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# Here and gone: competing discourses in the communication of families with a transgender member

Kristen Michelle Norwood  
*University of Iowa*

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HERE AND GONE: COMPETING DISCOURSES IN THE COMMUNICATION OF  
FAMILIES WITH A TRANSGENDER MEMBER

by

Kristen Michelle Norwood

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Communication Studies  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Steve Duck

## ABSTRACT

A growing number of families include a member who is transgender or transsexual. A discovery or disclosure of trans-identity and a transition of sex/gender identity that might follow are not only monumental for the trans-identified person, but also for that person's relational partners. When one engages in such a fundamental change of expressed identity, the person's relational partners are faced with renegotiating who that person is as well as who that person is to them, as a relational partner. Often, this process leads to the experience of ambiguous loss in which family members feel grief over a person who is still living. The purpose of this study was to investigate this renegotiation of meaning. More specifically, I sought to discover what cultural discourses or meaning systems are used by family members of trans-people when faced with the task of creating new meanings for their relatives'/partners' identities and their relationships to them, and how those meanings systems might contribute to the experience of ambiguous loss.

Using Relational Dialectics Theory and Contrapuntal Analysis, I analyzed the communication of 37 family members and partners of trans-identified persons who had begun or completed a transition of sex/gender identity. I conducted in-depth interviews with each family member, asking them to both narrate their experiences and respond to particular questions. Family members' talk was characterized by four sites of discursive struggle, in which the meanings of four salient concepts were created: the self, sex/gender, trans-identity, and family. The meanings for these concepts were constructed through participants' invocation and positioning of competing discourses relevant to the concepts in question. Results showed that many family members do experience grief in response to a transgender transition and that grief is connected to the meanings they construct at these four sites. The findings show the fundamentality of sex and gender to understandings of personhood, and the centrality of communication to experience.

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Kristen Michelle Norwood

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
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This dissertation is dedicated to the family members and partners who shared their stories with me and in doing so made this project possible.



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## ABSTRACT

A growing number of families include a member who is transgender or transsexual. A discovery or disclosure of trans-identity and a transition of sex/gender identity that might follow are not only monumental for the trans-identified person, but also for that person's relational partners. When one engages in such a fundamental change of expressed identity, the person's relational partners are faced with renegotiating who that person is as well as who that person is to them, as a relational partner. Often, this process leads to the experience of ambiguous loss in which family members feel grief over a person who is still living. The purpose of this study was to investigate this renegotiation of meaning. More specifically, I sought to discover what cultural discourses or meaning systems are used by family members of trans-people when faced with the task of creating new meanings for their relatives'/partners' identities and their relationships to them, and how those meanings systems might contribute to the experience of ambiguous loss.

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## PREFACE

In writing the final two chapters of this dissertation, I faced what is probably a common issue for researchers who employ qualitative methods of data collection and interpretive methods of analysis. My struggle was with representing the participants in a way that did not position them merely as means to an end. What I mean is, in interpreting my participants' words using academic discourse, I sometimes felt like I was imposing too much on the stories they told me; like I was reducing their real life experiences and emotions to findings that would serve theoretical purposes. Obviously, this is the task of a researcher. However, after spending sometimes an hour and a half talking on the phone with people – hearing their stories, laughing with them, empathizing with them, hearing them cry, making plans for future contact, and developing a sense of who they are – the task of de-personalizing those discussions was one that came with a sense of, well, something like guilt.

So, my hopes are that when people – and especially my participants – read this dissertation, they will keep in mind what gets lost in translation from discourse to academic discourse. Though the interpreting of the data was done with care, often that care is difficult to convey given the language of theory and the confines of the scholarly text. I hope that given this, the findings of this study can still be seen as worthwhile by those who are not academically invested in the topic, but personally are. And I, in turn, will do my best to disseminate the goods to a broader audience that might benefit from the disclosures of those who participated in this study.

INTRODUCTION  
THE IMBRICATION OF SEX, GENDER, IDENTITY,  
AND RELATIONSHIPS

Social organization and the process of social interaction rely heavily on categorization. When we perceive others, we place them in categories according to perceptions of various factors, such as age, ethnicity, sex, occupations, roles, behaviors, and emotions, and we relate to them accordingly. According to Duck (1976), people use four specific types of schemata or perceptual codes to classify information about others. The first, *physical constructs*, concern appearance cues, like whether a person is short, skinny, beautiful, old, Asian, Caucasian, male or female. The second type, *role constructs*, concern cues that tell us about a person's social position. Role constructs might include classifying a person as a mother, a friend, an authority figure, or a nurse. A third type of schema, *interaction constructs*, concerns a person's behavior. We might classify someone according to their behavior as warm, outgoing, ambitious, or submissive, for example. The fourth type of schema, *psychological constructs*, concerns perceptions of others' thoughts and emotional states. Therefore, we might perceive that someone is nervous, angry, excited or contemplative. Each of these perceptual schemas helps us organize sensory information in some meaningful way, so we can move forward with the process of perception, and subsequently or simultaneously, interaction.

Such categorization brings a sense of organization to our person perception processes (Anderson, 1984; Mandler, 1983; Rumelhart, 1980) and with that, a particular order to our lives. *Sex*, a category determined by biological/genetic factors, and *gender*, the behaviors and social expectations associated with sex categories, are among the primary social categories by which we identify ourselves and others and therefore are difficult to detach from the ways in which we conceptualize our own and others' identity. Typically regarded as natural categories that are stable and enduring, neither sex nor

gender has been shown to be easily separated from each other or from the ways in which we operate socially, as they are woven tightly into the fabric of our social world. Lorber (1994) states, “As a social institution, gender [and sex, by implication] is one of the major ways that humans organize their lives” (p. 101). This is evident in big and small aspects of social interaction.

With regard to sex, we are asked to check a box indicating whether we are male or female when we answer survey questions or visit a physician. We look for blue and white signs with the appropriate figure (skirt or no skirt) when we seek to use public restrooms. We are eager to find out the sex of the baby when someone we know is pregnant, so that we may purchase gifts accordingly (hence, gender follows from sex). We are asked “For a boy or a girl?” when we order a “happy meal” from McDonalds, so that we will receive an appropriately gendered toy. We address others with Mr. or Ms., by he or she, and him or her to indicate in which category a person belongs and to signal the *kind* of person we are talking to or about. We often point out exceptions to gendered norms; for example, we might refer to someone as a *male* nurse or comment that someone is “really direct for a woman,” both implying that someone has stepped outside the gendered expectations for their sex category. These examples serve to illustrate how essential sex categories and gender roles are to the ways we relate to others.

In fact, sex and gender are so essential to social organization and interaction that they infiltrate all of the four types of schema that organize the process of person perception. Sex category, most obviously, is classified as a physical construct as it is signaled by physical cues of the body, which themselves are related to gendered nonverbal communication (e.g., height, weight, facial structure, secondary sex characteristics, clothing, body hair etc.). Less obvious, but still quite relevant is the fact that gender (as related to sex, of course) influences our perception of role constructs, interaction constructs, and psychological constructs. For example, with regard to role constructs, we are probably more likely to assume that a person wearing medical scrubs

is a physician rather than a nurse if that person is man because the occupations of nurse and physician have traditionally been gendered. Second, a person's perceived sex category can affect the ways we organize and interpret their behavior, therefore gendering our interaction constructs. For example, if we notice that a person talks frequently about their work colleagues and their relationships, we might be more likely to classify that person as a gossip if that person is a woman rather than a man, since gossip is regarded as a feminine style of communication (Johnson, 1989; Tannen, 1990). Lastly, a person's sex category and the gender expectations that follow from that are likely to affect our use of psychological constructs. For example, we might be more likely to classify a person who is crying as weak and overly sensitive if that person is a man, as emotion expression is heavily gendered (Metts & Planalp, 2003). In all of these ways, sex and gender are integral to the ways we categorize and relate to others and serve as pillars of sociality through their embeddedness within traditional "naturalist" thinking.

According to Wood, (2006) "Gender cannot be understood apart from interpersonal relationships and the communication that continuously constructs them as well as the identities of the participants in them" (p. 1). Given the inseparability of gender, self, and relationships, it is not difficult to see why gender has been a recurring theme in research on identity and personal relationships. Gender is central to relationships and, conversely, relationships are central to gender. Wood (2006) explains further, "Interpersonal relationships are primary sites where embodiments of gender are practiced, embraced, rejected, and modified...where gender performances are critiqued, edited, and disciplined" (p. 4). Not only is gender created socially in *relation to* and in *relationships with* others, but also gender is a foundational construct of relationships – it is part of the perpetual subtext of relationships (S. W. Duck, personal communication, October 7, 2008).

Persons are expected to fill particular relational roles based on their sex and, consequently, the gender ascribed to their sex. For example, *girl*-friends are thought to be

different than *guy*-friends in the ways friendship is enacted. Adult, same-sex friendships are often built on gendered modes of relating: female friends privilege talk, self-disclosure, and emotion expression (Braithwaite & Kellas, 2006; Viniegas & Peplau, 1997) and male friends privilege activity sharing and instrumental reciprocity (Inman, 1996; Sherrod, 1989; Wood, 2011; Wood & Inman, 1993). Gendered interactions also tend to be prominent in the early stages of heterosexual romantic relationships.

According to Metts (2006), “Dating is a socially scripted relationship sequence that activates gender-relevant behaviors for most men and women” (p. 26). The masculine role is characterized by pro-activity and control, while the feminine role in dating is characterized by reactivity and submission (Rose & Frieze, 1989). Once couples move from the beginning stages of the relationship to relationship maintenance, the gendered proactivity/reactivity phenomenon seems to change (Metts, 2006). In fact, women become the relationships managers, specifically in charge of emotional connection (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Metts, 2006; Morrow, Clark, & Brock, 1995), since gender role scripts constrain the emotion expression of males (Metts & Planalp, 2003).

Even more so than friendships and dating relationships, family relationships may be tied tightly to sex and gender categories. Familial roles explicitly designate a sex, and therefore imply a gender. For example, our cultural understandings of the relational roles of “mother,” “son,” and “husband” begin with assumptions of particular and stable sex and gender identity. We expect a mother to be a female and one who bears or adopts and cares for children. We understand the role of mother to be inhabited by a female and to be performed via feminine, care-taking behaviors. Certainly, a man can perform these feminine, motherly behaviors, but even still would likely not be referred to as “mother.” Therefore, even as gender is made up of a set of behaviors, we may struggle to disentangle it from sex in certain ways, especially in the family system.

For these reasons, the family is a particularly fruitful site for exploration of the layering of sex, gender and relationships; for observing the ways in which sex and gender

serve to order our lives, organize our perceptions of relational partners (and ourselves), and provide foundation to the relationships we build. How, though, is it possible to peel back such taken-for-granted layers? How might we point to the importance of something so much a part of our everyday lives that it is all but invisible to us; thought of as simply a given? It seems that to investigate and pull apart the layers of sex and gender from identity and relationships, a disruption of their assumed stability might be necessary. As such, family relationships involving non-standard sex/gender identities offer productive sites to explore interruptions in otherwise stable constructs of sex and gender. Specifically, family relationships involving a transgender or transsexual member may prove particularly useful for understanding the role of sex and gender in relating, as trans-identities bring to the forefront these often taken-for-granted facets of identity.

#### Trans-identity as a Site for Dis-order

Trans-identities not only illuminate the importance of sex and gender to our identities and relationships, but they also serve to complicate assumed associations about them, namely that *body* equals *sex* equals *gender*. In this sense, a relational look at trans-identity positions us to observe social order through *dis-order*; to question the connections between sex, gender, identity, and relationships in a way that at once brings complexities into sharper focus and also blurs the boundaries. Bell and Blaeuer (2006) argue, “Interpersonal communication scholars can enrich their work on gender, relationships, intimacy, disclosure, dialectics, and conflict by recognizing and studying human communication performances that range from the mundane to the monumental, that are always materially consequential, and that are productive of and challenging to relations of power” (p. 19). Certainly, transitions in sex and/or gender are considered monumental communication performances, are materially consequential, and are challenging to relations of power. Paying attention to how these monumental shifts affect relationships can educate us on not only the place of sex, gender, and identity in



extraordinary circumstances and how such circumstances can affect family members, but also can elucidate the places of sex and gender identity in the ordinary, mundane doings of relationships that assume gender/sex category stability.

It can be argued that for many who are trans-identified, identity is marked by some degree of contradiction – a contradiction of felt psychological identity and of apparent biological and material identity (Meyer-Bahlburg, 1994). To reconcile this contradiction, transgender persons may opt to transition in some way, often making physical and communicative changes that signal a shift in sex, gender, or both. This transition in identity could potentially create contradiction for family members of the transgender person who have experienced the pre-transition identity of the transgender person and find themselves relating to an *apparently* different person, post-transition. Other persons who identify as transgender may not feel a contradiction between their bodies and their minds, but may simply be uncomfortable being classified in either the male or female sex category and may desire to exist somewhere between the two or in no category at all (Denny, 2004). Still, this often implies at least a transition away from one sex/gender category, even if not clearly toward another.

Research on the transgender population is primarily psychological in nature, focused on so-called Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and/or psychological counseling for the transgender person. Less is known about the relational challenges and negotiations faced by transgender persons and their relatives and partners in relation to a trans-identity and transition. More specifically, there is little research on family relationships as influenced by a transgender family member's identity changes. This lack of research is problematic for several reasons. A disclosure of a socially stigmatized identity (such as is created by failing to fit into normalized categories, Goffman, 1963) and a change in sex/gender identity of a transgender person will most surely reverberate in the relationships in which the person engages, especially family relationships, as the family is conceptualized as an interdependent system (Galvin, Dickson, & Morrow, 2006). The

families and significant others of trans-identified individuals are not often taken into account in trans-related research, with the majority of articles focusing on the experience of the trans-identified person alone. Research is needed to understand how the disclosure and transition of transgender identity affects close relationships, perhaps prompting negotiation or change in the quality and quantity of verbal and nonverbal communication, in expectations of relational roles, and/or in expectations of support between relational partners. Further, exploring the ways in which family members make meaning of transgender identity and transition as well as how they construct their relationships with a trans-identified relative or spouse can provide knowledge about whether or not a trans-identity functions as a family stressor and if it does, how families use communication to cope with and navigate the challenges they face.

Lastly, exploring the ways in which family members draw on different meanings of sex, gender, identity and family to make sense of and evaluate their experiences can help to expand and deepen theoretical claims about these interconnected phenomena. For this reason, Relational Dialectics Theory is used in the current study as a tool with which to shed light on opposing threads of meaning which can be heard in the communication of family members of TG persons as they construct identities and relationships using cultural concepts of gender, identity, and the family system. The goals of this study are to identify the discourses or threads of meaning that characterize the talk surrounding TG identity in the family, to uncover how those symbolic resources manifest in family members' talk to construct their experiences with transition, and to build the foundation for later work in discovering what, if any, meaning-making strategies might help to foster familial acceptance and support for transgender persons and what, if any, meaning-making strategies are less conducive to acceptance and support.

### Trans-identities: Terms and Prevalence

Though the trans-community and the larger LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, intersexed, and queer) community are continually evolving and negotiating certain labels, boundaries, ties, and separations, it is necessary to attempt to clarify the many terms that have been applied to those with sex and gender variant identities. It is important to note that these terms are often used in differing ways and that the definitions of the terms are evolving as the trans-community evolves. The terms and definitions presented here are offered as an effort to capture the currently used meanings and to specify the identities that are of concern in the current study.

*Intersexed* people are those who have what is currently considered sexual organ ambiguity or incongruence, who have certain chromosomal configurations that are different from either XX or XY, or whose genitalia do not match other aspects of their appearance (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Looy & Bouma, 2005). Many persons born intersexed are assigned to one sex category or another at birth and raised correspondingly as either male or female. Being intersexed is a distinct phenomenon from being transgender or transsexual and sex and gender identities of intersexed individuals are often negotiated at birth or early in life, so that their trajectories differ from those considered transgender. Though sometimes included in the trans-community, intersexed people and their families were not included in the current study as the issues they face were assumed to be distinct from the issues of concern in this study. Several other terms characterize a range of alternative sex and/or gender identities, including transvestites, transsexuals, and transgenders or transgenderists (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1996; Parlee, 1996).

*Transvestite* is a term (typically) used to describe a person who at times dresses in clothing associated with the sex category different from the one into which the person was born (i.e. a male transvestite would dress as a female) for purposes of sexual gratification, for “drag” performance, or as a mode of personal expression (Ellis &

Eriksen, 2002; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1996). Transvestites most often do not believe that they are or want to become the “opposite” sex and do not actively pursue transition, and therefore were not included in the current study, as transition of some kind is of primary concern here.

*Transsexuals*, on the other hand, most often maintain they were born in a sexed body that does not reflect their *felt* (sometimes called *psychological*) sex and/or gender identity and may choose to live as the “other” sex. Some transsexuals seek sexual reassignment surgery to align their material bodies with their felt identities, whereas others accomplish transition through other means, such as hormone therapy and clothing choices (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Meyer-Bahlburg, 1994). The term *transgender* or *transgenderist* is an umbrella term, which at times is used to incorporate the previously referenced identities as well as a variety of other persons. Hines (2006) defines transgender as referring to “individuals who have undergone hormone treatment or surgery to reconstruct their bodies, or to those who transgress gender categories in ways which are less permanent” (p. 353).

Transsexuals and some transgenderists may experience what is referred to by psychologists (DSM-IV) as Gender Identity Disorder which is defined as a “persistent desire to adopt the social role and to acquire the physical appearance of the other sex” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 532). Often, a disparity between a felt identity and the sexed body (as well as the social expectations that accompany the sexed body) will leave persons with gender dysphoria that may disrupt social functioning (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002). Still, there are others who would identify as transgender but who do not wish to transition to either culturally legitimated sex category, but prefer to be identified as *neither* male nor female, removing the element of sex from personal identity. The recent term, *trans-identified*, is even more encompassing as it does not imply a distinction between transgender and transsexual and can refer to those who want

to and/or do transition to a sex category other than the one into which they were born or to persons who choose to be more ambiguous in their sex and/or gender identity.

The current study seeks to explore family members' constructions of trans-identities and transitions within the broader contexts of how sex and gender identity matter in relationships, and therefore sought to engage family members of those individuals who *both* identify as trans *and* took or are taking steps to transition in one or more ways, be that sexual reassignment (or confirmation, as preferred by many trans-identified persons) surgery, hormone therapy, clothing choice, other appearance changes, name and/or pronoun changes, or some combination of these. Although the ideas in the current study may speak to a variety of persons with trans-identities, I will most often refer to persons who are transgender or trans-identified, since these terms denote an association among those with gender variant identities (Parlee, 1996) and likely encompass transitioning parties who identify as either transgender or transsexual, or both.

Statistics estimating the prevalence of persons with trans-identities are sparse, often debated, and biased at best. The DSM-IV estimates that 1 in 30,000 identifies as a male to female transsexual and 1 in 100,000 identifies as a female to male transsexual (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 532). However, it has been argued that this is an extreme underestimation. More current statistics put forth by scholars outside of the medical field estimate that at least 1 in every 2,500 adult males in the U.S. has had sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) and has become a postoperative woman (Olyslager & Conway, 2007). Even this does not take into account the number of female to male transsexuals, those who might identify as transgender or transsexual and have not come forward for SRS, or those who consider themselves transgender, but do not opt to transition through sexual reassignment/confirmation surgery. In fact, somewhere between 43%-50% of transsexual patients will choose nonsurgical options in transitioning (Green & Blanchard, 2000; White & Ettner, 2004). It only takes tuning one's television to a talk show or nightly news show like 20/20 to see that the trans-community is growing both in

numbers and in recognition. Certainly, this is a segment of the LGBTIQ community that faces unique issues that deserve attention from scholars studying gender and relationships, among other things.

Much of the existing research on the trans-community is focused on psychological aspects and treatment options for those “diagnosed” with Gender Identity Disorder. A developing field called Transgender Studies has undertaken research on a variety of topics such as the relationship between feminism and transgenderism, issues of sex and science (e.g., hormones, brain function, chromosomes, etc.), and gender identity and passing, that is, being socially recognized as belonging to the desired sex category (for an informative look at these issues, see Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Still, more work is needed to understand how those relationships that existed before transition are impacted by a trans-identity; how relational partners construct meaning of transgender identity and how the communication between relational partners is influenced by such an identity.

Communication scholars seem particularly well situated to understand transgender experiences in non-clinical ways. A worthwhile starting place for communication scholars is to explore the connection between family relationships and culture in light of transgender identity and transition; to discover the ways that cultural meanings of sex, gender, identity, and family are used by families to make sense of their experiences. Understanding how families construct the meanings of these experiences can lead to a greater understanding of how relationships work or do not work – how families come to support or not support their trans-identified members.

CHAPTER ONE  
 FOUNDATIONAL CONSTRUCTS AND CONSTRUCTING A  
 FOUNDATION: A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

To lay the framework for the project, this chapter attempts to cover not only the current literature on transgender identity and family relationships, but also seeks to explore the different perspectives on meanings of sex, gender, identity, trans-identity, and family that are likely to surface in different ways as family members talk about their relative's/partner's identity and transition. The review of literature begins with a discussion of the ways in which US culture understands sex, gender, identity, transgender identity, and family in order to explicate the symbolic resources which are likely to inform participants' meaning-making processes. Following this is a review of scholarship concerning both the family as a gendered system and what we know about family relationships and trans-identity. Extending from this discussion of family experiences with transgender identity, literature on the phenomenon of "ambiguous loss" (Boss, 1999a; 1999b; 2007) is presented and connected to a dialectic of presence-absence. Pilot study research is then presented, showing the saliency of both of these phenomena to families experiencing transition. Finally, a theoretical justification for and an exposition of Relational Dialectics Theory are provided and research questions are posed.

Cultural Constructs: Symbolic Resources for  
Meaning-Making

The impact that trans-identities and transitions have on relationships cannot be discussed without first giving great attention to the ways we understand, think about, and talk about sex and gender in U.S. culture<sup>1</sup>, especially in relation to personhood or

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<sup>1</sup> Although no culture is homogeneous, and certainly U.S. culture is not, I am using U.S. culture to refer to mainstream American culture. That is, the review of literature and the larger

identity. These meanings and the traditional binary thinking about these categories will certainly be salient to families with a trans-identified member. The ways in which we communicate about these constructs, as well as the ways which we communicate about family relationships, are culturally specific, that is, they cannot be separated from the worldviews and meaning structures that constitute a culture. Swidler (2001) argues that when we construct meaning for our personal experiences, culture is a resource that informs and infuses our talk; that is, our communication reflects the symbolic systems at our disposal. She further argues that this process is not unitary, but that a variety of meanings can be constructed using a common set of symbolic resources: “Cultures are complex and contradictory, and even a common culture can be used in very different ways” (p. 6). Often, there are multiple meanings attached to a concept, and sometimes these meanings are contradictory.

Since incongruent meanings co-exist as part of the available semiotic system in which communicators are immersed, attending to the ways these competing models interact in communication is essential to understanding how meanings are constructed for a given experience. For the current study, differing cultural models of sex, gender, identity, and trans-identity should be explicated, as well as the ways we conceptualize family and familial roles, as they will almost certainly be at play when family members’ talk about their experiences with trans-identity and transition. The following sections are organized around such models of these key constructs which inform our understandings of and our communication about them.

### Meanings of Sex: Split or Spectrum?

The terms sex and gender have been productively separated, at least in academic discourse: sex refers to a biological/genetic category (though one not immune to social

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dissertation focus on discourses that most Americans have access to and likely draw from in their meaning making, though the specifics of meaning making probably vary by co-cultures



construction) and gender refers to the socially constructed expectations for communication, behavior, role inhabitation, and performance for those assigned to the respective sex categories (Butler, 1988; Bell & Blauert, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Wood, 2006). Though the concepts of sex and gender are intimately connected, it seems useful to parse them out in order to see the particular strands of meaning that exist and work together to inform our conceptualizations of both sex and gender.

In U.S. culture, the dominant model of sex is dichotomous. A person is typically considered either male or female, and no other culturally legitimate categories exist (Bem, 1995; Butler, 2004). However, there are several variations known to occur in the manifestation of biological sex (see discussion of the *intersexed* above). Despite the occurrence of bodies that are not clearly male or female, the dichotomy persists and these bodies are considered to exist somewhere between male and female, as opposed to being thought of as another version of human sex. In fact, the intersexed have historically been subjected to surgeries intended to “normalize” their bodies to fit more clearly in either the male or female sex category (Looy & Bouma, 2005; Dreger, 1998). While some cultures highly regard similar bodies and may even reserve special religious roles for such persons, they are considered disordered in U.S. culture (Looy & Bouma, 2005). Hubbard (1998) suggests that this strict binary may exist because in our culture sex is associated with reproduction and the *natural* complementarity of male and female parts. Hubbard and others (Looy & Bouma, 2005) argue that the perceived sex binary may be reinforced by Western religious teachings (which are built on the separate categories of man and woman and the joining of the two) instead of physical reality, since biological evidence does show there are more sex complexities than clear-cut categories of male and female.

Further, the dominant view of sex entails that sex is a fixed, stable categorization and a certain thing - not something that is pliable or dynamic (Sloop, 2004). Therefore those who might feel they are a different sex than what their body appears to be or who desire to inhabit a sex category different from what their bodies indicate are also

considered disordered (Looy & Bouma, 2005) and are at times denied a true membership in a sex category even after their bodies have been surgically altered and/or have been granted legal classification in the desired sex category (Butler, 2004; Currah, 2008). For example, in the Spring of 2008 a news story broke about Thomas Beatie, a female to male transgender person who was pregnant with his and his wife's first child. Public reactions to this story, which was picked up by mainstream newspapers, magazines, online news websites, and even by Oprah Winfrey, were varied but a common sentiment expressed on blogs was to deny Beatie's maleness, claiming that he was not *actually* a man if he was able to get pregnant (Currah, 2008). This reaction serves as further evidence that the dominant cultural understanding of sex is that sex is something we are born as and cannot change, and that sex identity is equated with the ways the body is able to reproduce.

Others argue that biological sex would be better understood as existing on a continuum rather than as a binary, since biological evidence shows other bodies exist than what we would designate as male or female (Cole, et al., 2000; Fausto-Sterling, 1993, 2000). Biologist, Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2000) suggests that there should be as many as five sex categories as that number would better reflect the range of genetic and physical embodiments of human sex. Others support this dynamic, changing, and pliable meaning of sex by citing that our conception of sex has changed over time even to this point. For example, before the Enlightenment it was thought that there was one sex and not two, and so our model of sex was monomorphic instead of dimorphic (Hood-Williams, 1996; Stone, 1977). Anatomists at the time believed that women were a less perfect version of men, with the same sex organs simply carried inside the body (Hood-Williams, 1996; Laqueur, 1990). This aids the argument that a two and only two model for sex has not always been, and is therefore not naturally given and immovable.

Another site at which to explore important meanings of sex is at the intersection of sex category and personal identity. Certainly, the dominant understanding of sex

(which is arguably also a model of gender) is that it is an essential piece of our episteme (Butler, 1993; Sloop, 2004; Wood, 2006); it is integral to our identities and to how we understand and move through the social world. Sex is among the primary social categories by which we identify ourselves and others, along with things like race, social class, age, and occupation. In fact, sex is one of the first social categories in which we place individuals, as evidenced by our desire to know the sex of a fetus as well as the medical community's and parents' engagement in normalizing surgery for the intersexed. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that while some roles, such as student or daughter can be taken on and relinquished as the context of social interaction changes, other aspects of personhood, like sex category, function not as roles but as *master identities* which cut across social contexts and are nearly impossible to relinquish (p. 126). Similarly, Sloop (2004) argues that personhood is always sexed, by citing public debates and reactions to cases like Brandon Teena and John/Joan (publicly documented stories about a trans- person and a genetic boy raised as a girl, respectively) where the need to pin down the person's sex was at the center of debates and controversy.

An alternative view of sex, certainly a more marginalized view, argues that a person's sex does not or at least should not be considered as integral to their personhood. Bem (1995) argues for a complete depolarization of sex that she claims would lead to a diminished presence of sex and gender in our social lives. She argues that if we sever the ties between sex category and other aspects of the human experience, then sex will no longer be essential to the human experience: "What it means is that the distinction between male and female would no longer be the dimension around which the culture is organized" (p. 329). In this call, Bem recognizes that the dominant understanding of sex is that it is foundational to our identities and social experiences, but that there is perhaps an alternative way of being and thinking about the place of sex in personal identity.

### Meanings of Gender: Nature or Nurture?

Perspectives on gender have much to do with our cultural model(s) of sex as well as the sexed bodies we inhabit. Gender consists of the behaviors, emotions, and ways of being we expect from and prescribe to sexed bodies (Butler, 1998). Until scholarly efforts in the 1970s and 1980s, there was no real distinction made between the concepts of sex and gender (Hood-Williams, 1996; Oakley, 1972, 1981, 1985), but this original separation of sex into the biological realm and gender into the social was quite a significant move, as it allowed scholars to denaturalize sex differences as well as the subordination of women. This argument that our gendered behaviors are merely cultural performances (Butler, 1990, 1998, 2003; Goffman, 1959; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1990) and are no more real than the socialization from which they came runs contrary to the model of gender that was dominant before the 1970s and that is still going strong today – that there are natural, inherent differences between men and women that cause them to behave differently, to have different interests, and to desire different things in life. These contrary models for gender might be best described as representing a view of gender as originating from *nurture* and a view of gender as originating from *nature*, respectively.

The argument that gender originates from socialization, the *nurture* argument, holds that there is nothing natural or given about gender; that gender is a cultural notion – a set of expected behaviors, interests, goals, values, and tendencies that are taught through a process of social disciplining. According to Butler (1988), “...gender is the cultural significance the sexed body assumes” (p. 524). In other words, our bodies do not naturally dictate certain behaviors, but instead we assign and prescribe certain behaviors to bodies that we place in different sex categories: we see male and female as different and therefore expect them to behave differently. Butler (1988) argues that gender may seem natural to us because we are gendered from birth and our gendered acts are quite habitual, but that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which

various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 519).

The implications of this argument are important for apparent differences between men and women. If gender is external and not inherent then little girls are not naturally inclined to play with dolls and little boys to play with trucks, but instead they are encouraged and expected to. If gender is taught and learned, then men are not innately more logical than women and women more emotional than men, but are trained/expected to be. If gender is cultural and not inborn, then women are not intrinsically better suited for caretaking occupations and men for intellectual or physical labor occupations, but are directed toward those fields, receiving social rewards for complying and social sanctions for deviating.

