenon being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to create relationships with my participants, I participated in a campus GLBT center student organization meeting, conducted introductory emails and phone calls with each participant prior to the initial interviews, and facilitated two interviews with each participant. I emailed the completed transcripts to the participants in order to provide them with a sense of closure relating to the interview process. Each of these interactions helped me, as the researcher, to gain a deeper insight into the lives and stories of my participants.

Qualitative researchers do not expect that their results will be generalizable to a larger population, nor is this the intended goal. A qualitative researcher is, instead, seeking to provide the readers with sufficient detail about the study so as to determine if a similar process could be transferable to their own context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). In this study, I utilize the participant's voices to provide rich, thick, and descriptive information. Riessman (2002) makes note that the use of participant voices helps to decrease inaccuracies in relaying their thoughts and viewpoints. I also provided information about the campus setting, population demographics, and cultural background in order to provide readers with "an element of shared experience" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 78). By providing rich thick

description and details about the study location and setting, the reader is better able to determine what elements of the study are transferable to their own institution and context.

To ensure dependability it is the researcher's responsibility to clearly explicate the processes and procedures utilized during the data collection and analysis process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend providing an audit trail; a detailed explanation of how the data were collected and analyzed. An audit trail can, "attest to the quality and appropriateness of the inquiry process" (Mertens, 2005, p. 257). Change is expected in qualitative research, thus keeping an accurate audit trail is vitally important. For this study I kept a field journal where I documented all changes during the research process and detailed how all findings and conclusions were reached during analysis.

Authenticity is determined by presenting a balanced view of all of the participants' perspectives, values, and beliefs (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As Mertens (2005) explains, authenticity seeks to answer the question, "has the researcher been fair in presenting" participant viewpoints (p. 257)? Lincoln and Guba (2000) note that it is important for all participant voices, views, and perspectives to be apparent in the research. To omit voices that illustrate value differences or conflict would be a form of bias.

Researcher Subjectivity

Janesick (2000) explains that no research design can ever be value or bias free. While quantitative research seeks to distance the researcher from the researched in an attempt for objectivity, qualitative researchers argue that one's biases and assumptions impact the research at all levels. Lincoln and Denzin (2000) explain that it is not, "possible for an author to write a text that does not bear the traces of its author" (p. 1051). As the researcher's biases

and assumptions cannot be eliminated from the research, it is imperative that they be made clear for the reader. This study utilizes a constructivist approach which assumes that multiple realities exist and that the researcher and participants co-construct knowledge (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). As a researcher and co-producer of narratives it is, therefore, my responsibility to share my identities, personal history, and beliefs in an attempt to situate myself within this study.

I am a white, middle-class, college-educated woman. My gender identity is biologically female and my gender expression is feminine. As I have progressed through higher education, I have come to realize the many ways I experience privilege due to the color of my skin, level of education, socio-economic status, and gender. To illustrate, I identify as female and never hesitate to enter the women's restroom. My feminine gender expression privileges me to enter the women's restroom with no fear of my presence there being questioned. I am privileged over transgender individuals who often fear using public restrooms because they are afraid of being harassed (Beemyn, 2003). I also realize that I may often be blind to the ways I am privileged, which is why reflexivity is an important element of the research process. Reflective journaling allows me the safe space to explore and challenge the privileges I often receive for being a part of the dominant or majority group.

My research hinges on how transgender college students construct and make meaning of gender. An integral component of my participant interviews will focus on how transgender students define not only their own gender, but also those attributes and characteristics which denote gender to them. I asked myself these seemingly simple questions while creating a class activity on transgender college student issues and realized that it was a struggle for me

to come up with a coherent response. In my reflective journaling in April 2011 regarding that activity I realized that,

I've never really had to think about my own gender, especially not in terms of what makes me feminine or not feminine. If I'm honest, I'd have to say that up to now, I've really thought of my gender in terms of the binary, I'm female not male, which makes me feminine. I've definitely struggled with my definition of feminine before, but I'd have to say always in terms of a feminist argument, meaning, I can still be feminine if I don't wear make-up, or I can be a feminist and wear make-up. But, I've never had to question my gender identity or gender expression. For me, they've always been one and the same. That's been my privilege. I don't have to think about my gender, because I fit nicely within the binary that our Western world has created. Becoming aware of my blinders and privilege that I never really grasped is sometimes a very saddening and often uncomfortable position. I am also an out-identified lesbian, which is a particularly salient component of my sense of self. My interest in GLBT issues on college campuses, a topic I have researched extensively in my pursuit of higher education, is what led me to an interest in how transgender college students make meaning of gender. Since 2005 I have been actively involved in GLBT ally training programs at the institutions where I work, both as a trained ally and as a trainer. Over the summer of 2009 I interned for the GLBT Center at my university and worked to assemble a transgender awareness training module that was implemented in the spring of 2010.

Prior to identifying a research topic, I rarely noticed that the “T” in GLBT research was often only implied. As an avid reader of GLBT research, I assumed that transgender issues were similar to, or the same as, sexual orientation issues. In my gender privilege, I failed to see that a difference could exist. As I continue on this research journey it will be imperative that I regularly evaluate my interpretation to ensure that I do not overlook data due to the blinders of privilege. In terms of my research, I have both an insider and outsider perspective. As a queer identified person, I am an insider within the GLBT community. However, as I do not identify as transgender, I am an outsider with respect to the transgender community. And while similarities do exist between the queer and transgender communities, it is imperative that I not assume that my experiences as a queer individual are the same as those of someone who identifies as transgender.

When I began the dissertation process I identified as a lesbian and had done so for years. In many ways, I believed that I had resolved my sexual -identity and had, essentially, checked off that box of my development. As with many aspects of identity, I have found that my sexual orientation is not as fixed as I originally assumed. In the past two years, as I have worked to finish my dissertation, I have also come to realize that I no longer identify with the term/label ‘lesbian’. I began to find the label confining and not representative of my own experiences. I had always, even when identifying as a lesbian, acknowledged that I still found men attractive. Now, I find myself unwilling to limit how I see myself and my sexual orientation. I have embraced queer as a sexual identity because I appreciate the freedom it allows me to explore my sexual orientation and make it my own. Labels carry so much weight and cultural context, which can feel limiting and restrictive. While queer has many

negative connotations, it is also a word that is being reclaimed by the GLBT community. As a label and identity, it feels right to me. The process of questioning and changing how I view my sexual orientation has been freeing, but also frustrating and confusing. Being able to explain it clearly to others has been challenging and has reiterated to me that what truly matters is that I understand my choices. Whether others understand is less important to me, as long as they treat me with respect and consideration.

My own journey to understanding my fluid sexual orientation has served as a strong reminder that gender identity and gender expression are highly personal experiences. While in my daily life, I rarely have to consider my own gender identity, I clearly remember how confusing it was to feel out of alignment with such a salient identity. While going through the research process, I kept this personal journey in mind as a reminder that identities are not static and can change overtime.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is related to participant age. The study was originally conceptualized as focusing on traditionally aged college students. Of my seven participants, five were older than what is usually considered traditional college age. Taking time off from school, transferring from a two year to a four year institution, and changing majors ultimately meant that the majority of my participants were well into their twenties. A benefit to the participants being older meant that they were often able to think deeply about their experiences and examine how those events have impacted their gender perspective. Being older, however, meant that many of the participants felt disconnected from their peers with little in common outside of class. While their campus interactions were limited due to being

on campus only for class, all of the participants were able to share campus-related gender stories. Interactions with classmates, professors, and the GLBT community on campus all played a part in how they interacted with and experienced campus. With older participants, I perhaps missed out on perspectives of students who are just beginning their gender journeys. However, the participants' stories revealed that age is not necessarily an indication of where or how far along they are in the process. Leigh is the oldest participant, yet at the earliest stages of self-authoring his gender.

This study is also limited to a specific geographic region and a single institution, which may impact transferability. A single institution was selected because it had an active GLBT Center with a small, but known and 'out' transgender student population. The setting is described to provide readers with context and rich thick description is utilized to help aide readers in determining what elements of the study may be transferable to their setting.

My gender identity (female) and expression (feminine) afford me gender privilege in my day to day world and was a potential limitation within my research. Privilege can blind people to the experiences of those who exist outside of that world. If I leave my gender privilege unexamined I run the risk of being blind to the significance of the gender experiences of those outside of my own. As a researcher, it was necessary to not only examine my privilege, but to also challenge the bias my privilege affords me. Reflexivity, therefore, was a vital component of my research. Through reflective journaling, member checks, and conversations with my chair, the blinders of privilege were examined and challenged. As the primary research tool in this study, I decided what questions to ask, how to code the data, and the best way to present the data. All decisions that were made were

influenced by my understanding of the existing literature and qualitative analysis, and the desire to present my findings in a way that authentically represented the experiences of my participants. Ultimately, all analysis and discussion is filtered through the lens of experience, which was a potential limiting factor.

Conclusion

This study is designed to honor the voices and stories of transgender college students. Care will be taken to generate safe spaces for storytelling to occur and to ensure the safety of those narratives in terms of confidentiality and accurate representations. The study is framed using a constructivist approach because I acknowledge that multiple realities exist and my intent is to understand the lived experiences of the participants. Narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology and mode of analysis because it encourages participants to tell in-depth stories. As an analytic approach it allows for detailed reconstruction of their life stories. The findings and conclusions will be presented in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Four

Findings

This narrative study explores the gender experiences of seven transgender college students and seeks to understand how they make meaning of gender. Their gender stories were examined using the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of development in an attempt to explain how they construct their gender identities. The participants in this study demonstrate that gender is not easily defined and that being transgender is not a simple flick of the switch from one side of the binary to the other. Through their stories, it becomes clear that making meaning of gender is a patchwork of experiences, realizations about self, and discovering what feels right despite prevailing social norms. As reflected in the participants' stories, gender identities and expressions are deeply personal and varied. Their identities run the gamut of those who identify as wholly male or female, as trans men or trans women, or somewhere along the spectrum of gender queer. This chapter first introduces the study participants and then explores the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Participant Introductions

This section provides a brief introduction to each of the study participants. The stories shared by the participants were rich and often deeply personal. They expressed interest in the research being conducted and were happy to contribute their experiences to further the literature on transgender college students. While transgender students are often an invisible population on campus, it is important to note that each of the participants could easily be identified by a reader who is part of or involved with the GLBT community on their campus.

To ensure that their confidentiality is protected, many identifiable details, such as age and majors, will not be shared with the reader. Instead, broad descriptors will be used to provide a general picture of each participant. The reader will be able to get to know and learn about each of the participants' gender experiences through their voices and stories which are presented in detail in the findings and discussion sections.

Cee

Cee identifies as gender fluid, defining his gender as something that is not concrete and not necessarily male or female. He explains that his gender is fluid and changeable. When asked what gender pronouns he prefers and uses in his daily life, he responded that he uses male pronouns. He was excited to participate in this study and share his experiences and stories. He comes across as confident, secure, and comfortable in his own skin. He is an African American student who hails from a suburban background. He is a social science major and is involved in research projects as an undergraduate researcher. He describes himself as being very busy between classes, homework, research, and working off campus. While he is planning on graduate school, he also wants to take time off between undergraduate and pursuing a master's degree. At the time of our interviews, Cee lived on campus in a residence hall with single rooms. He noted that the campus GLBT Center helped him work with campus housing in order to have a single room. He has had a roommate in the past, but as he went further in his transition, he did not want to room with a female student because he was far enough into his transition that he felt it would be awkward for both of them.

Cee came out as trans during his sophomore year and has been taking testosterone since early spring 2012. He is currently saving to be able to legally change his name and then plans to work with the campus GLBT Center to begin changing his name on all of his campus documentation. He describes himself as a southern gentleman, a person who is always willing to help others, open doors, and minds his p's and q's. He passes as male, but regularly blends both masculine and feminine characteristics in his daily life.

Jane

Jane is in her mid-twenties, tends to define herself as queer, prefers female pronouns, and is working towards a major in the social sciences. Jane is not overly fond of labels, but gravitates towards queer, which she defines as a catchall term for people who do not like labels. She took several years off from school in order to work full time and gain some financial independence. She began her transition during her break from school and describes it as an abrupt transition in mind-set, saying, "I went from being a straight guy to being a gay trans woman." Jane feels that as a woman she has more freedom to be herself and that she can act masculine or feminine without her gender being called into question.

During that time off from school Jane decided to change majors. She is now a full time student again and feels more engaged and interested in her coursework. While she is not particularly active on campus, she plays for several recreational athletics leagues. Though she was quiet during her interviews and a little intimidated by the recorders, the stories she shared were rich with personal experience and self-awareness.

Mallory

Mallory is also in her mid-twenties and came to Southeastern Regional University via a transfer program from a community college. She began as a STEM major, but ultimately took a couple years off in order to sort through some personal issues. Now back in school she is looking into majoring in a romance language. She is also considering transferring to an out of state school in order to be closer to her friends. She explains that she does not have a large support group at Southeastern and that the majority of her friends live and work out of state. They have been very encouraging and supportive of her transition and she would like to be near them again.

At the time of data collection, Mallory had been taking hormones for just over seven months. Still presenting as a male in class, she explained that it was getting more difficult to hide the physical transformations brought about by the estrogen. She was planning to begin presenting as female in class at the start of the fall semester. She felt that it would be too confusing to transition how she presented in class mid-way through the semester. Mallory acknowledged being excited about presenting as female in more social settings, but was also nervous about ‘outing’ herself to professors to ensure that her preferred name and pronouns would be used in class.

Leigh

Leigh is one of the oldest participants and was most concerned about whether or not he fit the study criteria. He explained that he was biologically male, presented as male, and was not certain if he would ever decide to transition physically. We discussed the various identities that are encompassed by the transgender umbrella, and he explained that he

considers himself to be gender queer. He expressed feeling that having to only identify as one gender to be too confining as a concept. He has always been drawn to femininity and wants to be able to explore and honor that aspect of himself. While he is drawn to and wants to explore his femininity and gender options, he is firm in that he will always use male pronouns.

Leigh is a transfer student from a community college and is pursuing a STEM major. He is excited by the challenge the courses offer him and is looking forward to delving further into his coursework. He is enjoying the freedom he is experiencing at Southeastern Regional University and is actively exploring his gender identity. Leigh shared that he waited till he began attending classes at Southeastern Regional to begin exploring his gender identity. He enjoys being at a large school that has multiple resources available for students who are gender diverse. He is an active participant in the campus GLBT center's student group and regularly makes use of the counseling center's support groups for questioning students.

Page

Page was raised in a two-parent household in a suburban environment and attended an all-female high school. He transferred into Southeastern Regional University after earning an Associate's Degree at a local community college. At the time of data collection, Page was planning to complete his Bachelor of Arts degree by the end of the summer and lived in an off campus apartment with his girlfriend. He noted that he was not particularly active on campus outside of classes, but that he and his partner were involved in several activities in the greater community. Page shared that he loves art, both viewing and creating, music, and dancing.

Page's gender identity has changed over time. For most of his life, he identified as male and was very excited to begin taking testosterone. The reality of hormone replacement therapy, however, was not the "magic pill" that he was expecting and, after a year of being on testosterone, he stopped treatment. When he began his transition he identified as a trans man, now, however, he is identifying as gender queer. He still prefers male pronouns and his general appearance is male. Page noted that while on testosterone other people read him as male 100% of the time, now though, he feels that he passes 85-90% of the time. Ultimately, he reveals that he would prefer to have no gender and simply be seen as human.

Barry

Barry graduated in the past year and is working in a job that he loves. He grew-up in an urban environment in a single parent household. At the time of our interviews, he lived with a significant other in off-campus apartment. He and his fiancée were beginning the process of planning their wedding. While they do not plan to get married for several years, they have discovered that the sooner they begin planning the better as venues, photographers, and caterers get booked up fast

Barry presents as a very confident and optimistic person and he was happy to share his stories about his gender experiences. He identifies as male first and foremost. Barry feels that he was always male and that his biological body simply did not match. With his transition, he expressed excitement that his gender expression is now a match to his internal sense of self. He noted that before his transition he was very much a tomboy, he played a lot of sports and did not try and to fit feminine stereotypes. Throughout his high school career, he and his mother regularly fought over the clothes that he wore because they were not

typically feminine. Now that his gender expression matches his gender identity, he feels happier and more comfortable in his skin.

Mark

Mark graduated a year ago with a social sciences degree. At the time of our interviews he was completing his first year of employment in his field. He enjoys his job, but dislikes the long commutes from work to his home where he lives with his partner and their daughter. Mark's partner is also trans identified and had a child from a previous relationship. He is dynamic and tactile; during our interviews he illustrated his points with drawings, arrows, and figures.

Mark's gender identity and expression have evolved over time. Early in his transition he struggled to find a term that he felt encompassed his experience and purposely did not label himself. For a time, he claimed transgender and male, but now he identifies as a trans man, which he feels accurately describes how he sees himself. He explains that he is male, but he was not always that way; using trans in conjunction with man honors who he was before and who he is now.

Emergent Themes

Three overarching themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme, *power in self-definition*, explores how claiming an identity leads to a deeper understanding of self and is broken down into two sub-themes: queering the label and evolving gender identities.

Navigating gender roles, the second theme, examines the ways in which a transgender college student's internal sense of self informs gender construction. This theme is made up of two sub-themes: gender expectations of others (cisgender expectations of behavior and

negative gender stereotypes), and challenging gender expectations (experiencing emotions). The final theme, *negotiating connections*, is broken down into two subthemes: changing relationships (family, romantic relationships) and *Campus (Dis)connections* (faculty interactions, peer (dis)connections, trans community (dis)connections, and virtual trans community). This theme examines how the participants' relationships and connections with others have changed over the course of their transitions.

Interwoven throughout chapter four are the participants' campus experiences. Interactions with faculty, the perceived helpfulness of campus support services, and negotiating gendered spaces on campus all play a supporting role in their meaning-making process. How they represent their gender on campus is, in many ways, affected by their campus interactions. Also interlaced through the themes are images and textual descriptions of the participants' response to an interview prompt. As part of the data gathering process, the storytellers were asked to bring a visual or textual item that they felt represented their personal gender to the second interview. The family photos, collages, quotes, and personal items they shared revealed new gender stories and allowed for a deeper glimpse into the facets of their gender identity experiences. As the participants explained and described their items, they were also situating their gender representation within a larger societal context.