Support for the argument that gender is culturally constructed comes from variation both across cultures and within cultures. For example, gender scholars often cite research by Margaret Mead (1935) where vast differences in the social roles of men and women were found to exist in separate tribes in New Guinea. In one tribe, women were expected to be dominant and sexually aggressive and men were expected to wear decorative clothing and curl their hair as to appear attractive to women. Within and/or across cultures, gender scholars also cite the fact that if gendered behaviors were natural then there would be no men who exemplified feminine behaviors or women who exemplified masculine behaviors, but this is not the case (Bem, 1981; Wood, 2011; Butler, 1990).

Cultural gender scholars seek to support their claims by pointing to holes in the argument for nature. Hood-Williams (1996) argues that there is an inherent flaw in essentialism: “theories of natural difference pre-suppose that which they seek to explain” (p. 6). Others argue that if sex differences are inherent then there should be strong evidence to support the claim, but that there is in fact a lack of evidence of sexual determinism and a lack of consistency in significant differences between the sexes

(Connell, 2002; Paechter, 2006). Others argue against biological evidence that is supposed to show that gender differences are natural, claiming that these findings often paint an incomplete picture. For example, Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2000) maintains that while male and female brains have at times been shown to operate differently, the development and use of the human brain is affected a great deal by experience and therefore is not immune to culture or social influence.

This alternative view of gender, that gender is natural, has historically competed for dominance with the argument for nurture. In fact, efforts to separate the terms sex and gender represented efforts to displace the dominance of biological essentialism in explaining male and female behavior (Barrett, 1980). Biological essentialism is based on the idea that both sex and gender are biological or naturally given – that humans are not only born with sexed bodies, but that they are also born with sexed brains that have been bathed in different levels of hormones and that cause men and women to be wired for different tendencies, actions, emotions, desires, thought processes, personalities, and skills. Proponents of the argument for nature cite not only evidence of differences in brain size and function of men and women (Mealy, 2000), but also differences between men and women that result from chromosomal makeup and hormone levels (Cowley, 2003).

Sloop (2004) and Garber (1992) point out that essentialism has a strong presence in both scientific and popular culture. Both scholars cite the public communication surrounding the case of John/Joan as evidence that essentialism is not only a strong ideology among scientists, but is integral to the public's view of gender. In the John/Joan case, David Reimer, born a genetic male was reassigned to be raised as female after an accident during circumcision that damaged his penis to a great degree. David was raised as Brenda into his teen years, but according to reports, was always fighting the femininity that was forced on him by his parents and doctors, never wanting to wear dresses or play with dolls. When David found out what happened to him as an infant, he decided to begin

living as a male. This case was touted as the great gender experiment that failed by numerous news sources including *Time* and the *New York Times*, and was cited as evidenced that proved once and for all that cultural theories of gender were wrong - that gender was built into the brain, and certainly not into socialization (Sloop, 2004). These contrasting models of gender are both part of our cultural repertoire for understanding and giving accounts for the differences that we attribute to men and women in their desires, behaviors, and social roles.

### Meanings of Personal Identity: Fixed or Fluid;

#### Brain or Body?

Because the trans-identified persons of interest in the current study experience some discomfort or at least desire to change or relinquish some part of the sex/gender identity conferred on them, it is important to explore the ways we regard personal identity in U.S. culture, as these will certainly surface in family members' talk about their relatives'/spouses' identity transitions. There seem to be at least two sites for exploring cultural conceptions of identity that are likely relevant to transgender identity and transition: first, the nature of the self as stable or dynamic and as given or constructed, and second, the location of the self in the human being.

In U.S. culture, individualism is privileged (Baxter, 2011). We tend to talk about identity as something that an individual *has* and we regard individuals as separate and discrete from others (Carbaugh, 1989). Not only do we tend to see ourselves as unique and distinct from others, but we tend to consider ourselves as having one true self, as opposed to multiple selves that change over time and context. Erikson (1995) argues that the narrative of a true self is invoked when we believe we are behaving in ways that align with our values. It is easy to hear echoes of this narrative in the ways we talk about ourselves and others as having core or true selves that are assumed to be coherent, stable, and ongoing through whatever life experiences may come. I might say that I want to let

my friends see “the *real* me,” implying that there is a true and constant identity or self somewhere outside of the social roles I inhabit or the behaviors I perform in public. We often talk about our “selves” as existing apart from our behaviors, e.g., when someone accuses us of bad behavior we might argue, “That’s not the kind of person I really am, I was just having a bad day.” Further, we sometimes talk about the self as a thing which we cannot change, but that is stable across time and context, e.g., “That’s just the way I am.” In this sense, identity is seen as a stable entity residing within the individual as the cognitive schema by which one understands and interprets self in the social world (Markus & Sentic, 1982). From this view, the self exists as a true and definite part of the human psyche, where persons are born with particular behavioral tendencies and personality traits. Gecas and Burke (1995) further argue that this true/core self narrative becomes stronger when our social lives heighten in complexity. The concept of the true self has been found to be quite common among transgender and transsexual individuals in the narratives they tell of personal identity and transition (Mason-Schrock, 1996).

An alternative view of the self regards identity as not a property of an individual, but as a product of social interaction. According to Mead (1934), “The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process” (p. 135). Similarly, Bakhtin (1990) argues that there is essentially no self or author outside of culture: “An author is the uniquely active form-giving energy that is manifested not in a psychologically conceived consciousness, but in a durably valid cultural product” (p. 8). This view of the self is dependent on social construction, in which the notion of a coherent and *true* identity is not possible. This conceptualization of self is by necessity multi-faceted or even fragmented; a dynamic process rather than a packaged grouping of inborn traits. This view can also be heard in everyday talk about ourselves and others. For example, we might say “That experience shaped who I am today,” implying that sociality



creates and shapes the self. Or, we may highlight the fragmented nature of the self by saying, “I’m such a different person at home than I am at the office,” calling attention to social roles and interactions that construct different facets of our identities.

Another site for contention in regard to the self is the location of the self. Of course, debating the location of the self only makes sense speaking from the perspective that the self is a coherent package contained within the individual. Regardless, the location of the self or, more specifically, the relation of the self to the mind and body has been contemplated since Plato’s time and is probably best known through Descartes’s mind/body dualism (1641, as cited in Synott, 1992). Descartes believed that the self was split between two experiences: the rational thought of the mind and the impulses of the body. This pull between the mind and the body can be heard in ways we talk about desires. For example, we might say “My body was telling me yes, but my mind was telling me no,” implying that the mind and body sometimes function separately as distinct parts of the self. We might also reference this split in talk about our actions: “I tried to control myself, but I just couldn’t stop eating.” This statement implies that mind is the rational, control-center of the self that governs the less important and more unruly body.

There seem to be at least two distinct perspectives concerning the self and the mind and body: one view that the body is a shell for the self (wherein the self is located in the mind) and a view that the body is central to the self (self as both mind and body). Descartes (1641, as cited in Synott, 1992) endorsed the view that the self is located in the mind and concluded that the body is all but dispensable to the self. Plato held a similar view, believing that the body was the tomb or grave of the soul (as cited in Synott, 1992). From this conceptualization of the self it follows that the body can be changed and the self will remain unchanged. In fact, from this perspective, the body can be seen as an impediment to the self and not reflective of the true self (existing in the mind). In line with this implication, Gimlin (2006) found that individuals who had engaged in cosmetic surgery often cited the body as a “false testament to the self” (p. 705) and Charmaz

(1995) found that chronically ill individuals often experienced their bodies as alien to the self.

From the alternative perspective, the body is an integral part of the self and personal identity. Sartre (1943) argues that the body is not separable from the self; that the two are one in the same. Similarly, many social theories of the self argue that the body is essential to identity (Gadow, 1982; Goffman, 1968; Mead, 1934). From this view, the body cannot be separated from the mind and from the experience of the self, and further, if the body were to change, the self would surely follow. The relation of the self to the mind and body is certainly salient for many trans-identified individuals, as transition often involves changes to the body that will more accurately reflect a felt or desired identity.

#### Meanings of Trans-identity: Path or Pathology?

As the transgender community becomes more diverse, so do the meanings of trans-identity. There seem to be two main points of fracture in characterizing trans-identity: why transgenderism occurs (disorder vs. choice) and what identity a trans-identified person desires or is expected to develop (transition from one sex category to another vs. fluid or ambiguous identity). These two sites of fragment are captured in two competing models of trans-identity: a medicalized model of *transsexualism* and a social constructionist model of *transgenderism*.

The medicalization model is the longest-enduring and most dominant understanding of trans-identity in medical and scholarly communities and the political arena, as well as in the general public, as evidenced by ways trans-identified persons are discussed in news media. The medical model, or what Denny (2004) labels the transsexual model, holds that transsexuals are persons who feel they are “trapped in the wrong body,” are pained by this disorder, and seek to transition via sexual reassignment surgery to relieve the conflict between the true self and the false body (Denny, 2004, p.

26). This view of trans-identity is dominant in the field of psychology as evidenced by the listing of Gender Identity Disorder as a mental illness in the current diagnostic and statistical manual. This perspective on trans-identity is also typified by a pursuit of the cause or the reason for the “disorder.” Various explanations for such a condition have been offered, from early explanations of sexual perversion (Wiedeman, 1953) to repressed homosexuality (Socarides, 1969), to more recent theories of differences in the brain and hormonal conditions (Zhou, Hofman, Gooren, & Swaab 1995). Denny (2004) argues, “Theories of causation ranged from individual psychopathology to family pathology to prenatal, perinatal, or postnatal hormone disturbances or chromosomal aberrations” (p. 27).

The transsexual model can be heard in public discussions surrounding trans-identified persons like Brandon Teena and Calpernia Adams, both trans-identified persons whose identities were publicly debated after acts of violence brought their stories into the news media. Sloop (2004) shows that stories about Brandon Teena (who had a female to male transgender identity) often reflected a search for the cause of Brandon’s “disordered” identity and lifestyle. News media cited both Brandon’s psyche and his body as roots of his problems. Sloop argues, “In most general terms, Brandon’s ‘transgenderism’ is posited as resulting either from a chemical or physical imbalance (e.g., extra hormone shots during his mother’s pregnancy) or from psychosexual abuse at an early age” (2004, p. 76). Further, Sloop shows that this meaning is taken up by members of the trans-community citing online postings from trans-identified persons arguing that transsexual people are the same as any other persons with a birth defect, simply attempting to correct the mistake made by “mother nature” (p. 138).

The model of transsexualism makes trans-identities socially valid, acceptable, or justifiable in various ways. First, it provides a meaning of trans-identity that is somewhat easy for those outside the community to grasp. The either/or model where trans-identified people transition from one sex category to another, while still cited as a disorder, fits into

the cultural dichotomy of sex (Roen, 2002), and meshes with the conception of male and female as the only two options for bodies and identities. Second, the model of transsexualism where a disorder and a cause are of primary concern protects the trans-identified to some extent, characterizing transgenderism/transsexualism as “a medical problem, not a moral problem” (Denny, 2004, p. 28). Similarly, Ellis and Erikson (2002) argue that “If transgender people can be shown to be different biologically, then they cannot be blamed for their differences” (p. 291). On the other hand, the stigma of trans-identity is perhaps greater if attributed to personal choice (Cole, Denny, Eyler, & Samons, 2000). Lastly, the medicalization of trans-identity allows for the development and availability of technologies that aid trans-identified persons in transitioning (Denny, 2004).

An alternative model of trans-identity has more recently emerged as the trans-community becomes more diverse and more vocal both in the scholarly community and the political arena. Under what Denny calls the *transgender* model (2004), trans-identity is not considered a disordered way of being, but simply is representative of human variability and nuances of gender identity. This view, first theoretically articulated by Boswell (1991) holds that trans-identified individuals are not in conflict with themselves (mind vs. body), but are in conflict with culture, fighting against the notion of two and only two legitimate ways of being. Roen (2002) refers to this perspective as one of “both/neither...a transgender position of refusing to fit within categories of woman and man” (p. 505), as opposed to the “either/or” model of transsexualism. She argues that the both/neither model has become the centered meaning in transgender politics, characterizing open and ambiguous trans-identities as politically progressive, and closeted, either/or trans-identities as detrimental to the unraveling of cultural beliefs about sex and gender. Bornstein (1995) cites those transsexuals who insist on “passing” (see Goffman, 1963) in a non-natal sex category as supporters of the cultural binary of sex/gender. Similarly, Stone (1992) calls for a posttranssexual manifesto – for transsexuals

to cease attempts to pass as *either* male or female, but instead to exist as intertextual bodies that do not comply with hetero-normativity but contest it.

This conceptualization works to de-pathologize trans-identity and is called up to argue for the removal of GID from the DSM-IV. From this view of trans-identity, there is nothing wrong with identifying as trans, no disorder associated with identity, and no uniform path for trans-people to follow. Denny (2004) cites the transsexual and transgender models as ideological divisions in the trans-community, claiming that while the transgender model blames culture instead of the individual, it simultaneously endangers legal protections already in place as well as treatment options for those who are not comfortable with an identity that is not clearly male or female. For example, if there is no psychological or medical justification for technologies like sexual reassignment surgery, such a procedure could be regarded as simply cosmetic and therefore unnecessary, and perhaps unjustifiably frivolous.

#### Meanings of Family: Obligatory or Optional?

There is arguably a dominant view in U.S. culture of what family is supposed to be: family is first and foremost constructed as a biological, legal, or affection based system of relationships where financial, social, practical, and emotional support are given and received on a predominantly non-voluntary basis (LePoire, 2006; Segrin & Flora, 2005). More specifically, blood and legal ties are more readily legitimated than ties of communication or affection. Schneider (1980) investigated what Americans mean by the concept of “family,” finding that blood ties and legal ties (especially marriage) were privileged in American kinship. Baxter, Henauw, Huisman, Livesay, Norwood, Su, Wolf, and Young (2009) investigated “lay” conceptions of family, finding several factors that participants considered as more true to the concept of family: the presence of children, marriage (as opposed to cohabitation), blood or legal ties, heterosexuality, and the sharing of a household. Descriptions of family that held to these characteristics were

judged as more legitimate family forms than those which deviated from these. These characteristics describe the idealized concept of family in U.S. culture (Baxter, 2011).

Besides structural expectations of blood and law, there are expectations of how family relationships should be conducted. For instance, family relationships are typically conceptualized as long-term, highly interdependent (White & Klein, 2002) and non-voluntary (Hess, 2000). Families are considered relational systems that we do not necessarily choose. This notion can be heard in cultural sayings about family and friend relationships, e.g., “You can’t choose your family” or “Friends are the family we choose.” These clichés of talk indicate that family is considered non-voluntary, unlike friendship or romantic involvement. The view that “family is forever” is countered by another view that family is not immune to relationship breakdown; that there are instances in which family members might dissolve their relationships and no longer feel obligated to each other.

Research shows that sometimes family stressors present situations in which the idea of unconditional family love and support is challenged or strained. For example, incarceration has been found to be a reason for family relationship dissolution (Kaslow, 1987). Further, it has been found that parents withdraw support, reject, and even disassociate with their children who come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Saltzburg, 1996). Most relevant to the current investigation, transgender persons often find themselves rejected by family (Hines, 2006). Green (2000) suggests that once a person has disclosed a “deviant” sexual or gender identity to family members, any continued family relations after that point are considered voluntary. This runs contrary to the dominant cultural conception of family as a system of non-voluntary or obligatory relationships (Segrin & Flora, 2005). Green’s suggestion implies that the disclosure of a gay, lesbian, or transgender identity is a type of family stressor that could be a “deal-breaker” for family relationships, i.e., some family members may feel that they no longer are obligated to sustain a relationship with the family member who has disclosed.

But why would these identity disclosures compromise traditional notions of family? Perhaps this fracturing is due to a strong connection between traditional notions of family and traditional notions of gender. Butler (2004) argues that family or kinship in U.S. culture is predominantly conceived of as heteronormative, that is, legitimation is not afforded to kinship that deviates from the traditional nuclear family which is centered on a heterosexual, married couple with children. West and Turner (1995) claim that stereotypical gender roles are especially taught and reinforced by heterosexual parents. Further, as mentioned previously, many family relationship categories are strictly associated with one sex or another. As such, family relationships are steeped in assumptions of stable gender/sex identities and likely in traditional gender role socialization and so a disruption of the gender system may shake a family's foundation, compromising the otherwise obligatory, non-voluntary ties. To better understand the relationship between gender and family, literature pertaining to gender socialization and gendered patterns of communication in the family is presented next.

#### The Family as a Gendered System

According to Morrow (2006), "Processes of gender differentiation and identity construction begin with families. Research from both psychological and sociological perspectives demonstrates that family practices are profoundly gendered" (p. 94). Much of social learning happens in the home. Children's modeling behaviors are often based on the behavior of caregivers and it is often caregivers who punish and reward children's gendered behaviors in formative years (Bem, 1981; Kunkel, Hummert, & Dennis, 2006; Morrow, 2006; Santrock, 1994). Research has shown that children of pre-school age have strong knowledge of prescribed gendered behavior and can identify gendered toys, activities, and clothing (Bem, 1981; Levy, 1999; Thorne, 1993). Some research has shown that children experience "gender constancy" as early as 3 years of age (Schaffer,

1996) and by the age of 6 have come to the conclusion that their sex is an unchangeable fact (DiLisi & Gallagher, 1991; Kohlberg, 1966; Warin, 2000).

As discussed in the introduction, sex and gender help to organize and structure relationships, and especially family relationships. Family roles are labeled and in ways that indicate what kind of person should perform them and through what behaviors. We know that sisters are females and will be expected to relate in feminine ways, talking about emotions, feelings, and everyday experiences. We know that a father is a male and will be expected to earn money, be strong, and relate to sons and daughters differently. A female member of the family could perform these same behaviors and therefore the same familial role, but we would consider her a mother, though perhaps a non-traditional mother. Even as gender is considered a social performance by most scholars (in the social sciences and humanities; Butler, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1987), it is still steadfastly tied to sex categories, at least in the family system, which is the site of much gender socialization and gender-labeled role performance.

Family roles, like mother, father, sister, brother, son, and daughter, carry certain meanings in U.S. culture that prescribe certain behaviors to individuals and dictate certain relationships within the family system. For example, Baxter, Hirokawa, Lowe, Nathan, and Pearce (2004) identified a particular meaning of mother, what they called a “discourse of responsible motherhood,” present in the talk of women in their study of alcohol use among pregnant women. Responsible or good mothers were described as those who put the fetus/child before themselves. Mothers who failed to protect their babies/children were described as selfish and were socially disapproved of for their actions. Related to gendered familial roles, particular gendered expectations exist for family members according to their roles. For example, Tannen (2008) identified a master narrative for the relationship of sisters. Her participants repeatedly described sisterhood as a relationship in which closeness and similarity were expected.



The relationships between parents and children are also often gendered. It is typically thought that sons need to separate from their mothers for the sake of masculinity, whereas a daughter's identity is defined through attachment to her mother and not through distinction or separation (Miller-Day & Fisher, 2006). Mothers and daughters are expected to be central to each other's lives, where this kind of closeness and enmeshment is not expected and is even stigmatized in mother-son relationships (Jordan, 1993). Morman and Floyd (2006) argue that what it means to be a son is connected to notions of masculinity (e.g., independence) and that the relationship between father and son is thought to be more influential on the son's future successes than is the relationship between mother and son. Unlike the mother-daughter relationship, the father-son relationship is characterized (at least in popular culture) as one resting on activities, on doing things together, instead of intimacy and closeness through personal talk and disclosure (Morman & Floyd, 2006).

The everyday interactions between parents and children reflect these gendered role prescriptions. Generally, prescriptions of femininity maintain that females should be relationally oriented while males should be independent (Wood, 2011). Therefore, parents or other primary caregivers are more likely to verbally interact with female children and to play more actively with male children (Doyle & Paludi, 1991). Mothers engage in more relational talk with daughters and encourage more independence in sons (Galvin, 2006; Wood, 2011). Similarly, parents are more likely to encourage emotional expression in daughters and aggressiveness and competition in sons (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Segrin & Flora, 2005). Not only do parents communicate with male and female children in different ways, but different priority may be accorded to encouraging male and female children to adhere to gender prescriptions. Female children tend to receive less pressure to adhere to feminine behaviors than do male children who have less gender flexibility (DeFranciso & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000).

However, Galvin (2006) argues that because of the current changes in family make-up, traditional gender role socialization in the family may also change. She states, “As more children grow up in or witness single-parent families, stepfamilies, same-sex-parent families or other configurations, and as more families raise children who openly self-identify as gay or lesbian, cohabit rather than marry, or adopt as single parents, understandings of gender and family will continue to diversify” (p. 44). Some research has begun to examine non-traditional family situations as they relate to gender and relationships. For example, Hatfield and Abrams (1995) found that communication between father and child was less competitive and more cohesive in single-father families than in two parent families. Tasker and Golombock (1997) found that children of lesbian mothers were more likely to have positive relationships with their mothers’ partners than were children of heterosexual mothers. The changes in traditional family structure may indeed create changes in traditional gender socialization for subsequent generations. However, researchers would do well to also examine the fundamental place gender and sex hold in the family and how non-traditional sex/gender configurations affect family relationships.

#### Trans-identity and Family Relationships

While there is not a wealth research focused on the impact of trans-identities on personal relationships, what research exists indicates that many relational experiences become problematic after the disclosure. Transgender individuals may disclose and some may choose to transition in any of its forms at any time in the life course, at which time they might be involved in a variety of close relationships including romantic and spousal relationships, relationships with families of origin, and even relationships with their own children. These relationships will likely be impacted in some way by a change in the expressed identity of one relational partner, whether the impact is positive, negative, or both. There is research which suggests that the disclosure of a TG identity, like that of a

gay or lesbian identity, could be considered a family stressor (Brown, 1988; Connolly, 2006; Green & Mitchell, 2002), but to date no family communication research has explored it as such. According to Connolly (2006), family reactions to LGBT disclosures are “rarely neutral and typically have a wide range: positive and negative, static and erratic, with overt and covert communication” (p. 7-8).

As with disclosures of gay, lesbian, or bisexual sexual orientations, family reactions to transgender identity disclosure likely vary, functioning to exacerbate or relieve stress for the transgender person (Goldfried, 2001); some relationships are characterized by negative conflict while others are characterized by intimacy and support (Mallon, 1999). Scholars argue that family members of TGs are not immune to stigma and oppressive attitudes surrounding trans-identities and that these social conditions may not only constrain the trans-identified person but also the person’s family in profound ways (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Connolly, 2006). Some scholars have suggested that transitions happen not only for the trans-identified person, but also for the person’s family (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Connolly, 2006) suggesting that a transition in the identity of one person may reverberate in that person’s relationships. Connolly (2006) points to communicative negotiations of relationships that may ensue post-disclosure, stating that “...relational dynamics typically shift and new patterns are established. Ways that families experience intimacy, distancing, and boundaries may change” (p. 13). These changes are likely related to the ways family members call up and navigate cultural notions of what it means to be family in relation to what it means to be male or female (e.g. a mother-daughter relationship becomes a mother-son relationship post transition). Zamboni (2006) argues that family members must define and redefine their understandings of their gender-variant relative.

Some familial relationships may not fare well as a result of these changes. Hines (2006) found some partner/spousal relationships to be incompatible with the transperon’s transition due to complications of sexual orientation and difficulty with relationship

negotiation: “Findings show that the process of gender transition might initiate irreconcilable shifts in partnering roles, leading to relationship break-up” (p. 360). Hines also discusses case studies of parents who are trans-identified whose experiences show *transparenting* to be a very complex relational process. Hines’s work suggests that *transparents* may be problematic to our cultural ideas of parenthood – ideas that are stalwartly linked to the binary of biological sex.

Other studies have focused on the parents of trans-identified persons, revealing many negative responses that result from a son’s or daughter’s disclosure including feelings of loss, grief, guilt, shame, betrayal, anxiety, denial, anger, and depression (Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Granucci Lesser, 1999; Gurvich, 1992; Peo, 1988). The impact of these emotions is potentially detrimental for family relationships. Green (2000) suggests that when a person discloses a deviant sexual or gender identity to family, relational definitions might change altogether; family members may consider a continued relationship with the trans-identified person voluntary rather than obligatory.

Research in counseling and therapy suggests that one of the main roadblocks to family support of a trans-identified person is the experience of profound grief (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Granucci Lesser, 1999). In fact, some scholars have suggested that families of trans-identified persons, and particularly transsexuals, experience the same bereavement process and stages of grief that families who experience the death of a member often experience (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996). These stages of grief include the denial stage, the anger stage, the bargaining stage, the depression stage, and the acceptance stage (Kubler-Ross, 1969, as cited in Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996). When applied to transgender (and most specifically, transsexual) experiences, the denial stage is characterized by family members experiencing shock, denial, and rationalizing that the TG relative is merely going through a phase. The anger stage for the family of a trans-identified person may be characterized not only by anger from family members, but also blame and suspicion.

During the bargaining stage, family members may threaten the TG member with some negative relational consequence or may make promises about rewards in order to convince the TG person to cease TG behavior and identity claims. The depression stage occurs when family members begin to express grief by weeping, sometimes complaining about physical ailments, and at times even abusing substances. Finally, the acceptance stage is characterized by family members' realization that they cannot change the TG person and cease efforts to try. This does not necessarily equate to positive outcomes, however. Additionally, this stage is characterized by feelings of loss in regard to the TG relative's former identity (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996).

Granucci Lesser (1999) also notes grieving and loss as main themes in the talk of her case study participant. The experience of bereavement within families of TGs is less than straightforward, since a death in the family has not occurred. Granucci Lesser attributes the grief of her participant and other family members of a TG person to "...the loss of the individual they knew and learning to accept and appreciate the person who remains" (p. 182). To date, researchers in the fields of psychology and counseling have focused on the fact that this bereavement occurs for families, but have done less to explore the experience of the grief in relation to the trans-identity; what has happened in the relationship that causes this grief if not death? This particular kind of bereavement experience, where the loss is less clearly identifiable than death and the object of grief is less evident has been termed *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1980; 1990; 1999a; 1999b; 2007).

#### The Experience of Ambiguous Loss

"Ambiguous loss" is a term first used by Boss (1999a) who aimed to capture the dynamics of both psychological and physical presence-absence paradoxes. Boss (1999b) explained that the experience of ambiguous loss comes from "Not knowing whether a loved person is absent or present, dead or alive" (p. 4). Boss (2007) describes physical absence as "leaving without goodbye" and psychological absence as "goodbye without

leaving.” The former may be used to describe the experience of having a missing family member without confirmation of death (e.g., missing soldier). The latter describes reactions to a family member who is physically still present, but mentally deteriorated (e.g., in a coma). The premise of ambiguous loss theory is that this experience of ambiguity surrounding loss is problematic for families because it stalls the grief process, thus standing in the way of coping, decision-making processes, and closure (Boss, 1999a).

Researchers have explored the phenomenon of ambiguous loss in the context of a variety of family situations and shown it to be present in the experiences of mixed religious orientation marriages (Hernandez & Wilson, 2007), in families with children diagnosed with some form of autism (O’Brien, 2007), in families where predictive DNA testing is used for hereditary disease (Sobel & Brookes Cowan, 2003), in experiences of foster children (Lee & Whiting, 2007), for the non-biological parent after a lesbian divorce (Allen, 2007), in post-divorce stepfamilies (Afifi & Keith, 2004), in families that experience premature birth (Golish & Powell, 2003), in experiences of adoptees (Powell & Afifi, 2005), and in military families during wartime (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008).

Ambiguous loss is the psychological experience of a struggle to make meaning of something or someone that seems to be at once present and absent. In fact, Boss (2007) describes ambiguous loss as the resulting from the experience of the dialectic of presence-absence:

Family members have no other option but to construct their own truth about the status of the person absent in mind or body. Without information to clarify their loss, family members have no choice but to live with the paradox of absence and presence (Boss, 2007). I propose that “both/and” thinking strengthens adults’ and children’s resiliency despite the ambiguity of a family member’s absence or presence. That is, it is useful for a family member to think dialectically about thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in a practical way: my loved one is gone, but s/he is also here; I can learn to tolerate the stress of the ambiguity (Boss, 1999, 2004, 2007). (p. 105-106).

When something is ambiguous, it is polysemic and so is difficult to classify – meaning is a site for struggle. It is on this basis that the dialectic of presence-absence has been explored in communication research as the communicative piece to the puzzle.

### The Dialectic of Presence-Absence

The struggle between presence and absence in relationships has been explored in the context of families coping with adult dementia (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Golish, & Olson 2002), in families who experience the death of a child (Toller, 2005), and in long-distance romantic relationships (Sahlstein, 2004). Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, and Olson (2002) examined the contradictions experienced by wives coping with their husbands' adult dementia. These researchers identified a complex series of contradictions where wives experienced interwoven dialectics of presence-absence, certainty-uncertainty, openness-closedness, and past-present. This particular formulation of presence-absence captures what has been termed by other scholars “married widowhood” (Rollins, Waterman, & Esmay, 1985, p. 68), characterized by the feelings of spousal loss, but continuing responsibilities to a marital relationship. Wives engaged in “pregrieving” for their spouse who was still alive, and were unsure of how to exist between the roles of *married* and *widowed* (Baxter et al., 2002; Rollins et al., 1985).

Toller (2005) identified presence-absence as a dialectic tension experienced by parents who suffered the loss of a deceased child. She found that parents struggled to make sense of an ongoing psychological and emotional connection to the deceased child and the physical absence of the child. In many ways, parents struggled with trying to maintain a relationship with a child who was no longer living; a struggle to “keep the child alive” (p. 57). The presence-absence contradiction has also been identified in relationships where grief is not central to the dialectic. Sahlstein (2004) identified presence-absence as a dialectic through which long-distance romantic partners made meaning of their relationships. Couples described being together and being apart as both

enabling and constraining to the relationship. Sahlstein's study illustrates that the nature of the interplay between presence and absence takes more than one form, perhaps often related to ambiguous loss, but not always. It is important to parse out what exactly is being positioned as incompatible, as oppositional, as a site of meaning struggle that causes relational partners to construct a person or relationship as both present and absent.