Power in Self-Definition

Labeling and creating ourselves is powerful. Rather than being identified and labeled by others, individuals take that power and create a sense of self and identity through claiming specific labels. For many, gender is not a matter of self-labeling, it simply 'is' an inherent and all-encompassing concept that does not need to be examined or questioned. The

participants, whose gender identities challenge the binary and who question assumptions linked to biological sex, do view gender as an identity to be claimed, expressed, and owned. Self-labeling, then, is an empowering experience. What quickly became clear in the telling of their gender stories is that gender identity and expression is not an either/or experience and could rarely be expressed in a one word response. The gender identity journeys participants shared are winding, sometimes circuitous, and intensely personal. Mallory described the journey as, “being homesick for something you don’t know. That kind of just longing and feeling that something’s missing.”

The way the participants understood and explained their own genders was filtered through a lens of societal norms and expectations. Jane describes notions of appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors as being pervasive and learned. She states that, “You can’t really get away from it,” Mark explained that gender can be broken down into basics of biological anatomy, “well if you have a penis, then you’re a man. If you have a vagina, then you’re a woman.” He also feels that societal norms do not make distinctions between biological sex and gender identity. The participants agree that overall most people use the terms *sex* and *gender* interchangeably. “They tend to just kind of amalgamate everything together,” Mallory explains. The concept of the gender binary is deeply ingrained in the cultural psyche. Barry notes that, “even kindergartners can point out, ‘oh, he’s a boy and she’s a girl’. I mean it’s really funny that it’s like innate, [set] from the beginning.” Leigh acknowledges that for those who, “cross those boundaries or whatever, there’s all hell to pay.” Several participants felt that few cisgender people spend time thinking about gender identity or the way to express it. Mark believes that people are uncomfortable taking a deeper

look into themselves, finding it scary to face aspects of themselves that they do not understand.

Each of the participants in this study has grown up in a world where their gender is defined and limited by their families, peers, and societal expectations. As they have gotten older and obtained the relative freedom offered by college, the participants have taken the power of labeling and self-definition into their own hands, creating and strengthening their identities through deep introspection.

Queering the Label

The participants live in a world where they are often labeled by others, and their identities are constrained and limited by societal expectations and norms. Being able to label, or not label, themselves, is incredibly powerful, potentially freeing, and leads to a deeper understanding of self. Cee explains it this way, “I label myself so that I can understand myself. You know. Hence I am naming myself.” Page acknowledged that creating and claiming a gender identity is not necessarily an easy process, “but it’s good. It’s good to learn. It’s very empowering to learn about yourself.”

Expressing and naming their gender identity was often a multi-layered response. Sometimes a single word could not encompass all aspects of an individual’s gender identity. Barry was unique among the participants, being the only one to describe himself simply as male and explained that he was, “male from the beginning.” For many of the other students in this study, expressing their gender identity was more complicated. Leigh described himself as gender queer, but struggled to articulate how that particular label described his gender.

I consider myself to be gender queer. I'm cis-male [cisgender male] 'cause I was born male, but I feel like that's too strict or too confining...but oftentimes I find myself wanting to...desiring to... explore kind of female roles and typical female behavior, typical female things. My words are failing.

Cee also indicated that describing his gender identity to others was challenging and that it did not fit neatly into a single category.

Gender in itself is a lot. Like for the most part I present as male, but I don't think I necessarily identify as completely male. Gender is confusing. I mostly use gender fluid...it's not concrete and not necessarily male, not necessarily female.

Mallory noted that even though her gender identity is not easy to explain to others, it makes sense to her. Coming to identify as trans and as a woman:

Made sense because it's like I never felt quite right [as a man]. I just came across this [transgender as an identity] and it made perfect sense. Like, it's so hard to explain it to people who haven't gone through it, but to me it's just like obvious and...I've never been healthier...I'm the happiest I've ever been.

Not only is claiming a gender identity, self-labeling, hard to articulate, the participants also indicated that the pressure to claim a label was occasionally frustrating. Jane used several terms to describe her gender, but ultimately indicated that she would prefer not to have to pick a specific label. While she identifies as a woman, it was not the first label or identifier that she used:

I would say like trans, queer, lesbian type person...I feel like queer fits pretty well.

It's kind of like a catchall label for people who don't like labels, which is kind of like what I am. I don't really like labels much.

As Mark transitioned on campus, he struggled to deal with the pressure from friends to claim a label. Active within the campus GLBT center and the gay straight alliance student organization on campus, Mark found a strong and supportive group of friends who embraced his gender journey. That same community was also, at times the cause of stress and frustration because of their need to understand and know Mark's gender label. He notes that at times he did not have a label to share with them:

I didn't identify as anything and that's really hard because it makes people uncomfortable and they don't know what to do with it. They really honest to God have no idea what to do with it. How do I identify? I don't identify. I don't. Because I was uncomfortable with the boxes. I didn't know where I wanted to be. I didn't know who I was and I was tired of people asking me to put a label on myself that I didn't understand.

Interesting to note is that the refusal to self-label seemed to only cause consternation within the campus GLBT community. The participants indicated that they were rarely questioned by classmates or peers about their gender identity or asked which pronouns they preferred.

Rather than asking, their gender was assumed by others. Cee explained that he 'passes' as male 85-90% of the time, but occasionally something he does or says calls into question his gender identity. Trying to explain the concept of being transgender usually resulted in people

getting confused, frustrated, or angry. Page noted that prior to taking hormones his appearance was very androgynous and people often did not know what gender label to use:

No one ever addressed me specifically and asked me, ‘how do you prefer to be addressed? What pronouns do you prefer?’ You know, nothing like that. Just a lot of talking to each other about it and a lot of staring, it was awkward.”

While on hormones, the whispers stopped and his male gender expression was simply accepted. Now off testosterone, the odd looks are back, “but still no one has specifically asked me.”

Claiming a gender identity involves more than selecting a box on a form or choosing one side of the accepted gender binary. The participants’ experiences reveal that articulating gender is complicated. While they each have a strong sense of their personal gender, defining it to someone else is not an easy task. How they experience and express their gender is an evolving process that can be confusing and difficult to put into terms others will understand.

Confusion is often viewed as a negative emotion, something that is uncomfortable and should be explained and made clear. Cee related that he enjoys causing confusion; he likes when people,

Get confused. ‘Now you’re questioning everything you know about gender because I’ve confused you.’ I just like the type of confusion that can make people think about things that they don’t really ever think about or don’t have to think about.”

He embraces gender confusion and the multiple ways he can express his gender identity. His collage, created as a visual representation of his gender identity and expression, clearly

highlights that ‘confusion’ is not inherently bad or something that needs to be clarified and fixed.



Figure 1. Confusion, section of Cee’s gender prompt. The collage illustrates how Cee views his gender identity.

He describes the above image as, “*Confusion* because my gender identity is a very confusing thing. Not that I mind. It's not a problem. It's just confusing to me, but it's a good kind of confusion, I just enjoy things not being straightforward and explainable.” He no longer lets a pre-defined gender label determine how he expresses his personal identity. He explained that when he first transitioned he “tried to do the whole very binary like male type things,” but realized that trying to conform to a masculine stereotype was not an accurate representation of his gender. Rather than suppress various aspects of his gender identity he

...just kind of gave up on that and just realized people are gonna see me how they see me regardless really of what I do, so I was like, ‘I might as well do what I'm

comfortable doing and present in a way that I'm comfortable presenting.' I guess the more confidence I built in myself, the more I realize it's okay if I don't necessarily identify as 100% male. Like it's not a bad thing that I'm not super like binary identified.

Now that he is not repressing various aspects of his gender identity, he is allowing himself to embrace his femininity and the fact that he spent the first eighteen years of his life as a woman. He noted that those early years were confusing, but they are a part of his history and influenced the man he is today. In embracing gender confusion, he has become more comfortable with the person he used to be and the person he is becoming. Leigh also fights the notion that gender is set-in-stone and questions why he has to only be male simply because he was born biologically male. He honors, "the fact that I am male and I feel like it's not really a mandate on who I should be, but more so a template on...to base my life around per se." He is "drawn to femininity" and feels that he has, "a right to explore that and embrace that to whatever degree," he chooses. At the same time he acknowledges that he is still at a questioning place in his journey and not ready to make physical or lasting changes. In response to the interview prompt, "bring in a visual or textual representation of your gender," he shared a stanza from the song *Reflections*, from the Disney film *Mulan*, to illustrate where he currently finds himself in contemplating his gender identity. He explains that he finds a sense of empowerment in the lyrics:

Something I really resonate with is from the Disney film, *Mulan*. There was a song called *Reflections*, and part of the song was: When will my reflection show...who I am inside? Who is that girl I see staring back at me? I resonate with that a lot because

it's kind of like the same situation with me. It's from the point of a female trying to figure out her place and who she want to be and how she can break gender roles and still kind of fit in.

For Leigh, the song tells the story of a young woman trying to find a place for herself in the world and challenge assumptions based on her gender. Her story is a reflection of Leigh's own journey.

Language adds another layer of complication and confusion to naming and self-labeling because it is not static, but fluid and changes regularly as words pass out of favor or take on new meaning. Labels, especially those related to gender, carry cultural and historical subtexts which many of the participants took into consideration before claiming a label for themselves. Mark shares that he grappled with the distinction between transsexual and transgender as he was coming out.

One of the things I find really complicated – and this is probably partially because of when I came out – there's a shift between transsexual and transgender and more people are moving towards transgender, and also transsexual has some really strict boundaries around it that are troubling to me because ...I don't fit neatly into a gender box. Because I mean especially when being trans was just starting to being a thing, transsexual was very strictly like, "you...like unequivocally want to be the opposite...which is another thing that's problematic for me because I don't think that there are only two choices.

Mark struggled with the implied binary of a transsexual identity, the idea that to transition automatically meant switching from one side of the gender binary to the 'other.'

He notes that he enjoys the flexibility of moving his body and hands in ways that are not typically masculine, saying, “I sure feel good being a masculine feminine person.” Ultimately, it was an empowering experience to be able to choose the language that accurately reflected how he sees himself.

Not all of the participants experienced confusion related to how they understand and experienced their gender. For Barry, the process of claiming a gender identity has not been confusing, but has, instead, been a validating experience. He explains that he has always known that he is male. Transitioning has enabled him to bring his physical body into alignment with his internal sense of self. Barry is comfortable in his body and explains that others seem to pick up on his confidence. He feels that he has, “arrived where I need to be. I’m happier internally so I’m happier externally.”

As the participants claim gender identities some are embracing confusion, while others are leaving it behind. Ultimately, the experience of claiming a label is both continuous and deeply personal.

Evolving Gender Identities

Claiming a gender identify is not a one-time commitment. Similar to language, gender identity labels are fluid and may change over time to reflect the lived experiences of the storyteller. The reasons for change are deeply personal and, sometimes, agonizing. Page had looked forward to transitioning from female to male for years. The reality of the transition, however, was not what he expected, forcing him to look deeper into his sense of self and gender.

I transitioned hormonally for a year from December of 2011 to December of 2012 and then decided it was not right for me. I didn't recognize myself in the mirror. I missed myself. I was very sad that I had to essentially kill the person that I was to get society the right presentation so they would give me the pronoun I wanted. It was a very sad process so I decided to end that.

Transitioning, becoming male, was something that Page had always wanted, and it was "horribly disappointing to learn that I am not going to be the perfect whole guy." He mourns that he, "missed a year of myself aging...I didn't see myself in the normal process of aging. But I do feel happy again when I look in the mirror." While testosterone was not the "magic pill" he expected, the process of discovery helped him realize, "that it's okay to be both genders or neither gender or a fluid gender or...I think all of that has brought me to the realization that I don't believe in gender."

Page explained that the way he describes his gender identity has evolved since going off testosterone. He felt that the male/female binary no longer fit his gender identity:

If you asked me a few months ago, I would have said I'm definitely a trans man. I'm - a female to male transgender. In the last few months, I'm moving towards gender queer. I guess no gender would be preferable, but gender queer is the current terminology I guess I think of myself as.

The catalyst for changing/modifying identity labels is not always brought about by hardship or challenge. As life circumstances change, identities may become cumbersome and ill-fitting. In Mark's case, identifying as transgender was an important aspect of his identity, but has become less salient over time.

There was a time when saying the whole word ‘transgender’ was important to me because my experience was so transgender and I’m not [transgender] everywhere that I go now and it’s not as big a part of my life. So it’s almost like as it became less...absorbing, exorbitant...I don’t know. A part of my life kind of dropped off that – the transgender part – get rid of the gender part. Transgender meant well, now I’m just a trans-man.

Physical transformations also played a part in the evolution of gender identities. Most of the participants acknowledged that their gender expressions did not immediately reflect their burgeoning gender identities. There was a certain lag time that came into play as they waited for the hormones to begin transforming their bodies. Jane shared that her decision to transition was abrupt and her mindset shifted from thinking of herself as a straight male to viewing herself as a lesbian woman. Her physical transition, however, happened slowly over a year long period as she began seeing a therapist, taking hormones, and legally changed her name. She went back and forth between presenting as a boy and a girl depending on where and what she was doing. Work was the last place where she transitioned and she describes the switching back and forth between gender representations as, “a weird purgatory-like state”. While it was a stressful time, she felt that her slow transition allowed her to define for herself what being a woman meant and freed her from societal gender expectations for women.

A particularly significant and empowering moment for Jane happened the first time she looked into a mirror and, “saw a girl instead of a guy.” She felt that she, “couldn’t advance mentally or emotionally,” until her physical body began to resemble her internal

sense of self. Mallory noted that she's, "still cooking," but seeing the physical transformations has been exciting and validating. She brought a recent picture of herself as part of her prompt (to bring a visual or textual representation of her gender), and shared that it is the first picture of herself that she has ever liked and thought that she looked good.

Mallory is mid-transition and still presents as male in most aspects of her life. Seeing herself in pictures and in the mirror has been empowering because in her head, she still sees her male self. The physical transformations have helped her to gain confidence in her gender identity and gender expression. At the time of the interviews, she was planning to present as female in her classes during the fall semester.

Mark describes his voice dropping as a powerful moment in his transition. Having his voice match his appearance and gender expression felt like the final puzzle piece slotting into place.

I think that the very most empowering thing for me was when my voice changed because physically I'm a fairly large person. I come across as fairly masculine. That was never really a challenge for me, but I didn't really like hearing my voice. My voice didn't match my idea of who I was and it was really surreal. Now it does and it's just...it's so lovely and it's so nice...for something to finally match my conception of myself. And it makes me feel more confident...and now there's not a doubt in my mind that when people see me and when they hear me, they know who I am.

The physical transformation helped solidify for Mark his conception and knowledge of himself as male. He notes that his gender experience is not only male or only female, but is

instead, “an amalgamation of a bunch of different ideas.” His gender identity and his understanding of his own masculinity have been affected by how he interacts with the outside world and how society interacts with him.

While physical transformations are not absolutely necessary for the evolution of gender identities, the participants’ experiences illustrate that they can help to bridge potential gaps between gender identities and expressions. Self-definition is an important aspect of the gender journey, but it does not end there. In addition to figuring out how to identify, the participants also had to navigate external gender expectations and social norms.

Navigating Gender Roles

Transitioning does not end with the claiming of a gender identity or the physical transformations brought about by clothing, hormones, and mannerisms. For the participants in this study, gender expression is an outward reflection of their gender identity. The gendered spaces and cultural norms that the participants navigate on a daily basis play a large part in how they ultimately construct and express their gender identity.

Gender Expectations of Others

Most of the participants noted that there was a learning curve in navigating the gender-role expectations of others. All but one of the participants were raised and socialized as a gender that they no longer identify with. They felt that cisgender individuals, people whose gender identity matches their biological sex, expected a level of knowledge about what it means to be male or female that the participants did not have because they were raised and socialized as a different gender. Finding a balance between societal expectations of appropriate gender behavior and their own gender experiences has, at times, been

challenging. The participants encountered external expectations of gender-appropriate knowledge and behavior in a myriad of settings. For some, gendered spaces such as barber shops and clothing stores proved to be obstacle courses of expected gender appropriate knowledge (what hair guards to use, what clothes fit body type). Many of the participants who ‘pass’ as male regularly encountered assumptions that they would participate in chauvinistic behavior with other cisgender men. *Passing* is defined as being read and accepted by others as one’s gender identity. Dealing with negative stereotypes related to their gender identity was particularly troubling for several of the participants. Raised as women, but presenting as men, the participants described feeling surprised and troubled by cisgender women questioning their actions. Mark explained,

I feel like because of all my socialization as a woman and this is how women should behave, I really couldn’t fill the role of a man because it requires a very different concept of how you’re going to interact with the world in it. It almost requires re-socialization or reconfiguring of what it means to be a man.

When first encountering and passing as male in traditionally male environments, Cee felt like he was lacking in basic knowledge because he was not raised as a boy and shared, “there are these things that boys know...there are things that they’ve grown up being taught and they know these things.” Shopping as a woman posed similar challenges for Mallory, partly because, “at that point I still didn’t really know clothes in general ‘cause I’ve never been shopping for myself before period, much less for clothes I knew nothing about.” To help illustrate the unique situations a trans woman can face while shopping, as part of the prompt to bring in a visual or textual representation of her gender, she shared a blog post titled, *The*

Young Man's Guide to Wearing and Shopping for Women's Clothing for the First Time

(Plett, 2011). The guide highlighted, in a comedic manner, how to navigate women's clothing options, dressing rooms, and the mysteries of female fashion:

[Step]7. Go to the women's pants section. Decide this will be a way to ease into this mysterious part of the store. Try to figure out your size. Remember that sizes on women's clothing seem to follow no rooted system of measurement. Grab a bunch of different sizes of jeans, as well as a pair of Dickies. Scurry into the dressing room.