### Trans-identities, Ambiguous Loss, and Presence-Absence

How then does the experience of a family member's trans-identity fit into the phenomena of ambiguous loss and the presence-absence tension? It has been shown that family members of a trans-identified person may experience feelings of loss (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1999; Zamboni, 2006), and it is reasonable to think that confusion may occur about what exactly is lost. The trans-identified person is not mentally impaired (i.e., physically present, but mentally absent) *and* is not dead or gone away (i.e., physically absent, but psychologically present in family members' minds). What we have is a person who is physically present and mentally present, but is being grieved for some other reason. Zamboni (2006) argues that parents often claim to feel the loss of a son or a daughter, "the stress of which can depend on the meaning that a parent attaches to the gender identity of a child" (p. 175), implying that it is perhaps a sex/gender identity that parents construct as the object of grief.

When a person discloses a trans-identity to family members, the person is making a claim about his or her identity, likely one different from that which the family members have previously conceived the person to have; a different identity than the one that has, until that time, served as a basis for their interactions and relationships. Does this identity shift have implications for a paradox of presence and absence? Many transgender people engage in physical changes and behavioral changes. These changes can be few, or can be many if the person is in the process of a full transition from one sex category to another (i.e., sexual reassignment/confirmation surgery). Physical changes could include



appearance alterations from hormone therapy, use of or ceased use of cosmetics, cranial and facial hair changes, changes in clothing choice, and changes through surgery, like facial feminization, breast removal, or sexual reassignment surgery. Additionally, transgender people may make other communicative changes. They may prefer to be called by a different name and to be referred to by a different pronoun. They may change in verbal and nonverbal communication (including vocal behaviors, body language and facial expression, use of space and distance, and use of touch) style from feminine to masculine, or vice versa, or may adopt behavior that otherwise blurs gender lines. In this case, the transgender family member is still a physical presence – still quantitatively one in the same, but is qualitatively different. It is important to explore this further; to understand the root of this grief one must understand why and how family members construct the transgender person as both present and absent and what connections this meaning making process has to the cultural constructions of sex, gender, and identity.

#### Pilot Research

In order to familiarize myself with the themes that characterize the communication of family members with a transgender relative, as well as the communication of trans-identified individuals in reference to family relationships, I conducted an exploratory study using data collected from message board postings housed on transgender support websites. I used inductive analytic coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) to identify three sites of struggle present in the communication surrounding the identity disclosure and/or transition. The three contradictions identified were Presence-Absence, Same-Different, and Self-Other. The contradiction of Presence-Absence was a salient site of struggle for family members of transgender people. Posters described grieving the pre-transitioned identity of their loved one while at the same time acknowledging that they should accept the person's post-transition identity. Below, quotes are provided that show how families characterize trans-identified persons as both

present and absent. In an effort to preserve the actual communication of message posters, no edits were made.

there is a very real sense of loss... losing your husband,  
your family life and dynamic.

I understand what you mean by "him dying", i sort of went through the same thing with Isabella and her other persona. i was afraid of what i would lose when the old persona was gone.

I recently lost my only other brother to cancer, and feel as if I am losing my other brother. I cannot think of him as a sister.

He took it very well and said this to me: I will still love you with all my unconditional love knowing with all my support knowing I will lose my son to become my daughter.

What I went through in the beginning - in particular, the sense of having one's basic sense of reality uprooted. (I *know* the sun will rise tomorrow, I *know* there will be death and taxes, and I certainly *know* him and who I am with him. Wait.....I don't know "him"and apparently never did...do I know anything....?) [emphasis in original].

I know this was the last time I will probably see him as my BROTHER [emphasis in original].

The struggle to make meaning of the relative or spouses trans-identity seems to result in the experience of the person as both here and gone – an experience that seemed to function as an impediment to total acceptance and support of the trans-identified family member. Further, family members struggled with how to conceptualize the relationship between themselves and the trans-identified members. Some even referenced a familial role and relational frame shift e.g., “the last time I will see him as my brother.” The second quote illustrates well both the recognition of experiencing something like the death of a spouse when one has not physically occurred. The spouse talks about her transgender spouse as having two personas, and references the experience of one persona “being gone” and the other replacing it. She likens this replacement to “him dying” indicating that she struggles between her feelings that she has lost her spouse (his old persona) yet still has a spouse (new persona) present in her life.

The third quote illustrates the struggle for meaning that may be particular to the family system. In this quote, it is apparent that the sibling is struggling with the idea of losing her brother when he transitions. The sibling even references the death of another brother indicating that she/he is experiencing the transition in a similar way. However, at the same time the sibling recognizes that the transitioning sibling is not actually gone, but is in another gendered (and possibly sexed) form when it is said that she or he cannot think of him as a sister. The sibling indicates further struggle by using the masculine pronoun “him” and the feminine kinship term “sister” in the same sentence. By saying that she cannot think of him as a sister, the sibling points to a cultural conceptualization of family as a stable system, specifically familial roles and relationships are partially founded on sex and gender identity or at least the assumption of stability of sex/gender identity.

The finding that grief, ambiguous loss, and the dialectic of presence-absence are present in the communication about transgender identity in the family warrants further investigation into what about the transgender identity causes family members to make sense of the transition as a death and rebirth of the family member. It would be useful to understand what exactly family members construct as the object of grief, to know what concepts are positioned as oppositional that incite a struggle to make meaning of a trans-identified person who they conceive of as both here and gone. This question relates to many others; answers to which would shed light on the relationships between gender, identity, and family: Do families construct the person’s pre- and post-transition identities as incompatible or oppositional? Do the communicative changes (verbal and nonverbal) that occur for the trans-identified person cause meaning making struggles that prevent the family members from thinking of the person as the same, still present, or even still alive? Does the disclosure of a trans-identity bring about communicative struggles that serve to change the nature of the relationship between the trans-identified person and family members such that the family member constructs a loss of that relationship? Does the

disclosure or transition bring about a communicative struggle related to the trans-identified person's familial role so that family members construct transition as the loss of, for example, "a sister" or "a husband"? Communication scholars are particularly well suited to pursue such questions as meaning making and relationships are at the heart of the issues.

Given that the current study seeks to investigate through communication the relationship between the meaning-making and families' experiences of loss in relation to trans-identity, Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) is used as a theoretical instrument for exploring family members' talk about their experiences. RDT is a theory which focuses on three processes integral to this study: meaning-making through communication, the invocation of cultural knowledge in interpersonal communication, and the negotiation of contradiction in the construction of meaning. The opposing models or meanings of sex, gender, personal identity, trans-identity, and family outlined in earlier sections of this chapter can be conceived of as cultural knowledge or cultural discourses that will likely be present in the talk of family members as they create meaning for their experiences.

Quinn and Holland (1987) define cultural discourses as "presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it" (p. 4). It is these shared (although at times disparate) discourses that we as members of a culture are informed by when we make sense of and therefore construct meaning for our experiences. Our everyday communication must work from these culturally specific symbolic resources so that our talk can be understood by other members of our culture. A discourse as identified in interpersonal communication can be understood as, "...a cultural system of meaning that circulates among a group's members and which makes our talk sensical" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006, p. 2). RDT allows for not only an exploration of how cultural discourses of sex, gender, identity, and trans-identity are

present in the talk of family members, but more importantly allows for an examination of the ways family members *use* these competing cultural discourses to construct meaning of their experiences and of their relatives' identities. Understanding these meaning-making strategies and the relational consequences that ensue can be both theoretically significant and practically important for trans-identified persons and their loved ones.

### Theoretical Grounding: Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) (Baxter, 2004; Baxter 2006; Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) is an interpretive theory of communication and relationships grounded in the notion that “relating is a complex process of meaning-making” (Baxter, 2006). As a theory, RDT is meant to be utilized as a heuristic device, helping to sensitize the researcher to certain processes and features of communication with the goal of describing and making clear the complexities of communication and relating. The theory is based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986 1991; Voloshinov, 1986), referred to as dialogism. Dialogism maintains that the act of relating is what gives meaning to the self and to the social world. Bakhtin regarded sociality as a system comprised of multiple and often competing voices or positions of meanings.

Bakhtin argued that these fragmented meanings are present in every act of communication; that every utterance (or turn at talk; Baxter, 2011) is a site where multiple voices of varying force intersect and interplay (Bakhtin, 1981, Baxter, 2011). Further, he maintained that it is through the process of interplay of competing discourses that we produce or reproduce meaning (Bahktin, 1981; Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In other words, we often invoke more than one meaning of the same concept or phenomenon when we communicate about it and in doing so we come down on one meaning or the other, or find a way to successfully integrate multiple meanings.

For example, a person might make the following statement about wealth: “I know money doesn’t buy happiness, but I at least want to make enough to lead a comfortable

life.” Even though this is the utterance of one person, Bakhtin maintained that this single utterance is in fact dialogic, meaning that multiple viewpoints can be identified in the statement. In the first clause, the speaker acknowledges one perspective on money and wealth that is endorsed by members of U.S. culture, that money is not something that can make a person happy on its own. In the second clause, however, the speaker invokes an alternative viewpoint that money in fact does make life easier and does allow for some degree of happiness. These are considered two competing meanings or discourses of the relationship between wealth and happiness in U.S. culture, evidenced by the fact that most members of the culture would recognize these as ways of thinking about, talking about, and orienting toward money.

Building from the concept of dialogue, the central aim of Relational Dialectics Theory is to understand how relational partners put into play competing discourses to construct meaning for their relational experiences, specifically. According to RDT, discourses are systems of meaning, points of view, or ideologies that are constituted through communication (Baxter, 2011). RDT provides a guiding framework for identifying and analyzing the competing discourses that characterize the talk of relational partners and to understand how relational meaning is negotiated through sites the invocation of such discourses (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In her latest iteration of Relational Dialectics Theory, Baxter (2011) calls researchers not to simply identify the co-existence of binary opposites or dialectical tensions, as has been the case with the majority of RDT framed research, but to focus on *process* as well as existence of contradiction; to look at the interplay of competing discourses in the talk of interlocutors.

Further, Baxter directs researchers to attend to the power that is involved in the interaction of discourses. Since discourses do not typically carry equal force, some discourses are privileged and others are marginalized in communication (creating a discursive struggle between them) to create particular meanings. RDT identifies this process as centripetal-centrifugal struggle; centripetal, referring to the dominant

discourse(s) and centrifugal, referring to those not centered or existing more on the margins (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

The centripetal or centered discourse is the chain of meaning that is widely legitimated in the culture at large, considered normal or even natural. Despite the centrality of the centripetal discourse(s), other discourses do exist as alternative models of meaning. These centrifugal discourses are often regarded as non-normative or deviant. In this sense, centripetal discourses carry weight and power in the process of meaning making because they are widely accepted and legitimated, but it is the push and pull, the back and forth, the struggle between the centripetal and centrifugal discourses through which established meanings are reproduced or new meanings emerge. This struggle can be seen when persons invoke or give voice to disparate discourses; when they entertain some meanings, waver between several meanings, privilege one meaning, or attempt to extinguish other meanings in the process of communication, all in the act of creating meaning for their experiences. The ways in which this interplay, the centrifugal-centripetal struggle, can manifest will be addressed in the subsequent chapter, but first it is imperative to locate the relevant site(s) of meaning making under analysis in the current study.

The centerpiece of RDT and dialogism is the utterance, which is the act of communication that happens between two interlocutors. According to RDT, each utterance by a communicator is informed and marked by multiple strands of discourse, and each utterance serves as a link in a larger utterance chain (Bahktin, 1986; Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The utterance is but a link in a larger chain of communication where prior utterances and anticipated future utterances are taken into account (Baxter, 2011). Baxter (2011) and Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identified four links in the utterance chain that are potentially present in a given utterance: proximal already-spoken, proximal not-yet-spoken, distal already-spoken, and distal not-yet-spoken.

The proximal already-spoken link refers to the site of meaning making that concerns a relationship's past and a relationship's present. At times, the meaning of a relationship is reproduced through the utterances of relational partners. Other times the relationship's meaning is changed, or is at least complicated by competing meaning systems (Baxter, 2011). When two relational parties interact, they bring with them and operate on the basis of their relational history (Duck, 2002) and continue to negotiate the meaning of their relationship. Parties may reproduce the already existing relational meaning by interacting in ways that do not depart from their history, such as by relying on joint experiences, storytelling, and reminiscing. However, relational partners may also create new meanings for the relationship through their communication. For example, a couple who has always shared everything may reminisce about the long talks they have shared that have brought them closer and in doing so may reproduce the meaning of their relationship as a very open, intimate one. However, the same couple could talk about times they have been completely open with each other and how at times this has caused stress and strife in their relationship and may at that point decide that unabashed openness is not always best. In this case, the interaction may produce a new and different meaning of the relationship as one with more healthy amounts of privacy and disclosure.

The proximal not-yet-spoken link refers to one partner's anticipation of the other partner's response to an utterance. In this sense, this is a site of meaning making of the self in relation to the other person (Baxter, 2011). For example, a son could say to his father, "You can say what you want to about the merit of higher learning, but I know that college is just not for me." In this utterance, the son takes into account the possible responses of his father and includes in his statement the argument he anticipates his father making about college. In doing so, he signals to his father that he understands him and takes his views into account, but also constructs himself as different from his father.

Relevant to the current study are the distal already-spoken and the distal not-yet-spoken links in the utterance chain. The distal already-spoken link refers to a given



culture's symbolic resources, or shared meanings, which relational partners call upon to construct meaning in everyday talk. The distal not-yet-spoken link refers to the consideration partners give to normative meanings held up in larger society when speaking an utterance. This consideration of how a generalized other might respond to a given utterance is another way that cultural discourses infiltrate interpersonal communication (Baxter, 2011). These links are the sites in which individuals integrate cultural discourses into their talk in order to make sense of their relationships.

According to Baxter (2011), "A dialogically informed analysis of relationship communication thus begins with an identification of the distal-already-spoken that interanimate talk" (p. 53). The distal sites of the utterance chain seem especially important to studying the role of sex and gender in relationships, as the concepts are staunchly tied to cultural meaning systems. The ways in which family members call up cultural discourses of sex, gender, identity, and family to make sense of the TG identity and their relationships to TG relatives will help make lucid the interconnections of these constructs. Hopefully, by illuminating these connections, it will be possible to discover how relationships change when transgender identity is present and why families experience grief and loss surrounding transition.

The distal-already-spoken link in the utterance chain concerns the symbolic systems of culture that are present in everyday conversations. Swidler (2001) argues that culture is not just an abstract system organizing a group of people, but is the source of meaning for its members, which is composed of multiple models and worldviews, and affords speakers the ability to construct meaning in differing ways. Baxter (2011) identifies several distal-already-spoken discourses that are called up in interpersonal communication of U.S. cultural members to give meaning to relationships, such as discourses of romanticism and of rationality. For example, if Belinda were to hear Melissa say, "I feel like Noah is really the one – like he could be the love of my life, but at the same time I don't want to ruin it, so I'm going to try to take it slow," this utterance

would make perfect sense to her so long as she operated within the same larger culture. Belinda would understand what is meant when Melissa says that Noah is “really the one” because a discourse of romanticism permeates U.S. culture, providing a meaning of love as something that is fated where we each have a soul mate or at least one great love in a lifetime. Also, though, Belinda could understand what is meant when Melissa says she doesn’t want to “ruin it.” Belinda likely would make sense of this through a discourse of rationality that says that rushing into relationships is not the best way to ensure their success. These competing meanings of love and relationships are well recognizable to members of U.S. culture who make meaning of relationships through these discourses.

The distal-not-yet spoken link in the utterance chain is slightly different from the already-spoken link, though still concerned with the connection between interpersonal communication and culture. As mentioned, this site in the utterance chain locates the tendency of interlocutors to anticipate what others might think or how they might respond; the ways in which we construct talk to take into account not only possible responses from social network members, but also possible responses and evaluations from the larger society when we talk. Bakhtin (1986, p. 126) referred to this as attention to a “superaddressee,” which is simply a non-proximal, often imagined, other that represents normative and conventional meanings. Speakers often take this imagined other into account in utterances, showing that they are aware of what is expected, idealized, or centered even if they deviate from that meaning. For example, Audrey might say, “I know people will think I’m crazy, but I’ve just got to go for it and move to London to be with him!” In the first clause of Audrey’s utterance she takes into account what “people” might think of her decision to move to London for her partner. She acknowledges that people, either in her social network or people in general, or both, might find her decision irrational or not ideal.

This acknowledgement of the conventional, the idealized, and the morally right illustrates that we are not simply taking into account the immediate others in our talk, but

others who might indirectly respond to or evaluate our utterance. In this sense, it is typically the centripetal (dominant and legitimized) discourse(s) to which these anticipated normative evaluations are tied (Baxter, 2011). Certainly, when families are processing a socially stigmatized identity like trans-identity, they will anticipate the distal-not-yet spoken as they either describe their relative/partner and their family as deviant or argue that they are in fact legitimate, as would likely be the case when any stigma is present (Goffman, 1968).

Relational Dialectics Theory was chosen as grounding for the current study for several reasons. First, RDT is an interpretive/dialogic theory that allows for a researcher to study the process of meaning making in the act of communication, which is integral to understanding the families' experience of a trans-identity. Second, RDT centers discontinuity, contradiction, and change – all phenomena that arguably surround a transgender identity itself, as well as the relationships that are affected by the identity. Third, grief and bereavement have been identified as processes experienced by family members of transpeople, and this grief is likely due to a form of ambiguous loss (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002). The presence-absence dialectic has been shown to be connected to the psychological experience of ambiguous loss (Baxter, 2011; Toller, 2005). Baxter (2011) characterizes the presence of the presence-absence dialectic and ambiguous loss as signaling a discursive struggle of relational identity. She maintains that this particular dialectic of presence-absence and the construction of ambiguous loss seem marked by important life events characterized by some kind of loss. These life events count as relational turning points, or points of major relational transition. Although this certainly seems relevant for the current phenomenon of study, the concept of ambiguous loss and the presence-absence dialectic will be approached differently in this study.

Typically, the presence-absence dialectic has been studied as a struggle between the past and the present of a relationship identity (e.g., wife vs. widow; Baxter, et al., 2002). Approaching the phenomenon in this way positions the researcher to operate at the

proximal-already-spoken site in the utterance chain, meaning that a relationship's past and a relationship's present and how old relational meanings are reproduced or altered are the foci of study (Baxter, 2011). Certainly, relational change will be investigated in the present study and the past and present states of relationships (and perhaps persons) will be quite salient, as demonstrated by the pilot research. However, the difference will be that the phenomena of ambiguous loss and presence-absence will be examined not simply for their effect (i.e. relationship identity change), but for their cause(s). More specifically, the analysis will not only take on the ways in which participants talk about loss, grief, and their loved ones being present and absent, same and different, but will dig deeper to identify what are the *meanings systems* at play that lead them to do so. That is, what discourses are positioned as competing, opposite, or mutually exclusive that might serve to create the meaning that a loved one is gone when in fact that person has not died? In essence, there must be larger cultural competing discourses with which family members struggle that lead them to describe their relatives/partners as both present and absent at once, and it is this interplay of discourse that brings about relational change at the proximal sites of the utterance chain.

### Research Questions

The review of literature on sex, gender, identity, trans-identity, and family raises a plethora of questions that deserve attention from communication scholars. However, within the limits of the present study, only a first step can be taken toward understanding the communicative processes surrounding transgender identity in the family. This first step involves investigating how family members make sense of the transgender identity of their relatives using discourses that are circulating in the culture. To this end, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What are the competing discourses that animate family members' accounts of transgender persons' identities and the relationships that they have with transgender relatives?

RQ2: What is the interplay among these discourses?

RQ3: What meanings are constructed for trans-identity and family relationships through the interplay of discourses?

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

### Rationale for Research Method

The existing research on family experiences with trans-identity reviewed in the previous chapter fails to address some important issues. We know that some family members experience transgender transition as a form of loss. We know that some family members support their loved ones, while others reject them. We know that some family members express the attitude that it would be less traumatic or problematic if their relative was gay or lesbian, rather than transgender. However, we do not know much about the *why* or the *how* of these findings. We do not know about the meanings that are constructed for trans-identity or transition and how those meanings might facilitate familial support or constrain it.

The current study took steps to investigate, in rich detail, how family members talk about their experiences, emotions, reactions, struggles, and triumphs in relation to trans-identity and transition. Because meaning was at the heart of the research questions presented in the previous chapter, and because detailed, nuanced data would help to paint a more textured picture of family experiences than currently exists in the literature, qualitative methods were chosen as the most appropriate means of data collection and analysis. Specifically, in-depth interviews with individual family members were conducted to collect data and a form of discourse analysis particular to Relational Dialectics Theory was used to analyze those data.

Baxter (2011) encourages RDT researchers to justify the collection and analyses of the texts they choose. She maintains that different kinds of texts hold potential for understanding different links in the utterance chain and thus the researcher should give attention to the type of text under investigation and the site of the chain the text informs. Texts can be dialogically contractive, where polyvocality, or the direct voicing of multiple discourses, is not prominent. Texts that are contractive center one or a few

discourses and all but silence other meanings. These texts are optimal for researchers interested in identifying the practices by which certain discourses are centered and others are marginalized, i.e. a critical analysis of a text. Other texts are dialogically expansive, meaning they are prime sites for researchers interested in the process of meaning-making through the interplay of multiple discourses (Baxter, 2011; Martin & White, 2005).

Baxter (2011) advises less experienced researchers to locate dialogically expansive texts through either focusing on one of Bakhtin's genres [which are narratives, carnivalesque events, or relationship rituals] or locating communication and relationship events that are thought to be problematic or to cause rupture of some kind. In fact, Baxter, Braithwaite, and Bach (2008) investigated relationships deemed "voluntary kin" on the basis that these relationships seemed to exist in a state of liminality (family, but not related by blood or law), which Baxter (2011) describes as a logical place to locate dialogically expansive texts. Due to the seemingly liminal nature of trans-identity and the potential ruptures (or at least renegotiations) that disclosure and transition might cause in family relationships as identified in previous research, the present research is likely to produce texts which are dialogically expansive or polemical – texts in which multiple discourses are observable and are used in different ways to construct meaning.

Given that this study aims to uncover the cultural discourses that are at play in the family members' sense-making of trans-identity and relationships, and also aims to investigate the interplay of competing discourses that might lead to the construction of grief and loss of a person who is not gone, the particular sites of the utterance chain under investigation are the distal already-spoken and the distal not-yet-spoken links (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Baxter (2011) argues that ideal data for investigating the distal sites in the utterance chain are interview data. During interviews, participants construct accounts of some experience to the interviewer, who is essentially a stranger. With no relational history between the interviewer and the interviewee from which to draw, the participant must rely on mutually recognized and understood cultural

meaning systems to make the telling of their experience comprehensible for the interviewer. In this sense, the interview itself can be understood as a speech event in which the interviewer and the interviewee are involved in a meaning-making process (Baxter, 2011; Mishler, 1986).

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argue, “Qualitative interviewing is predicated on the idea that interview talk is the rhetoric of socially situated speakers” (p. 172) and “Qualitative interviews are a storytelling zone par excellence in which people are given complete license to craft their selves in language” (p. 173). In conceptualizing interviews as meaning-making or dialogic processes about relationships, the researcher operates under the assumption that the interviewee is engaging in a public construction of the relationship and its parties, or relational identity work for outsiders. Therefore, the interview method is integral to investigating the distal links in the utterance chain, where larger cultural discourses are called upon to give meaning to a relationship (Baxter, 2011). Rubin and Rubin (1995) claim that “Qualitative interviewing is appropriate when the purpose of the research is to unravel complicated relationships...” (p. 51). Because the current study is focused on the relationship between personal family experiences and cultural models of sex, gender, identity, and family, interviews provided the optimal site for data collection and analysis. To analyze interview data, a form of discourse analysis was used, the specifics of which will be discussed in more detail below. Discourse analysis (for a review, see Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001), and particularly contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011), was a particularly relevant fit for the interview data, as the construction of meaning through the interplay of cultural meanings in everyday talk was of primary interest.



## Research Participants

### Participant Eligibility Criteria

Since family relationships were the focus of the current investigation, participants were defined as those who are at least 18 years old and who consider themselves family of transgender or transsexual individuals. I chose not to define “family” for participants so as to be as inclusive and communication-focused as possible. Although many family communication scholars privilege definitions of family as constituted in communication, much communication research is still built on “family” in the biological or legal sense. In an attempt to include those who are not bound by biological or legal ties, but still consider theirs to be family relationships or relationships that exist within a family system (i.e., spouse or partner), participants were allowed to self-define family. This allowed for spouses, committed partners, and voluntary kin to be included in recruitment in addition to biologically or legally related individuals. Multiple participants from the same family were accepted, but were not interviewed together as each participant’s unique meaning-making process was of interest. Joint meaning-making endeavors in families, with a dyad or the family as the unit of analysis, certainly would provide interesting and fruitful data, but such research should be saved for a subsequent step in the research process.

A second selection criterion was that the trans-identified family member of the participant must have taken at least one step toward transition or shift in identify. This could include name change and/or pronoun change; physical changes such as in clothing, voice, gesture, hair, cosmetics, hormone treatment; surgical changes (breast removal, breast augmentation, sexual reassignment/confirmation, facial feminization or masculinization, etc.); or others. Because of the wide variety of transition paths transgender persons may take, the combination of steps to transition was left open so as to allow for greatest possible success in recruitment. The requirement for transition

served to exclude families with a relative who identifies as transgender, but who has not undergone or does not plan to undergo any changes to their sex or gender identity.

Transition was conceptually very important to this study, as the changes in identity were regarded as likely catalysts for the construction or renegotiation of meanings with regard to identity and relationships.

The existing literature on family and trans-issues, as well as pilot data, suggests that the construction of the trans-identified person as both present and absent and the experience of grief is likely linked to or brought on by changes to the trans-identified person's identity and not simply the disclosure of trans-identity. For this reason, it was important to include only participants who have experienced such identity changes of TG family members. Given that the recruitment methods allowed for a variety of transition paths among participants' family members, it was important during analysis to pay attention to whether there were differences of experience based on transition steps taken.

Lastly, it was not required that participants be in current contact with or in an ongoing relationship with their trans-identified relative/partner at the time of the interview. While it was expected that most participants willing to talk about their experiences would be those who were at least somewhat supportive of their family member and likely still in a relationship with that person, those who were not supportive and not in a continuing relationship were also sought. Clearly, a broad range of family experiences would best benefit understanding of family communication and trans-issues, so wide-ranging experiences were desired.

### Participant Recruitment

The study was approved by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board before participant recruitment began. Participants were recruited using several strategies, as locating and recruiting the desired sample presented some challenges. First, information about the study was posted on two transgender support websites to which

family members of TGs belong. Second, the same information was posted on a website for academics studying trans-identity issues in the section reserved for research announcements. Third, transgender support groups and transgender family support groups in the immediate and surrounding states were located via an internet search. Emails were sent to the support group contacts asking about the possibility of supplying them with the research information or allowing me to visit the support groups to speak to members about the study. Fourth, information about the research was circulated on the email listserves for the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender and the LGBT community at the University of Iowa. Lastly, my own social network was utilized for snowball sampling. An email was sent to members of my social network (which includes trans-identified people) asking for help in disseminating the information about the study to their own social networks and/or trans-identified people or their families that they might know.

Individuals who contacted me via telephone or email with interest in participating were screened for the eligibility criteria within a 48-hour follow-up period after initial contact. If they did not already have it, the consent document, which contained the details of the study, was sent to them via mail or electronic mail and any remaining questions they had were answered via telephone or email. Those who qualified and were willing to participate were asked to schedule an interview, typically within 1 to 2 weeks after initial contact. Interviews were scheduled at the participant's convenience. All individual interviews were conducted via telephone, predominantly due to geographic constraints. Participants who were geographically distant were scheduled for telephone interviews, but participants who were geographically proximal were also given the option to conduct the interview via telephone for the sake of privacy or convenience. Once the interview was scheduled, participants were sent, via email or mail, the demographic information form and were asked to complete the form and return it before the interview date. In addition to individuals, representatives from two support groups, one for trans-identified

people and one for families of trans-identified people, contacted me with interest and in-person meetings were arranged so that I could discuss my study with members and potentially schedule interviews with family members. These meetings led to telephone interviews with individual family members. A total of 37 in-depth interviews were conducted over a six month period (with all but one occurring in a three month period).

### Participant Information

Participants included individuals from across the United States and a resident of Canada. These participants represented a range of family relationships and their relatives/partners represented a range of transgender or transsexual identities and transition processes. Of the 37 participants, 34 were related to a trans-identified person by blood or law (adoption or marriage) and 31 were members of the trans-identified person's family of origin. Participants included 19 mothers of trans-identified persons, 5 fathers of trans-identified persons, and 4 siblings of trans-identified persons. In addition to family of origin members, 3 adult children of trans-identified persons were also interviewed. The sample included 2 participants who identified as a current spouse of a trans-identified person, 1 participant who identified as a former spouse of a trans-identified person, and 3 participants who identified as a current committed partner of a trans-identified person.

Most participants' family members were described as either female-to-male transgender or transsexual (N = 19), meaning they were born genetic females and were transitioning or had transitioned to a male sex category, or as male-to-female transgender or transsexual (N = 16), meaning they were born genetic males and were transitioning or had transitioned to a female sex category. Lastly, two participants reported that their relative's/partner's identifies as transgender, but does not necessarily want to be identified as either male or female, but instead as female-to-gender queer or simply "trans". These persons were described as having been born female and as having made identity changes, but as not moving explicitly to a male sex/gender category. While this

type of transition is somewhat different from female to male (F2M) and male to female (M2F) transition paths, the transition away from the former identity still likely implies some re-conceptualization of the trans-identified person and therefore holds potential for informing the study of discursive struggle surrounding identity and relationships.

Participants lived in 15 states: California, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin, and also in Canada. Participants' reported sexes were male (N = 5) and female (N = 32) and their ages ranged from 18-70 with an average age of 45 years. The sample was largely Caucasian (N = 34), with Hispanic (N = 2) and Asian (N = 1) being the only other ethnicities represented. The ages of their trans-identified relatives/partners were not asked directly, but much of the time they were referenced during interview discussions. The youngest known trans-identified person discussed was six years old and the oldest was over 60. The majority of transpeople discussed were at least 18 or over, but 5 of the interviews involved parents of young transgender persons (between the ages of 6 and 16). Family experiences with transgender youth showed some differences in issues families may face from those families whose transgender members were adults, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Participants' trans-identified family members were at varying stages of transition. The steps they had taken at the time of the interview are listed in Table A1 (See Appendix A). The time since the relatives'/partners' disclosure varied, ranging from less than one year to at least 15 years. All of the participants were still in a relationship of some kind with the trans-identified person.