(Plett, 2011)

Moving through gendered spaces with friends and family proved to be valuable in helping Mallory feel more comfortable and less like her presence was going to be questioned or challenged:

Well with friends and stepmom, it was totally great 'cause it's just such a confidence boost to have someone there with you in case anyone starts freaking out on you, they can get you out of there, which has never happened fortunately. Hopefully it won't.

Being raised as a male, Mallory did not receive the feminine socialization that girls tend to absorb from female family members, friends, peers, celebrities, and a myriad of media sources like movies, television shows, fashion magazines, and targeted advertising. Cee, raised as a girl, also experienced a knowledge gap in Black male culture, "that is central to a lot of identity and becoming male." Barber shops are, "heavily masculine" and Cee finds them intimidating, explaining, "I still don't know how to be like in such a heavily male environment." Even though Cee has kept his hair short since high school and has been going

to barber shops for years prior to transitioning, the way he interacts in and with the space now, as a Black man, is different than when he was perceived as female.

But navigating them now and being read as male is the most nerve wracking thing ever, mostly because I still don't know how to...like I don't know how to be in such a heavily male environment. Like I just don't know what to do with myself and I hate it. I hate going to the barber shop so much... 'cause they expect me to know what I want.

Before his transition, Cee could go into the barber shop as a woman and not be expected to know or understand the ins and outs of such a masculine environment. Now, however, as a Black male, the expectation is that he has the language and knowledge to be able to ask for what he wants and interact within the space appropriately. Had he been raised as a boy, he would have not only learned how to navigate this space via weekly haircuts, but also what it means to be a man in Black culture. Cee sees it as, "I'm having to learn how to navigate two communities at one time and it's really interesting and kind of difficult."

Not all of the participants experienced a feeling of being out of the knowledge loop. Barry, who has always felt male, couldn't understand being dressed like a girl as a child. He remembers being in kindergarten and wondering, "Mom, why did you put me in a freaking dress? I'm a kid...like I'm a boy." He notes that, "well, I had a turning point, but I don't think I had a really big rollercoaster trying to figure out who I am. It was just always male." Transitioning to a male identity and presentation was a natural fit for Barry; it was trying to 'be a girl' pre-transition which was far more restricting. Labeled as a tomboy as a child and in high school, he was considered an athletic girl who was not, "trying to fit in with like the

popular girls and wearing whatever they wore.” He chose, instead, to wear men’s clothing in high school and others seemed to accept it. Barry recalls, “I was definitely more tomboy like...it was kind of something I always did so everyone saw it as me.”

The expectation of knowledge gained by a lifetime of socialization was an initial obstacle in how the participants perceived their gender identity and expression. They experienced a level of discomfort and concern that they would act in a way that would call their gender identity/expression into question. The longer they navigate and are accepted as their gender identity by the outside world, the more they learn about societal norms related to their gender. As part of their journeys, they each are determining what norms to keep and what to challenge.

Cisgender Expectations of Behavior.

Along with expectations about common gender knowledge, several participants encountered cisgender expectations related to behavior; specifically in how they talked about the ‘opposite’ sex while around other men. Being read and accepted as male by other men was an important moment for Page, Cee, and Mark. At the same time, though, each was raised and socialized as a woman. Interacting with and deciding how to respond to stereotypical masculine ‘sexist’ behavior was challenging.

For Page, the experience of having male classmates treat him like ‘one of the guys’ and include him in conversations about women was uncomfortable. While he always wanted to be male and had greatly looked forward to beginning hormone therapy, the reality of his changing appearance and the way others interacted with him proved to be uncomfortable.

Then the testosterone started and no one questioned it, everyone thought I was a dude. It was interesting, the way the guys started talking to me was very different. They started talking...degrading women to me in conversations and they were talking about body parts that I still have. So that was very awkward.”

Now that he is off of the hormones, Page’s appearance has begun to shift and responses to his gender are once again confused.

Cee, who describes himself as a southern gentleman, has also struggled with how to deal with sexist behavior and the expectation that he will join in. On one hand, he is not necessarily comfortable ‘trash talking’ about women; on the other hand he is concerned that refusing to do so could bring his masculinity into question. Cee explained,

I work with a lot of guys and...they always have this habit...like we always talk about girls, which is a thing I’ve always done. But they have this habit of doing it in a way that’s really...like I don’t like it. It’s very stereotypically masculine. I’m like, ‘I don’t want to join in with you,’ but it’s almost as if I don’t it’s going to be seen as really weird if I don’t join in because these are things that most guys do.

As Cee continues to grow in confidence in his masculinity, he is attempting to make changes so that his behavior matches his internal value system. He notes that in, “changing these habits I’m just like further pushing myself away from society’s view of what masculinity means and kind of really making it my own.”

Mark shared that he has always, “been pretty out’ as a trans man, but now that he is working and ‘passing’ in his day to day life, he finds that he no longer has to explain his gender identity to others anymore. He is accepted as male and expected to act in ways similar

to other men. Navigating gender expectations has proven to be a challenging experience. He notes:

My experience isn't only male and it's not only female. It's an amalgamation of a bunch of different ideas and a bunch of different things. It's really complicated when people don't know because I'm gonna move through the world differently than a cisgendered man would.

He was recently invited to join some of his male colleagues at a local Hooters. While he appreciated being included and that his co-workers do not question his gender, he felt, "uncomfortable and conflicted," about being in an environment where women are blatantly objectified;

I don't really want to look at Hooters' idea of what a beautiful woman is. I want to look at what my idea of a beautiful woman is. And also, I don't want to go look at Hooters' idea of a beautiful woman around a bunch of men who are going to make me feel sleazy about looking at Hooters' idea of a woman.

Mark notes that he is thankful for his socialization as woman because, "the way that men talk about women; the way that it's acceptable for men to talk about women is really unacceptable. It's not okay. And that's one of those things I brought with me. I can't do it." Despite expectations that he will participate in such behavior because he is male, he is actively challenging the concept that men have to act in a certain pre-described ways. Mark does not believe that all men are or have to be sexist.

Negative Gender Stereotypes.

Transitioning from a female to a male world has not been without out its challenges for Cee and Mark. In addition to learning to navigate gendered expectations about how to ‘be a man’, they have also encountered negative stereotypes related to masculinity. Mark notes that women are taught certain scripts about men, that they are rapists and cannot control themselves. Women, however, are not alone in hearing and internalizing those same messages:

You know what happens when you’re a man? You hear those same scripts, ‘Men are rapists. Men are this. Men are untrustworthy; they’re going to attack you. You shouldn’t trust men with your children alone’. And a lot of that gets internalized. And that was a really hard thing for me during my transition because children are really important to me, I really love spending time with children, but when you have this expectation that you’re going to assault somebody’s kids or you’re going to assault a woman – it’s really kind of heavy.

Realizing that women may look at him as a potential threat has been challenging for Mark. Having people look at him like he was doing something wrong if he smiled at or greeted a child at a store was particularly difficult. As a woman he could be excited about and interact with children, no one questioned it. His gender expression and behaviors matched with societal norms. Now that he presents as male, the scripts are turned against him.

Cee has also noticed that he receives strange looks when he gets excited about and pays attention to children. Showering a baby with affection was considered normal behavior

when he presented as a female, but now he is regarded with suspicion. Learning to navigate gendered behavior expectations, he is also coming to terms with how to deal with negative gender stereotypes. He questions the stereotype and wonders why it is not considered normal for men to like children.

I just really like kids...men aren't supposed to like children and that is a thing I will never be able to do. I love kids way too much to not squeal at every adorable baby I see. And that's also been really weird to navigate, where like living as a female it was fine that I loved babies and loved to be around children, but now like having to navigate that as a male, it's really disappointing to see that society is just, like, you can be a father, but you cannot like children.

Despite the negative stereotypes, Cee is unwilling to change his behavior in order to make others feel better. Similar to how he is working to redefine what masculinity means to him, he is challenging social norms which dictate how men do or do not interact with children.

Challenging Gender Expectations

In response to the prompt to bring in a visual or textual representation of his gender, Barry created a collage that is both a reflection of and a celebration of his personality. He explained that he wanted his collage to be about all aspects of himself, which includes his gender. Through the clippings that he picked he is situating himself within his masculinity and defining for himself what it means to be a man. The word 'Brave' in large block letters is a reminder that transitioning from female to male is, "a huge life choice, you can't go back easily." His collage tells a story of masculinity that is self-defined and not heavily influenced by cultural norms.



Figure 2. Barry's collage. This collage represents how Barry views himself and his masculinity.

The quote, 'He's a Tough Guy' reminded Barry of the documentary *Tough Guise: Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity*, which makes the argument that violence and misogyny are "inextricably linked to how we define manhood as a culture" (<http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=211>). He resonated with the concepts in the movie and is defining for himself how to be a 'tough guy':

You can either be a tough guy in the most respectful way of maybe even just respecting women and doing things that make yourself proud versus being a tough guy like, 'oh, I'm going to puff out my chest and be an ass about it' sort of thing.

For Jane it was less that she felt a need to change her behavior for others, but that she was free to abandon behaviors associated with her biological sex. She feels that she does not, "really act a lot differently than I did before I transitioned...the way that other people interact

with me has changed.” She has found a more authentic sense of self through the letting go of ‘masculine’ behaviors that never felt natural.

And there were a lot of things that I was doing to fit into the male gender – the masculine gender – more before I transitioned and obviously I don’t feel the pressure to do that anymore. I did that to try and fit in with everybody and I think that’s pretty normal...so the things that I used to have like a fake interest in, like I don’t even care now...I feel like I’ve removed myself from a lot of those pressures by transitioning.

She feels that, as a woman, she has more freedom to express herself and to exhibit both masculine and feminine traits without others questioning her gender identity, “compared to if you were like a man who is gay or who acts effeminate or stuff like that.” She is not interested in acting like a “stereotypical woman or anything like that” and instead finds inspiration and role models in female athletes. Her response to the gender prompt reflects the way she connects to strong female role models. Jane shared with me a Gatorade commercial featuring Abby Wambach, a professional soccer player and two-time Olympic gold medal winner. The non-traditional approach to representing a female athlete was highly appealing to Jane. Rather than focus on Abby’s femininity, the commercial highlights and celebrates her athleticism, showing her in a game setting, sweating, dirty, focused, and determined to win. What really stood out to Jane was one particular shot, “where they actually zoom in on her face and you can see like the little hairs on her face.”



Figure 3. Screen-cap of Abby Wambach. Gatorade commercial featuring Abby Wambach, soccer player (<http://i1.ytimg.com/vi/k4q6muVH6FE/hqdefault.jpg>).

The fact that the commercial doesn't downplay Abby's 'imperfections' resonated with Jane because she sees herself as being imperfect too. As a woman, Jane has found freedom to let go of inauthentic behaviors and embrace her own strength and imperfections.

Clothing is another way some participants challenged gender norms. Mark, specifically, likes to queer his clothing, mixing masculine and feminine elements together. He chose his outfit for the second interview as part of his prompt to reflect the multiple aspects of his gender identity and expression. Mark says that his clothing decisions are always intentional because he is aware that what he wears sends a message out to other people. He discusses his thought process when he is choosing what to wear:

Well, if the thing that's going to be the most comfortable for me today is my kilt, how is that going to influence the people that are looking at me and the messages that I'm sending out about my gender? I explore the ramifications of a lot of it, especially the dressing choices that I make, the clothes that I put on my body because they really

change the way people see or interact with me...And then some days I'm like, 'Fuck it. I'm going to go out in the world and I'm going to screw with people's heads because that's fun too.' Like my outfit today is my screw with people's heads outfit.



Figure 4. Queering clothing. This picture illustrates Mark's response to the prompt for representing how he views his gender.

Mark is at a point in his transition and has achieved a comfort in both his gender identity and expression that enables him to outwardly test gender norms. He notes that he does not always look to push the boundaries of gender appropriate clothing. When he is at work, where he presents as male, he chooses outfits that fit his male expression. When he is out with his queer identified friends, he often selects clothes contain both masculine and feminine elements because he knows that his friends, "will respect [his] gender no matter how [he] presents to them".

In counterpoint to the other participants, Leigh, who is pre-transition and may never physically express his gender identity, is grappling with societal expectations of what it means to be male or female and is actively trying to find a balance that feels authentic. Thus far, he is still limiting his behavior in order to stay in line with societal gender norms. He acknowledges that throughout his life he has struggled with society's expectations of masculine and feminine behavior. Drawn to the feminine, Leigh has been scared that if anyone found out, he would be teased and targeted. He strived to present an appropriate 'masculine' front, while internally wanting to, "imitate the girls or try to keep up with them and figure out what they were up to and what they were doing." He describes himself then, and now, as being,

Mentally between [two] worlds and wasn't adherent to gender norms per se because as a little kid I wanted to play with the girls as well as the boys and I tried to be macho about it so I didn't get identified as a female or anything like that or get teased for it.

Social norms dictate that men and women will act in certain ways. Children are socialized to think of and view certain behaviors as being masculine or feminine and that it is wrong for a boy to act like a girl and vice versa. The participants' stories and experiences illustrate both the challenges and freedoms that can be experienced when settling into their gender identities

Experiencing Emotions.

The stereotype exists in Western Culture that women are emotional and irrational, while men are logical and stoic. Cultural norms place relatively severe boundaries on the

range of acceptable emotions men can exhibit, while allowing women a greater scope of emotional responsiveness. On the other hand, women are often chastised for being overemotional, the implication being that they are weak or fragile. Despite these societal limitations, both Cee and Jane have discovered a greater sense of freedom in displaying emotion based on their gender expressions. Jane explains that she feels,

Like I'm allowed to do more things because I feel like women have a little bit more leeway in how they want to act. I know that's not what a lot of people think, but I feel like women have more freedom to like express themselves however they want.

As a woman, Jane feels that she has more access to her feelings and that people are generally more accepting and forgiving of displays of emotions simply because they read her as female. Cee also finds that it is now more culturally acceptable for him to display emotions, anger in particular, than when he presented as female. He shares,

But now, being a Black male, while that expectation to be strong is still there, it's not as prevalent anymore. Like I'm allowed to be angry and be loud and be mad and express the fact that I'm upset and it's fine. Like it's not seen as normal but it's not as big of a deal as trying to express those things as a Black woman.

Cee's experiences illustrate the intersection of race and gender and the need to navigate multiple cultural gender expectations. Cee explains the intersection as, "not only am I being read as a male, I'm being read as a Black male which is a whole lot different." Culturally, African American women are expected, "to be strong, you're supposed to hold everything down. You're that anchor. Like being a Black female in a Black family, you're the anchor." These expectations lead to suppressing emotion and putting on a strong face in

order to keep the family together in the face of adversity. Now, as a Black man, Cee has discovered that it is culturally and socially acceptable for him to display emotions, even negative ones, saying, “oh that’s normal. You’re supposed to be angry ‘cause you’re a guy.”

Leigh admits, “one of my biggest hang-ups right now towards just like fully embracing this identity, is how will it affect my standing in the African American [community] especially...” While he wants to be able to fully explore his gender identity and be able to present and emote in a way that feels authentic, he is, “kind of maintaining in very standard kind of roles until I can figure out how to break out of that role and do as I please.” He is afraid of how others in the Black community will react to him if presents in a way that is not typically male. This fear limits his ability to fully express himself and he is looking for transgender role models who have similar experiences and backgrounds to his own. For now, the fear of others outweighs his desire to express himself authentically. He is hopeful that the more he learns about himself and his gender will make it possible to match his gender expression to his gender identity.

Page’s experiences with emotion are perhaps the most poignant and powerful. In response to the prompt to bring in something that could be a visual or textual representation of his gender, Page brought in a cut class jar containing a crumpled tissue. The object itself is simple, yet the story it represents is complicated and personal.



Figure 5. Page's glass jar. The glass jar is Page's response to the prompt, 'bring in a visual or textual representation of your personal gender.'

That small crumpled tissue holds the tears Page cried the night he came out to his parents:

[I] gave my parents my coming out video. I had waited years and years for this moment. And so I was crying and she [Page's significant other] was holding me and she was wiping my tears away with that tissue and she saved it on the windowsill...and several months later she put it in a glass jar. We have lots of little jars like this that have significant moments in our lives on our mantel piece, but the tears on this tissue are significant because my whole life I felt like I couldn't be a real guy because I always had a really sensitive heart and I've always cried fairly easily – not over physical things...but I would cry over emotional things in my own life and other people's lives. I'm always very compassionate, I've very empathetic. But I saw the guys around me, and especially my father, were not like that. I thought that in

order to be a real guy you had to not cry. So I've kind of always hated that part of me all my life, that I was very sensitive enough to cry over...shed tears over something like that.

A few years prior to beginning his transition, Page remembers watching the movie *Boys Don't Cry* and he began to consider how he had been, "taught all my life that boys don't cry," and began to question why. It wasn't till he was in the midst of the transition process, however, that he began to challenge the stereotypes. At the time of his coming out, Page was six months into hormone replacement therapy and taking the highest dosage of testosterone that he could. During that time he found that his reaction to emotional situations had dramatically changed, where he once would have cried, he instead would react with anger.

Whenever I started passing as male after the testosterone those expectations for my gender were...it was a lot more pressure to never cry over things, to not be sensitive, to not be empathetic, to care about people...you know, those things that I'm used to doing socially as a female, I couldn't do anymore. That made me sad. I pretty much didn't cry for an entire year, both because the hormones made me not feel like it and because I thought I couldn't.

He notes that the testosterone made him feel, "that I didn't need to or want to cry because I thought I was in control of everything." As he continued to move through his transition, he explains that he began to lose his need for control and, "started being able to cry again." In the process of relearning how to access and display emotions, Page has challenged external expectations of appropriate masculine behavior and is now able to authentically display his emotions. The tears forever preserved in the jar serve as a reminder that, "It is

okay to cry. No-one has a right to tell [someone] that they can't cry or that they can't be emotional.”

Overall, the participants now find a greater freedom to explore the range of their emotions and challenge social norms which put constraints on appropriate displays of emotion. As they navigate social norms and expectations related to appropriate gender behaviors, the participants have gained a better sense of what gender means to them and how they want to interact with the world in terms of their gender expression.

Negotiating Connections

Each of the participants in this study experienced shifts in the relationships they shared with others. From parents, to significant others, to faculty, peers, and friends, all relationships underwent changes as the participants progressed through their transitions. They each indicated that how they interacted with others changed over time as they became more confident and comfortable in their own skin and their gender identities.

Changing Relationships

Family.

Coming out as transgender had a direct and immediate impact on relationships, especially with parents. The majority of participants had at least one parent who did not react well to the news. For Barry, Cee, Mark and Page, who already had tumultuous relationships with their parents, coming out as trans caused further deterioration of those familial ties. As adolescents, they all indicated that their parents struggled with their tomboy appearance. Barry described his relationship with his mother as controlling and stunted. Throughout high school he and his mother clashed over the clothes he wore, the activities he was involved in,

and his non-feminine behavior. Barry relates, “We just never agreed on anything. She signed me up for prom dress catalogs. I’m like, ‘Mom, I’m not going to prom. I’m not doing this, that’s not me.’ As he’s gotten older, their relationship has not improved. Prior to cutting ties with her she would make negative comments about his appearance, call him names such as dyke, and accuse him of trying to break into her home. Barry has realized that he is not required to deal with her behavior and has made the decision to eliminate her presence from his life moving onto, “bigger and better things,”

Appearances were also very important to Cee’s mother and he felt that they often took precedence over his needs. He remembers fighting over his appearance throughout most of middle school and high school because he was not, “girly enough. And we fought all the time over things that I chose to wear. That was her thing, ‘You’re my child. People see you dress this way and it all falls back on me.’ Similarly, when he came out as a lesbian in high school, his mother was not supportive, appalled that her child was “different.” Cee shared that he was very depressed in high school and often felt suicidal, but did not receive support from his mother. Black women are supposed to anchor their families and be strong. Sharing emotions, especially ones that could be described as weak, was not encouraged by Cee’s mother.

Growing up with depression and just really awful anxiety, like those were things I wasn’t allowed to acknowledge. My mother knew. Like I was very suicidal in high school, but instead of her addressing this...getting me help, her response was, ‘It’s fine. You’re making this up. Pray about it.’

Their relationship is still contentious, and Cee has been taking steps to limit their contact. He loves her because she is family, but he admits that he does not like her. While coming out as trans was less traumatic than coming out as a lesbian in high school, the experience has not been pleasant. His mother still exhibits controlling behavior and is overly concerned about what other people will think about Cee's actions and appearance. While he knows that cutting his mom out of his life may hurt, he has also reached a point in his life where he is unwilling to share his life with individuals who cannot be accepting of all aspects of himself.

Because if you're not gonna understand me or be okay with me for who I am, then I don't really need you in my life. And that accounts across the board – family and all.

That's just kind of how I feel about it... That's how I've had to learn to cope in order to deal with my mother.

Page has greatly limited contact with his parents, who refuse to call him by his name or use the correct pronoun. He is letting them work through their emotions and, "have their own journey." Mark has made a similar decision after a significant fight with his parents. His mother wants him to change how he behaves at home, including how he dresses, so as not to make others in the family uncomfortable. Mark is frustrated by his mother's actions feeling that she values other people's comfort over his own in his childhood home. The experience has been hurtful and he has cut contact. He understands that his transition is not what his parents expected or hoped for his life and that, "to go from having a sister to a brother or from a daughter to a son is really difficult." While he acknowledges that it has been challenging for them, he is not willing to take on as his own their "angst and all of their discomfort."

Mallory's mom has been less than supportive, but she has found an ally in her step-mother, and her dad is slowly coming around to being more accepting and understanding. A particularly significant and empowering moment in Mallory's gender journey happened over the Easter holiday. She went home for break and discovered that her step-mom had bought her some new clothes, new shirts and a pretty bra. She says that knowing her step-mom "was willing to like get stuff for me really meant a lot so I called her into my room and started crying for like two hours." That same trip, Mallory was treated to a new haircut and style, which her step-mom later revealed was all her dad's idea. "She said, 'you should probably thank your dad 'cause that was his idea' and he said I looked really good." Knowing that her father was behind her new hairstyle was both powerful and emotional for Mallory because it felt like the first real steps towards acceptance. Parental acceptance has been an empowering experience for both Mallory and Jane. Jane notes that her mom "is awesome about it. My grandparents are really cool about it...My dad has not been great about it, but recently he's shown more...acceptance of it."

Leigh has not come out to his parents because he is seeking a more solid understanding of his own gender identity before he shares this aspect of himself with them:

I want to be able to say specifically, 'This is where I stand on a lot of stuff. This is who I am as a person. And to be able to give them a very solid idea of what that is for me and, you know, kind of like [not] give a false hope I guess, to be like, 'Oh well, he's questioning, but he's not fixated or settled on certain things so maybe there's still hope.' I want to say, 'This is really my situation [my gender].'

He is hopeful that they will be supportive and understanding and that they can join him on this gender journey.

Relationships with friends and family can be tumultuous and painful when one's identity is rejected. Some participants found acceptance and understanding from extended family rather than parents. Cee's aunt is an advocate for him. Knowing that he has her support and love helped him to realize that,

People actually do care. Especially like in my family 'cause they're all religious, and I was like...that is the best feeling knowing that someone cares enough about you to like pretty much get yelled at by the entire family. It's like, that is awesome...I love her to death. She's my favorite person ever.

He recognizes this as an incredibly significant moment in his transition. Having his gender identity and expression acknowledged, supported, and respected has been very powerful and freeing. Barry has also found support from an extended family member. While the dynamic between himself and his mother remains strained, he relates that his grandmother has been surprisingly supportive. He notes that she is not 100% accepting, but that she loves him and is trying to understand his life now. When he first began his transition, she struggled to understand and was concerned that his life would be negatively impacted. Barry recalls stressing to her all the ways in which he was, "thriving" in his new life including better grades, gaining acceptance into his college's honors fraternity, friends who knew and supported him, and a partner who loves him. His grandmother came to his graduation. It was significant for him to have family there who supported him while he finished that chapter in his life.

Relationship dynamics.

At the time of data collection, all but two of the participants were in intimate relationships. Many acknowledged that transitioning and romantic relationships can be difficult to balance and manage, but that it can also be a positive force for bringing a couple closer together. Barry began his transition while dating his now fiancé. When he told her that he wanted to transition, that he felt male, she was understanding and supportive. Her own sexual identity was not called into question because she does not, “necessarily consider herself gay or straight...she just loves the person.” Barry acknowledges that at times things were challenging between them as he transitioned, but that stemmed more from miscommunications and not from a lack of acceptance or support. They have worked together to bridge communication gaps and nurture their relationship

It’s good that I have her. Like I would probably be still in my dorm room in the dark like sad all the time if I didn’t have someone like her to brighten up my life...[she’s] definitely a support system.

Mark’s partner is a trans woman who transitioned prior to their meeting through the campus GLBT center. They were friends and occasionally dated as Mark started his transition and she acted as both a guide and a support network for him as he navigated his family dynamics. She advocated for him as he began to explore his gender identity early on and continues to encourage him to manipulate and mold his gender expression to fit his internal image of himself. They occasionally struggle within their relationship, but more as two people navigating a life together, and not because of their gender identities/expressions.

For Page, transitioning was hard on his relationship. While his partner was fully in support of Page's need and desire to transition, as he began to physically change and become more masculine in appearance, she struggled to reconcile her lesbian identity with dating a man. Things between them became strained and difficult. Page's partner had been newly out as a lesbian when they began to date and was still coming to terms with her own identity. Page's physical transformation to being more male-bodied was in opposition to how his partner understood her own sexuality and preferences. He acknowledges that while he always appeared boyish prior to his transition and taking hormones, his partner was attracted to his femaleness. When he began to transition that changed.

And then as soon as the testosterone started, it became a different story. It was very scary for both of us not knowing what was going to happen to me, but she was not attracted to me anymore almost immediately. She had to go through all the stuff over again that she didn't get to go through before we met, which is, 'I'm a lesbian, I'm attracted to women. I love the female part of you, but I'm not allowed to address it or recognize it because I feel like I'm disrespecting you. I'm a lesbian with a man. I don't know how to reconcile that. I'm not attracted to you, but I love you.' It was really hard for both of us.

They broke up for a time, before deciding that their feelings for one another outweighed gender and sexual identities. Page is now off hormones and his physical appearance has become less masculine as the amount of testosterone in his system has decreased. He still presents as male and uses male pronouns, but is more comfortable with his gender queer

identity. At the time of data collection, both were working on how to navigate their relationship and honor each other's needs.

The participants in relationships stressed the need for communication in relationships to make them successful. Cee describes himself as polyamorous (loving or romantically involved with more than one person) and was in an open poly relationship during our interviews. He notes that being poly and trans make dating difficult because it can be challenging to find someone who is okay with both of those identities. He was excited about his current relationship because his significant other was also trans and poly identified. In his dating experience thus far, Cee stresses communication, "solves a lot of issues up front." He identifies honesty as being a lynchpin to a successful polyamorous relationship.

Communication and honesty also come into play when the participants are dating and meeting new potential partners. Mallory never dated much pre-transition, but now finds herself interested in potentially pursuing a relationship with someone else. In her mid-twenties and older than the majority of her peers on campus, she has looked to on-line dating sites as a preferred way to meet people. While she likes the ability to interact with a variety of people in a relatively safe environment, she notes that dating as a trans person is hard. Often, she finds that when she discloses her gender identity to someone that she has been interacting with on-line, the communication stops.

The dating thing...it's been really depressing because ideally I would be dating either straight guys or gay women, or bisexual people of either. But straight guys, since I'm...well, intact, kind of usually have a problem with that, which I mean I can't really blame them for. But it gets really depressing because as soon as I disclose like

most of the time they just stop talking to me. I always tell someone before I meet them, for safety reasons if nothing else.

Mallory would like to meet someone who is interested in her for who she is and less because of her gender presentation. She identifies as pansexual, a person who is attracted to all gender identities and biological sexes, and stresses that she is more concerned about a person's personality than, "their bits." For now, it is a balancing act in communication, deciding when to come out to potential dates and wonder if all interactions will stop when she does. She feels that being honest about herself and how she identifies is a must, but does wish that others could be less focused on her biology and more on who she is as a person.

Dating and negotiating relationships as a trans person can be a struggle. For the majority of the participants, romantic partnerships were something that they valued and hoped to maintain and all indicated that they wished to be partners with people who could accept them for who they are.

Campus (Dis)connections

Participant experiences with campus climate and culture were, for the most part, mixed. Jane believes that the campus location plays a large part in how gender is perceived because, "it being in a state in the south, it's obviously going to have some more conservative perspectives on it than if we're in the northeast or California or something. I would say it's very traditional." Barry suggests that most people accept what they see and rarely delve deeper, "You're evaluated on the surface first, and some people are really good at kind of figuring things out and then some people just...like if you appear female, you're female."

While Leigh agrees that campus views on gender follow along the same lines of greater Western society, he also feels that there are safe spaces for gender exploration.

Unless you do start going into more alternative kind of areas or alternative kind of organizations and things like that [GLBT Center, Counseling Center]... safe places and stuff, there's more latitude in places like that. I would say typically Western unless you...but there are areas to kind of explore gender I think.

Page notes that, "most of the people that I've run into [on campus] don't seem to know what transgender means." He feels that campus may be "a little more accept[ing], that there's room for androgyny...there is a growing acceptance towards, I guess, options outside of the binary for people who live in the gray area." He stresses, however, that even with positive strides forward, he regularly encounters pockets of animosity and hate. Campus bathrooms in particular were identified as less than accepting places, "I go into, you know the men's bathroom, even just today, and see gay slurs and 'faggot' written on the wall and so I know that there's a large community here that does not accept it." Overall, his impression is that Southeastern Regional University is, "very mixed, but it's getting better."

Mallory also expressed a feeling that, "people in general seem like they're...they would be rather accepting. Maybe not supportive or...let's go tolerant." All but two of the participants 'pass' on campus and indicate that they feel relatively comfortable navigating classroom spaces. Mallory still attends class as a male, but has recently begun living openly as a female in the apartment that she shares with three men. As she moves further along in her transition, she plans to begin presenting as female in class, but is waiting till the start of new semester. In terms of safety she notes that:

Well at school I feel...I mean I feel safe at both really [campus and housing], to the extent where I don't think anyone's going to like murder me horribly for what I am. But like comfortable – sometimes yeah, sometimes no. I mean I'm still a little iffy on going out as a girl by myself.”

Faculty interactions.

Only a few of the participants are ‘out’ as trans on campus and most indicate that they are not out in the classroom environment. In class, their gender expression is not necessarily questioned by their classmates. To be able to pass successfully in class, however, the participants indicate that they need to share their gender identity with their professors each semester to ensure that the instructors use the correct name and pronouns from the start of class. Reaching out to professors is a stressful experience because there is no guarantee that the professor will respect and honor their wishes. The five participants who have gone through this process report mostly positive results, finding that, overall, professors were willing to respect their requests. For Cee, reaching out to his professors and asking them to use his preferred name and pronouns was a nerve-wracking experience because he could not be certain of their reactions.

That was one thing I was really, really anxious about, was having your teacher be like, ‘No, I’m not going to and you cannot make me.’ I’ve been prepared like ever since I started transitioning for that to happen and it hasn’t yet...and that just helped me realize that even though this campus as a whole is very conservative...that there are certain people who understand how important it is...to have affirmation [about] your identities.

Jane has had similar experiences thus far. In fact, it took three semesters before she encountered a professor who did not fully understand the importance of using her preferred (and now legal) name in class, “she was like, ‘Oh if I mess up, just correct me’.” Feeling that it would be a constant struggle, she chose to drop the class. Some professors did not seem to understand the importance of the request, and Page remembers receiving a few emails back along the lines of, “I don’t even have my roll printed out yet. You can just tell me what your preferred name is when I call your name in class.” Page acknowledged running into this same perspective from a few professors who did not understand the importance of the request. Being accidentally ‘outed’ in class is potentially dangerous for transgender students because there is no guarantee that they will not become targets of hate speech or harassment. The start of each semester holds a certain level of anxiety as the participants reach out to their professors and place their gender identities in the hands of strangers.

The classroom environment is not limited to in-person classroom interactions. The study participants also encountered issues with on-line classroom environments. On-line course management sites are used by professors as an extension of the classroom where students can participate in discussions with classmates, post assignments, and take exams. A number of the participants expressed frustration with the on-line classroom environment because their profiles were directly linked to their campus records, meaning their birth name, not their preferred name, is visible to their classmates, essentially outing them. Page has dropped classes with a heavy on-line component because he did not feel safe in that environment. Being ‘outed’ in the on-line classroom negated the work they did with their professors to ensure that the correct name and pronouns were used in the actual classroom.

Peer (dis)connections.

The participants' connections on campus were varied. While personal connection with people was definitely valued, many of the participants found those connections off campus. Jane, Mallory, Barry, and Page each mentioned their age as one barrier to connecting with classmates and peers on campus. Mallory, who is in her mid-twenties, took time off from school for a variety of reasons, some which were transition related. She explains that most of her friends live elsewhere, have already graduated, and are working now. Living off campus and only coming to campus for classes, she does not have a lot of interaction with other students, "I'm on campus for about an hour a day or two hours a day every day of the week." Jane, also in her mid-twenties, also isn't particularly active on campus beyond class, explained:

I'm not incredibly active on campus. Like I said, I feel like I'm so much older than everybody here...I don't feel incredibly active on campus other than just going to classes and stuff like that. I have a lot of things outside of school going on.

Barry differentiated between class friends and actual friends explaining that, "you have your classroom friendships where you're like, 'I'll text you about class or something,' but you don't really hang out." As a transfer student, Page has not felt a particular connection to the student body. All four of these participants live off campus and many were not heavily involved in an organization on campus, which also limited the contact they have with other students.

While they do not have strong connections to the campus, Jane and Barry have strong support networks off campus. Jane plays soccer in several different adult leagues, both single

sex and co-ed, and works off campus. Many of her friends come from the leagues she plays in or are co-workers. She has found her work environment to be very supportive and encouraging, noting that she is not the first person to transition there. Barry, who recently graduated, has a wide network of friends, some from work, and others through his partner, and more from athletic teams that he has been involved with in the past. When he was taking classes on campus, he had friends through his college (class friends that he did not tend to see away from campus) and through the intermural co-ed teams that he played on. He was not 'out' as trans in these friendships because he preferred to build relationships with others based on mutual interests and not his gender identity.

Both Cee and Mark have close connections to classmates and peers. Even though Mark has graduated he is still in contact with many of the friends he made at Southeastern Regional University. Cee is actively involved in research through his college and has made some valuable connections and relationships through that opportunity and he is also closely connected to the GLBT community on campus. He has created a support network for himself that loves and accepts him for who he is on campus. Leigh is still trying to make connections on campus. As an older transfer student he feels somewhat disconnected from his classmates. He also relates that he has always had trouble making friends. He spends a lot of time inside of his own head, which can make it hard to open up to others. He is active within the campus GLBT center student organization and is considering reaching out to the minority support program through his college as another avenue for meeting new people. Ultimately, all of the participants indicated a desire to connect with people based on similar interests and ideals.

Whether they met and connected with them as part of their campus interactions was less important.

Trans community (dis)connections.

Of the participants, only Mark and Cee described strong connections to the campus GLBT and trans community. Mark connected to the campus' GLBT Center and student group early in his first semester and maintained those relationships until he graduated. Through his partnership with the center he found a support network and a friend group who became like family. He also found a role model, someone who was going through the transition process on campus that he could learn from. Mark notes that his role model, a trans man,

Is actually a really important person in my transition because he did a lot of the things that you think of when you think of transition like name change and hormones and like living full time. He did a lot of those things before me and I got to watch him do it, [and] I knew that I didn't identify as just nothing [no label], that this was a direction that I should be taking.