#### Data Collection: In-depth Interviews

Before the interview, each participant completed a demographic information form, which asked for information about themselves as well as their trans-identified relative/partner and their larger family. Participants were free to leave any questions

unanswered. This preliminary form included questions about the age of the participant, the person's relationship to the trans-identified person in the family, and whether or not the participant was currently in a relationship with the trans-identified person in the family. The form also asked for information about the transgender relative/partner including information about the trans-identified person's identity (e.g., born female, transitioning to male) and the steps the person had taken in the transition process to that point (e.g., hormone therapy, name change). This information allowed me to describe the sample and also provided information that would be important for framing each interview. Before the interview began, I asked any questions I had concerning the information participants provided on the demographics form and allowed them to ask any questions they had about me, the research, or the interview process.

A narrative, semi-structured interview format was used to gather detailed information about family members' and partners' experiences with trans-identity and transition. A narrative interview, and specifically a *personal narrative* interview uses conversational interaction or dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee as a method for producing interesting stories (Corey, 1996; Langellier, 1989). Narrative, as both an empirical approach and an ontological paradigm positions respondents as dynamic tellers of stories which are often told in relation to cultural meanings of race, class, gender, and sexuality; as "sites of multiple, changing, and often contradictory cultural discourses" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179). Narrative interviews are among the least structured interview techniques with the overarching goal being to allow participants' stories be told in whatever way they feel comfortable telling them. This calls for the interviewer to be a facilitator of discussion, but not one who constrains the story that the respondent wishes to tell.

Interviews began with a charge for participants to simply tell their stories. After reviewing the consent information and gaining permission to record the interview, I asked participants to tell me their stories in relation to their trans-identified relative,

partner, or spouse. I indicated that they could start their stories wherever they considered the beginnings to be, but to make sure that as they told the events of their story they were including their own thoughts, feelings, emotions, and reactions to the events they recounted. This opening question served to solicit uninterrupted narratives from family members, allowing them to construct their experience in story form, to mark what they considered the beginning and end to be, and to highlight important turning points and events in the experience. Gathering these narratives before posing the questions from the interview protocol allowed me to discern what information family members considered important enough to tell, without me guessing in advance what the important information might be. I took notes on items that participants talked about that I wanted to learn more about later in the interview. And lastly, the narrative approach allowed participants to communicatively immerse themselves in their experiences at the beginning of the interview, in a sense allowing them to “warm up” before more specific and sometimes sensitive questions were posed.

The remainder of each interview followed a semi-structured interview protocol which contained a series of questions generated from the pilot research and the current literature reviewed in chapter one. Interviews were semi-structured in that the protocol was regarded as a framework instead of rigid format, as qualitative interviews should be flexible, iterative, and continuous (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), “To adapt to what you are learning, your design has to be flexible” (p. 43). Therefore, the interview protocol was adapted to each interview in terms of the ordering of questions as well as in response to the details of each narrative and the responsiveness of the participant.

The content of the interviews included discussion about how family members learned about their relatives’ transgender or transsexual identities, how they felt or currently feel about the disclosures and transitions, how they make sense of their relatives’ identities (how they conceptualize the person in terms of sex, gender in relation

to personal identity and their role in the family), how their relationships have changed as a result of the change in their relatives' identities, and how they explain their relatives' identity changes to others, among other things. Interview questions ranged from *experience questions* (Spradley, 1980), like "did you ever experience conflicting emotions?" to *example questions* (Spradley, 1980) "were there any identity changes that your relative underwent that you struggled to accept or that made you experience especially negative, positive, or wavering emotions?" The protocol also included a few *compare-contrast questions* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) including "how do you think the experience of having a trans-identified person in your family might be different than having a gay or lesbian person in your family?" and "how is having a son different than having a daughter?," for example.

In addition, sometimes a *devil's advocate question* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) was used to elicit participants' opinions on views or meanings that exist in the culture regarding trans-identity, like "some people might say that transgender identity is something a person chooses, what would you say to that argument?" Some more *sensitive questions* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) were saved for later in the interview, particularly those about grief and loss, since this was likely to be a topic that would conjure up strong emotions for some participants. An example of a sensitive question was, "Did you ever experience feelings of grief or loss in relation to your transgender family member?" Many *loose-end questions*, like "Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you think is important to tell me about your experience?" and *probes*, like "You mentioned (fill in the blank), can you talk more about that?" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) were used to elicit more details about both things participants discussed in their opening narratives and answers they offered for primary interview questions.

Interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 102 minutes with an average length of 58 minutes (only two interviews were shorter than 30 minutes in length and 29 were at least 45 minutes long). After the interview, participants were asked if they would



like to read the results of the study when it was completed and a list of names and contact information of those who said “yes” was kept separate from interview data for this purpose. Participants were given a \$20.00 gift card to Starbuck’s, Barnes & Noble, Wal-Mart, or Target for their participation, which was mailed to them after the interview was conducted. Gift Cards were purchased with funds from the Social Science Award, which I received from the Department of Communication Studies and with Daniel and Amy Starch research funds.

As is the rule for qualitative research, data were collected to the point of saturation, where additional data did not produce new information or help to refine the thematic categories present in the existing data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe saturation as the point at which “we cease to be surprised by what we observe or we notice that our concepts and propositions are not disconfirmed as we continue to add new data” (p. 129). Saturation for the current data set was reached at interview number 28, but data were gathered beyond the point of saturation to ensure validity of the thematic categories that had arisen in previous data and to provide the richest possible data set from which to extract data examples for illustration of thematic categories.

### Data Analysis

#### Transcription and Data Management

Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device (and telephone adaptor) and written notes were taken, as well. The recordings were uploaded to my computer and were then transcribed, by me, using ExpressScribe transcription software. I chose to transcribe the interviews myself, as I considered this degree of immersion in the data important as a first step of analysis. As I transcribed the interviews, I often marked particular segments of the text as pieces of data that I wanted to make sure to pay close attention to during subsequent steps in data analysis. In this way, transcribing the data

served as the first step in data analysis as it was my first read of the data, as well as my first pass at earmarking striking segments and recurring strands of information. Further, transcribing the interviews myself allowed me to begin data analysis as I continued to collect data, which positioned me well to recognize theoretical saturation when it was reached. While transcribing, I made sure to use pseudonyms instead of the actual names of participants and their family members. Additionally, I replaced names of cities or states that were mentioned with the words “city” or “state” in order to keep the participants’ locations confidential. Any other identifying information was changed or deleted, with the exception of the name of one participant who asked that her real name be used so that she may be contacted by those seeking support who might read this research in some form.

After interviews were transcribed, data were further analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. ATLAS.ti is a program used for analysis of qualitative data and helps a researcher manage, explore, and organize large amounts of textual data. ATLAS.ti provides a tool for systematically categorizing qualitative data, extracting meaningful pieces, and comparing data, while still allowing for creativity and flexibility in doing so. This program was helpful in managing a very large amount of data that resulted in 425 pages of text.

### Contrapuntal Analysis

Data were analyzed using contrapuntal analysis which is a methodological companion to Relational Dialectics Theory, articulated by Baxter (2011). To provide a sound and thorough explanation of contrapuntal analysis, it is necessary to revisit and extend the explanation of RDT from the previous chapter. Contrapuntal analysis is a form of interpretive, thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), where the semantic categories are discourses, or systems of meaning. More specifically, contrapuntal analysis is a form of discourse analysis (Baxter, 2011) in that it guides researchers in a close reading of

language use and meaning-making. While there are many forms of discourse analysis, contrapuntal analysis is unique in that the central aim is to uncover how speakers invoke multiple and competing discourses in communication when constructing meaning for their experiences and relationships (Baxter, 2011). The interplay or discursive struggle between the competing meanings is the focus of the analysis; it is not enough to simply identify discourses that are present in speech communication, but a researcher must also identifying how those discourses are working against or with each other to form particular meanings.

Interview transcripts were analyzed for both manifest themes, described as discourses that exist on the surface of participant talk (i.e., what is said), as well as for latent themes, or discourses that rest deeper in the underlying meanings of participant talk (less directly stated, but somehow implied i.e., the unsaid) (Baxter, 2011). In the present study, contrapuntal analysis was employed partly in an inductive manner and partly in a deductive manner. That is to say, for the most part, prior knowledge of cultural discourses was utilized only as a sensitizing tool and not to establish pre-determined coding categories. Discourses were identified as they emerged across transcripts. However, during interviews, I did ask directly about grief and loss. If and when participants discussed this experience or the experience of both presence and absence occurring with regard to a person or relationship, I probed further to learn more about the discourses that construct this experiences and paid close attention to these discourses during analysis, which provided an inductive element to the analysis.

Contrapuntal analysis follows three steps: identifying a text, identifying competing discourses, and identifying the interplay of discourses. First, the researcher identifies a text that is potentially dialogic, which was discussed earlier. In this case, the text is the interview transcript. Second, the researcher locates competing discourses, which, in contrapuntal analysis, constitute thematic categories. The general process of identifying thematic categories (in this case discourses) takes place in six steps outlined

by Braun and Clark (2006): the researcher becomes familiar with the data set; begins to generate initial coding categories; generates themes; reviews themes; defines and names themes; and lastly produces a report providing description of the theme and exemplary quotes from the data that illustrate the theme. To locate *competing* discourses, the researcher will need to show either that the discourses are framed as competing in the talk of participants (using discursive markers), will need to verify with the participants that said discourses are competing, or will need to show that the discourses are typically understood to be competing in the research literature or in the larger culture. One means of showing that the meanings are considered competing in the larger culture is for the researcher as a cultural member to demonstrate that within the reasoning systems of the larger culture, the tenets of the discourses represent opposite meanings.

After locating competing discourses, the next step of analysis is to explicate the interplay of the discourses; to identify how the centripetal-centrifugal struggle occurs in which one or more discourses are centered and others are communicatively pushed to the periphery, or are transformed into discursive hybrids or aesthetic moments (Baxter, 2011). Competing discourses are rarely given equal weight in the meaning making process; that is, speakers typically will privilege one or some meaning(s) when they talk about a given phenomenon and will make discursive moves to marginalize other meanings that might exist. Baxter (2011) notes that this centering of some discourses and the marginalization or silencing of others constitutes a form of power in that the meanings that are most often centered in people's talk are those that are regarded as legitimate, normal, and sometimes natural, while the alternative meaning(s) or discourse(s) may be regarded as deviant, not legitimate, or easily dismissed. Baxter urges researchers to attend to the manner in which this kind of discursive power dynamic occurs, serving to keep some discourses in a position of privilege while suppressing or de-legitimizing alternatives.

It is through these three steps of contrapuntal analysis that a researcher can uncover how people navigate contrasting cultural meanings, using them as symbolic resources in the process of sense-making through communication. Next, I will address the latter two steps in contrapuntal analysis in more detail, providing examples to illustrate how the analysis was conducted.

### Locating Competing Discourses

Before performing a contrapuntal analysis, and specifically for the second step of identifying competing discourses in interpersonal communication, the researcher does well to analytically prime him/herself in two ways: by formulating overarching questions of meaning and by framing each text (here, an interview) as one that is culturally embedded. First, to understand the interviews as culturally embedded texts or utterances, I used a general analytic procedure called *unfolding* (Baxter, 2011; Bakhtin, 1984), wherein I regarded each interview as an utterance that was responsive to prior and anticipated future utterances. That is, I asked myself, analytically, “What could have been said in the ‘prior utterance’ to make this particular utterance comprehensible?” and “What does this utterance reveal about the anticipated responses of a general addressee?” The first question prepared me to analyze meaning making at the distal-already-spoken site of the utterance chain – to identify the existing cultural meanings of the constructs important to the current study that might be invoked by participants (e.g., sex or identity), both directly and indirectly. The second question prepared me for analysis of meaning making at the distal-not-yet-spoken site of the utterance chain – to identify how participants constructed meaning, in part, by anticipating what others might say about their experiences and opinions, or in other words, by taking in to account what meanings are considered legitimate and illegitimate.

Second, as another way of priming, it is helpful for the researcher to have in mind some broad analytic questions that prepare the researcher to recognize significant strands

of meaning in the data. These are over-arching questions that guide the researcher in extracting from the data information that answers the more specific research questions posed. In this study, some analytic questions I formulated to aid the process of analysis included: [In these texts] *What is the meaning of sex? What is the meaning of gender? What is the meaning of the self or identity? What is the meaning of trans-identity? What is the meaning of family, and what are the meanings of specific family roles, like son or sister?* These sorts of questions position the researcher to look for the ways in which meanings are constructed for the central concepts under investigation. Once the researcher attends to what meanings participants assign to these constructs, he/she can begin to analyze the discourses that are involved in that meaning making process.

During the initial phases of analysis, whenever a segment of the text spoke to one of these broad analytic questions of meaning, it was marked as a possible theme. The coding of qualitative data is an iterative process in which a researcher first marks parts of a text for possible themes or coding categories and with each subsequent step of analysis clarifies, combines, and refines those categories or themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once a category or theme is established, each subsequent datum is compared to that theme. If the datum fits with the theme, it is included and becomes part of what constitutes that thematic category. If it is distinct from that category, it is considered as a new thematic category. This is an interpretive process in which the researcher makes analytic decisions about the cohesion and disparity of the data in an attempt to bring theoretical order to the set. Along the way, I engaged in the process of taking *theoretical memos* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), in which I wrote about the themes that I saw emerging in the data, possible connections between these themes, and possible discourses themes might constitute.

As part of the iterative coding process, the segments that were initially marked as possible themes were grouped together in ways that made sense according to similarity and dissimilarity, were refined through comparison to other data, were ultimately

regarded and named as discourses (in accordance with the language of RDT), and were packaged as sites of struggle in meaning making of family members' (e.g., self or personal identity). For example, initial themes that concerned the continuity or discontinuity of the trans-identified person's identity through the process of transition were first labeled "same person vs. different person," "self is inside vs. self is outside," "still here vs. gone away." These themes were eventually combined to form the site of struggle over the nature of identity, in which competing discourses of *self* were put into play. These initial labels represent kernels of meaning, or ways of talking and thinking about a concept, that make up the larger system of meaning for that construct – the discourse. An example of a segment of text that was initially marked for one or more of these meaning kernels and eventually helped to constitute the site of struggle over *self* follows:

PARTICIPANT: You know, I mean, you're just - you're used to somebody being a certain way and now they're completely different and it's just hard to make that mental shift.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, so you said you're used to him being one way and now he's completely different. Do you feel that he is not the same person that you married or that you were married to?

PARTICIPANT : Um...no, I mean, basically I mean I think he is the same person inside, um, sometimes I see things now that I didn't see before, so I don't know if it has anything to do with this or I just didn't see it.

This segment of text was marked because the participant describes her ex-spouse as *different* after she made her transition. A few lines later, however, she describes her ex-spouse as essentially the *same* person, *inside*. The transcript continues with the participant talking about her ex-spouse's physical transformation through clothing choice and hormone therapy and a picture is painted of a person who is, in some way, both different and the same - the same on the inside but different on the outside. In the end, this participant comes down on the side of sameness, claiming that even though her ex changed physically, she is still the same person. This sameness-difference/inside-outside

struggle over identity was common in the data, as were other strands of contradiction regarding the continuity of the self. These different meaning kernels were marked and initially regarded as themes until further into the analysis they were combined into a site of struggle involving competing discourses of identity.

There were essentially two competing discourses of self or identity present in the communication of participants. The kernels that were labeled “same person,” “self as inside,” and “still here [the pre-transitioned person]” were eventually combined to form a discourse of the self as stable, coherent, and internally located. This meaning of personhood that was invoked in participants’ talk about their relatives/partners was a meaning of identity that holds that a person has a core self; one that exists internally (either in the mind or the soul or both) and one that is constant and unchanging, even if the body is changed. In this meaning of personal identity, sex and gender (being the bodily configuration and the exhibited behaviors that signal male or female) have no affect on “who a person is,” as they are external and material facets of identity that do not cut to the core of who we are. So, within this meaning of personhood, a person can transition their sex and/or gender and remain the same person.

A competing discourse of identity was present in the talk of participants, as well: a discourse of the self as fluid, fragmented, and externally located (at least partly). This competing discourse of the self was identified as containing the themes initially labeled “different person,” “self is outside,” and [the pre-transitioned self is] “gone away.” This contrasting meaning of identity holds that if a person changes in sex and/or gender identity, then that person is a different person than he or she was before transition. This view implies that the body and behaviors (communicative identity performance, including vocal behaviors, clothing choice, word choice, body positioning, etc.) are central to the self, so that the self is changeable and is actually altered when physical and communicative aspects are changed.



It is in this manner that themes became discourses and sites of struggle were identified in the analysis of the interview data. However, identifying these kernels of meaning, refining the categories, and naming discourses does not complete this second step of contrapuntal analysis. Once the researcher identifies discourses, the next task is to show that the discourses are actually competing in some way. Without demonstrating the disparity of the meanings, the centripetal-centrifugal struggle that is at the heart of RDT and contrapuntal analysis is moot. To argue that discourses are competing, the researcher must either show that the discourses are framed as competing by participants through the use of a variety of discourse markers, must verify with the participants that the discourses are competing (e.g., through member checking procedures, Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or must show that the discourses are typically understood as competing in the larger culture (Baxter, 2011). I relied on each of these modes of analysis to show that the identified discourses were in competition.

### Demonstrating Competition

First, to show that the discourses that constituted participants' talk were competing, I looked for discursive markers that show that two or more meanings or views are positioned as counterpoints. Baxter (2011) borrows from the research of Martin and White (2005) three kinds of discourse markers showing such counterpoint relationships: negating, countering, and entertaining. Negating is accomplished when a discourse is acknowledged, either directly or indirectly, in talk for the purpose of rejecting it (Baxter, 2011; Martin & White, 2005). For example, a speaker might say "Well, Darcy, I certainly don't think you have to be best friends with your mother-in-law." In this utterance, the speaker invokes two discourses of relating, a discourse of autonomy and a discourse of connection, in the context of a particular familial dyad. The discourse of connection, which holds that family members (particularly female family members) should have intimate, close relationships, is acknowledged indirectly and only so that it may be

negated in favor of a discourse of autonomy, or independence in such a relationship. The use of the word “certainly” works especially hard to undermine the discourse of connection, implying that the idea that mothers and daughters-in-law must be close is in some way unfounded.

In addition to negating, I reasoned that discourses were competing when I noticed participants countering one discourse with another. Countering is accomplished when a speaker replaces the discourse that might be expected (i.e., the culturally centripetal discourse) with an alternative discourse (Baxter, 2011). There are certain words and phrases that tend to mark the countering of one discourse with another: *however, but, even though, although, surprisingly, on the other hand, only, and still*, for example. A speaker who is engaging in countering might say, “Even though I’m adopted, I’ve never felt unloved.” The combination of the two clauses in this utterance indirectly acknowledges a view of adoption as a second-rate family form where adopted family members are not loved as much as those who are related by blood. The phrase “even though” indicates that this discourse represents perhaps a common belief among members of U.S. culture, but that there is an alternative discourse of adoption - that adopted children are no different and no less loved than biological children, which is implicated in the second clause.

Lastly, I identified discourses as competing when participants engaged in entertaining. Entertaining is accomplished when a speaker indicates that a discourse is but one of multiple worldviews available (Baxter, 2011). Common linguistic markers of entertaining include: *may, might, could, it seems, and it is possible that*. A speaker who engages in entertaining might say, “It may be that she just doesn’t want to get married.” This utterance can be understood in the larger utterance chain in two ways: as a response to a proximal other who might have questioned why a woman he knew was still single at the age of 35, and to a distal, cultural discourse of femininity/womanhood that holds that women should get married (by a certain age), and should want to get married (and if she

does not, there is something defective about her). The utterance above entertains another discourse of femininity/womanhood, one in which it is possible that a woman does not marry because she does not have the desire, and not because she is unable to acquire a spouse. Entertaining shows that there are different meanings available from which to choose when making sense of a given phenomenon.

Another way to show that discourses are competing is to verify that claim with one or more members of the population involved in the research. This procedure is called *member checking* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and is a tool used in interpretive research to ensure accurate description of the phenomenon under investigation, since interpretive analyses privilege native points of view. This method was utilized in the current study so that the native's view was well represented and to ensure the validity of the interpretive analysis. In accordance with this process, two participants were contacted and asked to separately review a sample of my analysis, to offer feedback about the validity of the claims, and to generally engage in discussion with me about the findings. These participants agreed that the discourses I identified qualified as competing meanings, either in their opinion or in their assumptions of others' opinions.

While this procedure is useful for demonstrating competition among discourses, it is perhaps not always effective if used without other methods of verification. There is always the possibility that in the act of communication, participants will engage in some form of transformative dialogue where they discursively position two or more competing meanings in alignment – basically, they communicatively level the playing field so that the meanings are no longer competing (Baxter, 2011). This kind of transformative meaning making will be discussed in detail in the subsequent section, but it is important to note here that if participants reframe the discourses as compatible then they are not likely to validate them as competing during member checking procedures. Further, if the interview dialogue is transformative, the researcher would be also hard pressed to demonstrate that discourses are competing in the data using the discursive markers

discussed above (Baxter, 2011). For these reasons, a third procedure can be used to make the argument that a centripetal-centrifugal struggle exists: showing that discourses are competing in the culture at large.

Baxter (2011) argues that for a contrapuntal analysis, a native can be regarded as either a member of the population being researched or as a member of the culture in which the research is embedded. This is necessary because of the possibility of transformative dialogue and is logical because any member of a given culture is qualified to verify that two or more cultural meanings are typically regarded as contrasting. So, a researcher can argue that discourses are considered disparate in the larger culture either through logical reasoning, by verifying this claim with members of the culture (including those who were not involved in the research), or by relying on research literature that validates this claim. For the current study, I carried out each of these practices.

First, I engaged in the process of *peer debriefing* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with a small group of colleagues who are members of U.S. culture and who are versed in Relational Dialectics Theory and Contrapuntal Analysis. During this procedure, I presented the group with a sample of data and asked them to perform individual analyses of the data and then to discuss their analyses with me, in effect engaging in a sort of data workshop. Their analyses verified the integrity of my own and served to validate my claims regarding both the competition and interplay among discourses (to be discussed below) in the interview texts.

Beyond this second form of member checking data validation, I engaged in one last procedure to support the argument that the discourses present in the talk of participants were in fact disparate and competing. I utilized research literature that shows that discourses present in the data are typically regarded as competing systems of meaning. This literature, included in the previous chapter, helps show that there are competing schools of thought about sex, gender, identity, trans-identity, and family, both in scholarly communities and among lay persons.

### Identifying the Interplay of Discourses

The third and final step of a contrapuntal analysis is to identify the interplay of the competing discourses in the data. Interplay refers to the ways in which discourses are positioned in relation to each other in a given utterance and in the larger text (Baxter, 2011). In order to understand interplay, it is helpful to locate it in the larger context of the meaning making process. Baxter (2011) contends that speech communication constitutes a spectrum in which one pole represents monologue and the opposite pole represents dialogue and that other forms of discursivity exist between (see Figure 1). According to Bakhtin (1984), there is such thing as single-voiced communication in which a single perspective or worldview dominates. This single-voiced communication constitutes monologue, where an authoritative voice or centripetal discourse silences all other alternatives (Bakhtin, 1981). This type of communication is characterized by meaning(s) that has become calcified, or so internalized that it is seen as the only meaning or understanding available.

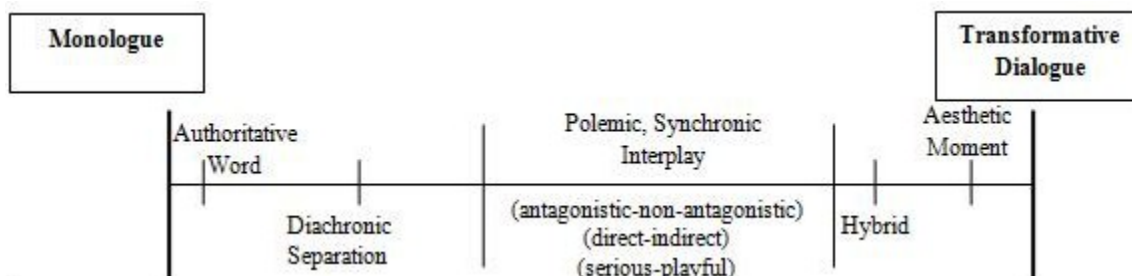


Figure 1. Spectrum of Communication

Moving away from monologue toward the other end of the spectrum, we can locate double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin, 1984) where at least two meanings are given voice in an utterance, either directly or indirectly. The pole opposite monologue on the spectrum represents the idealized form of double-voiced discourse, transformative

dialogue, where competing systems of meaning are positioned in a way that one no longer dominates and the centripetal-centrifugal struggle ceases to exist. This transformation allows for a new meaning to emerge either in the form of a *hybrid* or an *aesthetic moment* (Baxter, 2011).

Hybridization occurs when two or more distinct discourses are no longer positioned as incompatible, but instead are positioned as equal by a speaker. Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) use the metaphor of salad dressing to describe a hybrid: “The discourses (oil and vinegar) are distinct, yet they combine to form a new meaning – salad dressing” (p. 354). In this type of transformative dialogue, the distinct meanings are still recognizable parts of a new meaning that has been created. In an aesthetic moment, however, this is not the case. Aesthetic moments are types of transformative dialogue wherein discourses themselves are in some way reconstructed. Baxter and Braithwaite liken the process of the aesthetic moment to a chemical reaction: “For example, two molecules of hydrogen combine with one molecule of oxygen to produce an entirely new entity – water” (2008, p. 355). Although monologue and transformative dialogue are both possible in the meaning making process, they are probably less common than the communication that lies in the middle of the spectrum, which is where interplay can be more readily observed.

Two overarching processes characterize the middle of this communication spectrum: diachronic separation and synchronic interplay. Diachronic separation is a process in which the centering of meanings changes over time and possibly by communication context. When diachronic separation happens on the basis of time, it is characterized by speakers privileging one meaning at one juncture and a competing meaning at a later point in time. When diachronic separation happens on the basis of context, the privileged meaning shifts depending on the context of meaning-making, and so interplay happens (over time) as relational partners shift to operate in different contexts. In both forms of diachronic separation, a separation of discourses happens,

making interplay difficult to witness without longitudinal data. Baxter (2011) refers to the diachronic process as limited in dialogic potential, hence its place toward the monologic end of the spectrum.

Toward the middle of the spectrum exists synchronic, polemic interplay, characterized by the co-occurrence of multiple discourses at a given time point. This type of interplay exists at each site in the utterance chain. Relevant to the current study is a non-antagonistic form of such interplay in which one speaker gives voice to multiple meaning systems at the distal-already spoken site (a struggle between co-existing discourses that compete in the larger culture) and at the distal not-yet-spoken site (a struggle among competing discourses brought about by a speaker's anticipation of multiple responses) (Baxter, 2011). Synchronic interplay can also occur antagonistically, when one speaker gives voice to a discourse and another speaker gives voice to a competing meaning. Besides the antagonistic-nonantagonistic dimension of synchronic interplay, there are other dimensions by which the process can vary. Synchronic interplay can be direct or indirect, serious or playful, and polemical or transformative (the latter moving it toward the dialogue end of the spectrum). The current investigation focused only on non-antagonistic synchronic interplay, but was not limited on the other dimensions.

As stated, the co-occurrence of competing meanings can occur directly or indirectly in talk. Direct interplay occurs when a speaker explicitly invokes two or more competing discourses when speaking. Take, for example, this statement: "Of course, I want to trust the person I love, but I've been cheated on before." In this utterance, the speaker acknowledges, directly, two distinct discourses of relating: one, a discourse of romanticism, which holds that we should just give trust to relational partners because trust is a part of love, and another, a discourse of rationality, that says that we should learn from experiences and that trust should be earned by partners. Other times, discourses are not invoked so directly.

Indirect interplay is characterized by the direct voicing of one discourse and the indirect implication of another or others. Indirect interplay allows for more ambiguity in meaning and can function in at least three ways. First, indirectness can serve as a way for a speaker to avoid confronting competing meanings that may exist for a given construct or phenomenon. Second, indirectness can serve to marginalize a discourse by acknowledging it by implication and typically for the purpose of dismissing it in some way. And third, indirectness can function to temper the dominance of a commonly centered discourse. The use of words like *sometimes*, *some people*, and *perhaps* in relation to such a meaning suggest that the centered view is not without criticism or alternative.

Another way synchronic interplay can differ is in its communicative tone. The invocation of a discourse can be done in a serious or playful manner. Serious invocation of a discourse is simply characterized by a lack of playful tone in the utterance. Playful invocation of meaning usually serves to dismiss a meaning system and can happen in three ways, as outlined by Bakhtin (1981): by use of *the rogue*, *the fool*, and *the clown*, which are all communicative resources that invoke a humorous or teasing tone. The rogue is accomplished through parody; a discourse is given voice and attributed to a particular group or person who is subsequently mocked. Another way that a speaker can playfully challenge a discourse is to play the part of the fool, feigning ignorance about the view in a way that serves to question its coherence or validity. Lastly, a speaker can take the role of the clown, which is to comically distort a viewpoint so that others may laugh at its absurdity.

The final dimension of synchronic interplay, polemic-transformative, characterizes the dialogic nature of a given utterance. As discussed above, speech communication can be transformative, in that competing discourses can be invoked in such a way that they are not positioned as incompatible or even can be invoked in a way that changes them altogether, and in doing so creates a new meaning. On the other end of



this dimension lies polemic interplay, in which meaning systems are positioned as competing or incompatible, or combative, in the extreme. Polemic interplay can take many forms as the centripetal-centrifugal struggle for meaning is enacted in talk. The most benign of these forms is called *balance* (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). When alternative meanings are balanced by a speaker, a compromise is constructed. The speaker still positions the discourses as competing, and each meaning is only partially affirmed, neither taking precedence over the other.

It is the latter two of these dimensions (serious-playful and polemic-transformative) that were under investigation in the third step of contrapuntal analysis: identifying the interplay of discourses. Specifically, the data were analyzed for the nature of the interplay between competing systems of meaning. In other words, once competing discourses were identified, I attempted to uncover how these disparate viewpoints were positioned in relation to each other to create particular meanings for participants' experiences. To help explicate this interplay, I looked for particular discursive practices outlined by Baxter (2011) and borrowed partially from Deetz (1992), including *disqualification, naturalization, camouflage, proclaiming, topical avoidance, subjectification of experience, pacification, entertaining, and attributing*. Each of these represents a communicative move that a speaker can make in privileging or dismissing a particular meaning. These types of positioning constitute the interplay of discourses.