Cee has found the campus's GLBT Center to be incredibly helpful as well during his college experience. The director helped him get a single room on campus to avoid complications with a roommate around gender (this campus assigns rooms based on gender). He notes that his friend base now is made up almost completely of people within the GLBT community. He describes it as being, "kind of sheltered in that sense and that there aren't many straight people in my circle of friends...which is really nice, but make for a semi-jaded life that you forget straight people exist."

For Mark and Cee, their trans identities are salient to their gender identities and being a part of a greater trans community on campus was very important. Having people to share stories with, learn from, and discuss challenges experienced has been very helpful during their transition. Both found role models through the center's trans community and felt welcomed and embraced by the queer culture on campus. Leigh also enjoys the campus GLBT center and the resources that it offers him. He regularly attends the student organization's meetings both as a way to meet new people and to learn more about the queer community. He appreciates the opportunities to talk about what he is experiencing in a safe environment and is curious to meet others who may be on similar journeys. Leigh notes that it was a center event that helped him realize that he identifies with the term gender queer, which was a significant moment in how he understood himself and his gender.

They had a trans panel one night where they [had] people of various kind of transgender areas there to present and kind of give their perspectives and kind of help the LGBT community understand them. One of the members wasn't trying to identify as [either] gender. They explained to me how they did identify [as] gender queer and what that meant to them...I think once I connected with them I felt like it suited me...and works for me.

Being able to talk to someone who identified as gender queer, to ask them questions and see similarities between their experiences, helped Leigh feel comfortable embracing an identity that he had been considering for a long time. That connection was significant in helping him see his gender journey in a new light and helped him realize that he is not alone.

Not all of the participants have felt as at home with the center and student group. Barry notes that he does not feel particularly drawn to the queer community. For now, he wants to meet people based on similar interests and indicated, “I want to meet people on my own terms versus kind of forcing it down their throat or saying, ‘Hey I’m trans, everyone. Let’s all be friends’ ...I want to be seen as [Barry]...So it’s male first and then we go from there.” Both Barry and Jane are aware of and have occasionally attended programs that the transgender support group that the city GLBT center (off campus) offers, but neither feels a strong connection or desire to build relationships with the people there. Transgender is not primary identity for either Barry or Jane, and both prefer to connect with others based on similar interests rather than common trans identities.

When asked what they were looking for in terms of connections and relationships with others, all the participants indicated that what really mattered to them was being treated like a person who mattered. The decision to stop taking testosterone has changed to an extent how Page wants friends to see and interact with him:

Before I went off the testosterone was projecting forward, I though, I want to have friends who accept me as a guy...I’d hope they would be accepting, but I would want them to be manly, treat me manly, you know, joke around with me, hit me on the shoulder, spit with me, all that kind of stuff. But now what I really want in people is to see me as a human being and for me to be able to treat them as human beings and for me to like the things that I like...and for them to like the things they like. I really just want openness out of relationships.

As with all the relationships in their lives, the participants of this study demonstrate that they want to be treated as people first. They want to be recognized as having interests, hobbies, passions, and dreams that others can relate to and build connections over. Their gender is far less important than their sense of themselves as people relating with other people.

Virtual trans community.

The transition process can be lonely and confusing. The participants found that being able to follow along with another's journey online was a concrete way to place themselves within a larger context of what being trans means. Cee is grateful for the role that tumblr, a blogging and social networking site, has played in his journey:

I'm just really thankful that I found tumblr. I'm sure that I would still have transitioned without it, but it wouldn't have been as easy. Like it's almost as if I have a support group of just all these people that don't necessarily know me, I don't necessarily know them, but we are all having the same struggles and we all know that, 'Hey, there are, like, thousands of people somewhere in the world who are having these same struggles; I'm not alone'. It's really awesome.

The participants acknowledged the importance of connecting with other trans individuals in person, but stressed that social media sites allowed them to tailor virtual support to meet their individual needs. Barry does not feel a strong connection to the transgender community, primarily because he has always viewed himself as male. He found that he was not particularly interested in life stories, the why behind the transition, but rather the "the actual transition portion" of the journey. In-person interactions via transgender support groups, therefore, were less important to his sense of masculinity and self. For Barry,

transgender is a secondary identity, far less salient than his masculine identity. He found YouTube videos to be far more helpful than in-person connections during his transition.

I checked out this one guy, I think the name was Skylark11 and I was a little jealous of him because he started his transition at like 18. So he's younger than me now and he's already three years into his transition. You can't rush it. Everyone kind of figures it out on their own path...I mean you can search Youtube and there's probably a million videos on here's how do your shot this week or here's how you do that...[Skylark11] did tell personal things but he focused more on, 'here's a transition'...and it was great that I found him far enough along that I could go back and look at 7 videos of his. He did it every two weeks or so, so I could see his year, year and a half transition...as I was starting.

Social media sites such as tumblr, a blogging and social networking site, and reddit, a social news and entertainment site, also provided participants with opportunities to gain broad opinions, experiences, and stories from other trans individuals. Mallory described the social networking site reddit as, "basically everyone posting...what being trans meant to them," helped her make sense of her feelings about being trans.

Leigh, who describes himself as being, "stuck in my head," has found the internet and social media sites to be helpful in helping him explore different facets of his gender and answer questions about masculinity and femininity. Virtual communities, then, offer another way to reach out for help. As interaction is not required, they also afford the opportunity to just explore what others have already posted and shared, as well as find stories, pictures, and articles that reflect where they are now and where they can hope to end up in their journey.

Watching YouTube videos was empowering and helped Barry to research and, “prepare myself per se... or whatever else before or starting my transition to kind of see where everything leads, but you don’t know until you try it.”

While Page appreciates what social media can do for transgender youth, he expresses some concern about the messages that come across. He notes,

Certainly the process is different for everyone, but I think...I mourned all the young, young trans guys I see on YouTube transitioning at like 18 years old, as soon as they move out of their parents’ house and I’m glad that they’re happy they finally got their hands on something that can help them pass easier, but I feel like it would really help if they could learn more about themselves before they changed the person they never got to know.

His own journey colors his perspective. Testosterone turned out not to be the “magic bottle” that he wanted it to be. He explains hormone therapy this way, “testosterone is kind of like a staple on your stomach...it doesn’t get to the root of what’s the issue.” He worries that these young trans men are expecting testosterone to be their ticket to finally becoming the men they see themselves as, but are not getting the counseling support that may prove to be beneficial and necessary for their journeys.

While Mallory appreciates the anonymity that these sites like tumblr and reddit provide, Facebook (social networking) and Instagram (photo posting site that links to sites like Facebook) can cause transgender individuals anxiety as they are inexorably linked to a one’s actual identity. Mallory chose to create a new Facebook account and only add friends who already knew about her transition. She is slowly adding people as she moves further

along in her gender journey. In this way, she has been able to control how and who she comes out to, rather than simply changing the name on her old profile and dealing with the influx of questions, comments, and opinions of others. Several other participants commented that changing their names on Facebook brought about some uncomfortable questions from acquaintances, friends and family. Jane took steps to diminish such discomfort by deleting individuals she was not close with or thought would have a problem with her transition.

Virtual communities have their share of limitations. However, they also offered a unique way for the participants to explore gender identities, to find a sense of belonging, and to know that they are not alone in their experiences or feelings. Finding a sense of place, of belonging, of not being alone was powerful and helped many of the participants feel strong enough to make changes in their own lives related to how they understood and expressed their gender.

Conclusion

The purpose of this narrative study is to examine the gender stories and experiences of transgender college students in an attempt to better interpret the gender meaning-making process. The participants' stories reveal that while they all have gender identities that fall beneath the transgender umbrella, the way they experience and understand their genders is very different. In selecting and claiming a gender label they are interpreting and redefining for themselves what masculinity and femininity mean outside of social norms. As they navigate in a world of gendered expectations they are deconstructing external messages of what it means to be a 'real' man or woman and testing out the different ways that they can maneuver through gendered spaces. Their relationships with others are also greatly impacted

by how they interpret and express gender. A primary focus in connecting with others, whether they be family, friends, or significant others, is that they be treated with respect and honesty. Gender is deeply personal and how it is experienced is varied. While commonalities exist between the participants, their stories are not homogenous.

The following and final chapter situates the emergent themes from chapter four within the existing literature and discusses how this study extends current research. Implications for future research and for policy and practice are also examined.

Chapter Five

Discussion of Findings

In chapter five, the emergent themes from chapter four are situated within the existing literature and analyzed utilizing self-authorship theory and queer theory as a critical lens. Self-authorship is driven by three questions which represent the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of development: How do I know? Who am I? What relationships do I want with others? The research questions for this study stem from these driving questions. The purpose of this study was to explore how trans-identified college students make meaning of gender and was guided by three research questions:

- 1) How do transgender college students construct and interpret gender?
- 2) How does a transgender college student's internal sense of self inform gender construction?
- 3) How do relationships with others inform transgender college students' construction of gender?

The over-arching themes from chapter four are discussed in relation to their corresponding research questions and are situated within the literature. Identities are not developed or understood within a vacuum; it is therefore essential to consider how personal cognition is interwoven with an internal sense of self and relationships with others when exploring how transgender college students understand gender (Baxter Magolda, 2009a; Hines, 2007; Keagan 1982, 1984). This study's findings illustrate that the process of constructing a gender identity involves both the deconstruction of gender schemas and the

development of a strong internal foundation and voice (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010; Turner, 2000).

Queer theory, as an additional theoretical lens for this study, examines the deconstruction process that the participants faced as they worked to create a gender identity for themselves. Throughout the gender construction process each participant had to dissect, question, challenge, and leave behind external messages about gender in order to author a gender identity that reflected their personal sense of self. The gender journeys shared in this narrative study demonstrate that identity is not static, but fluid, and that pre-described identity distinctions, such as male/female or even transgender, are rarely a neat and perfect fit (Turner, 2000; Hines, 2007).

The participants' narratives illustrate that gender identity is constantly evolving and changing, as individuals move from societal definitions to an internal sense of self. What follows is a review of the study findings and theoretical implications, recommendations for policy and practice, and finally suggestions for future research.

Summary of Study Findings

In this section the emergent themes are connected to the research questions and situated within the literature. The themes are woven together with self-authorship as the theoretical framework and queer theory is considered throughout as a broad lens in understanding the deconstruction and re-construction process of the participants' gender journeys.

How do I know? Power in Self-definition

The epistemological dimension of self-authorship delves into the thinking and reasoning process, also known as knowledge construction (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010). This dimension also considers knowledge assumptions, “the theories and beliefs” that individuals have about knowledge (p. 8). The participants in this study experience and construct their gender in a culture that does not readily acknowledge gender identities outside of the binary and that sets limits and expectations on appropriate gender behavior (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011). Sex and gender are viewed by many as being interchangeable and it is assumed that gender mirrors biological sex: penis equals male equals masculine (Diamond, 2002; Schoellkopf, 2012). The gender identities and experiences of the participants in this study clearly demonstrate that gender identity and self-labeling is more complicated for those outside of the binary.

Knowledge construction does not happen in isolation. The way in which the participants explained and understood gender was filtered through a lens of societal norms and expectations. In self-labeling, defining for themselves what gender means, the participants are taking control of their identities rather than allowing external formulas to define and restrict them to the binary (Regales, 2008). The overarching theme, *power in self-definition*, and its subsequent sub-themes (queering the label and evolving gender identities), focuses on how the participants separated their personal understanding of their gender identity from external expectations and assumptions of gender definitions. Gender diverse individuals often find their identities ‘othered’ and relegated to subordinate positions to the dominant group (Jensen, 2011). By self-labeling and defining their genders, the participants

are disengaging from cultural narratives of the dominant group, in this case cisgendered heterosexuals (individuals whose gender expression and gender identity line up with their biological sex) who set the norms and expectations for ‘gender-being’ (Collins, 2000; Saltzburg & Davis, 2011). Self-authorship research demonstrates that the cognitive dimension, how individuals think and make-meaning, becomes more complex over time and is influenced by situations and experiences that challenge previous ways of thinking (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001, 2009a, 2009b). Self-definition provides the participants with a foundation for telling their own stories and understanding themselves as both individuals and as part of a larger societal context. Instead of being ‘othered’, they are narrating their own stories. Cee explains that by labeling himself, he can also understand himself.

Challenging the gender binary is not an easy process, but many of the participants indicated that learning about and defining for themselves what gender means was an empowering experience. King (2010) notes that cognitive development research suggests that, “meaning-making is a cognitive activity, as it requires one to engage in tasks variously described as thinking about, making sense of, and figuring out, all of which require expending cognitive effort” (p. 174). Only one participant, Barry, felt comfortable with and claimed ‘male’ as his gender identity and expression. The rest of the participants found it more challenging to select a single term or label to define themselves. Regales (2008) notes that identity construction is intensely personal and the transgender youth in her study were fighting against being, “misrepresented or ‘cut’ into smaller ‘pieces’ to prove an academic point” (p. 88). Many of the participants in my study expressed a level of frustration with labels and found the language available to define gender inadequate. Saltzburg and Davis

(2011) note that gender diverse youth do not see their experiences and identities represented in the, “social vocabulary used to represent gender” (p. 94). To enter into gender discourse, it is, therefore, necessary for trans students to deconstruct, “the socio-linguistic gender system,” (p. 95) and redefine what gender means based on their lived experiences with gender. Jane settled on queer because she felt that it was a, “catchall label for people who don’t like labels.” For a long time during his transition, Mark did not identify as anything, reluctant to claim a label that he didn’t really understand. Uncomfortable with the available identity boxes, he chose not to select a label until he could understand and explain for himself how he identified. At times, the participants felt that they were selecting a label to appease others and not themselves.

While self-labeling can be empowering, queer theorists stress that identity categories can be limiting and most individuals do not fit neatly within a pre-described identity (Turner, 2000). Early in their transition, several participants tried to conform to a traditional and stereotypical male label, but realized over time that the way they viewed themselves and their gender did not fit within that binary. Cee embraces the confusion and ambiguities he occasionally faces in learning to interpret his gender. He notes that confusion is not a bad thing and that it is not something to be fixed. Instead of clinging to external definitions of masculinity, he is redefining them in a way that fits how he understands himself. A primary aim of queer theory is to break down universal truths and demonstrate that they are culturally constructed (Wilchins, 2004). As the participants construct their gender identities they are deconstructing societal norms and challenging the absolutes represented by the binary (Sullivan, 2003). Several of the participants were actively re-defining what masculinity and

femininity meant and working to create definitions that fit their lives. Gender was viewed as fluid and malleable by the participants, “a template” to mold and shape to fit their lives (Abes, 2003; Saltzburg & Davis, 2011).

The participant’s gender identities evolved overtime. While a solid gender identity is thought to be achieved in early childhood (Dragowski, Scharron-del Rio, & Sandigorsky, 2011), Lev (2004) suggests that identities are not immutable and people can change how they behave, how they present, and how they define themselves. For some, identities became cumbersome as their lives changed; the language selected no longer fits how participants saw themselves. Language is context heavy, carrying cultural and historical subtexts (Feinberg, 1996; Saltzurg & Davis, 2011). Mark used to self-identify as transgender, but as his life has changed the label has become ill-fitting and less salient to his overall identity. His male identity is more salient than his transgender identity, and he now refers to himself as a trans man. In this way he is able to embrace his male identity and honor the fact that he was not always male.

Transitioning involves transformations of both the body and the mind (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). For many of the participants, the physical transformations from hormone therapy helped to align their bodies to their internal sense of themselves. Jane felt that once her body and mind were aligned, she was able to advance mentally and emotionally. For the majority of the participants, those physical transformations were affirming and helped them to settle into their identities. For Page, however, the physical transformations related to testosterone called into question his gender identity. No longer recognizing himself, he felt that he had to, “essentially kill the person that I was to get society,” to use his preferred

pronoun. Re-evaluating his gender identity as a trans man was challenging and scary, but ultimately empowering. He finds the available gender language to be inadequate to encompass his experiences and is, for now settling on the term gender queer (Saltzburg & Davis, 2011). His story demonstrates that self-labeling is not a one time commitment, but is always evolving.

Self-authorship is also ever evolving and cyclical in nature (Torres, 2010). Page's story, especially, illustrates that an individual can demonstrate complex ways of knowing, but that catalytic events, such as unhappiness with physical transformations, can force a self-authored individual back into a questioning phase (Parks, 2000; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007). Baxter Magolda (2010) describes self-authorship not as a linear progression moving forward in measured steps, but more as taking, "two steps forward and one step back or, at times, one step forward and two steps back" (p. 322).

The participants' experiences with self-definition and labeling demonstrate that how they understand themselves is an evolving process. They have developed complex ways of knowing and are able to construct self-definitions based on their lived experiences and personal beliefs rather than external gender expectations (Baxter Magolda, 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). The epistemological dimension is a vital element in self-authorship, but is not the only dimension involved in becoming a self-authored individual. The intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions also influence how an individual comes to know and make-meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009a, 2009b, 2010)

Who am I? Navigating Gender Roles

The cognitive dimension is by far the most studied of the developmental dimensions (Pizzolato, 2007). Self-authorship theory, however, stresses that cognitive development does not happen alone, but in conjunction with the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 2009b, 2010). The intrapersonal dimension, where individuals asks questions such as ‘Who am I?’, ‘What do I value?’ and ‘Why?’ reveals the, “influence of identity on epistemology” (Pizzolato, 2007, p. 34). For the participants in this study, the ability to define their gender and self-label stems directly from their ability to align how they know with their internal sense of self. The intrapersonal dimension examines how an individual develops the capacity to construct an internal identity that is, “not overly dependent on others” (Baxter Magolda & King 2007, p.492). As the participants become less influenced by external opinions and expectations related to gender, they rely more heavily on an internal foundation to determine their values and how they interpret their own gender (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Kegan, 1994). Similar to the epistemological dimension, as the participants navigated, experienced, and deconstructed gender roles and gender expectations, their internal sense of self became more complex overtime (King, 2010).

The overarching theme *navigating gender roles* and its subsequent sub-themes, gender expectations of others and challenging gender expectations, examines how participants react to and interact with the world of social behavioral norms and reconstruct them to fit their internal sense of themselves (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Their gender expression is an outward reflection of how they view their gender identity and their stories reveal that both are fluid and changeable. In constructing an inner sense of self, the

participants are encountering the expectations of others concerning gender appropriate knowledge and behaviors. As they become self-authored, the participants have been able to deconstruct gender norms and messages about ‘how to be a real man’ or ‘how to be a real woman’ and reconstruct them in ways that meet their, “internal definitions” of personal gender (Pizzolato, 2007; Wilchins, 2004).

On a daily basis, all but two of the participants present as their gender identity or ‘pass’, meaning that others read and accept them as their gender expression (Davidmann, 2010; Huegel, 2003). Passing does not come without challenges, however, and the participants indicated that they experienced a learning curve in navigating gender expectations of others (Hines, 2007). Many explained that they lacked knowledge related to their gender identity and expression that others expected them to have. Gender socialization, which is linked to biological sex, begins at birth and individuals learn what gender is and how to behave appropriately from their parents, family, peers, and greater society (Diamond, 2006). The participants, raised as their biological sex, did not receive the socialization skills for the gender with which they now identify. For many these knowledge gaps were intimidating, especially when moving through gendered spaces such as barber shops or gender specific clothing stores.

For Cee and Mallory, being in such heavily gendered environments was challenging because others assumed that they already knew how to navigate that space. Mallory commented that shopping for women’s clothing was far less scary when she was with other women because she was less worried that others would question her presence there. In the early stages of their transitions, many of the participants followed external patterns of

behavior, copying what others did in order to present the ‘right’ way (Baxter Magolda, 2010). Berkowitz, Manohar, and Tinkler (2010), citing Connell (1987), note that, “masculinities and femininities are not preexisting norms that are passively internalized through childhood socialization, but rather are constructed and reconstructed in interaction” (p. 133). As they become aware of knowledge assumptions, the participants, as Mark explains, are actively re-socializing and reconfiguring for themselves what it means to be male or female, masculine, or feminine, or somewhere in-between.

Along with knowledge gaps, many of the participants describe encountering societal behavioral expectations related to their gender presentation. Mark, Cee, and Page, all of whom predominantly present as male, acknowledged that other men included them in and expected them to participate in stereotypically chauvinistic behavior. As they negotiate their way through such encounters, they grappled not only with a desire to ‘fit-in’ and follow the masculine binary, but also with feelings of discomfort related to participating in degrading behaviors. In some ways, the participants were performing masculinity as they perceived it at the time. Queer theory describes gender as being performative, something that is created through actions and interactions with society (Berkowitz, Manohar, & Tinkler, 2010; Butler, 1990; Wilchins, 2004). The participants, especially early in their transitions, were concerned about presenting in the ‘right’ way and attempted to behave in ways they felt ‘matched’ their gender presentation. They were subscribing to external formulas for masculinity and behaving in ways that did not necessarily fit with their internal sense of themselves (Baxter Magolda, 2010; Hines, 2007). Namaste (2000) stresses that viewing gender only as performative is limiting because it does not take into account lived

experiences. Barry and Jane, in fact, felt that transitioning away from their biological sexes allowed them to abandon behaviors associated with their birth-assigned gender. They were able to step away from performative aspects of gender and settle into gender expressions that fit their gender identities.

While there may have been an element of performance to their interactions at first, the participants were actively engaged in questioning and deconstructing the messages they were receiving about masculinity and typical male behavior. Abes and Jones (2004) found that as college students with minority and/or marginalized identities move towards self-authorship they begin to question stereotypes and limiting labels. The further the participants progressed into their transitions, the more confident they became in listening to their internal voices and questioning stereotypes about appropriate masculine behavior. In addition to learning to navigate encounters with other men, many of the male-presenting participants also regularly encountered negative stereotypes relating to masculinity such as men are rapists and cannot be trusted with children. As part of gender socialization, men and women learn not only what is appropriate for their gender, but what is inappropriate for another gender (Diamond, 2006; Sax, 2005). Mark and Cee struggled with such negative stereotypes related to their masculinity, because prior to transitioning they were not considered threats to other women or children.

In moving away from external formulas and expectations of behavior, the participants were better able to decide for themselves what it means to be masculine and use that internal foundation to guide their actions (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, 2010; Hines, 2007, Parks, 2000). For Mark and Barry that has meant redefining for themselves how to be masculine and

respect women in the process. Barry stresses that you can be a tough guy, but still talk about and treat women like human beings. Mark and Cee are also challenging stereotypes that man cannot be trusted with children. They are seeking, through living their definitions of masculinity, to deconstruct, “foundational, seemingly indisputable concepts” (Turner, 2000, p. 3). Many of the more male-identified participants reflected that as they are reconstructing masculinity, they are incorporating aspects of the feminine socialization they were raised with to create an internal sense of gender that is truly their own (Hines, 2007). In doing so the participants are securing internal commitments and developing, “a personal philosophy of life to guide action” (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2010, p. 4).

The participants challenge gender norms and regularly re-define and defy the male/female and masculine/feminine binaries (Sullivan, 2003). As they change and interact with society, society interacts with and changes them, which may eventually result in shifts in societal norms (Abes & Kasch, 2007). The majority of the participants indicated feeling a certain freedom in transitioning and creating an internal sense of their gender outside of external norms. Jane and Cee felt that they now had more access to their emotions and were able to express them in front of others without concern of being judged. Page’s journey towards becoming comfortable displaying emotion demonstrates the process of deconstructing external formulas relating to appropriate displays of male emotion. He moved from worrying about displaying emotions the ‘right’ way to listening to and cultivating his internal voice which enabled him to reframe how he understood emotions. He has been able to use that internal voice that tells him it is okay to display emotion and uses it as a guide for

action (Baxter Magolda, 2010). He stresses that no one has the right to tell him how to feel or when to display emotions.

The participants left behind gender norms in other ways as well. Mark's daily clothing choices are deliberate and provide him with the opportunity to test gender norms. While his clothes may push boundaries in some contexts, in others he is simply dressing to go to work, not to send a political message. Other participants share how leaving behind gendered-related expectations of behavior has been freeing. Hines (2007) and Namaste (2000) argue that the focus of queer theory on deconstruction and political fissures fails to take into account the subjective and lived experiences of trans individuals. While the participants are actively redefining gender for themselves and leaving behind external gender expectations, they are, first and foremost, doing so in order to live their lives more authentically, not as political statements.

As the participants navigate social norms and expectations related to appropriate gender behaviors, they are working to develop an authentic sense of themselves. This internal foundation enables them to take responsibility for how they interpret reality, which then determines how they interact with others and the world around them (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010). This developed intrapersonal dimension intersects with the epistemological dimension and directly influences the relationships the participants build with others.

What Relationships do I want with others? Negotiating Connections

As individuals gain a better understanding of how they define and understand themselves, there is often a shift in how they relate to others (Baxter Magolda, 2009a; Kegan,

1994; King, 2010). The interpersonal dimension is closely linked to both the epistemological and intrapersonal developmental dimensions of self-authorship, yet is perhaps the least explored dimension outside of self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2010; Parks, 2007). The students' relationships mature from valuing others over oneself to, "negotiat[ing] multiple perspectives, and engag[ing] in genuinely mutual relationships" (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 492). They are able to be interdependent and learn from others without losing their independence and becoming inordinately reliant on others (Kegan, 1994; Parks, 2000, Pizzolato, 2007). While relationships with others were important to the participants of this study, the way they approached them varied and was often dependent on where they were in their journey. All indicated that they want to foster and create relationships based on common interests and shared values. Ultimately, the participants want to be loved and respected, to be treated like human beings, and to not be limited in their interactions with others by strict gender roles and gender norms. In authoring their gender journeys, they are looking to build and nurture authentic relationships with others (Parks, 2000).

Relationships are not often considered or examined in research related to transgender college students. The majority of research on gender-diverse students primarily focuses on campus connections, campus climate, and policies/procedures (Blumer, Green, Knowles, & Willaims, 2011; Hines, 2007). Queer theory, which focuses on deconstructing universal truths and absolutes (Wilchins, 2004), does not tend to focus on construction of relationships. Self-authorship theory, however, stresses that relationships, play a large part in becoming a self-authored individual (Baxter Magolda, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). In a recent study, Rankin and Beemyn (2012) note that coming out as transgender often puts a strain on

relationships with others and few remain unchanged after disclosure. All but one of the participants in this study have begun and are in the process of transitioning and that process has necessitated the renegotiating of relationships with almost everyone in their lives (Iantaffi & Bockting, 2011). As each participant gains a better sense of self they each become better able to change and redefine interactions with family, significant others, and peers. For some, this has meant limiting contact with family members in order to protect themselves from toxic behaviors and opinions. For others, it has meant finding connections and support virtually.

Leigh is the only participant who is not 'out' as gender queer in most aspects of his life. His story illustrates how an individual can exhibit self-authored behavior in the epistemological dimension, and still be at the crossroads in other dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 2010). While he is able to clearly articulate how he understands his gender and is beginning to trust his internal voice and build a foundation on which to base how he views himself, he is still figuring out how integrate this knowledge into his relationships with others (Torres & Hernandez, 2007). In terms of his familial and peer relationships he is not sharing this aspect of his identity. He is still working to come to a complete understanding of what his gender means and how to express it and does not feel comfortable enough with his identity to come out to his family.

Research supports that relationships with family, especially parents, can be damaged and fractured when a transgender individual comes out (Hines, 2007; Nuttbrock, 2002; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). For a number of participants, relationships with family, especially parents, have become strained. Page, Barry, Cee, and Mark have created limits and

boundaries for their interactions with their parents in order to protect themselves and what they need. They are putting their needs into the foregrounds of these relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2009b, 2010). Page notes that his parents need to have their own journeys as they try to understand how their child's gender identity has changed from childhood. While the participants were understanding that coming to terms with a child who does not meet gendered expectations can be challenging, especially in regards to social norms, they have also come to realize that it is not their responsibility to make their parents happy (Winter, 2010).

Romantic relationships are an important aspect of the interpersonal dimension yet are not adequately examined in transgender research (Blumer, Green Knowles, & Williams, 2012; Hines, 2007; Zamboni, 2006). Some studies suggest that normative scripts regarding sexuality and gender, "may become more important if an individual has a strong desire to be perceived as legitimate within a relationship or mainstream culture" (Iantaffi & Bockting, 2011). While sexual orientation was outside of the scope of this research, transitioning while in a relationship did have an impact on some of the participants' significant others. Trans individuals face a unique challenge in coming out and identifying and expressing their gender identity when in an intimate relationship with another person. As one partner transitions genders, it can throw the other's sexual identity into question (Bloom, 2002). Hines (2007) notes that intimate relationships can be fluid and changeable, able to be reframed to fit new identities. At the time of data collection, several of the participants were in long-term relationships and discussed how their relationships were impacted. For Barry it was a positive experience, providing a time for him and his fiancé to gain a better

understanding of one another, especially in regards to their relationship. He describes his fiancé as a person who is not particularly concerned with putting a label on her sexual identity; instead, her personal philosophy is to love the person, not the gender. Bloom (2002) and Hines (2007) note that many relationships do not survive after one partner transitions. There can be a level of bitterness and anger at the person changing their gender and disrupting the balance of the relationship. For Page, the transition process caused upheaval within his relationship. His partner identified as a lesbian and struggled with her sexual identity as the person she loved transitioned to a masculine/male gender expression and identity. They broke up for a time as his physical appearance began to change and become more masculine. While she was completely supportive of his need to transition, she struggled to reconcile her lesbian identity with loving a man. At the time of the interviews, they were back together, working to find a balance between their love for one another and their identities. Relationship dynamics within the interpersonal dimension are based on mutual needs, where both individuals are able to be interdependent without losing a sense of themselves (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010). Page and his partner are negotiating their relationship based on what they both need.

In addition to their family and romantic relationships, connections to their campuses play a large role in transgender college student lives. While higher education literature does not tend to focus on personal relationships of transgender college students, it does examine the relationships and connections gender-diverse students forge with their campuses, faculty, staff, and peers (Beemyn, 2003, 2005; Bilodeau, 2007; Pusch, 2005; Dugan, Kusel, and Simounet, 2012). Campus climate research indicates that transgender students experience

higher levels of discrimination and harassment than other students on campus and perceive their campuses as being unwelcoming and hostile (Beemyn, 2005; Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Kelig, 2004; Malaney, Williams, & Gellar, 1997; Rankin 2003, 2005; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Feeling like they do not have a place on campus can lead students to disengage from their college experiences (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). Interpersonal relationships are formed within social contexts and influenced by how individuals understand themselves within those contexts (Baxter Magolda, 2009b, 2010). The participants of this study, overall, found their campus to be moderately tolerant of their gender identities and experiences. They all indicated feeling relatively safe on campus and have not experienced outright discrimination. Page and Jane have both encountered some faculty who did not fully understand the need to use the correct name and pronouns in the classroom, but mostly found their interactions with professors to be positive. The majority of the participants did acknowledge feeling disconnected from their campus and their peers. Being older than the majority of their classmates, due to transferring in or taking time off of school, led many of the participants to feel that they had little in common with their classmates. The current literature on transgender college students primarily focuses on traditional age students and does little to address the experiences of older and/or transfer students on campus.

Not all of the participants are looking to be 'out' as trans to everyone that they encounter and interact with in their daily lives. As they build new connections and relationships, each participant faces the decision about whether or not to disclose their gender identity. The majority of the participants indicated that 'outing' themselves on campus is not

a priority. Instead, they prefer to relate to others in a way that reflects their current gender identity (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Mallory, Page, Jane, and Barry related that their relationships with classmates were not something that they were looking to foster outside of the classroom. They each indicated that they had lives off campus that they nurtured and fostered; campus relationships were less significant. While research about transgender college students describes off-campus arrangements as an alternative to campus housing, it does not delve into how living off campus impacts the students' campus engagement (Rankin 2003, 2005; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Many of the participants in this study made distinctions between their personal lives and their academic lives and were not particularly interested in making them intersect.

Leigh, Cee, and Mark, on the other hand, actively engaged in relationships with peers and classmates. Within their classes, they do tend to prefer to be viewed and known as their gender presentation. Rather than focusing on classroom relationships, they have built connections with the campus GLBT community. They have found the campus GLBT center and the center's student organization to be safe places to explore, question, and challenge gender norms. Through the center they have found trans inclusive programming, resources to ease the process of transitioning on campus, and a support network of friends and allies. Research indicates that students who actively participate in supportive trans inclusive environments feel a greater sense of connection to and satisfaction with their campus (Bilodeau, 2005; Pusch 2005; Sausa, 2005). Leigh has found the resources offered through the campus GLBT center to be very helpful. Via the programming and social opportunities provided, he is hoping to form relationships with others to form a support network. In these

trans inclusive environments Cee and Mark have developed relationships with individuals who are supportive of their gender identities and with whom they can be themselves. They are establishing and maintaining relationships that meet their needs, able to be interdependent with others without losing themselves in the relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2010).

Not all of the participants had a strong desire to connect to a transgender community either on or off campus. Research on transgender individuals seems divided on whether or not a community connection is important to transgender individuals. Some seems to indicate that transsexuals (individuals who are looking to transition from one side of the binary to the other) do not want to maintain connections with the trans community once they have transitioned, preferring to immerse themselves in their new gender identity (Hines, 2007; Namaste, 2000). Transgender college student research seems to indicate that connecting to a queer or trans community is important in helping them feel connected (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). For several participants in this study, connection to the trans community was not a priority, especially in terms of creating and fostering relationships. For Barry and Jane, transgender was a far less salient identity for them compared to their gender identity. They expressed a desire to form friendships with others based on mutual interests, not because they happened to have an identity in common.

While not all of the participants were interested in creating strong ties to the trans community, all indicated that they found a connection to the trans community via a digital outlet rather than in-person contact. The internet offers multiple mediums for gender storytelling (Ekins & King, 2010). The participants shared the important role that social

media sites have played in their gender journeys. Watching youtube videos of people transitioning to learn how to take hormone shots and what kinds of changes to expect helped Barry through his physical transformations. Cee, Mallory, and Leigh all use blogging and entertainment sites such as tumblr and reddit to read about peoples' gender stories, take part in debates, and view images of people who were like them. Through their computer screens, the participants are able to be connected to thousands of people having similar struggles and experiences. Higher education and self-authorship research do not examine how digital relationships and connections impact how trans students develop relationships; this is an avenue of research that needs to be explored.

The relationships that the participants in this study form are fostered and maintained in part by how they understand themselves. The interpersonal dimension, which needs to be studied in more detail, plays a role in how the participants navigate and understand their lives. Their ability to interweave how they understand gender with their internal sense of self influences the kinds of relationships that they are looking to nurture (Baxter Magolda, 2009b, 2010).

Implications for Theory

This study was guided by both self-authorship theory and queer theory. The use of these theories in conjunction provides a unique perspective into how transgender college students interpret and make-meaning of gender. Self-authorship is a holistic approach to understanding how individuals author their lives. Researchers describe self-authorship as the internal capacity to define values, opinions, and beliefs for oneself and the ability to construct an internal sense of self (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Kegan, 1994). Queer theory, on the

other hand, focuses on the deconstruction of abstract concepts such as social norms, universal truths, and binaries like male/female and masculine/feminine (Wilchins, 2004). Self-authorship theory and queer theory were used in conjunction to analyze the deconstruction and reconstruction process of interpreting gender.