Some discursive moves are what Baxter (2011) calls dialogically contractive, that is, they work to establish or sustain the dominance of a centripetal or dominant discourse. Disqualification serves this purpose. When a meaning is disqualified, the speaker denies the legitimacy of the meaning by depicting those who align with that discourse as inexperienced, lacking in expertise, or otherwise having little right to expression. For example, a parent might say to a teenager, "Well, you may want to do a lot of things, but you're still not an adult and so you don't know what is good for you yet." Here, the

parent disqualifies the teenager's right to autonomy on the basis that autonomy comes at certain age and maturity level.

Naturalization is another form of a dialogically contractive discursive move. When a meaning is positioned as natural, it is touted as "the way things are," which leaves little room for alternative meanings. When a speaker naturalizes a discourse, she might say something like, "Well, of course I'm going to take his name! That's what you do when you get married!" The positioning of the discourse of patriarchy as natural or simply a given frames alternative ways of thinking as absurd or abnormal.

Another way that meaning systems are positioned as unquestionable is through camouflage. To camouflage means to present a value-laden worldview as if it is objective; this makes the meaning more difficult to challenge. Camouflaging is often accomplished through the use of *proclaiming*, in which a speaker invokes the reported speech of some authority figure who espouses this meaning. For example, a speaker might say, "Well, say what you want about gimmicks, but I've read medical reports that say that the Atkins diet works and isn't unhealthy. My friend Sally did it and she's a dietician." In this case, medical, scientific, and dietary expertise are called upon to debunk the idea that a diet is simply a gimmick, implying that medicine and dietary professionals are unquestionable on this issue.

Topical avoidance is another way to marginalize a meaning. Avoidance may be more difficult to recognize, as it represents a form of hidden polemic. In other words, it is a very indirect form of interplay. To locate such interplay, the researcher must be very aware of the unsaid or the manifest themes that lurk in the participants' communication. For example, a hopeful adoptive couple might say to a birth mother, "We respect and admire you for choosing life." While this utterance does not directly acknowledge the fact that the birth mother has another option – abortion – the option is implied by the phrase "choosing life" and the discourse of adoption is privileged through the applauding of that choice.

Two other discursive moves qualify as dialogically contractive: subjectification of experience and pacification. Subjectification happens when a speaker positions a meaning as merely opinion, which makes it easier to discount or dismiss. A speaker might say, “Oh your teacher says all students should have the opportunity to go to college? Well, she’s entitled to her opinion, I guess.” When a meaning is characterized as opinion, it implies that it holds little power because it is subjective and not a fact. Counter to this, subjectification can also be used as a tactic for shutting down arguments from others. For example, if a speaker says, “Well, you can think what you want, but that’s how it felt to me.” In positioning a discourse in such a way, a speaker closes the possibility of negation from other speakers, as opinion can be disagreed with, but not proven wrong.

Lastly, a speaker can engage in pacification of a discourse that competes with the meaning he or she is discursively centering. Pacification entails positioning difference as trivial and in effect, stripping a discourse of its power. For example, a boss could say to an employee, “Okay, so you want to make more money and I want to see your sales improve, so basically, we want the same thing.” In effect, the boss silences the employee’s claim of entitlement by pointing to a common goal that would entail the employee working harder to earn more money for the company, and in effect for him/herself.

In contrast, there are communicative practices that serve to open up the possibilities for meaning making, rather than to stifle them. These moves are considered dialogically expansive (Baxter, 2011) and include *entertaining* (Baxter, 2011) and *attributing* (Martin & White, 2005). Entertaining, which was discussed in the previous section, is accomplished when a speaker invokes multiple meanings or at least alludes to multiple possibilities for meaning. For example, speaker might say, “Yeah, I can see where you would want to take the job because it is really prestigious. On the other hand, you might find yourself happier in a job with fewer demands and pressures, or maybe

there's a way to effectively minimize the pressures in the more prestigious position." In this utterance, the speaker entertains three possibilities for meaning.

The other expansive communicative move outlined by Baxter is attributing. Like camouflaging, attributing often involves reported speech, but the testimony of others is used as a means for introducing multiple viewpoints instead of closing them down. A speaker might say, "Well, my mom thinks I'll regret getting a tattoo because I won't like the same things in 10 years as I do right now. My girlfriend thinks you should only get a tattoo to commemorate something special, like the birth of your child, but then my brother says getting a tattoo is like a rite of passage for people our age – it's just something we should do as a part of being young." In this turn at talk, the speaker lays out three viewpoints by reporting speech from three relational partners.

#### Applying Concepts to the Data

Each of these communicative moves was used as a sensitizing device for the analysis of the interplay of discourses in the interview data. I looked for these forms of interplay, as well as others that participants might use in privileging, silencing, or mulling over multiple meanings. I paid close attention to words that participants said that indicated evaluation, consideration, dismissal, or privileging of a particular viewpoint, as well as what was not said that might do similar communicative work. In reading for manifest and latent themes, guided by the spectrum of communication outlined above, I was able to uncover not only the meanings that were created by the participants in the interview process, but to discern how participants' communication was infused by the symbolic resources or cultural discourses at their disposal.

Because interviews produced such a large amount of data, the contrapuntal analysis was performed via multiple reads of the transcripts. As described previously, during transcription, I marked passages of the transcripts that seemed particularly rich and that constituted points of commonality across interviews. After transcription was

completed, a broad thematic analysis was performed wherein the thematic categories were formed, refined, and named, as previously explained. After discourses had been identified, I located parts of the data where discursive markers showed that the discourses were positioned as competing, as discussed above. Then, I returned to the passages that were marked for richness and it was on these passages that I performed the closest discourse analysis and in effect identified the interplay of the competing discourses present in the texts. It would be impossible to dissect every single utterance of every interview for such interplay, not to mention futile, since not every utterance of every interview spoke to the questions important to the study.

### Presenting the Data and Validating the Analysis

During analysis of the interplay, passages were flagged as potential examples of data to be included in the results chapter as illustrative of findings. Extracting and presenting rich examples of data are important for qualitative researchers because they bear the burden of demonstrating that they have been immersed in and affected by the experiences of participants, but also were able to remain conscientious analysts of their experiences. Researchers must also demonstrate sufficient complexity of the data in a way that supports the higher order, theoretical claims that are made from the analysis (Anderson, 2001). One way to meet these responsibilities is through the presentation of *exemplars* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Lindlof and Taylor provide the following description of the exemplar:

This term describes self-contained depictions of events that are vivid, fine-grained, and dense with significance... They are fragments that 'stand for' a larger phenomenon by demonstrating its practical dimensions. Because they are evocative, exemplars also stimulate readers to consider *what* is being demonstrated and thus anticipate the writer's impending interpretation (p. 297).

Exemplars were chosen on the basis that they were clear, evocative representations of a given thematic category or effectively supported a claim about the data.

Presentation of data exemplars also serves to demonstrate the validity of qualitative research. One important measure of validity for qualitative research is *transferability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1998). It is not the goal of qualitative research to make general predictions about a given phenomenon, as is the case with quantitative research, but instead to provide a thick description and interpretation of the phenomenon. Hence, generalizability is not applicable as a measure of validity. Instead, it is the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to provide a detailed enough description of the phenomenon under study that readers can judge for themselves whether the findings are relevant to them and/or are transferable to other situations. Other relevant modes of validation for qualitative research include establishing *credibility*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Steps were taken to ensure the analysis was valid according to these standards.

Qualitative analysis is credible when it “rings true” for natives of the population (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure that the analysis made sense to, and resonated with, natives from the sample, two participants were contacted and asked if they would participate in the process of member validation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), a form of *triangulation* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), which is used to validate claims about qualitative data. The two participants who were contacted agreed to participate in the process and so were emailed a short write-up which provided a sample of my analysis. The write-up included 5 data exemplars along with short interpretations of each, as well as an opening paragraph that described the themes that were emerging from analysis. Participants were told that they could discuss the analysis with me via telephone or email. Both responded via email and validated the analysis.

Qualitative data are considered dependable when an external check can be performed on the data and analysis and outsiders can readily observe and understand how a researcher got from one point to another during interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A process known as *peer debriefing* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to satisfy this

criterion, and also served as another form of data triangulation (which adds to the validity, Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Three of my colleagues who have experience working with RDT and contrapuntal analysis were asked to participate in a data analysis workshop so that I might validate my preliminary analysis. I presented the group with a sample of data exemplars and asked them to first write notes individually on whether they could observe competing discourses in the data, what those discourses might be, and how the interplay of those discourses was manifested. Then, I asked the researchers to share their analyses and engage in discussion. During this process, I also shared my analysis of the data that were presented and the researchers validated not only my findings, but the process I used to develop them.

Dependability stands in for the reliability criterion in quantitative research (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). A quantitative measure is reliable when it consistently measures the same thing over time. Because the research is the tool of “measurement” (though measurement is not the appropriate word) in qualitative research, and because the analysis is situated in time and context, a qualitative researcher’s analysis may shift over time. However, the analysis will remain dependable as long as outsiders can see a logical path between the researcher’s initial analysis and subsequent analyses that may occur.

Lastly, I attempted to meet the criterion of confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability means that data must be traceable to their sources and analysis must be sound and logical, and virtually transparent. I attempted to meet these standards by using a systematic process of analysis and by providing a detailed, coherent, and explicit description of that process. Further, I labeled exemplars in such a way that they were traceable to the original interview transcripts. Using these standards of validity for qualitative research, I was able to exercise both creativity and rigor during the process of analysis. Results of the analysis are presented in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

### Context for Findings

According to the information reported by participants on the preliminary information questionnaire, the research participants were all currently involved in what they considered to be familial relationships with someone who had engaged in some form of identity change with regard to sex and/or gender. Most of these transgender family members had changed their names, the pronouns by which they are referenced, and the label designating their family role (e.g., sister to brother), in conjunction with a transition from one sex category to another. Many, if not all, of them had at some point begun dressing according to the prescribed gender of their post-transition sex category (i.e., female-feminine, male-masculine) and took on other appearance cues, accordingly, like hair styles and secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breasts or flat chest). Some experienced or induced changes to their voices and some communicated in ways that aligned with the gender corresponding with the post-transition sex category, specifically in their gestures, body movements, activities, and topic choice during conversations. Given the nature of transgender identity and the changes that the transgender family members experienced, it is easy to imagine that relational partners of trans-people find themselves involved in a renegotiation of meanings; when a sister, a father, or a daughter redefines his or her identity in such ways, family members may have to re-conceptualize who that person is, what type of relationship they have with that person, and even their own identities as related to the identities of their family members.

Negotiation and renegotiation of meaning turned out to be central to the experiences of the participants in this study. Broadly speaking, following the disclosure and subsequent transition of their trans-identified family members, participants engaged



in (re)construction of meaning<sup>2</sup> of the trans-identified person and their relationship to the trans-identified person. More specifically, in this process of constructing meaning, particular constructs connected to transgender identity and transition became salient. Those constructs were personal identity or the self, sex, gender, trans-identity, and family relationships. The discourses that were called upon and the meanings created for these constructs became quite important to at least four issues in the lives of participants: their emotional response to the disclosure of TG identity and transition, their relationship with the TG relative/partner, the support they did or did not offer the trans-identified person, and how they presented the trans-identified person, themselves, their family, and the situation to others.

During interviews, I commonly heard talk about grief, loss, relief, confusion, and relational change/continuity; about finding answers, understanding, and happiness; and about offering compromise, acceptance, and support. These discussions were informed by various worldviews or discourses that were defended, favored, dismissed, and entertained regarding the core constructs significant to this experience: personhood, sex, gender, trans-identity, and family. These constructs represent the four sites of struggle that permeated participants' communication. These sites were characterized by the invocation of competing discourses which were discursively positioned in various forms of interplay through which participants settled on the meanings that defined and framed their experiences.

These centripetal-centrifugal struggles operated at both the distal already-spoken and the distal not-yet-spoken links in the utterance chain. Participants drew from existing symbolic resources or established discourses as they framed their stories and also

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<sup>2</sup> The meanings that participants constructed during interviews may be different from the meanings they had constructed for their experiences before the interview. That is to say that the interview process itself may have brought about particular meaning making endeavors that were either consistent with the meanings participants held to prior to the interview or were new even to them, created for the first time in the moment of the interview.

responded to what outsiders might think or say about those stories. In doing so, participants employed both contractive and expansive discursive practices (Baxter, 2011); at times they entertained several meanings and other times dismissed all but one. However, taking the texts as a whole, the communication tended to be more contractive than expansive.

Some participants recounted for me processes of meaning making that showed diachronic separation, but participants also engaged in synchronic interplay, directly and indirectly, often with a serious tone and occasionally, a playful one. Finally, participants' communication sometimes reached transformative dialogue, where either a discursive hybrid or an aesthetic moment occurred, allowing for new meanings to be created. These specifics of my interpretation of the data will be elaborated in the explanation of results below.

As mentioned, loss was a very prevalent topic of discussion during interviews, whether participants reported that they experienced it personally or not. The framing of the self in relation to sex and gender seemed especially tied to experience of ambiguous loss. An explication of the relationships between meaning making and emotional and relational outcomes will highlight the importance of communication to the families' experiences with trans-identity. Secondly, it will provide insight into the connections between gender, sex, identity, and family relationships. The data and analyses presented here will hopefully be a productive first step toward understanding these many connections.

In accordance with the research questions posed in chapter one and with the steps of contrapuntal analysis outlined in chapter two, the results of the analysis will be presented as follows: for each site of struggle that characterized the interview talk, the competing discourses will be identified and explained, the competition of those discourses will be verified, and the interplay of the discourses will be demonstrated, all with an eye toward the constructions of meaning that were prominent across the data.

### Sites of Struggle in the Meaning-Making Process

The following sites of struggle represent the dominant themes that characterized the communication of participants, as viewed through the lens of Relational Dialectics Theory. These sites and the discourses that characterize them are certainly not easy to separate, but are separated here for the purposes of clear exposition. Their connections will be discussed later in more detail in an attempt to appreciate and demonstrate the complexity of the meaning making processes that surround transgender identity. Each is elucidated by a discussion of discourses and subthemes, their competition, interplay, and the framings that follow from the interplay. The meaning making processes under investigation are made more tangible through the inclusion of detailed examples of data representative of each struggle.

#### Discursive Struggle #1: Sovereign Self vs. Social Self

##### Locating the Discourses

Probably the most pervasive struggle over meaning in the data concerned the nature of the self. The central issue underlying this struggle is continuity/discontinuity of the self given trans-identity and a transition of sex and/or gender identity - the question being whether the *person* remains the same through this type of identity transition. The answer to that question had very real implications for emotional and relational outcomes in participants' lives. Therefore the meanings that they privileged, marginalized, and created for "the self" - and specifically for their trans-identified family member's identity - were quite important to their framing of this experience.

Participants commonly talked about their relatives/partners as "the same" and/or as "different" and as "still here" or somehow "gone." They also made frequent references to the location of the self, at times, claiming the self existed on "the inside," with specific references to (most often) the brain and other times the soul, personality, heart, or "essence" of a person. The opposing meaning referenced by participants held that the

body and behaviors of a person play a central role in the person's identity. Participants often referred to "the outside" in discussing this view. These ways of talking about the trans-identified person's identity qualify as manifest themes (Baxter, 2011), as they were explicitly discussed by almost all participants. There were also some more latent themes regarding the nature of the self that at play that rested below the surface of participant talk (Baxter, 2011), meaning that they came through implicitly as participants discussed their relative/partner. Latent themes regarding identity included the idea that we are born with our identities as opposed to the idea that our identities are socially created through experiences and relationships to others. Related to these themes were the conceptions of the self as a personal possession, something a person owns as an individual and has control over versus the self being a social construct that others influence and help create and define. Once assembled, these manifest and latent themes show two distinct ways of conceptualizing personal identity: as constituted by a sovereign self or by a social self.

#### Discourse of Sovereign Self

The discourse of the sovereign self is greatly informed by a discourse of individualism (Baxter, 2011) and is a view that holds, fundamentally, that identity is an internal, inborn possession belonging solely to the individual. The self resides in or consists of some combination of the brain (which includes "the personality", e.g., likes, dislikes, tendencies, modes of thinking, etc.) and the soul. Many implications follow from this conception of the self, first that the self is independent of the body. Within this view of the self, a person's body and the ways the person uses the body can change with no affect on personal identity. So, the way a person looks, the composition of the body, and the ways he or she communicates through the body have no bearing on who that person is.

Second, the self is independent of circumstance and other people. Because the identity is inborn and internal, the individual owns it and has primary and private access

to that identity. In effect, only that person can determine who he or she “really” is. Others may form impressions of that person, but they could make incorrect assumptions or characterizations of that person’s identity. Another implication that follows from this view is that the self does not change over time or because of experience in any fundamental way – it may mature or grow, but its foundation is stable and coherent across time and situation. In sum, the sovereign self can be thought of as a “true self,” which can and does remain intact through a transition of sex and/or gender.

### Discourse of Social Self

The discourse of the self as social came through when participants referenced “the outside,” which referred to the body and behaviors of that body – the outward, observable person. Participants would often say that their relative/partner was either different or not different as a result of physical and sometimes behavioral changes. The discussion of these outward and observable aspects in relation to the person being the same or different makes sense only given that there is an alternative way of conceptualizing the self. This alternative conceptualization then holds that identity *is* partially constituted by the body and the observable behaviors of that body, and therefore is a social self. A social self is not one that is inborn, unchangeable, located internally, and immune to outside influence. A social self is, by definition, connected to the identity of others and in fact is formed through social interaction and relationships with others. This formulation of identity holds quite different implications than that of the sovereign self discourse. First, if the self is partially constituted by the body, then a change to the body implies a change to the self. The same principle applies to behaviors, or the way a person communicates.

A social self is not stable, immovable, or coherent across time and situation. The social self is flexible and fragmented. Further, if the self is social and tied to others, then the individual cannot solely determine who he or she is, as others have a say in that identity. In sum, from the social view of the self, a transition in sex and/or gender –

especially one that includes changes to the body, in behaviors, names, pronouns, and roles (as is the case with the participants' relatives/partners) – does necessitate a change in the identity of that person, essentially making him or her a different person post-transition. It is clear from the explication of these discourses that these are quite different meanings of self, and further that the meaning family members operate from has great implications for how they experience transition. Having identified these discourses, the next step in analysis is to demonstrate that these discourses are in fact in competition, which is the element that constitutes a discursive struggle.

### Demonstrating Competition

The first form of evidence of the competition of these discourses lies in the comparison of the tenets outlined above for each discourse. The claims that constitute each worldview as well as the implications that follow represent many logical opposites (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) - either the body matters to the self or it does not (if not X, then Y), for example. On their face, these discourses represent views that would likely be considered opposing by members of the culture at large (Baxter, 2011). Second, I have demonstrated the competition of these meanings by showing that they are characterized as competing in the existing literature (Baxter, 2011) (see chapter one). Third, through the practices of peer debriefing and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as discussed in Chapter Two, I verified with both participants and dialogic experts that these discourses were in fact in competition both in the culture at large and in the data. Finally, I attended to linguistic markers of competition (e.g., but, although, sometimes) and the discursive practices of negating, countering, and entertaining to verify that these discourses were positioned as competing in the interview data (Baxter, 2001). The following examples demonstrate their opposition as positioned in the talk of participants.

## Negating

As discussed in Chapter Two, negating is accomplished when a discourse is acknowledged, either directly or indirectly, for the purpose of dismissal (Baxter, 2011). An example of negating comes from an interview with Audrey, 21, whose fiancé was transitioning from female to male:

INTERVIEWER: So, the emotions you experienced when you found out, would you say they were mostly positive, negative, neutral, or was it a mix?

AUDREY: It was, um, mostly positive. I mean, I still want them [my fiancé] the same. It's not like the person I cared about on the inside is changing, it's just the outside changing. Doesn't really make a difference. (Interview #5)

In this utterance, Audrey's talk works to negate the discourse of the social self in which a change to the body or the "outside" would mean that her fiancé was not the same person. She references the social self discourse indirectly by outlining and endorsing the view of the sovereign self. Audrey begins with "It's not like," before she voices the discourse of the social self, which shows that her talk works against this meaning, clearing the way for the discourse of the sovereign self, which she subsequently voices. Audrey says, "It's not like the person...the inside is changing." In this segment, her talk equates "the person" to "the inside" which serves to privilege the discourse of the sovereign self.

In the next clause, the idea that the body has anything to do with the person is fervently dismissed when she says, "it's just the outside changing." Audrey's use of the word "just" is a move that works especially hard to make the body seem insignificant, which effectively marginalizes the discourse of the social self. Finally, Audrey adds that the external change "doesn't really make a difference." With this, Audrey shows that her conceptualization of transition is rooted in the discourse of the sovereign self where the self is continuous through transition. It is especially important that Audrey offers this without direct questioning about whether her fiancé was the same or a different person,

but merely a question about her emotional reaction to the disclosure. This indicates that Audrey was aware that some people may think or say that a change to the body equals a change to the person. Audrey shows awareness that there is an alternative way of thinking of the self that circulates and makes clear that she privileges the opposing view, even without direct prompting from me.

### Countering

An example of countering, where the dominant discourse (and the expected meaning) is given voice, but then opposed by a less dominant meaning (Baxter, 2011) comes from an interview with Ellie, a 68 year old mother of a female to male transgender son. At this point, she has just begun telling her narrative, which she began by describing her son's childhood.

ELLIE: And of course I'm using male pronouns because my son told me that even though I identified him as a little girl, he was in fact a boy, so he actually prefers me to use male pronouns from the beginning. (Interview # 12)

Here, Ellie's talk counters what is positioned as the dominant or the expected discourse of the social self. Operating from this discourse, a mother would know the identity of her child, since it would be apparent from the child's body, and she would not have to be corrected by the child about his or her identity. Ellie's communication counters this when she tells me that "even though" she thought of her child's identity in one way, she was wrong, according to her son. The use of "even though" indicates that the discourse of the social self is positioned as the dominant discourse that needs to be countered with the one Ellie now privileges, the discourse of the sovereign self. Under this discourse, her son can tell her who he actually is, since that information is his to determine and share. Ellie's talk works especially hard to supplant the social self meaning with the sovereign self meaning when she says "in fact" he was a boy. By presenting the alternative view as a factual view, Ellie's talk naturalizes (Baxter, 2011) the discourse of the sovereign self and positions it as something that cannot be argued against.



Another example of countering comes from Melissa, a 48 year old mother of a female to male transgender child who invokes both discourses of the self and counters the meaning of the self as social with the meaning that the self is sovereign, through talk about loss and mourning. Melissa was in the process of telling her story when she said:

MELISSA: Um, I fully support my son, understand, accept, um, wouldn't change him back to be the little girl I thought I had if I could. And interestingly, people have asked me, "Don't you mourn your daughter?" And I said, "No, because I never really had a daughter." You know, "I've always had a son." (Interview #20)

Here, Melissa's talk shows that the dominant discourse of self invoked in response to transgender identity and transition is the discourse of the self as social, as changing when the person transitions. The discourse is shown to be centripetal through the reported speech of others who say "don't you mourn your daughter?" The fact that the inquirers are reported to say "don't you?" with regard to the mourning indicates that they expect that to be the case; they presume that Melissa will feel a sense of loss due to a change in her child's identity. By reporting this speech of others, Melissa's talk positions the social self discourse as dominant. Her talk then counters that discourse with the discourse of the sovereign self when she indicates her child's identity has remained the same – that she in fact always had a son and wrongly "thought" she had a daughter.

### Entertaining

Finally, the discourses can be shown to be in competition through the discursive tactic of entertaining, where a participant voices both discourses as different ways of seeing the situation (Baxter, 2011). Patty, the 23 year old sister of a male to female trans-identified person entertained both discourses of the self when we were discussing whether she experienced grief over her sibling's transition:

PATTY: I feel like it is the same person. I just know more about her now. Like, you know if we take being transgender as a big fact of someone's life, like now I just have more information about her.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

PATTY: But I can kind of see it, especially like from a super traditional setting. Like, I can see how it would be like you lost “X” family member. And I can see it maybe being more like a wife losing her husband or like a parent losing their child.

In this excerpt, Patty allows that although she does not see transition as bringing about a different person, this is a valid way to conceptualize the transition. By doing so, Patty shows that there are opposing experiences that depend on the discourse of the self under which one operates; if a person accepts and endorses the discourse of the social self then that person may be likely to experience grief and loss when his or her relative/partner transitions, as the person would then have a different identity. However, if a person accepts and endorses the meaning of the self as sovereign, then the person will be more likely to avoid feelings of grief and loss, because the person they knew is not different, not gone, but still the same.

#### Identifying the Interplay

Clearly, the meaning that is constructed for the trans-identified person during and after transition is important to the emotional experience of relational partners. Loss and grief were almost always discussed through these discourses of self; loss being linked to the social self and avoidance of loss being linked to the sovereign self. Participants’ talk showed a struggle between these opposing discourses as they created meaning for their experiences. Most participants privileged the discourse of the sovereign self, but many of these participants reported that they only got to that point with time and re-thinking. They described feeling loss and grief in the beginning, and feeling like they were losing someone or something, but later they realized that the transgender relative/partner had not changed as a person. This common theme indicates a diachronic separation of discourses (Baxter, 2011), which means that one discourse was privileged at one point in time and later the other took the centripetal position in the discursive struggle.

Other participants privileged the discourse of the social self, claiming that they do feel like their relative/partner is different and that grieving the loss of the former self is a

very big part of their experience. Others managed to create new meanings from these competing discourses of self, reaching transformative dialogue in the form of the hybrid (Baxter, 2011). The different forms of interplay which were present in the data show how the two cultural discourses of self are used in different ways by different members of the culture in order to come to meanings that make sense to them in light of a transgender transition. A sampling of the interplay is provided here to show how different meanings are created from the two discourses concerning identity.

### Privileging the Social Self

The majority of participants constructed their transitioning(ed) relative/partner as still the same person, even if at one point they did not see the situation that way. Across the data, the center position in the centripetal-centrifugal struggle was most often occupied by the discourse of the sovereign self and continuity of self was the meaning constructed for the trans-identified person the majority of the time. However, that was not true for all participants. A few centered the social self and marginalized the sovereign. The following examples from the data illustrate forms of interplay that privileged the meaning of the social self, framing the trans-identified person as a different person because of transition. The first example comes from an interview with Ava, the 31 year old mother of a female to male transgender child (the youngest of the trans-people discussed at age 6):

INTERVIEWER: Mmm hmm. So, in terms of, I wanted to talk to you more about the grief you mentioned. What do you think caused that feeling of grief? I mean, this is a common thing, but for you, what do you think caused it for you?

AVA: Um, I think it's because at one time I had this blonde haired, blue-eyed daughter and now I have a blond haired, blue-eyed son. And so, it's like the person doesn't exist anymore. I mean, even when I look at pictures of Regan as a girl, I don't recognize them. I don't- I remember her, but I look at her as a different person because...I don't know why...it's kind of hard to explain, but it definitely feels like it's a different person.

INTERVIEWER: Mmm hmm.

AVA: So, I think that's the big deal. And because you're not, I think that's why a lot of us do that is because when we look back at the person – what it used to be – you don't know that person anymore. You don't see them anymore. I don't see her anymore, the little girl that was so beautiful and had little white sandals and little dress and beautiful long blonde hair – she's *gone!* I mean, I didn't get to see her become a 4 year old little girl, or a 5 year old little girl. She only made it to a 2 ½ or 3 and then all of the sudden it became a boy. Even though her hair was – it wasn't a boy cut, it was still very short and even though it was short, all the boys' clothes and the mannerisms and the facial expressions – cause kids, smaller ages, they don't really have facial expressions that go boy or girl, but as they get older it goes that direction. Well, her mannerisms and the way she is, she became such a more – the boy kind of grew and grew – the girl never did. So, you grieve over the girl you thought you had....that little girl never grew up. Where'd she go? She never grew up and it's like she doesn't exist anymore. You grieve over it. (Interview # 24).

In this example from Ava's interview, an indirect, synchronic form of interplay is present. Ava does not directly give voice to the discourse of the sovereign self, under which her child would be the same and grief would have no place in her experience, but she indirectly negates the sovereign self discourse by centering the discourse of the social self, through her talk of grief. She tells me that the daughter she once had does not exist anymore and points to the physical and behavioral shifts that indicate a transition from girl to boy as the catalysts for that feeling, citing the fact that she “doesn't see” her daughter anymore as proof that that person is gone. She tells me that the person her child was at age 2 ½ or 3 was halted and went away, and that another person continued on from there, the little girl never growing up. These utterances only make sense if Ava is operating from the discourse of the social self where the body and behaviors, the outward-ness of a person, matter to identity.

Another example of an interplay that privileges the discourse of the social self comes from Catherine, a 43 year old partner of a male to female trans-identified person. As Catherine recounts her experience, her talk shows the discursive practice of attributing, where she calls upon the speech of others to give voice to the discourse of the sovereign self, but then rejects that discourse in favor of the discourse of the social self:

CATHERINE: And people have told me, when they try to give me advice - and I understand that they've never been through it and they're trying to make me feel better - they'll say, "Oh, it's the same person, just their physical body is different." And that wasn't necessarily true. I mean, because the personality changes. You take this man's brain and you marinate it in estrogen, you're gonna have biochemical changes which cause personality changes. (Interview #33)

Catherine's use of reported speech from other people not only allows for the voicing of the sovereign self discourse, but also shows that if she or others were to operate from this meaning then that might alleviate some negative emotions connected to the experience of transition. Catherine's talk shows this when she tells me that she knows that the advice-givers are trying to "make her feel better" by saying her partner is the same person. So, if the self is continuous, the grief may not come. Further, there is an interesting discursive move in how the interplay between the two discourses of the self happens in Catherine's talk. She hints that if it were only the physical body that were changing, that change might not equate to a different identity, and in effect, a loss; however, in her case it is not only the body of her partner that changed, but also the personality. She elaborates on this a little later in the interview:

INTERVIEWER: So, from then until now, do you feel like you've started relating to your partner differently? Has your relationship changed a lot since the transition started?

CATHERINE: Well, we're still going through it. I really liked Brett. I loved him. And then I found another surprising thing, cause I had psyched myself up for "Oh, it's just gonna be an appearance change." Then, when the personality change came, I felt grief. Brett is gone and he's never coming back and the appearance just made that seem clear. So, there's no going back. Brett is gone. And throughout our church group we had a funeral. It was very helpful.