While queer theory is not usually brought into discussions of self-authorship, its use in conjunction with self-authorship theory expands our understanding of the deconstruction process of external formulas. What quickly becomes apparent is that the participants are constantly encountering external formulas about gender (behavior expectations, knowledge assumptions, appropriate dress) across all phases of self-authorship development. The meaning-making process involves the questioning of external formulas (cultural gender norms), deconstructing those messages, keeping what works, leaving behind what does not, and creating a personal sense of gender (Baxter Magolda, 2010). Using queer theory in conjunction with self-authorship theory expands our understanding of how the deconstruction of absolutes and social constructs can be utilized in identity construction. Researchers describe self-authorship as the internal capacity to define values, opinions, and beliefs for oneself and the ability to construct an internal sense of self (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Kegan, 1994). Using queer theory as part of the process of questioning external formulas expands the internal capacity to define values, opinions, and beliefs for oneself to a broader societal context. The participants' stories demonstrate that their gender identities are influenced by societal norms, but, in the process of deconstructing external messages, they are able to self-author their gender identities. Within this study, the participants are deconstructing societal gender norms that place limits on how gender can be perceived and

expressed. When Page began transitioning, he believed that as a man, he could no longer express emotions such as sadness and empathy because those were not traits of 'real men'. As he has progressed through his gender journey, he has actively challenged and questioned masculine stereotypes about expressing emotions. The deconstruction process has been followed by redefining and restructuring his own masculinity to better reflect his authentic self. Using queer theory to understand the deconstruction process of self-authorship illustrates that deconstruction is an essential component in all phases of becoming self-authored.

Queer theory also focuses on deconstruction of norms and universal truths and demonstrates the inadequacies of language to encompass concepts such as gender (Wilchins, 2004). Language is not simply a reflection of reality and social norms, the usage of words over time and in context produces meaning, which then impacts the evolution of social norms (Richardson, 2000). Sullivan (2003) states that, "particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become 'naturalized' in culturally and historically specific ways" (p. 39). The use of queer theory as an analytical tool for this study, helped to illuminate the struggles with language that the participants experience. They each indicated that they did not have the words to adequately describe their gender identities. Mark, Jane, and Page all expressed frustration with claiming identity labels because they did not feel that existing terms were often able to fully encompass all aspects of their gender identities. Many of the participants, such as Leigh, Mallory, and Cee, struggled to fully articulate how they understand femininity, masculinity, and their personal gender characteristics. All of the participants tended to meld words together, combining them in a variety of ways to try and

give a name to how they experience gender. Jane described herself as a, “trans, queer, lesbian type person,” Cee settled on gender fluid, Mark identifies as a trans man, and Mallory alternated between female, trans woman, and queer. Only Barry was able to settle on a single term, male. Queer theory uses language and deconstructions of absolute truths to suggest that they are social constructs (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Butler, 1990). For the participants, language was a compelling component in how they made meaning of their gender experiences and how they used language demonstrated that the meanings behind terms like ‘male/female’ and ‘masculine/feminine’ are not absolutes, but social constructs which can be reshaped and reformed.

Self-authorship is made up of three phases: following external formulas, the crossroads (acting as a catalyst), and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009a, 2009b). As an individual cycles through the each phase, three driving questions, each representing a developmental dimension, influence and impact the meaning-making process: How do I know? Who am I? What relationships do I want with others? The emergent themes from this study, which reflect the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal developmental dimensions, are integrated and interwoven into each phase of the self-authorship journey and are viewed as a cohesive whole, rather than as separate silos of development (Abes, 2003; Abes, Jones, & McEwan, 2007). As the participants progress towards self-authorship, they develop complex ways of knowing, personal identities, and relationships with others. Development in one dimension, usually the epistemological (how do I know?), encourages growth in the other dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 2010). Leigh and Mallory are working their way through the crossroads, actively deconstructing external messages about gender and

beginning to define for themselves what gender means. Leigh is at the early stages of his gender journey. While he is comfortable claiming a gender identity outside of the binary, he is still trying to figure out how to integrate his gender queer identity into all aspects of his life. He is learning to trust his internal voice, but acknowledges that he is unwilling to begin any physical transformations or come out to his family until he feels more confident about his gender identity.

Mallory is at the cusp of self-authorship, comfortable with her gender identity, she is learning to become equally at ease with her gender expression. While her confidence in her sense of self is growing, she is still learning to navigate relationships, particularly romantic interactions. As her internal sense of self becomes more complex, the more she trusts her internal voice, which also influences how she is approaching relationships with others. A more developed understanding of knowledge, enables individuals to examine and develop a more complex personal identity, and influences how relationships with others are negotiated (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010; Meszaros, 2007). In many ways, Leigh and Mallory are still “cooking” and finding their way as they become more comfortable with their gender identities and expressions.

Cee, Mark, Page, Barry, and Jane are self-authored in terms of their gender identity. In developing a sense of themselves and their gender outside of the male/female binary, they have left behind external formulas and constructed gender identities which are reflective of how they see themselves and the world around them. The participants use this understanding to shape and mold their relationships with others. While Cee, Mark, Page, Barry, and Jane are young, they have developed complex ways of knowing and have created strong internal

voices which they use to navigate through their daily lives. They have developed strong gender identities, “based on their personal characteristics, experiences, challenges they encountered, and support available to them” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 281-282). For Cee and Mark, the process of creating and interpreting gender identities is an ongoing process. They are consistently refining their concepts of masculinity, learning to navigate chauvinistic behavior, and exploring ways to incorporate their femininity into their gender expression through gestures and clothing. Jane, who eschews labels, is working to create a gender identity that is separate from social norms and is an authentic reflection of her internal sense of self. She is not interested in fitting a feminine stereotype and is seeking out ways to incorporate all aspects of her gender identity into her gender expression. For several participants, like Barry, who has always known he is male, and Jane, who identifies as a queer woman, their progress towards self-authorship has been linear. Their journeys have been a steady progression away from gender identities imposed by biological sex to ones built on an internal sense of self. For others, like Page and Mark, their journeys reflect the cyclical nature of self-authorship, their gender identities changing with life experiences and time. Each cycle through the phases of development brings them further forward into self-authorship. Their experiences also highlight the many paths that students can take even when facing similar stimuli. Encounters and experiences that challenge previously held beliefs can result in individuals retreating to an earlier stage of accepting external authority while they work through the various developmental dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, 2009b).

This research also continues to broaden the scope and applicability of self-authorship theory in understanding the experiences of minority and marginalized student populations.

Baxter Magolda's (2010) longitudinal study was primarily based on the experiences of a White high-SES population and her participants did not exhibit full self-authored behavior until they reached their early thirties. Later researchers have shown its effectiveness as a model for looking at marginalized or minority populations (Abes, 2003; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Their work demonstrates that marginalized college students can exhibit self-authored behavior prior to or upon entering into higher education usually predicated by catalytic experiences, such as encountering racism, negative stereotypes, or harassment (Abes, Jones, & McEwan, 2007; Torres 2003; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). As an invisible minority, the participants daily interact and navigate a world where their gender identities are not supported or understood. They have each experienced discrimination and hostility simply because their gender does not easily fit within the gender binary. In facing negative stereotypes, strict gender expectations, inadequate language for self-definition, and strained relationships, the students within this study all faced significant and empowering moments that have added to their complexity of thinking and meaning-making processes. Page regularly encounters homophobic and gendered slurs in the campus bathrooms, Mark, Cee, and Barry consistently navigate negative stereotypes related to their masculine identities, Mallory experiences anxiety and fear when going into typically female gendered spaces, and the majority of the participants experienced family and/or peer rejection based on their gender identities and expression. Despite the challenges that the participants have experienced related to gender, they all expressed that being able to live authentically was more important than ascribing to gendered social norms.

Much of higher education research on transgender college students focuses on external factors which impact and influence how the students interact with their campus. There has been less of a focus on the personal experiences of gender-diverse students. Using self-authorship in conjunction with queer theory afforded an intimate look into how the participants interpret and make-meaning of their gender. The deconstruction of gender norms and the importance of language were revealed to be essential elements across all phases of self-authorship development. Self-authorship theory was an effective analytical lens for examining the participants' journey in gender identity. The participants' stories reveal that the gender meaning-making process is a constant cycle of breaking down external formulas, recognizing the shortcomings of universal truths and absolutes, cultivating personal values and beliefs, and redefining personal expressions of masculinity and femininity. The participants' experiences demonstrate that their gender identities are influenced by societal norms, but, in the process of deconstructing those external messages, they also reconstruct them to fit their inner sense of themselves. Pairing these two theories together expands both our understanding of how gender-diverse students interpret and experience gender, but also imbues subjective experiences into the abstract concepts of gender identity and expression.

Future Research

This study reveals that transgender college students have distinct gender identities and that a homogenous trans experience did not exist for the participants. For several participants, such as Barry, Jane, and Page, their gender identity is more salient than their transgender identity. For others, like Cee, Mark, and Mallory their trans identity is integrated into their gender identity. Leigh is early in his gender journey and is still learning and

exploring how to integrate his gender identity into his self-concept. The emergent themes of this study help to contribute to the growing body of higher education literature specifically in regards to their personal gender journeys. The majority of higher education research focusing on gender-diverse college students assumes a common trans experience and the recommendations for practice tend to be one size fits all (Alexander, 2009; Beemyn, 2003, 2005; Bilodeau, 2005, Carter, 2000). This study continues the work of demonstrating that transgender students construct, conceptualize, and experience their gender identities in a myriad of ways. This study adds to that growing literature and provides a space for transgender students to share their stories.

Research on transgender college students is slowly growing, yet there are many areas that need to be addressed. Much of the existing literature focuses on external factors related to transgender students' interactions with campus climate and institutional policies (Beemyn, 2003, 2005; Bilodeau, 2005, Carter 2000; Cramer & Ford, 2011; Miner, 2009). Since the beginning of this project, a few studies have been done that move beyond the scope of policy, procedure, and programmatic interventions (Alexander, 2009; Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). This study examined the meaning making processes involved in gender identity construction of transgender college students, which does not tend to be a primary focus of research. Many gender identity development models do not allow for variances in the masculine/feminine binary and most assume that gender identity becomes fixed at a young age (Egan & Perry, 2001). Some models, such as Bem's (1983, 1993) gender schema theory, Lev's (2004) model of binary systems of sex, gender identity, gender role, and sexual orientation, and Tobin et al's (2010) gender self-socialization model (GSSM)

view gender as a life-long process influenced by multiple factors, but only examine gender within the binary. The participants' of this study demonstrate that gender identity is not static or fixed, but nuanced and continues to develop and change throughout their lives. Their stories reveal that gender expression is fluid and changeable. The way the participants understand and express their gender to others has also evolved over time as they have gained a better understanding of self. The participants' gender identities run a spectrum not represented by current gender identity models. Future research can seek to answer such questions as: How does gender identity develop across the lifespan? In what ways do external and internal factors influence gender identity development? How can gender development models be expanded to include a variety of gender experiences? Broadening the spectrum of gender identities would serve to de-pathologize individuals who find themselves left out of the gender binary.

The participants repeatedly acknowledged that language was complicated and confusing. Trying to pick terms or labels that accurately described their gender experiences was often challenging for each of them. The majority of the participants could not give a simple one-word response (male or female) to label their gender, but their stories clearly demonstrate that they each possess a distinct and personal sense of gender. Barry was unique in this study in that he has always identified as male and was the only participant to claim his gender identity with a single word. Interestingly, all of the participants prefer to use traditional male and female pronouns. Out of seven participants, only Cee acknowledged that gender neutral pronouns do exist, but he did not show an inclination to use them in his daily life. Language is not static, but fluid and changes regularly as words pass out of favor or take

on new meaning (Feinberg, 1996). Richardson (2000) notes that language, “does not simply reflect social reality, it produces meaning, which creates reality” (p. 928). Labels, especially those related to gender, carry cultural and historical subtexts which many of the participants took into consideration before claiming a label for themselves. The results of this study raise several questions relating to gender-diverse students and language: How is language used within the trans community? How does it evolve over time? Why do words fall in and out of favor? How does common vernacular change to be more inclusive of gender diverse experiences?

This study sought to examine gender and the meaning making process involved in the construction of a gender identity from a transgender college student perspective. The construction of a specific transgender identity and transgender identity models were outside the scope of this research. Transgender identity development models that currently exist focus primarily on the development of a trans identity without focusing on how trans individuals also develop a personal sense of gender. Several participants indicated that their gender identity was more salient to how they saw themselves while their transgender identity was secondary at best. Future research needs to continue the work of researchers such as Bilodeau (2005, 2007), McKinney (2005), and Pusch (2005) in examining transgender identities and how they develop. Practitioners working with trans students would benefit from research that seeks to find ways in which gender identity and transgender identity intersect. Questions to be considered include: How do transgender students navigate multiple dimensions of identity? How do certain identities become more salient to gender-diverse students over others? How does identity saliency change over time? Research that extends

knowledge of gender and transgender identities may enhance practitioner understanding of how trans students navigate the binary, and the gender privilege it bestows on cisgender students.

A final recommendation for future research focuses on non-traditional students. Research on transgender college students primarily focuses on traditional age students and their campus related needs. Recommendations for policies and procedures are designed to alleviate the disconnect and help make trans students feel comfortable and welcome on campus. The needs of non-traditional and transfer trans students are absent from current literature. Campuses, by and large, are gendered systems and transgender student interventions are being shoe-horned into a system that does not truly understand their gender experiences (Bilodeau, 2007). This study demonstrates that older students often feel disconnected from their classmates, peers, and campus due to being somewhat older and having different priorities. Most had lives outside of campus and felt they had very little in common with many of their peers in the campus GLBT student organization. Future research needs to include the experiences of non-traditional trans students in order to enhance their experiences on campus. How do the needs of older/transfer trans students differ from traditional age students? How can a campus be proactive in meeting the needs of older trans students? With more research into the experiences of older trans undergraduates, recommendations for policies and procedures can be more inclusive and expansive of multiple experiences.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Transgender college students are a mostly invisible population on campuses nationwide. Much of that invisibility comes from the students' need to feel safe both in and out of the classroom. Campus climate studies indicate that trans students do not feel safe or supported on their campuses (Alexander, 2009, Rankin, Weber, & Frazer, 2010). Common recommendations include providing support groups, identifying gender neutral bathrooms on campus, allowing for multiple housing options, adding gender identity and gender expression to campus policies, and creating GLBT centers to provide programming and support for the GLBT population. Southeastern Regional University is a progressive institution that has many procedures and policies in place to help make the campus more welcoming and accommodating for gender-diverse students including an inclusive non-discrimination policy and an active campus GLBT center, which works in conjunction with other offices on campus to meet the needs of transgender students. The experiences and stories of the participants reveal that even on a campus that is actively seeking out ways to accommodate gender-diverse students there are areas that can be improved upon.

A reoccurring theme throughout the participants' stories was the desire to be treated as human beings with needs and wants which are not always linked to their gender. While their gender is a salient identity, it is not their only identity or interest. All indicated that they are interested in creating relationships and connections with others based on similar interests and beliefs, not simply because they share a common gender identity. Creating and implementing a transgender ally training program on campus can be an effective way to raise awareness about gender identity and the issues gender-diverse students often encounter on

campus. Such programs can help faculty, staff, and students see gender diverse individuals as human beings with similar wants and needs as themselves and not as objects of curiosity. Research indicates that campuses with GLBT training programs increase awareness of issues faced by the GLBT community and can increase perceptions of tolerance (Ballard, Bartle, & Masequesmay, 2008; Poynter, & Tubbs, 2008). GLBT ally trainings tend to focus primarily on sexual orientation issues and, in the limited time available for training, typically two to three hours, gender issues experienced by trans students are not adequately covered. By creating and implementing a training program focusing solely on transgender students and their gender experiences a distinction can clearly be made between sexual orientation and gender diversity. Awareness trainings provide a safe place for faculty and staff to ask questions, learn about language and terminology preferred by the trans community, common challenges trans students face on campus, and ways to be better allies. Ultimately, transgender awareness training programs help move the concept of gender identity from an abstract to a reality and illustrate that a single homogenous trans experience does not exist.

For the participants in this study, changing majors, taking time off from school, and transferring from community colleges to a four year institution were all contributing factors to the disconnect that the participants felt in regards to their classmates and peers on campus. Being older than the majority of their classmates led to feeling that they had little in common with them. For students who are looking for a connection, but may feel that their age is an impeding factor, offering a transfer/non-traditional student organization as an option to students could prove beneficial. A transgender specific group would be ideal, but a group open to all non-traditional/transfer GLBT students would help to ensure enough student

interest. A club or organization such as this would offer a way to interact with other students, could focus on the issues older students face on campus, as well as support issues related to identifying as trans. Another option would be to create a trans support group through the counseling center that is separate from a sexual orientation support group. This is a way to acknowledge that issues trans students face are primarily gender-oriented and not necessarily sexually-oriented.

Many of the participants indicated that while they may not have felt a strong connection to the campus GLBT community, they did connect on some level via the Center's website. All noted that they had made use of a campus map on the center's website detailing the location of single-use lockable bathrooms on campus. The site was also considered useful in terms of locating resources on and off campus. The process of transitioning on campus is often confusing and complicated. The majority of the participants demonstrated a willingness to seek out help, support, and community in the virtual realm. Visible support on the institutions' websites would be another way for campuses to demonstrate that transgender students have a place on campus.

The process of transitioning on campus can be complicated and students run into a number of obstacles including changing their names on campus documents and systems, housing and roommate issues, online classroom environments, finding support services, and connecting with other transgender students. The findings demonstrate that not all of the participants were looking for or interested in connecting with the campus GLBT center or student organization, but all indicated that they did, at some point in time, use the resources listed on the center's website. It would be beneficial to students, especially those who are not

interested in being ‘out’ to the center staff, to have access to a transgender specific resource page that outlined and was linked to various offices on campus needed in the transition process. This would essentially be a campus resource page that could be found on multiple campus office websites including the campus’ GLBT center, the counseling center, student health, the diversity office, financial aid, admissions, and housing. Such a linked-resource page would provide a one-stop shopping page, accessible via multiple websites, for students to use as they consider and begin transitioning on campus. In conjunction with linking a trans resource page to multiple campus websites, a suggestion or ask comment box should be included. Doing so would provide gender-diverse students with an anonymous way to alert campus administrators to challenges that they are facing, support that they need, and recommendations for beneficial policy changes.

Research indicates that not all trans identified students also identify as anything other than heterosexual (Namaste, 2000, Pusch, 2005). Being able to access information relevant to their gender journeys through multiple avenues and not only through the campus GLBT center, sends a clear message that the institution understands the multiple identities of transgender students. A final benefit of a trans-specific resource page, accessible from all campus websites, is that it offers visible support that transgender student needs are being considered campus wide.