Here, again, Catherine alludes to the fact that the physical changes alone might have been easier to take. She says she prepared herself for the transition to be "just" an appearance change, which dismisses the idea that the body has a huge impact on identity, but that once she realized the change was both in the body and in the behaviors, her experience of grief began. Once those changes took place, Catherine felt the presence of a

different person than the person named Brett she began dating. She even mentions that they had a funeral for Brett, as if that person she knew had died and was not continuing as a part of her life. She references this again after I asked her if she said anything at the funeral.

CATHERINE: I just gave him a big hug and said – when I was having all my grief – and I didn't say this, but this is how I felt. I felt kind of ripped off. Here this person I loved is gone and I feel pressured to be in a relationship with this “Brooke” that I just met, you know?

By framing Brooke as someone Catherine “just met” her talk puts a strong emphasis on the view that her partner's identity was not continuous through transition. Excerpts from my interview with a mother named Nora, 39, show another example of how the social self was the privileged meaning for some participants. Like the others, Nora's interplay happens through talk about grief and loss, as she constructs her female to male teenager as a different person:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, so the physical transformation, has that been difficult in any way? Do you think that's part of why you feel that loss?

NORA: Looking over the past couple of years, seeing it altogether, yes. But just on a day to day think I don't pull it all together, but to look back and see the whole picture, I still, I've got pictures of when he was my daughter – some of my favorite pictures – and to look at that and to look at him now, it's two totally different people.

INTERVIEWER: Ok, so visually, those two people are different people. In terms of personality, do you feel like your child is the same person or do you feel that he has changed in more than just physical ways?

NORA: Um, changed more than just physical. Once he transitioned over from female to male, his spirit was a lot brighter. He was a lot happier. (Interview #28)

Nora's talk indirectly negates the discourse of the sovereign self when she cites the ways that her child has changed both in looks and in personality, that make her see him as a different person. Seeing those changes caused her to feel grief because those changes were attached to the meaning of the self that is privileged in Nora's talk. She

emphasized this again later in the interview, naturalizing (Baxter, 2011) the discourse of the social self with her use of language. She said:

NORA: Essentially, you're losing a son or daughter and gaining a son or daughter and there's a lot of things that you mentally have to go through as your child transitions.

By framing this experience as “the way it is” with words like “essentially” and “you’re losing a son or daughter” as opposed to “*you might feel* you’re losing a son or a daughter,” Nora’s talk positions the social self discourse as not only the dominant understanding, but as the only understanding that is available to her as a parent. Another interesting example of talk that positions the social self as the central meaning for the conceptualization of a trans-identified person comes from Edward, the 70 year old father of an adult female to male trans-identified person. As he narrated, Edward talked about how the past, his memories, and his own identity are affected by his son’s transition:

EDWARD: I guess the only other thing I have to say is, and I think I said this at the dinner table the other night when the transgender group was meeting and you were there – the other father who was there and said, “Oh, it’s the same kid!” To me, it wasn’t that easy. I am a person who, like most men, has always been uncomfortable around male homosexuals, and, uh, I guess I was homophobic and I had to retrain myself and then when Adam transitioned and became, and identified as a homosexual male, it was difficult for me. But, you can learn those things. What was more deeply seeded emotionally was how I identified myself as a loving, protective father of a cute little girl and I retroactively lost that identity and in a sense lost the experience even though I had lived through it. Suddenly, I didn’t have it anymore in my past, which sounds counterfactual, but that’s how it felt. (Interview #13)

Here, Edward describes for me his unique experience of loss as related to his child’s identity and transition. First, his talk negates the discourse of the sovereign self via attributing. Edward presents the reported speech of another father of a trans-child with whom we had spent time at a support group meeting the week before. He contrasts his experience to this father’s by saying, “to me, it wasn’t that easy.” By beginning with “to me” after voicing the speech of another father, Edward’s talk shows the discursive move of subjectification of experience (Baxter, 2011), where a discourse is framed as a

matter of personal opinion, which effectively shuts down the possibility of anyone claiming the meaning is wrong.

Edward then goes on to describe feeling a loss connected to his own identity and his own past experiences as the father of a female child, which further centers the discourse of the self as a social entity. He tells me that he “lost that identity” and “lost the experience” “retroactively,” meaning once he conceptualized his child as a different person, he also began to conceptualize himself and his experiences differently, and found there was loss around that re-conceptualization as well. This drives home the fact that Edward views the self as social in that our family members’ identities are connected to our own and if a child’s identity changes, so does the parent’s. Again, Edward’s talk shows subjectification of experience when this viewpoint is framed as one that he is entitled to have even if it “sounds counterfactual,” it is still “how it felt.”

Even for those participants in the minority who privileged the discourse of the social self, the discourse was invoked in different ways to construct different meanings. For some, it seemed that both the body and the behaviors (discussed here as “personality”) had to change for the person’s identity to change. For others, the behaviors/personality were the linchpin; changes to the body could be adjusted to, but once the person changed the way they acted, the identity was considered to be different. As seen through these exemplary quotes, the experience of a different self was profoundly connected to the experience of loss and grief.

### Privileging the Sovereign Self

While the examples above show that some participants privileged the discourse of the social self, the majority of participants centered the discourse of the sovereign self during their narratives and in responses to questions. Even with this tendency to privilege the same discourse, the discourses were voiced by participants in a variety of ways which resulted in different forms of interplay and at times slightly different meanings of the



trans-identified person's identity and transition. The following examples give a sense of how the trans-identified person was constructed as the same, continuous person through transition by the privileging of the sovereign self. First, I return to Audrey who talks about how she avoided feelings of loss when her fiancé transitioned:

INTERVIEWER: Did you make sense of the transition as "I had a girlfriend and now I have a boyfriend?" And if so, do you ever feel any sense of loss in relation to that?

AUDREY: Uh, I don't really like feel like I've lost anything. I feel like I've just gotten to know Sam better than I knew before. (Interview #5)

In this excerpt, Audrey engages in a discursive practice called pacification (Baxter, 2011) wherein her talk positions the differences brought on by her fiancé's transition as trivial, in effect dismissing the discourse of the social self in favor of the discourse of the sovereign self. Audrey uses the word "just" which implies that getting to know more about her fiancé is a simple task, one that was not a big deal, which portrays transition changes as inconsequential to her partner's identity. Later in the interview, when Audrey and I were discussing the difference in coming out as gay or lesbian and coming out as trans, Audrey again engaged in pacification and also in naturalization as her talk dismissed the notion that transition changes should have any negative implications for family members and other relational partners:

INTERVIEWER: So, then how do you see those coming out processes as different, if at all?

AUDREY: Um, I don't really see them as being different – it's like just coming out to your friends and family about who you really are. And you just want them to know more about you. You want them to be able to respect and identify that this is how you are, and whether or not they accept that is their choice.

Audrey's talk does much work here to negate the discourse of the social self. First, she pacifies the changes a trans-identified person goes through by again using the word "just" which could be replaced with "simply," indicating again that the disclosure and transition are not dramatic life events. Audrey goes on to describe the coming out

process as a mere act of giving your friends and family more information about your identity, rather than as a dramatic revelation of potentially devastating news. Further, Audrey's talk naturalizes the discourse of the sovereign self when she says that coming out is telling family and friends "who you really are," that "this is how you are," and that the only thing family members can determine is whether to accept that. This positions personal identity as something the individual controls and basically informs family/partners about, rather than family/partners having any say whatsoever in that identity.

Alaina, the 22 year old current spouse of a male to female trans-identified person, talks about her experience in a way that showed diachronic separation of the discourses of self in her meaning making process. She says that at first she experienced her spouse as different, which brought feelings of grief. This indicates that at one point she likely privileged the discourse of the social self in the process of making meaning. However, she talks about how she eventually came to think of her spouse as the same person, essentially, which shows a shift in meaning making. At the time of our interview, Alaina's talk showed a centering of the sovereign self discourse:

INTERVIEWER: So, you did experience a feeling of loss, would you call your emotions grief? Did you experience grief or just a sense of loss?

ALAINA: No, I would pretty much call it grief. I had to grieve knowing that pretty much what I thought I knew was like a front, was pretend. (laughs)

INTERVIEWER: So, it just felt like a non-genuine identity that you had known the whole time?

ALAINA: Exactly. That the person that I was in love with, I was losing.

INTERVIEWER: So, do you think that the feelings, did the feelings of loss start right at the disclosure, or, and if they did, did you feel them again or did you feel them heighten when things started changing? Maybe when there was a pronoun shift or she started using makeup or dressing differently? Did any, was there like a significant change that brought on feelings of loss more so than any others?

ALAINA: It wasn't like when the disclosure happened. It really wasn't at that point because I was way too confused to understand and just didn't know if somebody was just feeding me bullcrap about you know, cheating on me, you know what I mean? Like I didn't know what it was. When I figured it was legitimate; as soon as I realized it wasn't an act, that's when I started to feel the loss. And I'd feel it. It would start to go away because I tried to accept things. Nothing was really progressing, nothing was going too fast. But then I'd come home and like my clothes would be on him - on her and then of course I'd feel it again, or makeup and I'd feel it again. Um, like even when we started going on the [message] boards, like, I felt it again. It was like, it's just chipping away. 'Cause it's slowly, it's like a full transition so every time something goes forward into becoming who she wants to be it chips away at who I had before.

INTERVIEWER: [later in the interview] So, how did you reconcile or adjust to this loss, if you did?

ALAINA: I was just so confused, I felt like the person on the inside could have been just a lie. But like the time it's been since then; I've had a long time to keep looking and watching and I've realized that it's the same person no matter what the outside holds. I've had to come to realize that the person I fell in love with is still going to be there. I've realized that I fell in love with a woman and just didn't know it. (Interview #1)

Alaina describes her feelings of loss as related to the physical changes her spouse went through, telling me that as those changes happened, she felt that the spouse she knew was being chipped away. As her spouse transitioned, she constructed the meaning that the person she loved was leaving and a new person, a female person, was appearing in the place of her husband. This experience is clearly formed from the centering of the social self, as under this discourse a change in physicality necessitates a change in identity. However, Alaina's talk later in the interview negates this idea and centers the discourse of the sovereign self, dismissing the idea that the body has anything to do with the self, and conceptualizing her spouse as still the same on the inside.

Evelyn, a 62 year old mother of a male to female trans-identified person first tried out the discourse of the social self, in which she reasoned that she had a different child. However, after consulting with her daughter, the social self discourse became marginalized in her talk, in favor of the self as sovereign, as she constructed her daughter as the same person:

EVELYN: I was exhausted [after the disclosure conversation]. I was, it was such a change and then just trying to get my brain around it. My first thought was, “I’ve lost a son,” and then I said, “Yes, but Evelyn, you’ve gained a daughter.” And I tried that out on her [her trans-identified daughter] and she said, “No, that’s not right –I’m the same person.” And I thought, you know, you’re right. You are the same person. I haven’t – I never lost Steven.” (Interview #15)

In two ways, Evelyn’s communication centers the sovereign self discourse, here. She offers her first interpretation of her child’s transition, which was that she had lost her son, Steven, who was replaced by her new daughter, Stephanie. So, she first gives voice to the social self meaning, however, this meaning is negated by the reported speech of her daughter who tells her, “That’s not right” and by her agreement with the assessment that Stephanie is, in fact, the same person. This positioning means that the feeling that she lost Steven loses relevance. Further, Evelyn allows that Stephanie has the right to tell her that her original interpretation is wrong, which shows that she sees Stephanie’s identity as something she determines herself and informs her mother about secondarily. The continuity of the self, from Steven to Stephanie, which Stephanie claims and Evelyn confirms, is in line with the sovereign self discourse.

Interestingly, once this meaning is centered in her meaning making, Evelyn and her sister end up reminding her daughter, Stephanie, of it when at one point Stephanie writes on her blog that “Steven is dead.” Evelyn recounted this event and conversation for me:

EVELYN: ...so I was on the blog one day and she said, this is so awful, she said, “Steven is dead.” I didn’t read it, but my sister called me up because Grace [sister] had read it...And she said, “That’s terrible, she shouldn’t be saying that!” and I thought, “that’s exactly where I was before Stephanie told me that Steven was not dead, that it was the same person.” And so, Grace and I both tried to, Grace in particular...she called her up or wrote to her and said, “You know, you’ve got to affirm all the things you are and even though you are now Stephanie, Steven is not dead. Steven was a wonderful person and even though Steven’s now Stephanie,” and whatever. I don’t know.

An interesting thing happens here in Evelyn’s communication. When Stephanie posts on her blog that “Steven is dead,” Evelyn and her sister think this is an “awful”

thing to say. At one point, she and/or her sister imply that Steven is a different person who existed in the past by saying he “was” wonderful. However, their talk does still privilege the fact that the self has stayed the same by saying that “even though” Stephanie has changed, she should affirm all the things that she is which includes a past as Steven.

An example of countering comes from my interview with Aaron, 30, when I asked him about how he conceptualizes his sibling who transitioned from female to male.

INTERVIEWER: Was there ever a point where you felt like your sibling was not the same person you’d always known or has that been a pretty consistent factor you – that he’s still the same person?

AARON: Um, good question. I need to think for a second... You know, I think there was an expect- I think as we were going into this transition, and as he was talking about sort of, “I want you now to call me, to refer to me as ‘he’ and to think of me as ‘male’ I was expecting that at some point in that transition there would be some sort of change that would make it feel like my sibling was a different person. And so, it was sort of like I was looking ahead and expecting a change – a loss. Um, and I think that’s where the resistance came in, which, for me, was relatively minor, but um, but was there. And so I guess maybe I kept expecting it and then especially after the testosterone I remember hearing maybe from my parents – I don’t know exactly – maybe from him that he had just gone on it and that it would take a few weeks to really, for the changes to come through, like his voice to change and stuff like that. And I was really kind of nervous before we talked on the phone at the point at which I knew I would hear a change. Um, and his voice did sound a little different –it sounded like he had a cold and still does, years later. But, other than that, he was – it was like I was talking to the same person. And um, and so I think there wasn’t ever actually a point at which I experienced a different person – except to the degree that he became a little more confident and easier to talk to, really. But there was no point at which there was loss, but I did expect that to be the case at some point. (Interview # 17)

Aaron’s description of his response to his sibling’s disclosure and transition serves as an example of countering because Aaron repeatedly relays the fact that he did “expect” that he would feel loss in relation to his brother’s transition, but then makes clear that his expectations did not match his experience. The fact that Aaron expected to think of his sibling as different when the changes happened, and expected to feel a loss, signals that the social self is the meaning that is typically centered in response to a

transgender transition. In other words, most people would probably assume that family members would feel some sort of loss or at least conceptualize their trans-identified relative/partner as a different person during and after transition. However, Aaron counters the idea that loss is a necessary effect of transition when he denies feeling it and claims he did not experience his brother as a different person, even when he noticed a difference in his sibling's voice. This claim displaces the discourse of the social self and centers the discourse of the sovereign self.

Probably one of the most lucid descriptions of how grief and loss are connected to personhood comes from Olivia, the 29 year old daughter of a male to female trans-identified person. Olivia recounts for me how she first experienced grief over what she described as something like her father dying, but then explains that when she was feeling that grief and conceptualizing her father as gone, she was failing to take into account his personhood. Eventually, Olivia's talk negates the social self discourse in favor of the discourse of the sovereign self. As she told her story, she explained how she felt when she first found out about her father's trans-identity:

OLIVIA: So, if a soul can shake in a body, my soul was shaking in my body. I had a very sleepless night and I didn't know what to think. I was taken aback because I wasn't familiar with transgender, transsexual – only in the sense of cross-dressing and flamboyant gay men. Um, I hadn't been like really aware of the medical procedures and the psychological procedures that go along with it and it really threw me for a loop. And from that time, the next few years I had very intermittent, very difficult contact with my parents. Partly because I felt I had been betrayed, partly because I felt as if my father had died, but was still there. And it was very confusing. I didn't have any sense of closure...I don't know this person anymore! (Interview #22)

Olivia states that she felt her “father had died, but was still there.” This statement represents well the competition between the two discourses of the self, and also perfectly captures the concept of ambiguous loss. She even mentions that she did not have “closure” surrounding this loss, which is an experience that we typically expect to follow

at some point after the loss of a loved one, due to death. Olivia elaborates on this with some probing from me:

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about that experience of grief or loss – in a way, a living death? Can you talk about why you think it was that you made sense of it in that way at that time?

OLIVIA: It was very much a grief, loss, kind of thing. I definitely went through the stages of grief, initially. I had trouble sleeping, I would cry uncontrollably, I would have to like go and run and throw things around and hit trees and, like, I had a lot of anger about it. I went through anger, I went through depression. I went through bargaining. The last conversation I had had with my dad was, “Well, you know I’m only going to consider you as my father and that’s gonna be it and you can take it or leave it, so that’s it.” (laughs) Um, so I definitely went through all the stages of grief during that and it was odd because there was no closure. She was still there. And how do I reconcile losing my dad but keeping my dad at the same time? Because I wasn’t recognizing her personhood...

Olivia describes in detail what the experience of grieving someone who had not died was like for her, as a teenager. Through this description, it is evident that at one point Olivia created the meaning that her father had changed in such a way because of transition that he was somehow gone. At the end of this passage, though, Olivia explains why she experienced such grief at first: “because I wasn’t recognizing her personhood.” Here, her talk shows a negation of the discourse of the social self in favor of the discourse of the sovereign self. Olivia elaborates on the notion of personhood at another point in the interview discussion when she describes how she broached the topic of her father’s decision to transition:

OLIVIA: And I sat down with my dad when I was home on break one day and I’m like, “You know dad, it’s cool. I don’t necessarily think that you may have made the right decision. I don’t know you well enough in that area to say, all I know is what mom has told me” because my dad and I still haven’t talked about it. This is 10 years later and we still haven’t talked about it. And she’s like, “Oh, I wanted to tell you about it – I really do, but I’m not ready to.” I’m like, “Okay. If that’s where you’re at, then that’s where you’re at, but know that I see you for you and it’s not about your body and it’s not about what you wear, what you don’t wear, how you have your hair or your nails or whatever. I don’t care. You are part of me, I am part of you and when we talk it’s person to person, it’s heart to heart. And if you never tell me about why

you made this decision, that's gonna be okay because I still know you. I don't have to know everything about you, I don't have to know your specifics, but I know *you*. I know how you think and if this is a decision that you've made and you're sticking with it, I respect that because I understand how your mind works.

Olivia's talk implies that eventually, the discourse of the social self which occupied the centripetal position in her meaning making for some time after her father's disclosure was supplanted with the discourse of the sovereign self. The centering of the sovereign self discourse allowed for a re-conceptualization of her father as the same essential person despite the changes in physicality. Olivia also gave voice to the notion of the sovereign self when she anticipated the responses of others in her social network whose negative judgments she considered at one point. She referred to her father's mind and practice because he was a well known and respected professional in their community:

OLIVIA: "Are they going to reject me because of what my father has done? Are they going to judge me because of that? Are they going to judge her because of that?" If they respect her mind and her practice, there shouldn't be an issue with her physical presence because she's still the same person. That hasn't changed. There's still that continuity of self.

This utterance firmly establishes the sovereign self as the correct way of thinking about a person who transitions, dismissing that a person's physical presence should have any impact on identity and the way others view the person. At the end of the interview, when I asked Olivia what advice she would give to others who have experiences similar to hers she returned to the struggle of these discourses and addressed almost explicitly how the discourse of sovereignty works to frame one's experience of a relative's/partner's transition:

OLIVIA: I think it's very important to question why you are having such a hard time, if you're having a hard time. Or if you're having an easy time with it, why are you having an easy time with it? What is it that you understand about what it means to be an individual?...It's the existence vs. essence thing. Who are you *essentially*? And how does that influence your existence?

In giving advice, Olivia's talk all but connects the dots between the centering of discourses of the self and emotional experience in relation to a relative's/partner's



transition. She cites the social view of the self as potentially leading to “having a hard time” and the sovereign view of the self as facilitating an “easy time with it.”

So far, in the data examples presented where participants privilege the sovereign self, they did so in the process of creating a particular meaning: the trans-identified person can transition and remain the same, in effect, allowing family members to avoid or recover from the experience of loss. Interestingly, one participant centered the discourse of sovereignty, but did so in the act of creating quite a different meaning for her child. The following exemplary quote set in contrast with the quotes above illustrates that the same discourse, in this case sovereignty of self, can be centered, but invoked in starkly different ways to create various meanings. Kay, the 42 year old mother of a female to male trans-identified person, told me that Alexandra would always be her daughter and that she would refer to her as “her child,” but never as her son. I asked her what keeps her from saying, “Ok, fine, you’re my son” and this was her reply:

KAY: Because the way I look at it, when you’re born, you’re born who you’re gonna be and in your own mind if you wanna change, fine, but you’ll always be what you were born to be. And no matter how much surgery, no matter what you try to do there’s always gonna be – to me, when I delivered her, I know what she came out as, I know what I raised her to be...because no matter, it’s like people with plastic surgeons, plastic surgery – no matter what you change on the outside, inside, you’ll always be the same person! That plastic surgery’s just a cover up!

Kay engages in subjectification by using phrases like “the way I look at it” and “to me.” Again, this makes a statement difficult to argue with, since it is positioned as a matter of opinion. Interestingly, Kay’s talk frames her view as an opinion, but is also characterized by declarative language that fervently negates the social self discourse, e.g., “no matter what” [you change] and “you’ll always be” [who you were born as]. Through subjectification, the discourse of the sovereign self is centered in Kay’s talk like in the talk of other participants, but the positioning of the discourse creates a different meaning than was made by most other participants who centered the same discourse. Through the invocation of this discourse, Kay’s talk constructs a true transition in identity as

impossible, because, she explains, one cannot change the way in which he or she is born. Therefore, “the outside” or physicality of a person can be changed, but this does not truly change who the person is. This illustrates that there are multiple possibilities for making meaning through the interplay of just two competing discourses.

#### Transformative Interplay: Hybrid

Some participants’ talk created new meanings from the discourses of the sovereign and the social self by eliminating the opposition of the discourses. As discussed in chapter two, there are two types of transformative dialogue where competing discourses are transformed and new meanings are made from that transformation: hybrids and aesthetic moments (Baxter, 2011). A hybrid occurs when a speaker’s talk positions two competing discourses in such a way that in that moment they are equalized in discursive force. With hybrids, the competing discourses are still present and recognizable, but they are no longer positioned as incompatible. An aesthetic moment occurs when the competing discourses are superseded or disbanded – the speaker moves away from both discourses altogether to create a meaning that exists outside the bounds of those meaning systems. In an aesthetic moment, the original discourses are themselves altered in some way. An example of a hybrid comes from John, the 59 year old father of a male to female trans-identified person. After John told me that he now feels like he has a daughter, I questioned him about the son he had before:

INTERVIEWER: So, then do you feel that the son you had before is gone or how do you reconcile that?

JOHN: Um...no, well the son I had is no longer with me, but the son I had is still available in the past. And I don’t have to feel like that son is gone, it’s just going forward, that son is gonna transform...So, in many ways, I don’t feel like I’ve lost a son, you know, I’ve gained a daughter. But, uh, all of the past experiences are still there and this doesn’t really alter them.

John’s talk is transformative in that the two competing discourses of self are positioned in a way that makes them somehow co-exist equally. He tells me he does feel

he has a daughter now and that the son he had before is no longer with him, implying that his child is not the same person she used to be. However, he says that despite this, he does not “have to feel like that son is gone.” So, somehow John’s description makes it plausible that one can *both* not lose a son *and* still gain a daughter, by removing the element of competition between the discourses of social and sovereign self. The sense-making mechanism present in his talk which accomplishes this neutralization is the construction that his son does still exist, but exists in the past, in *memories* that he can still retrieve and refer to if he desires. Lilly, the 42 year old mother of a female to male trans-identified person constructs a different sort of hybrid from the discourses of the self in her talk about her child’s transition:

INTERVIEWER: Do you conceptually see those two people as the same person or did you experience some sort of conceptual transition where you see Lacey as no longer a person who exists and Kyle exists in place of Lacey? Or do you think, “It was always Kyle, I just didn’t know it.”

Here, I as the interviewer give voice to the competing discourses of the self, presenting Lilly first with the idea that her child is a different person operating under the meaning of the social self and secondly with the idea that her child was always this person he is now, operating under the meaning of the sovereign self. Lilly, however, does not center one or the other. Her response shows a reflection on these meanings and a transformation of them. Her utterance effectively positions them not as meanings she must decide between, but as meanings that can be privileged equally and simultaneously:

LILLY: Um, good question. Something I’ve struggle with a little bit. For me, Lacey is who Kyle used to be. Not that she never existed, because this was *my* child. My only natural child. And so, denying that part of her would be wrong... So, the same person conceptually for me. Kyle is still who Lacey was. I don’t even know how to put it. I look at the pictures and I know that that’s who he was. And he’s evolved to this person now and this is who he is. It’s sort of like an evolution, for me. Not that this child never existed, not that this child was never female – yes he was – that is a fact. This is a fact of his life. This is who was born to me. And so, now my child has evolved to be this person. This is who my child has grown up to be. And for me, that’s what it’s like. I don’t know if that make sense.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, absolutely.

LILLY: I won't let him deny that this was his past, this is who he was. And it will always be a part of him...so for me, it *has* to be an evolution. An evolution doesn't mean that the past goes away – it means that's where you started from and this is where you are now. (Interview #26)

Lilly's talk very clearly sets up a hybrid of the discourses of the self. As is the case with hybrids, both discourses are still recognizable in Lilly's explanation. For example, she says that Kyle still is the same person, but also refers to who Lacey *was* and who Kyle *is*, which positions Kyle and Lacey as distinct persons in their own right. In different words, Lilly says that Lacey is who her child used to be in the past, but that does not mean that she has to feel that Lacey is gone or was never present. She will not accept the meaning that Lacey never existed. In effect, Lilly's talk constructs her child's self as at once both sovereign (the same) and social (different), which equalizes the discursive force of the two discourses.

Lilly accomplishes this equalization and creates a hybrid of the two discourses by framing her child's transition as an evolution, which she positions as different from a replacement or a loss/gain type of change in Kyle's identity. She says it most clearly when she notes that “an evolution doesn't mean that the past [and who Lacey was] goes away- it means that's where you started from and this is where you are now.” She even likens the changes to what would be considered “normal” changes that happen as a person grows up, which are expected, often non-traumatic changes. She says, “This is who my child has grown up to be.” Essentially, creating the meaning of evolution for Kyle's transition allows for integration or a weaving of two selves into one.

### Conceptualizing and Experiencing Transition

Three sub-themes emerged across the data that are connected to the concept of the self and the experience of loss in relation to transition changes: erasure-integration, sudden-gradual, and warning-no warning. These subsidiary themes represent specifics of

the transition experience that family members indicated either helped or hindered their adjustment to the process.

#### Erasure-Integration

The first subsidiary theme is very much related to the hybrid meaning constructed in Lilly's talk. More than a few participants referenced, either directly or indirectly, that the experience of transition (and the trans-identified person's identity) was affected by whether there was an erasure of the past or an integration of the past with the present and future (obviously related to continuity/discontinuity). This erasure-integration theme surfaced at times in talk of how the trans-identified person's post-transition identity was an extension of or a departure from the pre-transition self, as Lilly referenced above, which of course can be subsumed under the discourses of the self. Other times, participants referenced this subtheme when discussing what their trans-identified relative asked or did not ask of them in terms of referencing the past. Many times, participants mentioned that either they were or were not asked by their trans-identified relative/partner to put away pictures from before the transition or whether they were asked/told to consider the pre-transitioned self as having never existed. I return to my interview with John (father of a male to female adult child) for an example of the erasure-integration subtheme. While we were discussing whether John experienced grief, he referenced the fact that his child had not created an erasure of her past by telling him she was never the son he had experienced for many years. She allowed him to keep pictures from her past:

JOHN: ...the past experiences are still there and this doesn't really alter them. She doesn't say, "You have to put away all the pictures." She's quite accepting of uh, this is a change that's happened and, uh, one of the reasons maybe that's the reason she is so accepting of us and how we've responded and she hasn't said- she hasn't been demanding or difficult or unforgiving about mistakes we made. So, uh, maybe it's because she's not demanded she's no longer that person, like she's "gonna be somebody new and we better by god recognize it." (Interview #3)

John cites his daughter's recognition of who she used to be as helpful to his own adjustment to her transition. He implies that if she had insisted that she was never his son and asked him to take down pictures from before her transition, the experience would have been emotionally more difficult and possibly would have led to the experience of loss/grief. Pictures were also a significant topic for Chloe, mother of a female to male transgender child:

INTERVIEWER: So, in terms of making sense of your child, do you consider it, "Ok, I had a daughter, now I have a son," or "I just thought I had a daughter, but I always had a son," or do you have a different way of conceptually...

CHLOE: I think I probably see that I had a daughter – I mean, you've got all these pictures and she hates to see them and doesn't want to know anything about them and doesn't want them displayed, but it really is part – and I hope she can find a way to accept that, you know, that that was her, but different and her parents didn't understand. Because I hate -it's almost like there is no birth to 3 or 4 [years old] – we wiped that [time period] out. You know, there's bows and there's pink, so it's hard to find a picture that she doesn't look like a girl in.

INTERVIEWER: Right. So, was it hard knowing that she didn't want you to display the pictures?

CHLOE: A little bit. Back then I was scrap-booking and I had all these girly pages. We don't ever get those out, and it's fine, it's fine, I just think it's something that we're all gonna have to find a way to incorporate and just deal with it and accept it and move on. (Interview #25)

Chloe expresses that she hopes her child will find a way to accept that the person in the childhood pictures is who she used to be so that the time period when her child was considered a female does not have to be "wiped out" of their references, memories, and from the physical space of their home. The lack of photographs of the pre-transitioned person seemed to incite the feeling of erasure for some family members. Finally, Ruth, the mother of a female to male trans-identified person discussed photographs and integration in relation to the emotional experience of transition in the family:

INTERVIEWER: Did you put away on your own or did your son ask you to put away pictures from when your daughter was growing up or do you still have that out?

RUTH: I do still have it out. And I asked my son if that was okay and it was okay with him because he says, “Mom, that’s me.” So, he accepts his life as it was and as it is. And we have pictures then and now.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it would have been harder if you’d been asked to put away the pictures?

RUTH: Yeah, probably would have been.

INTERVIEWER: Some of the parents I’ve talked to their kids asked them to put pictures away and it seems to be something parents struggled with, like not being able to keep that part of the child’s life-

RUTH: Right. Mmm hmm. Yeah, I think that would have been difficult for me. You know, I enjoyed my children, you know? And the life that we had together when they were kids. So, I wouldn’t want to have to put that aside. (Interview #32)

#### Sudden-Gradual

A second subtheme of the struggle between the discourses of self concerned how and when the physical and behavioral changes came about during the transition process. Many participants described the changes as either sudden or gradual and explained how this affected their reactions to the changes, especially in relation to the experience of grief. Whenever this sudden-gradual subtheme was mentioned, participants described the changes as easier [to adjust to] if they were gradual, as opposed to being perceived as sudden. When Aaron talked about his sibling’s transition, he indicated that if the physical changes had been sudden, he would have had a harder time adjusting to the transition, emotionally:

INTERVIEWER: Can you speculate, do you think that the fact that Chase was Melissa, he was already sort of dressing androgynously, the hair was short – do you think that the fact that his physical appearance when you thought he was female, do you think that maybe eliminated some of that - what you might have experienced if there had been a sudden physical change?

AARON: Yeah, I definitely do. Even sort of with my openness to homosexuality and theoretical openness to trans or anything else – I think that I would have been pretty shocked and probably felt – I certainly would have had a much harder time with it if it had been sudden. (Interview #17)

Similarly, Liz, the 50 year old spouse of a male to female trans-identified person explains the difference between changes that are gradual versus sudden:

INTERVIEWER: Out of the changes that Beth has gone through have any of those been particularly difficult to get used to?

LIZ: No, not really. A lot of our female friends, because Beth took hormones and has now grown breasts, a lot of our female friends say, “Boy, if they’re bigger than mine, that’s it, it’s over” and I mean that’s all said in joking fun, but it’s not been an issue for us. So, no, because it was always so gradual. I always had time to adjust in stages, so it’s not been a shock.

INTERVIEWER: Ok, so in terms of the process from the time you found out to now, what are the top three most significant moments that stand out in your mind?

LIZ: We’ve had some other traumas in our life, so maybe those stick out more than this does. We’ve lost two children. And my mother passed away and Beth’s parents passed away. Those things tend to be more important probably because they were more sudden. This gradual change and this constant communication, if there’s been anything significant it has not been as significant as other things. (Interview #36)

Liz describes the experience of adjusting to changes that are gradual versus those that are sudden, implying that sudden changes are more traumatic than changes that happen gradually. Both Liz’s and Aaron’s descriptions connect the dimension of time to the conceptualization of the self implying that it might be easier to adjust to a person’s identity change if the identity changes incrementally over time rather than in a more concentrated manner. Time, it seems, might dilute the sense of discontinuity and therefore help to create a sense of the evolution Lilly constructed, rather than the halting that Ava described in her interview, for example.

#### Warning-No Warning

The final subtheme for the site of struggle over personal identity is quite related to the gradual-sudden subtheme. Many participants, when discussing whether they felt a sense of loss in relation to transition, referenced the existence of “signs” of trans-identity, or at least gender variation. Many said that the disclosure and/or transition was not shocking to them or did not create a dramatic sense of loss because either they saw signs



of such an identity beforehand or because their relative's/spouse's gender expression was already in line with the sex category the person planned to transition to. For example, if a male to female trans-identified person had been expressing femininity for many years before the disclosure and official transition, then the identity change was not as conceptually and emotionally difficult to adjust to. Clearly, this theme is tightly bound to the element of time described with the sudden-gradual subtheme and also more generally to the issue of continuity-discontinuity of self. Illustrative of this sub-theme, Isabella, the 26 year old sister of a female to gender-queer person said:

ISABELLA: I don't feel in any way that Jess is a different person. I don't feel like our relationship has changed significantly, um, and I don't you know, probably because this felt like such a natural transition to me, like it wasn't out of left field. (Interview #4)

Isabella explains that the transition away from the female sex category made sense to her – that it did not stretch too much who she already conceived her sibling to be because her sibling had never expressed a strong feminine identity in the past. Isabella was not the only participant to make a comment implying that the transition felt almost “natural.” Words like “signs” and “left field” were commonly used by participants when they described their family members' pre-transition identities in comparison to their post-transition identities. Patty had a very different experience than Isabella's because she had not noticed any signs that her sibling was gender variant in any way:

INTERVIEWER: So, you said when you first found out you were kind of surprised - kind of shocked that your brother was no longer your brother. Can you recall any other specific emotions you felt besides surprise? Were you ever sad, or anxious, confused? Were you happy, were you –

PATTY: Okay, yeah, so actually she still dates women, so in part I was kind of confused you know in a sense I wish you could just stay with Trisha and just stay a man, but um, I guess kind of like sad because I did want to be like my brother, but then I guess kind of happiness because she seemed to be much more comfortable with herself like with the decision, so because mostly just kind of shock because it kind of came out of left field for me.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, so you didn't perceive there to be any signs before that that might have led you to believe that she was struggling with this or anything?

PATTY: Right (Interview #9)

It seems that the lack of signs for a transgender identity might lead to a feeling of shock or surprise for family members. Following this line of logic, if the family member perceives the trans-identity as a surprise, the family member also might be more likely to perceive the identity change as sudden rather than gradual (assuming that the transition begins soon after disclosure). Taking this line of thinking even further, the perception that changes are sudden seems connected to the conceptualization of the trans-identified person's identity as discontinuous, and this seems connected to the experience of loss. Clearly, these themes and subthemes are connected in ways that have very real implications for family members.

The site of struggle based on the meaning of self was the most prevalent struggle in the data. However, other sites were also quite salient for participants, one of which was tightly tied to both conceptualization of the trans-identified person's self and to the experience of ambiguous loss: the site of struggle over sex and gender. These constructs are discussed as a single site of struggle because it did not make sense to separate them, conceptually. The reasons for this are elaborated below.

## Discursive Struggle #2: The Nature of Sex and Gender

### Locating the Discourses

As discussed in Chapter One, the concepts of sex and gender are typically made separate and distinct in scholarship on gender. Sex is understood as a biological category assigned based on the configuration of the body, and gender refers to the social meanings that sexed bodies take on (Butler, 1990; Bell & Blaeuer, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Wood, 2006). Still, scholars often use the terms interchangeably, claiming to study gender when they actually study sex differences between men and women on a given

variable (Reeder, 1996). Given that scholars often conflate the terms, it is no surprise that the participants in this study also used the terms sex and gender interchangeably most of the time. This fact on its own makes pulling apart the meanings of sex and gender in these data difficult, but their overlap was not as simple as that. In fact, pulling apart these constructs and discussing them as separate sites of struggle is all but impossible, as their meanings were constructed together and from common discourses. Said differently, the discourses at play in the meanings made for sex are the same as those at play in the meanings made for gender and the two constructs were unavoidably intertwined in this process.

The central issue for participants concerning these constructs was how sex and gender factor into personhood and relationships - a matter usually taken for granted, but made salient by participants' experiences with transgender identity and transition. The ways participants directly or indirectly addressed this topic in their talk held implications for further understanding the constructions of self, of loss, and lastly, of trans-identity. During our discussions, participants talked about the way(s) sex is determined, whether by the brain or the body. They discussed sex/gender as being "black and white" or as having "shades of gray," referring to whether there were only two distinct ways of being (male/female, masculine/feminine) or more variation than that (split vs. spectrum). They talked about gender being inborn, the brain being hardwired as male or female, or gender being socially performed and learned through interaction (nature vs. nurture), and they made claims about the role of sex/gender in personhood and relationships (integral vs. inconsequential). The talk surrounding sex and gender resulted in a variety of themes that culminated into two opposing discourses, each containing several tenets and holding many implications for meaning making: a scientific discourse of biological essentialism and a socio-cultural discourse of sex and gender.

## Discourse of Biological Essentialism

The discourse of biological essentialism is made up of several precepts. This view holds, first and foremost, that both sex and gender are naturally arising. That is, the body is naturally sexed as either male or female, for reproductive purposes, and that we can identify a person's sex through elements of their physical body; chiefly by their anatomy (genitals and secondary sex characteristics, like breasts), and secondarily by their reproductive organs (testes, ovaries, uterus), their chromosomal makeup, and their hormonal composition. This discourse also holds that the brain is sexed, meaning that there are separate and distinct male and female brains that cause men and women to behave in different ways, to enjoy different activities, to be inclined toward certain tasks, and to process information differently, among other things. This is often referred to in scholarly literature as sexual determinism.

Several propositions follow from these core maxims. First, sex is a dichotomous construct. A person can be either male or female (anything else holds no reproductive purpose and is therefore not legitimated), and those categories represent complementary opposites, in many ways: where men have sperm, women have eggs; where men have penises, women have vaginas; where men are rational, women are emotional. Because there are only two categories for persons, personhood is always sexed, as Sloop's work (2004) discussed in chapter one suggests. Since personhood is always sexed, relationships are always gendered, meaning that men and women are hard-wired to relate to others in particular ways, taking also the other person's sex into account.

An important implication for relatives/partners of trans-people is that since personhood and relationships are always sexed/gendered, a transition toward and/or away from one category might play into the feelings of grief and loss participants described. If sex/gender is essential to a person's identity, then others might experience that identity as lost if the sex/gender element is changed. This implication is even more important given the meanings of male and female which follow from this view. If male is the opposite of

female, then son is the opposite of daughter (and brother is the opposite of sister and so on), and an individual cannot simultaneously be both. Therefore, for a daughter to exist, a son must not exist, and so a transition from one to the other likely creates a sense of loss for relational partners. When a person who once was a son becomes a daughter, that son may be conceptualized as “gone.”

### Socio-cultural Discourse of Gender

The opposing model for sex and gender discussed in Chapter One can be referred to as a socio-cultural discourse of sex and gender. This view commonly opposes biological essentialism in scholarship on gender, and the presence and opposition of the two worldviews was also present in the data. The socio-cultural discourse has many axioms which counter the axioms of biological essentialism. The crux of this cultural model is that gender is a social construct. This means that the behaviors that define masculinity and femininity are not natural or pre-determined but are socially learned through interaction with others within a particular culture. This also means that behaviors that constitute masculinity or femininity are merely performances that can vary within or across cultures and can be altered. Under this view, masculinity is only a male attribute because we socially construct it to be, not because nature determines it to be. The socio-cultural perspective holds that gender is nothing more than the meaning that a sexed body takes on through social construction. However, this does not mean that from the social perspective, sex is a biological category of nature that exists outside of social construction.

The social view further implies that sex as a categorical system is also given meaning through this process, and as such sex does not necessarily have to be a dichotomous construct, but we simply have agreed that it is. From this discourse, it follows that sex could be conceptualized as a spectrum instead, given that other bodies exist which are not clearly male or female. This view does have something in common

with a meaning that follows from biological essentialism, though only part of the tenet is in agreement. Like with biological essentialism, the social/cultural view of gender implies that the self and relationships are gendered – that we do relate to others on gendered terms. The reason for gendered relationships under the socio-cultural view, however, is different from the reason for gendered relationships according to the essentialist view. Working from the social discourse, we relate on gendered terms because sex and gender are among the primary ways we organize ourselves socially. They are social constructs that are with us, almost inevitably, from birth, but only because others communicate them to us. We are taught what is expected for and from a male and female, as well as how to relate based on those expectations. So, for biological essentialism, sex is integral to the self because a person naturally is male or female (and masculine or feminine, as follows). From the socio-cultural perspective, sex and gender are integral to our experience of ourselves and others because we are socialized to treat them as such.

#### Challenges in Identifying the Discourses

The presence of these discourses and the interplay in which participants engaged at this site of discursive struggle presented something of a challenge during analysis on a few accounts. First, the presence of the socio-cultural discourse was more latent than the presence of biological essentialism; the suppression of this discourse was important to the meanings that were created by most participants. Only a few participants gave direct voice to the idea that gender is something that is learned, taught, and merely performed, and for good reason. If one operates under this discourse then there would be only one consistent meaning available of transgender identity and transition, namely, transgender people would simply *want* to transition and would not have a *need* to do so, based on an inborn condition. This is not to say that no participants constructed trans-identity this way, because some did voice or even center a non-medical view of trans-identity.

However, for most, the essentialism discourse was privileged, creating a meaning of sex and gender consistent with the meanings of trans-identity and of self that most participants privileged, medicalized and sovereign, respectively. This shows how absolutely connected and in some sense interdependent the relevant discourses are even at distinct sites of struggle, and also demonstrates why the cultural view of sex and gender does not have a strong foothold in the talk of the participants in this study.

A second reason the analysis of the competing discourses for sex and gender presented a challenge was because participants often engaged in transformative dialogue. As Baxter (2011) suggests, it can be difficult to recognize opposing discourses that frame communication if those discourses have been transformed into a hybrid or (especially) an aesthetic moment. Several participants did engage in transformative dialogue that resulted in an aesthetic moment, which made identifying the discourses that were being dissolved difficult to point out. The analytic obstruction was remedied by the analysis of other participants' communication which did not transform the discourses and therefore more clearly showed the voicing and opposition of the systems that were superseded, dissolved, or altered by others.

#### Extraction as a new form of Interplay

The final obstacle to delineating and labeling the discourses involved in the meanings of sex and gender was that the majority of participants engaged in a form of interplay that has not yet been identified and explicated by scholars of relational dialectics theory and was itself transformative. This new form of interplay, which will be demonstrated subsequently through the presentation and analysis of exemplary data, can be described as *extracting*. Extracting occurs when speakers voice an existing cultural discourse, like biological essentialism, but remove a component of that discourse, in effect, reworking it. This reworking transforms the discourse itself so that it becomes compatible with the meaning they aim to construct, as well as with other meanings they

have constructed previously or will construct in subsequent communication. This discursive move represents what might be called “cherry picking,” in which speakers take what works for them from an existing discourse and discard the components that do not.

Removing one component of a discourse might not seem transformative on its face, but that depends on the nature of the component extracted. If the piece which is discarded is a core, defining component of the existing discourse - one that makes the discourse what it is - then the discourse itself is qualitatively altered by this move. This was the case for biological essentialism. Less transformative instances of extraction may occur as well, but in the case of essentialism, the change of a piece necessarily changed the whole of the discourse, in a sense creating a “new biological essentialism” from which participants made meaning of sex and gender. This new essentialism is equivalent to the existing model in every way but one. Under new essentialism, the body does not determine the sex category in which a person belongs. In fact, the body is discarded as an indicator of sex. True sex is located in the brain alone. This move transforms biological essentialism, undoing the power of the body by extracting the reproductive basis for sex.

### Demonstrating Competition

Like with the discourses of the self, the first form of evidence of the competition between the biological and cultural discourses of sex/gender lies in the comparison of the tenets outlined above for each discourse. The claims that constitute one worldview as well as the implications that follow seem to me as a cultural member to logically oppose the tenets and implications of the other. For example, either gender is natural (internal) or it is not (external). In mainstream American culture, these views would likely seem to be in competition (Baxter, 2011). Second, I have demonstrated the competition of these meanings by showing that they are characterized as opposing schools of thought in the existing literature (see chapter one) (Baxter, 2011). Finally, I was able to locate in the data the discursive practices of negating and countering to verify that these discourses



were positioned as competing by participants (Baxter, 2001). The following examples demonstrate this competition.

### Negating

Aaron, the brother of Chase, a female to male transgender person, voiced the social discourse of sex and gender, but his talk then negated it in favor of the discourse of biological essentialism.

AARON: We [he and his wife] had a lot of conversations about social norms, saying, “Well, why does Chase have to, you know, if Chase feels a particular identity, why can’t those identity traits – those things that he feels – like just be, you know, female and he can change what it means to be female.”

INTERVIEWER: Right

AARON: Um, instead of having to switch to being male. I think that was one of the things that I was a little stubborn about at the time. And I don’t know if this is answering your question, but I know that I definitely struggled a lot in terms of understanding and I was resistant to it at first.

INTERVIEWER: So, how did you – I think it’s interesting what you’re saying about, “Well, why can’t you just be female and be masculine or dress neutrally” or something, you know. How did you reconcile that eventually?

AARON: (laughs) Well, I don’t know that intellectually I have yet. Um, except that I have accepted the strength of *need* for him to transition. I’ve, I guess around that time he gave us- my parents and me- a few books to look at. One was “Normal”, Amy Bloom, I think, and another one was, I’m not gonna remember the author. It was a book of photographs mainly by someone who had transitioned – um female to male

INTERVIEWER: Is it Volcano?

AARON: I don’t know. I can’t remember, but I can tell you they were sort of beautiful photographs. Both of whole bodies but also of like genitals after surgery, things like that. That was quite fascinating and there was some narrative and stuff to, so that was helpful. And I think just sort of like being exposed to it and I think basically just seeing the fact that he *needed* this sort of made me accept that this was necessary and also sort of in a more general sense made me accept this as something people need to do-even if I don’t really understand it... (Interview #17)

Even though Aaron says he still might not completely understand trans-identity, intellectually, he says that he eventually was able to understand that his sibling had a “need” to transition. He emphasized the word both times he used it, demonstrating its contrast to a “desire” or a “want.” He indicates that for his sibling to engage in simply “gender bending,” or redefining social gender roles would not be enough, implying that Chase is compelled to transition because of something out of his control; something he was born with. While the social discourse of sex and gender might have occupied the centripetal position in Aaron’s meaning making at some point in time, his talk privileges an essentialist view in this utterance. His voicing of both viewpoints and negation of the social discourse demonstrates that they are opposing views on sex and gender.

Amber, the 39 year old mother of a male to female transgender child, also engaged in negation. Her talk gave direct voice to the discourse of culture, which was subsequently eschewed in favor of an essentialist discourse. After telling me about how daycare providers told her biologically male child that “boys do not wear skirts” when he tried to wear one while playing “dress-up,” Amber tells me that she felt as if, and was told that, her child’s issue with gender was her fault:

AMBER: So, from that point on my husband was horrified...he was hell-bent that he was gonna change this kid. “Let’s start the reparative therapy!” (laughs) He blamed me. It was my fault. I babied him [the child] too much. He [the husband] would throw Barbies away when he’d find them on the floor...I mean anything that he could do to try to prevent these “behaviors” that he didn’t like.

[later in the interview] INTERVIEWER: So, through all of this, did you experience any sort of change in your relationship with her?

AMBER: Absolutely. I never made it a secret to anybody that I wanted a daughter. And I battled with that feeling of guilt for a long time thinking maybe I had done this to her. I think all parents go through that, “it’s my fault” thing. But, once I realized “this is the hand I’ve been dealt” and this is what I always wanted, why don’t I enjoy it? (Interview #18)

Amber voices the cultural view on gender when she says that both her daycare providers and her husband attempted to teach her child how to behave more like a boy should. She further does so by reporting that her husband blamed her for her son's identity issues, implying that a parent can actually be responsible for such a thing, having not taught the child the correct and appropriate ways to be masculine. After Amber tells me that her husband was determined to change their child, again giving a voice to the socio-cultural discourse, she laughs at the idea of "reparative therapy" and in doing so her talk invokes Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the clown. Invocation of the clown is accomplished when a discourse is given voice, but then made to seem absurd and laughable. Amber's talk relies on this technique to mock and therefore disqualify both her husband and the social approach to gender.

Later in the interview Amber voices the cultural discourse again when she tells me she felt guilty at first, as if she had done something to cause her child to feel like a girl, instead of a boy, but then her talk negates this view when she refers to her situation as a "hand I've been dealt." This metaphor characterizes sex and gender variance as something that is out of her control, that she cannot be blamed for, and therefore something that arises naturally. With this move, the cultural discourse is negated in favor of an essentialist view of gender.

### Countering

An example of countering can be found in Karrie's interview. Karrie, the mother of Toby, a female to male trans-identified person, gives voice to the biological essentialism discourse (body equals sex equals gender) but the discourse is then countered with an alternative view:

KARRIE: I mean, it was just so much in our face, how could we *not* support it? How could we not understand it when we finally had a term to put on it? And again, though, I think it's also the awareness that both Benji [Toby's brother] and I have that gender isn't black and white. That even though I might have been

told, “It’s a girl!” when Toby was born, it was evident that – only biologically so. (Interview #20)

Karrie’s talk demonstrates countering when she tells me that “even though” the sex of her child was announced when he was born as female (because he had the body of a female), that his gender was not yet determined. The use of “even though” indicates that biological essentialism is the dominant cultural understanding of sex; that most people probably take for granted that what the doctor tells us about a child’s sex at birth or before birth is necessarily true. She constructs this matter as not so black and white; a female body does not necessarily lead to a female person - there are not only two ways of being. With the description of gender as not “black and white,” Karrie voices the socio-cultural discourse of sex and gender, implying that sex and gender are not dichotomous and should not be conceptualized as an inflexible system with two and only two possibilities.

### Identifying the Interplay

The interplay of the discourses of sex/gender is very important for understanding the experiences of the participants, as the meanings they created for sex and gender were absolutely connected to the meanings of the self and of trans-identity, and also held implications for experiencing ambiguous loss. A few participants privileged the socio-cultural discourse, although for reasons outlined above, this was not common. Another few participants privileged a traditional biological essentialism discourse, maintaining that the body determines sex, and gender naturally follows from sex. The majority of participants engaged in the tactic of extraction as described above, transforming traditional biological essentialism into a version that worked within and in light of the other meanings they constructed for the self and trans-identity.

Interestingly, the privileging of one or the other of these competing discourses did not seem to lead to the avoidance of feelings of loss. While participants whose talk privileged the cultural discourse reasoned that any loss they felt might be silly or

irrational because gender is merely a construction and a performance, they described still feeling a sense of loss due to an attachment to the expected gender of their partner/relative. Participants whose talk privileged essentialism reasoned that they should not feel loss or said they had overcome feelings of grief because they realized they had been wrong about their relative's/partner's sex in the first place, and so there never was anything to lose.

However, even after coming to this conclusion, they described feelings of loss occurring not simply around a re-conceptualization of sex, but also around a re-conceptualization of gender. Many told me they grieved not just the person who was no longer there (or who they thought had been there in the first place), but also the expectations for that person's future, which were always tied to gender (e.g., a father walking a daughter down the aisle at her wedding). This relationship between gender and loss seems to follow from both the social and the biological discourses, as masculinity and femininity are opposing constructs under both views. So, it seems that to break this connection between gender and loss, a speaker's talk would need to dissolve both discourses and create a meaning of personhood that is not sexed/gendered at all, which is what some participants did. All of these forms of interplay and the meanings they created will be demonstrated through the data presented below.

#### Privileging the Socio-cultural Discourse

While the socio-cultural discourse of sex and gender was generally marginalized in participants' talk and often present only through indirect forms of interplay, there were some participants whose talk not only recognized, but centered this system of meaning. Elyse, the partner of a female to gender-queer trans-identified person and also herself a graduate student in a field of social science explained very clearly the social view of sex/gender while we were discussing how our own identities intertwine with the identities of our relational partners:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, definitely. One father that I talked to said it was really hard for him to give up his own identity as the father of a daughter when his child transitioned.

ELYSE: Right, 'cause it's not just father, 'cause there's a different relationship between a father and a son and a father and a daughter. It's silly that we do that; we base our relationships on gender, totally, like how we interact with people. Just by walking down the street, if I see someone that's female or male, how I'm gonna act toward them is based on their gender...

...Yeah it just seems so silly when I talk about it out loud, I'm like, "Why do we base so much on whether or not the person is male or female in our relationships with them?"...I'm kind of one of those radical Sociologists who's like "Okay, we're basing things on our social roles and this defines the systems and the powers that be." And I think it's because I mean based on whether or not you are a man or a woman determines a lot of things that you are supposed to and not supposed to do. And when you see people moving from one to the other, you're like, "Wait a second, you're not supposed to do that. You're supposed to stay there and you're supposed to do these things."

...Because I think that once, if people, especially with trans people and like intersexed people, when they start moving back and forth between these two different roles – these two roles that our society has – you can be one or you can be the other, we when see that there is movement that's allowed between them I think a lot more people will be more willing to say, "Yeah, okay, just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I can't do this thing or act this way or dress this way – I mean who cares?" And I think that really scares a lot of people because we have this whole thing, this idea of this *natural* order of things, which natural order was actually a man made creation! "Okay, well this how people with a penis are gonna act and this is how people with a vagina are gonna act." You know? And there's people that have both penises and vaginas and you know everything in between and some people really can't wrap their mind around that.

...I think everybody, honestly, I do think everybody's a little, you know, trans, if you will. Um, I think it's because, if you think about it, we do gender from the moment we are born. You don't really realize it as a child, but, "Okay, I had a baby." "Oh, did you have a boy or a girl?" "Okay, I know what toys I'm gonna buy and how I'm gonna interact with my kid and how I'm gonna do these things and how I'm gonna raise them to be either strong or nurturing or whatever." And I think that a lot of people because that's something that we do from the moment we're born, we're trained to be this one person. And especially since we have these two different roles so people associate this, masculine or feminine, with like I guess like the very essence or soul of that person. So, I feel like they're like, "You're ripping out their soul and you're putting in a different one." You know? (Interview #19)

Elyse's articulation of the socio-cultural discourse of sex and gender is very explicit. She emphasizes that we base interactions and relationships with others on the sex category to which we perceive they belong and the gendered expectations attached to that category. She points out that it is "silly" for things to be this way, implying that they do not have to be. Elyse points to the fact that individuals are gendered from birth, and that there are only two ways of being which follow from the existence of a penis or a vagina; masculinity and femininity, respectively.

However, Elyse characterizes this not as the way it is naturally, but as the way we have decided it will be through social construction. In fact, her talk counters what is positioned as most people's understanding of sex and gender, biological essentialism, with the socio-cultural discourse when she says that the existence of intersexed people and trans-people "really scares a lot of people because we have this whole thing, this idea of this *natural* order of things, which natural order was actually a man made creation!" By saying that the natural order was created by man, Elyse's talk centers the socio-cultural view of sex/gender which posits that the categorization of both is socially constructed. In the final paragraph presented from Elyse's interview, she articulates well the connection between gender and loss within the cultural discourse when she says that people likely experience loss because they tend to attach gender, even if it is a social performance, to the essence or soul of a person and therefore feel a loss when sex/gender changes.

Another example of interplay that shows a centering of the social discourse of sex/gender comes from Violet, the mother of Kip, a teenager who was born male and is gradually transitioning to female:

VIOLET: ...and I've been very honest with him, I said, "My anxiety, my discomfort wants him to pick a box and climb in it: girl or guy." And I see this on the forum all the time, that the limbo is what the parents hate because we want to be bi-gender, you know. But, I said, "Kip, you may end up being one of those people who lives between the boxes." He was asking if he could get a driver's license that didn't have a gender on it. "Sorry, not

yet. Male, female, not none of the above.” But I’ll talk to people about “my kid” and they’ll always say, “Do you have a boy or a girl?” and I’ll look at them and say, “Well, the jury’s still out on that!” And they look at me like-

INTERVIEWER: Like, “what do you mean?”

VIOLET: Exactly. And I’ll say, “Have you ever heard of transgender?” and they’ll go “Oh!” and I’ll say, “My 16 year old doesn’t quite know where Kip is gonna land.” (Interview #29)

Violet gives voice to the biological view of sex and gender by saying that there are boxes, male and female, that everyone must fit into and says that parents often experience discomfort if a trans-child does not clearly transition from one to another. By citing not only her own, but other parents’ discomfort, Violet attributes the essentialist view to herself and others and by citing discomfort with someone who is not clearly male or female, shows the dominance of the essentialist view in U.S. culture. She uses the phrase “between boxes” which demonstrates a view that there is no third, or fourth or fifth option for sex/gender identities. Then, however, her talk counters this assumption when she says that her child might just continue to live as neither male nor female, but as something else. She says that Kip does not know yet where he might “land,” indicating that where he lands is not a matter of biology or nature, but is a matter of preference for expression. Violet’s talk again indicates that essentialism is the paradigm from which most people operate when she attributes it again to “people” that ask about her kid: “boy or girl?” Her talk shows once more that the common way of thinking about sex/gender is that there are two categories, and the category in which one belongs is not up for negotiation. Violet again gives voice to the essentialist discourse, but only for the purposes of countering this view.

#### Privileging Traditional Biological Essentialism

Only a few participants privileged a traditional form of the biological essentialism discourse with their talk in which the body determines sex and gender is hard-wired in the brain, following from the sexed body (e.g., penis = male = male brain = masculine



behaviors). When I asked Chuck if he would ever consider his child, who was born female and was transitioning to male, to be his son, he answered in a way that firmly centered the traditional biological essentialism discourse:

CHUCK: Nope! No, I flat out told her, uh, “You will always be considered my daughter, period. You were not born male. You are not a male. You will always be female.” Now, unless some magical genie comes over and like “I Dream of Genie” and puts a magical thing on her to say, “I’m gonna give you the attributes,” until that magic thing where she is transformed to 100% male, which is not gonna happen, that’s my daughter.

INTERVIEWER: You mean like genetically, chromosomally and everything?

CHUCK: Yeah, that. Say you get put into a machine where you become a complete male – 100%. Guess what? It is never gonna happen, okay?

INTERVIEWER: You think you’ll ever call her by her new name, “Jake?”

CHUCK: Nope. Never. Never in a million years. (Interview #6)

Chuck’s talk operates from the discourse of biological essentialism and his talk does not alter this discourse through extraction, which was the case for most participants. Chuck’s use of language shows that he is unyielding in his position, when he uses words like “always,” “never,” and “period.” When he closes the claim that his child will always be his daughter with the word “period,” Chuck’s language works to silence and negate other discourses of sex/gender that might oppose the view he takes, specifically the socio-cultural discourse. His talk further negates the idea that one can choose or change sex/gender identity (consistent with gender as performance) when he says that it would take “magic” to make that happen. Chuck does not count the hormones his child is taking and the surgeries his child plans to undergo as enough to get the job done. At another point in the interview, Chuck addresses gender as it relates to sex, and the way in which he addresses the relationships serves to maintain the centripetal position of biological essentialism:

CHUCK: Now, she did not act this way growing up. If someone is transgendered, quote/unquote, ok, it's like this, they're gonna show you signs from when they are children, you know? Little boy wanting to wear mommy's dresses and play makeup with the girls instead of playing cars with the boys. Little girls [who] don't want to play with dolls, they'd rather play with boy stuff. Well, Alexandra played with dolls and stuff growing up. She had dresses, she always liked to look nice, okay? She did not fit the part of wanting to be a boy, you know?

Here, Chuck's talk calls up sexual determinism, a component of biological essentialism, and uses this logic to argue that his child is not transgender. He cites the fact that he perceived his child's behaviors to be in line with her biological sex as proof that she is, in fact, a female through and through. A little later, Chuck's talk does even more discursive work to negate the socio-cultural discourse of sex and gender:

CHUCK: She doesn't have a clue about what being a man is all about. She's trying to act a certain way and be a certain way and I keep trying to explain to her, "You're not gonna be a man. You can't be something you're not!" You know? If a guy tries to dress like a woman, okay or a guy goes in drag – I'm sure you've seen this...when you've see someone like that, aren't they a little over the top? Trying to act overly feminine!