The participants’ stories reveal that the campus GLBT center tends to be the catalyst for bringing about change on their campus. The onus for change needs to be institution wide and not from a single department. Academic departments also need to be proactive in creating changes within the classroom environment. Implementing standard policies for how

to work with students both in-person and in the online classroom will send a strong message to trans students that they are valued and that their needs are understood. More campuses nationwide are beginning to work on policies relating to institutional paperwork such as admissions policies and housing applications, but policies and practices that will directly impact the classroom environment have not been as closely examined (Alexander, 2009; Bilodea, 2007; The Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2013). Ludeke (2009) stresses the importance of the administrator role in creating tolerant and safe environments in schools, McGuire and Toomey (2010) report that teacher and administrator interventions are uncommon. While a few of the participants of this study were ‘out’ on campus, it is important to note that there are varying degrees of being ‘out’. Coming out refers to the process of sharing with someone else that an individual’s gender identity and expression is not a match to their biological sex. For the majority of participants in this study, they are ‘out’ to their parents, family, and close friends. On campus, however, many only ‘out’ themselves to their professors, staff members at the campus GLBT center, and occasionally counselors at the campus counseling center, but rarely to their classmates and peers. The classroom was not viewed as a place where it was necessary to share their gender identities nor were they looking to foster relationships with their classmates.

Implementing transgender ally trainings can help to raise awareness about issues faced by trans students on campus, but should not be required for faculty and staff as part of staff development. It is important that people become allies because they want to and not because it is part of faculty training and obligations. Ally training should absolutely be available and valued in terms of staff development, but should not be the only recourse.

Institutions can and should strengthen their commitment to trans students by creating and implementing interventions at multiple levels including campus wide, departmental, academics, and organizational. The campus where this study took place has an inclusive non-discrimination policy that includes and protects gender identity and expression, an active campus GLBT center that works one-on-one with trans students, a transgender ally training program, and is working towards updating institutional paperwork to be more gender inclusive. The participants' stories reveal that they are still experiencing struggles on campus, specifically in the classroom environment.

Their experiences demonstrate that there is a clear need to create a standard department response to student requests concerning gender identity, preferred name, and preferred pronoun use in class. Currently, before the start of each semester, the majority of the participants face an uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing task: emailing their professors to notify them about their gender identities and request that the professors use their preferred name and pronouns in class. Each time the participants reach out to their professors, they open themselves up to potential harassment, disdain, and/or ignorance. While the majority of the participants had positive interactions with their professors, some instructors did not seem to understand the need behind the request. Page stressed that having the professor use the wrong name or pronoun in class would reveal his biological sex to his classmates and potentially create an unsafe situation. Reaching out to professors would be easier on the participants if they were confident in the type of response that they would receive. Training at the academic level with faculty on how to appropriately respond to trans students and how to meet their needs in the classroom would be beneficial both for the students and the faculty.

Knowing that their campus has policies in place for connecting with faculty over gender issues would be very beneficial to trans students, leading them to feel more comfortable and safe in class. For faculty and staff, having a clear process for handling gender issues in class relieves the professor from having to guess the best response.

The classroom environment is not limited to in-person classroom interactions. The study participants also encountered issues with on-line classroom environments. On-line course management sites are used by professors as an extension of the classroom where students can participate in discussions with classmates, post assignments, and take exams. A number of the participants expressed frustration with the on-line classroom environment because their profiles were directly linked to their campus records, meaning their birth name, not their preferred name, is visible to their classmates, essentially outing them. One participant indicated that he has dropped classes with a heavy on-line component because he did not feel safe in that environment. Being ‘outed’, having their biological sex revealed to others without their consent, in the on-line classroom negated the work they did with their professors to ensure that the correct name and pronouns were used in the actual classroom. In addition to working at the departmental level with professors, campuses need to reach out to the on-line campus platforms that they use to create procedures that would allow students to go in and manually change their profiles before classes begin. Understanding that such a change to the software could take time, in the meantime, departments can cover with their faculty members how to work with the students to create separate profiles, not linked to campus records, and add them to the classroom roster. In this way, multiple aspects of the

classroom environment are being addressed to ensure that the needs of trans students are being met.

A final recommendation is for campus administrators to implement regular campus climate surveys to assess the impact of policy and procedural changes. The participants of this study found their campus to be moderately tolerant, but did not describe the climate being particularly welcoming or accepting of gender diversity. The focus of campus climate surveys can be broad, encompassing a wide variety of climate issues related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender diversity. Campus perceptions of faculty, staff, and students can be gathered to provide a broad perspective of the campus climate. Questions related specifically to gender-diverse students should be included to help administrators gain insight into the trans perspective on their campus. While participant responses should remain anonymous, campus climate surveys can help to gather demographic information about transgender students on campus. Gender options beyond male and female, such as transgender and gender queer, should be provided. Regular campus climate surveys, completed every few years, would help create a more accurate map of the campus climate and reveal areas that need attention.

The implementation of recommendations such as these can help campus administrators move from reactive to proactive practice and policy changes. Providing multiple avenues for gender-diverse students to gain access to resources would demonstrate that they are wanted and welcome on campus. Creating policies for the classroom environment and regularly assessing the campus climate can also communicate that campus administrators are dedicated to forward momentum in creating change.

Conclusion

The participants of this study shared deeply personal stories with a virtual stranger in order to add their experiences and voices into the slowly growing pool of transgender research. Their gender journeys clearly demonstrate that they have distinct gender identities that have been shaped and refined over time. Their stories demonstrate that gender is malleable and constantly evolving. This study demonstrates that the participants' gender identities change over time, their gender expressions are fluid and malleable, and their experiences and gender journeys were not homogeneous. Self-authorship theory and queer theory, used in conjunction, proved to be effective analytical tools. The participants' stories reveal that the gender meaning-making process is a constant cycle deconstruction of gendered social norms and reconstruction. The participants daily take the disparate components of deconstructed gender messages and redefine and construct them into gender identities that are an accurate reflection of their inner self concepts. Pairing these two theories together expands both our understanding of how gender-diverse students interpret and experience gender, but also imbues subjective experiences into the abstract concepts of gender identity and expression.

Mark, Cee, Page, Barry, Jane, Mallory and Leigh are strong individuals who want to be recognized and treated fairly and with respect. While their gender is an important aspect of who they are, each is so much more than just their gender identity, and they are constructing lives for themselves based on their interests, goals, and dreams. Rather than being viewed as a man or a woman, masculine or feminine, or even somewhere in between, the participants each articulated that they want to be viewed as human.

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Appendices

Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

From: Deb Paxton, IRB Administrator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: October 4, 2012

Project Title: Self-Authoring Gender Beyond the Binary

IRB#: 2844

Dear Kasey Ashton

The project listed above has been reviewed by the NC State Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, and is approved for one year. **This protocol will expire on September 27, 2013 and will need continuing review before that date.**

NOTE:

1. You must use the attached consent forms which have the approval and expiration dates of your study.
2. This board complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
3. Any changes to the protocol and supporting documents must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
4. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days by completing and submitting the unanticipated problem form on the IRB website.
5. Your approval for this study lasts for one year from the review date. If your study extends beyond that time, including data analysis, you must obtain continuing review from the IRB.

Sincerely,

Deb Paxton

NC State IRB

Appendix A

IRB Revision Approval Letter

From: Deb Paxton, IRB Administrator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: February 15, 2013

Title: Self-Authoring Gender Beyond the Binary

IRB#: 2844

Dear Kasey,

Your addendum to the study named above has been reviewed by the IRB office, and has been approved. Revision includes: additional listserv for participant marketing, criteria that participants must be full/part time traditional age college students, and compensation. This approval does not change the original IRB approval expiration of the project.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact the IRB office at 919.515.4514.

Sincerely,

Deb Paxton

NC State IRB

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Dear Student,

I am a doctoral student at North Carolina State University and my dissertation research focus is on the gender experiences of transgender college students. Research on transgender college student experiences is a slowly growing field, but is still limited. There is continued need to include the voices, stories, and experiences of transgender college students as they navigate and challenge the gender binary. To complete my degree, I am conducting a study at your university about how students who do not conform to the gender binary construct a personal sense of gender. A deeper look into how gender is constructed and self-authored may help to illuminate how gender privilege negatively impacts students who do not fit easily within the gender binary. Your stories can play an important part in the significance of this study.

I am recruiting 6-10 full or part-time enrolled traditional age college students for this research project. If you choose to participate in this study, we will meet in person for a total of two interviews in a private location of your choosing, on or off campus, each lasting no more than 90 minutes. For the second interview you will be asked to bring something that you feel represents your personal gender. This can be a photograph, poem, art piece, collage, quote, or any other visual/textual representation of how you view and understand your personal gender. As compensation for participation, you will receive a \$25.00 gift card at the end of the second interview.

To protect confidentiality in all presentations of the results of this study, institutions will be anonymous and all identifying details about you will be omitted. At the first interview you will self-select a pseudonym which will be used in place of your actual name in any and all write-ups of the study. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any point during the process.

I am hopeful that participation in this study will provide you a unique opportunity to reflect on your college experiences and gender journey. I thank you for your consideration and future participation in this project.

Sincerely,

Kasey Ashton
kjashton@ncsu.edu
919-522-1197

Advisor:
Alyssa Rockenbach, Ph.D., North Carolina State University
Alyssa_Rockenbach@ncsu.edu

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Self-Authoring Gender: Interview Guide

Participant Pseudonym:
 Interviewer: Kasey Ashton
 Date:

Location:
 Interview Time:
 Start:____ End:____

Introduction: Thank you for meeting with me today! Before we get started I would like to review a few essential components of the interview process. We'll be talking today about your gender experiences and journey towards interpreting your own gender. All information shared today will be kept confidential and will be linked to your self-selected pseudonym, not your actual name. We'll review the consent form together and I will have you sign it before I begin asking you questions. You may choose to skip any question that you would prefer not to answer; participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to remove yourself from the study at any time. There are no right or wrong answers and you can take as much time as needed to answer the questions.

Opening Questions:

1. Tell me a little about yourself:
 - a. Family
 - b. Major
 - c. Likes/interests – hobbies

Questions about Gender:

2. How do you define gender?
 - a. How do you think society defines gender?
 - b. How do you think gender is perceived on campus?
 - c. Do you feel that your gender expression/identity is supported on campus?
3. How do you perceive your own gender?
 - a. How you would describe your gender to someone else?
 - i. What terms or phrases do you use?
 - ii. How did you come to identify with this term?
4. Share with me the story of your transgender journey.
 - a. How did your story (journey) begin?
 - b. How has your story changed since coming to campus?
 - i. Have campus experiences influenced how you experience your gender?

- ii. Tell me about a situation that happened on campus involving your gender expression
 - c. Describe a “life-changing” situation that impacted your gender journey.
 - d. If you can recall:
 - i. Tell me about a time in your childhood involving your gender expression/identity
 - ii. Tell me about a time in high school involving your gender expression/identity
- 5. How have your relationships changed during your journey?
 - a. What kind of relationships do you want with others?
 - i. Personally?
 - ii. Have campus experiences influenced your relationships with peers? Faculty? Staff?
- 6. Looking back over all of your experiences with gender, tell me about an empowering gender experience that you have had.
 - a. What made it empowering?
 - b. Have you changed since that experience?

Closing Questions:

- 1. Is there anything that I haven’t asked you about gender that you would like to add?
 - a. Personal beliefs, commitments, relationships

Potential probes:

Could you please describe that in more detail? Tell me more.

Could you define that word for me? Yes/No, What does that mean to you?

What did you do/say next? What happened?

Please give me an example.

Walk me through the experience. How did that make you feel?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Prompt for Second Interview:

Please bring something that you feel represents your personal gender to our next meeting. This can be a photograph, poem, art piece, collage, quote, or any other visual/textual representation of how you view and understand your personal gender.

Second Interview:

Participant Pseudonym:

Location:

Interviewer: Kasey Ashton

Interview Time:

Date:

Start: ____ End: ____

Opening Question:

1. How have you been since our first interview?

Questions about prompt:

1. How did you find this piece?
2. What feelings does it evoke for you?
3. Describe how this piece is a reflection of your gender.
4. If you were going to display this piece at a museum, how would you describe it for others?

Appendix D

Informed Consent

North Carolina State University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

This consent form is valid from 9/27/12 through 9/27/2013

Title of Study: Self-Authoring Gender Beyond the Binary

Principal Investigator: Kasey Ashton

Faculty Sponsor (if applicable): Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals whose gender identity/expression does not conform to the gender binary define and understand gender, both personally and as a larger concept.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form, and fill out an optional demographics questionnaire. As part of the study you will participate in two interviews, each lasting 60 to 90 minutes. At the beginning of the first interview you will have the opportunity to select a pseudonym or fake name which will be used throughout the study to ensure your confidentiality. At the end of the first interview, we will schedule a second interview 1-3 weeks after the initial interview. After the first interview, you will receive a prompt to complete before the second interview. The prompt should take no more than 30 minutes to complete. Once both interviews have been completed and the interview recordings have been transcribed into word documents, you will receive a copy of your interview to review and make changes to if necessary.

Risks

There are potential psychological risks in participating in this study. Answering some questions that are personal in nature may result in feelings of stress or anxiety. Please note that all questions are optional and that you can stop the interview at any time. If you experience feelings of stress, anxiety, or depression, please contact Hopeline, Inc. at 919-231-4525 or the National Youth Crisis Hotline at 800-442-HOPE (4673).

Benefits

Participating in this study allows you to contribute to the growing research on transgender college students and to have your story heard and included in the literature. Transgender student voices are largely missing from current literature making it vitally important to include your story.

Confidentiality

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in password protected external hard-drive and will be destroyed 10 years after the final report is accepted by the Graduate School. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. Individual quotes will be used as part of the study results but your identity will remain anonymous.

Compensation

You will receive a \$25 gift card at the end of the second interview as compensation for participating in the study. You must complete both interviews to be eligible for the gift card.

What if you are a NCSU student?

Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades at NC State.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Kasey Ashton at kjashton@ncsu.edu

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Appendix E

Participant Prompts

Please bring something that you feel represents your personal gender to our next meeting. This can be a photograph, poem, art piece, collage, quote, or any other visual/textual representation of how you view and understand your personal gender.

Mark:



If you were going to display this piece at a museum, how would you describe it for others?

My gender is so complicated and so multifaceted that I'm not really sure if I can come up with a visual representation of it because it's so convoluted. But the idea [that] there are so many different aspects of my gender representation and there are so many different ways I present and people react to me differently but my gender is something I experience as relatively constant. But some days I wear a kilt and some days I wear pants.

Appendix E

Participant Prompts

Please bring something that you feel represents your personal gender to our next meeting. This can be a photograph, poem, art piece, collage, quote, or any other visual/textual representation of how you view and understand your personal gender.

Barry:



If you were going to display this piece at a museum, how would you describe it for others?

I wanted it to be a 'me' collage. If I could give it a name, well to be funny it'd be waffles. But, definitely I'd say dynamic.

Barry's personal philosophy for life: When in doubt, eat waffles.

Appendix E

Participant Prompts

Please bring something that you feel represents your personal gender to our next meeting. This can be a photograph, poem, art piece, collage, quote, or any other visual/textual representation of how you view and understand your personal gender.

Jane:



Screen-cap – Abby Wombach Gatorade commercial

If you were going to display this piece at a museum, how would you describe it for others?

Usually even with sports figures for women, they're portrayed with makeup on and they don't look like when they play. I thought this was very refreshing, it's a game situation...and shows her as a strong person. She shows all of her imperfections and she's still the face of Gatorade. [In a museum setting] I think people who haven't been schooled in a lot of gendered thinking will see it and recognize it as something they haven't really ever seen before. I would try and get whoever watches it to recognize that this is not how women are usually portrayed.

Appendix E

Participant Prompts

Please bring something that you feel represents your personal gender to our next meeting. This can be a photograph, poem, art piece, collage, quote, or any other visual/textual representation of how you view and understand your personal gender.

Page:



If you were going to display this piece at a museum, how would you describe it for others?

It might look very simple. It's just a glass jar with a wooden lid and it has a crumpled up tissue in it...the tissue inside of there is the tissue that I cried tears on whenever I gave my parents my coming out video...those tears are never going to go away. They're always going to stay with me in this museum-like jar to remind me that it's okay to cry.

Appendix E

Participant Prompts

Please bring something that you feel represents your personal gender to our next meeting. This can be a photograph, poem, art piece, collage, quote, or any other visual/textual representation of how you view and understand your personal gender.

Mallory: prompt was a PowerPoint slide-show of several quotes and two pictures of herself – one pre-transition and one right before our interview.

The Young Man's Guide to Wearing and Shopping for Women's Clothing for the First Time

(Plett, 2011).

[Step]7. Go to the women's pants section. Decide this will be a way to ease into this mysterious part of the store. Try to figure out your size. Remember that sizes on women's clothing seem to follow no rooted system of measurement. Grab a bunch of different sizes of jeans, as well as a pair of Dickies. Scurry into the dressing room.

(Plett, 2011)

If you were going to display this piece at a museum, how would you describe it for others?

I suppose it would kind of be best described as just like snapshots of me, like over time like from discovery of myself and like how I felt about myself and being trans to... basically the whole transition process.

Appendix E

Participant Prompts

Please bring something that you feel represents your personal gender to our next meeting. This can be a photograph, poem, art piece, collage, quote, or any other visual/textual representation of how you view and understand your personal gender.

Leigh:

Leigh brought in the lyrics to the song Reflections from the movie Mulan.

Something I really resonate with is from the Disney film, Mulan. There was a song called Reflections, and part of the song was: When will my reflection show...who I am inside? Who is that girl I see staring back at me? I resonate with that a lot because it's kind of like the same situation with me. It's from the point of a female trying to figure out her place and who she want to be and how she can break gender roles and still kind of fit in.

If you were going to display this piece at a museum, how would you describe it for others?

Ambiguous and aberrations or something crazy. Aberrations and ambiguous.