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, sometimes you see hyper-femininity in drag.

CHUCK: Well, it's hysterically funny! Okay, these would be also what a girl does to try to act like a guy – they try to act overly macho and they look like a bunch of fools!

INTERVIEWER: So, what does she try to do? I mean is it her gestures, her voice?

CHUCK: Gestures, voice, the way she acts, the way she tries to hold herself as a man. Ehhh, no! It doesn't happen! Her voice goes, [uses a deeper voice, but one that sounds like someone only imitating a deep, male voice] "Hi, this is Jake, also known as Alex."

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, so why do you think it doesn't come off well? It's not natural or what?

CHUCK: She's pretending to be something she's not. And I think that's what a *lot* of people are doing when they act this way.

During this segment of our conversation, Chuck's talk negates the socio-cultural discourse through disqualification (Baxter, 2011). The talk does this in a few ways, two

of which are by invoking the clown and the rogue (Bakhtin, 1981). First, Chuck says that his daughter does not have “a clue about what being a man is all about,” indicating that if one is not born into a sex category (determined by body), then one does not have membership in or access to experiences of those in that category. The portrayal of Alex as clueless, disqualifies her as a reasonable, well-informed person. He follows that by saying “you can’t be something you’re not” and subsequently says that to take on the behaviors and features of a man when one was not born as one is merely “pretending.” With this move, Chuck gives voice to the socio-cultural discourse by recognizing that some (including drag queens and kings) do perform genders that do not align with their sex categories, but by calling this “pretending” his talk constructs this as something like “make believe,” which is associated with children, again disqualifying those people and the cultural view. Further, by insisting that those people are “trying” to be “something they’re not” his talk asserts that those performances fall short in some way and are not real, but the sex and gender one is born with are the real thing.

The presence of the clown and the rogue in Chuck’s talk aides the negation of the socio-cultural discourse by disqualifying it even further. First, the clown is invoked to mock those dressed in drag, as well as his daughter who identifies as transgender, when he cites their performances of gender as over the top, as hysterically funny, and says they look like fools. The rogue appears in his next utterance when he parodies his child’s performance of a male voice, positioning both Alex and the idea that one can take on the gender of the “opposite” sex in any meaningful, real way as ridiculous.

#### Privileging “New” Biological Essentialism

Most other participants’ talk was characterized by a transformative practice of extraction, in which the talk did not simply do something *with* the discourse of biological essentialism, like center or marginalize it, but also did something *to* this well-established worldview. This unique form of interplay shows how speakers’ talk might first have to

reflect an alteration to a discourse before the discourse can be adopted as the centripetal force in their meaning making. The conundrum family members faced in making meaning for sex/gender is that operating from a socio-cultural view means that, like Aaron suggested above, a female person who desired to be male could simply perform masculinity and change what it means to be female, since sex and gender are both socially negotiable. On the other hand, if family members privileged the traditional biological essentialism discourse, then there is no way a trans-identified person can legitimately transition from one sex category to another, as Chuck argues, because the genetic and anatomical body the person has at birth are deterministic and unchangeable. From this view, sex follows from the body, most specifically from genitalia, because sex by definition exists for reproductive purposes. So, it seems that neither of these discourses as they stand allow for a non-problematic meaning of sex and gender for participants who also privilege the discourse of the sovereign self (self is inborn, contained in the brain) and the medicalized discourse of transgender identity, which also privileges the brain and holds that trans-people have an inborn condition which compels them to transition (to be discussed in a coming section).

Participants talk showed a discursive move that allowed them to bypass this obstacle to coherent meaning making. Their talk did not show a third and different discourse, but instead showed a claiming and reworking of the discourse of biological essentialism for a unique meaning making endeavor. By extracting a core component from this system of meaning, that component being that the body (configured for reproductive purposes) determines sex, participants' talk utilized this discourse in a way that allowed for coherency and consistency in their meaning making process. The anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones were discounted as indicators of sex in favor of the brain. This extracting of a core component of biological essentialism transformed the discourse into a workable system of meaning for participants whose talk also centered the sovereign self and the transsexual model of trans-identity.

Following from this transformed biological essentialism, if the brain and body are not aligned (e.g., female brain, female body), then necessarily the body has to be the defect, not the brain. Otherwise, the sovereign self discourse would lose its currency and therefore its centripetal position in participants' communication. The following examples show how the discursive move of extraction allowed participants to privilege (new) biological essentialism and dismiss the socio-cultural approach to sex/gender in their talk. Ava, mother to a female to male trans-identified person explained how her young child understands trans-identity:

AVA: She doesn't know what transgender is, she just knows that she got a girl body and that, but she's a boy in her brain, but her body is that of a girl. And I've explained to her that's the reason people think she's a girl because she didn't get the boy body and her parts are like a girl. And she knows what a penis is and as a matter of fact, she pretends she has one. Like, if you're wrestling with her and she gets hit [in the genital area] she goes, "Oh, my wiener!" (laughs) and her older sister will correct her and say, "You're a boy, but you don't have a wiener."

In this utterance, Ava's talk directly explicates the altered essentialism view by saying that her child has a boy brain and a girl body. The talk shows that the brain trumps the body through the reported speech of her other child, "you're a boy, *but* you don't have a wiener." By extracting the body's power from biological essentialism, Ava's talk can coherently construct her child as being a boy without having a penis, because Regan [the child] has a boy brain. A bit later in our discussion, I asked Ava how she explains her situation to outsiders. In telling me how she recently explained trans-identity to a friend Ava's talk directly negates the relevance of cultural discourse of sex and gender to her situation and privileges the new essentialism:

AVA: I just explained to her about the condition, that in her [Regan's] brain she truly has a male brain and that's what she feels, you know, and that it's more than just that she wants to wear boy clothes, and wants to do this or that, it's her mannerisms. You know, I mean raising this child – the mannerisms of Regan are 100% boy mannerisms, with excitement, with disappointment, with how she communicates with a girl, with a boy, the differences. There is a "no girls allowed" sign in her bedroom!...I just explained to her that there are people out there that are actually

born with a body that is different from their brain and that you know, that Regan would not exclaim that she's a boy her entire life if that's not how she truly felt. And that's more serious than someone who just likes to play baseball or likes to get dirty. Cause people always say, "Oh, I used to climb trees and get dirty." "But, did you go around trying to use boys' restrooms and wanting to wear boys' underwear and did you tell your mom" you know, none of these things happen to regular tomboys. (Interview #24)

In this recounting of the explanation Ava gave to her friend, the discourse of culture is marginalized and the transformed biological essentialism discourse is centered. She again describes that bodies and brains can be misaligned as far as sex is concerned. By using the word "truly," Ava's talk makes sure that the new essentialism discourse is not taken lightly and implies that even though her friend may not be able to verify that Regan has a male brain in the way that she could verify a male body that does not make the claim any less true. Ava then goes on to offer gendered behavior as proof that Regan has a male brain, which again instantiates the new biological essentialism discourse. Near the end of this utterance, the cultural discourse is voiced through attribution to "others" who tell her that her child's behavior is merely variance in gender expression, a nuanced performance, and therefore not an indication of a sexed brain. Ava responds to this view by describing the difference between someone who is merely a gender-bender or a tomboy, and someone who is actually male in the brain.

The next example comes from Gabbie, mother to a female to male trans-identified person. As Gabbie tells the story of how she caught her child talking to his reflection, saying, "You're such a handsome boy," her talk engages the discourses of nurture and nature in direct, synchronic interplay. However, she offers a caveat which transforms traditional essentialism to an essentialism that is more appropriate for her meaning making process:

GABBIE: ...And I thought, "This is more than a tomboy, this is more than a lesbian in the making. This is - this kid's confused." So...I sat on the edge of the tub and said, "You know, listen, Rosalie," that was the name at the time, "you're a beautiful person and you're a wonderful person and I love you deeply, but you are a girl. You have a vulva and a vagina. You're a girl. Jared [Rosalie's brother] has a penis, he's a boy." As if that's what

makes us a boy or a girl – that’s what I thought then. And he looked at me and he said, “Mom, I *am* a boy and I do have a penis on the inside and when I grow up to be a man, it’s gonna come out.” (Interview #27)

First, Gabbie alludes to the socio-cultural discourse of gender when she voices the idea that girls can be masculine and might be called tomboys or lesbians, but are still regarded as female. Her talk dismisses the idea that this view of gender has any relevance to her child’s identity when she says “this is more than” both tomboy and lesbian identity. Gabbie then tells me about how she tried to set her child straight by explaining to Rosalie that having a vulva and vagina made her female. This, of course, follows from the biological essentialist discourse. Immediately after, Gabbie offers a qualification of that statement: “As if that’s what makes us a boy or a girl – that’s what I thought then.” With this caveat, Gabbie’s talk shows extraction by discarding the physical body, specifically the genitalia, as a valid indicator of sex. She alludes to the fact that she has a new understanding of how sex should be determined, and later tells me that the sexed brain is the true indicator of male or female identity. Amber, mother of a male to female trans-child, also created the meaning that brain sex trumps anatomy in her talk when I asked her if she felt that she had a son and now has a daughter or if she feels she always had a daughter:

AMBER: Mmm hmm. I always had a daughter...with a penis. We were wrong.

In this utterance, Amber’s talk indirectly accomplishes extraction as it works to remove the physical body from biological essentialism, making it is possible to have a daughter with a penis. A bit later in our discussion, Amber’s talk lends support to the transformed discourse of essentialism through the discursive practice of camouflaging (Baxter, 2011). The “new essentialism” discourse is presented as objective and value-free through citation of authority, specifically the American Academy of Pediatrics:

AMBER: Yep, the American Academy of Pediatrics – have you seen their article about gender identity?

INTERVIEWER: No.

AMBER: ...It talks about by the age of 4 a child's identity is stable.

INTERVIEWER: Right

AMBER: So, if they're saying, "I'm a girl" and they have male parts, yeah, they're a girl with male parts. (Interview #18)

By referencing a medical association, Amber's talk invokes the authority of science and research to position the transformed biological essentialism as the centripetal discourse. The socio-cultural discourse is completely silenced. Karrie, on the other hand, does acknowledge that there is another way to think about gender, as being taught and learned, but her talk directly negates this discourse in favor of the transformed version of biological essentialism. We were discussing parents who feel guilt when they discover that their child is transgender:

INTERVIEWER: Oh yeah, some people have told me that they experience guilt, like, "What did I do wrong?"

KARRIE: (laughs) That's crazy when people say that, but people again have the hard time of trying to wrap their heads around, but you know, "She was born female! She has female parts! "Well, they might have the female parts, but he's got the male mind!" (Interview #20)

Here, I gave voice to the socio-cultural discourse of sex/gender through the reported speech of other parents I had interviewed. Karrie laughs at the idea that a parent could do something to make their child transgender and with that laugh and the remark that it is "crazy when people say that" her communication disqualifies and therefore negates the socio-cultural discourse. Directly after, her talk shows the dominance of traditional biological essentialism when she tells me that people have a hard time shaking the view that the body (genitalia) determines sex. Karrie's talk accomplished countering through extraction when she says, "but he's got the male mind." With this utterance, Karrie's talk pulls the metaphorical rug from under biological essentialism, stripping the importance of the body from this worldview, but leaving everything else in place. In effect, the transformed version of essentialism counters the traditional version of it so that



an essentialist view is still centered in understanding for sex and gender, consequently keeping the socio-cultural discourse in the margins.

Audrey's talk provides a very clear example of how this eschewing of the body from the essentialist view works through characterizing the body as defective because it does not align with the brain. Audrey is the fiancé of a female to male trans-identified person:

INTERVIEWER: So, when Sam came out to his family, how did he explain his identity to them?

AUDREY: Um, he explains his identity as, um, it's like a birth defect. He was born, the inside of him- his brain- still identifies and thinks that it's male, but the body is female, so it's pretty much like a birth defect; like things grew that shouldn't have grown and things didn't grow that should have grown. (Interview #5)

Audrey explicitly describes her fiancé's body as defective because it is female, and therefore not aligned with his brain, which is what determines his sex. Again, this meaning of the body as defective is necessary to remove the body's central position in the biological essentialism discourse. Therefore, a vagina which under traditional biological essentialism is recognizable, normal, and female, becomes a defect or a "thing that grew that shouldn't have grown;" a body part that has no function or relevance to a male person. This meaning of the relationship between the brain and body is the basis for one of the discourses of transgender identity that will be discussed in a subsequent section.

### Sex, Gender, and Ambiguous Loss

One of the most important themes to arise in the struggle of meaning making surrounding sex and gender was the connection between these concepts and the experience of loss. Several of the data examples presented in order to illustrate discourses of the self alluded to this connection between loss and sex/gender; any who experienced loss indicated that they lost "a son," "a daughter," "a father," or "a sister," for example. As described above, if the concepts of male and female are conceptualized as opposites,

then both cannot exist at once, creating potential for the experience of loss when transition occurs. There were several references in the data that show that men and women are conceived of as opposites, or at the very least, different kinds of people. For example, Elyse's talk explicitly characterizes sons and daughters as opposites:

ELYSE: I've heard parents say you know, "I felt like I was," like they mourned the loss of their child because they feel like they're *losing* a daughter, they're *losing* a son, they're gaining the opposite. (Interview #19)

Bianca also provides a poignant description of how the conceptualization of male and female as opposite can affect family members when someone transitions. She talked about her ex-husband's reaction to their child's trans-identity:

BIANCA: I didn't know what to think or what to expect or, and we went back out to sit in the waiting room and my husband was obviously purely shaken, my ex-husband. And he said, "I love him as my son. I don't love him as my daughter."

Even when family members were able to privilege the sovereign self discourse and construct their post-transitioned relatives as the same, having always been there because the true self was in the brain and never changed, some family members still struggled with loss connected to gender. They cited gendered relationships as the cause of the feelings of loss, for example, they said communicating with a person who is male is different than communicating with someone who is female, and that they had gendered expectations for their loved ones and realized those would not be fulfilled. As mentioned before, the connection between gender and loss makes sense from both socio-cultural and biological discourses of sex/gender, because according to both worldviews, we relate to others on gendered terms, even if the reasons behind that fact are different. Below, Edward's talk represents loss surrounding the idea of a daughter, and he gives voice to biological essentialism as he provides a reason for that:

EDWARD: ...but what was more deeply seeded emotionally was um, how I identified myself as a loving, protective father of a cute little girl.

INTERVIEWER: Did that feeling of loss, of the past, of being the father of the little girl – did that happen immediately or did it happen as changes in Adam started to happen?

EDWARD: I think immediately. As I started trying to think of him as a male it was just, it raised all kinds of cognitive dissonance with my memories of him as a cuddly little girl...[later in our discussion]...you know gender bifurcation is built into our language, our pronouns, our sentence structure, and thus into our thought processes – it's the paradigm that we start out with from childhood- from earliest childhood! A kid has a mommy and a daddy, you play with boys and girls – the world is bifurcated along gender lines...[later in our discussion] I mean the fact of the matter is that men relate to women in gendered terms – that's the way our brains are wired. There's no way in the world that I could relate to a woman and the man in the same way. It's just not in my repertoire. (Interview #13)

Edward describes experiencing cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) when he thought about his “cuddly little girl” as a male. Cognitive dissonance is discomfort that comes from holding two contradictory ideas or beliefs simultaneously, and so Edward's mention of this again shows how male and female are conceptualized as opposite concepts. One person cannot exist as both, which leads to the experience of loss in relation to sex/gender identity transition. Similarly, even though the sovereign self discourse was privileged in the talk of Alaina, the wife of a male to female trans-identified person, as she constructed her spouse as still the same person, Alaina still struggled with the loss of the masculine role of “husband”:

ALAINA: Well, I mean it was also the roles [in addition to the physical changes]. I mean, a male normally takes the lead in the family, he normally handles some responsibilities that the female wouldn't and that that point like it was more kind of like a 50/50, but I was hoping I'd be able to rely on a male. I'd always grown up with like my grandparents, they were old style, like my nanny always stayed home with us and the males, grandpa went out and got the money. That's my ideal life, that's kind of what I wanted, and I felt like I was losing all hope of that. (Interview #1)

Alaina acknowledges that her description of male and female roles are traditional social roles that do not necessarily have to be followed, but “normally” are, which gives voice to the socio-cultural discourse of gender. She described losing hope for the gendered relationship she thought she would have being married to a male when her

husband transitioned to female. Other participants also struggled with the loss of a gendered family role. Isabella describes her experience of loss specifically surrounding the gendered label for her sibling:

ISABELLA: The thing that I'm struggling with, that actually I think we're both [she and her transgender sibling] struggling with is the loss of the term "sister" and the um, the lack of anything that doesn't sound clinical, like "sibling" sucks, man! Um, so we've been talking and like playing around with different things like I told you we use this term "bester," (Interview #4)

Isabella's sibling was transitioning away from a female identity, but not clearly toward a male identity, and therefore a transition from "sister" to "brother" was not an appropriate one for the situation, but of course, there are no alternative gender-free labels from which to choose besides "sibling." This shows how relationships, and especially family relationships, are built from the ground up on assumptions about sex gender and again shows the importance of these concepts to identity, both our own identities and those of our relational partners. Although Olivia eventually came to center the sovereign self discourse and think of her father as the same person, she also talked about how gendered family roles and gendered family labels were an issue for her at one point in relation to her parent's transition from male to female:

OLIVIA: ...I was only recognizing her role in my life, um, which at that point had just been very fatherly, very paternal and she had wanted me to call her "mom" and she wanted me to refer to her as "mom #2" or "mother" and I couldn't do it. So, there was definitely a lot of sense of loss.

INTERVIEWER: So, the loss seemed to be about losing "father," not about losing this person?

OLIVIA: Yeah

INTERVIEWER: So, why do you think you couldn't call her "mom?"

OLIVIA: The presence that she had had in my life growing up had been taking us to church on Sundays, being there for dinner, talking over our day, um, and helping us study for tests and stuff. She hadn't been there to take us to softball games, do our laundry, to make sure that we got up to go to school, and to be there when we got hurt, when we needed to cry... So, she hadn't

been filling that role of mother to us. She wasn't the nurturer, and so I couldn't bring myself to give her any credit or give her any say in what my mother had experiences with us growing up. And that was my big contention, like "You're not my mother, you're not. I'll figure out what to call you, but you're not my mother."  
(Interview #22)

Olivia told me at another point that she and her parent decided on a "slightly" feminized" version of "dad," and so she called her parent "dadda." Olivia's description of the roles of father and mother demonstrates well the expectations for the male and female persons who are assumed to fill those roles, respectively. Again, even though Olivia's talk did privilege the discourse of the sovereign self and she said that she knew that her dadda was the same person on the inside, she still experienced grief over the loss of the role her parent had always played in her life, as father. Many parents of young and adult children also described loss of the gendered relationship they either had with their child or expected to have with their child as he or she grew up. Carter, the father of a female to male trans-identified person, describes what he felt when his daughter became his son:

CARTER: A lot of the emotions that come with grief, uh, sort of you can't believe it, but you do believe it. I can't really believe it, but I do believe it. Um, the loss of your imagined future for your child completely gets turned on its head...and of course, I always imagined that someday I would walk Olive down the aisle and she would get married to some nice man and um, we'd have grandchildren at some point. So, those kinds of things were – the loss of that imagined scenario was very real. I felt like I had lost a daughter in the things that normally would come with having a daughter. So, um, yeah, she was the only daughter I had.

Carter uses the phrases "imagined future" and "imagined scenario" to talk about the gendered expectations that he had for his child's life when he conceptualized Olive as a daughter. There are not only gendered expectations for Olive's life trajectory, but also for their relationship, for example, he would someday walk her down the aisle, which is tradition for a father to do at his daughter's wedding. Carter uses the word "normally" which indicates that these are events that most fathers expect for their daughters' lives and the expectations are not the same for fathers of sons. It is not abundantly clear, in this utterance, which discourse of sex/gender Carter' talk is privileging, as both would lead to

the meaning making of a daughter as traditionally feminine. Carter's talk does, however, privilege the discourse of the sovereign self later in our discussion when he says that Olive is the same person now that he is Isaac, and so probably Carter's meaning making processes also center the "new" essentialism discourse, which privileges the brain in matters of identity. Ruth also conveyed feelings of loss surrounding her adult child's gender identity:

RUTH: The first thing you learned about your child was "It's a girl!" which really sets up a lot of expectations, which I had just never really thought about before...I definitely feel still that I lost a daughter (voice breaks) and I haven't quite worked through that. I don't even really know what that means. It's a concept. It's an idea (laughs). It's not a person. I didn't lose my child, so it's just sharing what mothers and daughters share that isn't there...(Interview #32)

Ruth's talk privileges the socio-cultural discourse of gender when she says that she does not even know what it means to feel like she lost a daughter, because that is merely a concept or idea, not a person. If it were a person, then the gender would be inborn, and so Ruth's talk points to the constructed nature of what it means to be and have a daughter. Further, she tells me that her child is still there, but they do not have a mother-daughter relationship and in that way, she feels some sense of loss.

#### Transformative Dialogue: Aesthetic Moment

Regardless which discourse participants privileged, that of culture or biology, there is no way around conceptualizing the trans-identified person's identity and their relationship to the family member as gendered because within both of these meaning systems, the concepts of man and woman, and even the concept of "person," are gendered, though for different reasons according to the discourse being invoked. To get around sexed/gendered personhood and relationships, to detach sex and gender from them, one would have to dissolve both discourses of sex and gender and engage in the transformative interplay of an aesthetic moment, discursively making room for a new meaning where sex and gender matter not to personhood and relating.

A few participants did create aesthetic moments with their talk by removing sex and gender from their relative/partner's identity and their relationship to that person. For example, Elyse's talk constructed her partner as neither male nor female and she cited that construction as the reason she was still having trouble using pronouns in reference to her partner:

ELYSE: The "she/he" has taken a while for me to wrap my mind around because I got so used to thinking of Cal as a woman. Um, and I don't really think of Cal as a guy either, so I think that's why I have trouble with the pronoun usage.... I see Cal as Cal. I don't see Cal as a man. I don't see Cal as a woman. (Interview #19)

Elyse removes the sex and gender from Cal's identity, therefore superseding both the biological and the socio-cultural discourses of sex/gender where what it means to be a man vs. a woman is integral to personal and relational identity. Instead of saying that Cal is now male, Elyse opts to construct Cal as simply, "Cal." Roxy, the 59 year old mother of Jackson (female to male), talks about her child in a similar way, constructing him as "Jackson" instead of as strictly male or female. However, Roxy says it took her time to get to that point, indicating diachronic separation in her meaning-making process:

ROXY: And so what I really was grieving was a shell of a dream that had vanished. I mean, it was gone. The idea that Jackson would grow up as a woman – I had to lose that dream and all those expectations. And they were so deep. There were layers and layers and layers of kind of femininity built into my association with him as a gender-based human being! So, through a lot of emotional and intellectual work, I replaced layer by layer through fresh experiences, but it took a lot of time.

INTERVIEWER: So, then do you think of it as you lost that daughter and gained a son or do you make sense of it in a different way?

ROXY: Well, for me, I realized that I have always made presumptions that who Jackson was, was female, and that it was my presumptions that had to be reexamined... And for a while I would say definitely I was in the "I lost a daughter, but I gained a son" because it took me a while to learn about, "well, what would that mean? What does maleness really mean to Jackson?" Um, I mean the way he expresses his maleness is actually very nuanced and not at all steeped in male cliché. (Interview #21)

Roxy then explained to me that Jackson now looks male and passes very easily. She told me that Jackson's masculine physicality made it easier for her to think of him as her son, but that even given a masculine physicality, she does not really think of Jackson as strictly male or female:

ROXY: And those physical changes were very confirming for me of "this is my kid, who is male, therefore he is my son," but there's kind of a beautiful integration where I just think of him in a way as Jackson.

Interestingly, Roxy actually describes the experience of the aesthetic moment she creates through her communication as "beautiful." Transformative dialogue and especially aesthetic moments, by definition, are thought to be somewhat pleasing in that they relieve the struggle between two or more competing meanings, which Roxy has done here with the opposing meanings of male and female. She told me that to get to this point in the meaning making process she had to work through layers of femininity that she had associated with Jackson's identity. Her words emphasized how steeped in sex and gender our ideas of personhood and relationships really are. Sofia, the 66 year old mother of a female to male trans-identified person, also constructed through her talk sex and gender as unimportant to her child's identity. I gave her two choices for categorizing her child's identity and she refused both:

INTERVIEWER: So, do you feel like you do have a son now instead of a daughter?

SOFIA: Truthfully, I don't think it – neither one makes sense to me at this point. Elijah is just Elijah, you know, um, when I refer to him with other people I usually say my son because, you know, the appearance is definitely male. Um, but you know, it's like with my other two [children] who are definitely female, I don't think of them as female so much as just who they are. Somehow it doesn't really register with me to put a label on it, you know?  
(Interview #2)

Sofia's talk recognizes that most people consider sex and gender to be integral to a person's identity and therefore to their relationships when she tells me that she refers to Elijah as her son for other people's sake. Then, her talk dismisses the idea that sex and



gender are necessary categories of personhood when she says that she does not categorize any of her children as male or female, necessarily, and really sees Elijah as simply, Elijah. The use of a name to describe a gender-less identity was common for all of the participants who engaged in this type of discursive meaning making which produced aesthetic moments. By using the persons' name to refer to them instead of pronouns, the participants were able to still recognize their loved ones as legitimate persons, but also to remove the components of sex and gender from their personhood.

It was especially important that participants used names to identify their relatives/partners because there is no widely recognized and used gender-neutral pronoun. In fact, three participants made reference to the use of the pronoun "it" in relation to a person and implied that using "it" to describe a person is not only unacceptable, but it does discursive violence (Alcoff, 1991) to them. Elyse, who gave such a clear explication of the socio-cultural discourse on sex and gender, and then constructed her partner as simply, Cal, addressed the use of "it" to describe an ambiguously or non-normatively gendered person:

ELYSE: ...when they see something that doesn't conform [to traditional gender roles] they're like, "Huh, that's interesting," but at the same time people think, maybe look at individuals who are androgynous or kind of ambiguous gender benders as kind of less than a man, less than woman. They can't quite pinpoint it, so you're an "it." And often, you become something that's not human. It's like you have to be a man or a woman to be a person...(Interview #19)

Elyse makes the connection between sex and personhood explicit, and again speaks the socio-cultural discourse, saying that the way sex/gender are conceptualized in U.S. culture is that a person has to belong to one of two sex categories or else not be counted as human. Elyse shows that there is a very different way of de-gendering a person than the way she did so for her partner, Cal. This kind of de-gendering is accomplished by referring to a person as "it." In pointing out how others de-humanize those who do not clearly fit into one sex category or the other, Elyse's talk illuminates the

dominance of the idea that sex and gender are integral to personhood, identity, and relationships. Similarly, Karrie gave a specific example of how the use of the pronoun “it” can be used to show a lack of acceptance for trans-people and other gender variant persons:

KARRIE: Toby’s father does not accept him at all. I mean, he had not had anything to do with Toby for over a year and actually we just say his dad just a couple of weeks ago and his dad referred to Toby as “it.”

From Karrie’s retelling of this event, it is clear that Toby’s father’s use of “it” to refer to him was taken as a sign of lack of acceptance and support, implying that Toby’s father refuses to recognize him as either male or female, and therefore refers to him as if he is not a person, but an object instead. The use of “it” creates a removal of sex and gender that also takes away personhood, which instantiates the notion that sex and gender are integral to being human/person. Finally, Lois, sister of Louie who transitioned from female to male, gives an example of how referring to a person as “it” is degrading:

LOIS: My mom and one of my sisters had the hardest time and still do. I think my mom has the hardest of all, of saying “Louie” and “he.” And at some point they got so self-conscious and flustered that they had screwed up again that they said, “it.”

INTERVIEWER: Oh no

LOIS: And laughed about it. And Louie is right there. And it was like this nice meal we were having at like the [restaurant] – very fancy. And I was all excited about everyone being there and having this great family Norman Rockwell experience and there they go calling Louie “it.” And I had a little bit of compassion for them because I could understand how flustered and embarrassing the whole thing is, but not a lot when you go as far as saying “it” and I was angry at them and then I was like standing back and watching to see how Louie wanted to handle it and Louie was kind of shocked and then got really angry and said, “I am not an ‘it,’ just so that you know.”

Lois reports that her brother Louie was very angry and insisted that he was not “an it.” This, again, shows that the use of this pronoun in reference to a person does something to remove the sex/gender component from personhood, but also seems to remove the right to personhood itself. This is clearly seen as different from the aesthetic

moment created by the participants who used their relative's/partner's name in lieu of man/woman and he/she. It seems that using the names of persons allows for their membership as human to remain; removing sex from their identity without erasing personhood itself, whereas referring to a person as "it" does not. At least, that is how these participants constructed it in their talk.

The interplay of the biological and the social discourses and the meanings made for sex and gender, especially in relation to personhood, relationships, and loss are intimately connected to the discourses and meanings present in the next site of struggle over the nature of trans-identity. The brain, the body, biology, and culture all feature prominently in this centripetal-centrifugal struggle. The reason for extraction and new essentialism will hopefully become clearer as the site of struggle over trans-identity is elucidated.

### Site of Struggle #3: The Nature of Trans-Identity

#### Locating the Discourses

Another pervasive struggle in the participants' meaning making concerned the nature of trans-identity. Not surprisingly, the two models of trans-identity outlined in Chapter One surfaced during the interview discussions. Participants talked about trans-identity as a medical condition, as a mental illness, as a natural variation in the human condition, and/or as a way of life. They referred to their relatives/partners as either having a need to transition in order to treat the condition of trans-identity, or as making a decision to transition, not necessarily due to a need, but more like a desire to live in a way that did not conform to traditional sex/gender roles. These themes made up two competing discourses that offer opposing views on trans-identity, a medicalized view and a social view, which Denny (2004) called the transsexual and the transgender model, respectively.

### Discourse of Transsexualism

The medicalized model or discourse of transsexualism conceives of trans-identity as a condition where persons feel their bodies are not reflective of their true sex categories. The inclusion of this in the DSM-IV suggests that the condition is a psychological one where the problem exists in the mind; however, the participants in this study who privileged the transsexual discourse, citing trans-identity as a condition, referred to trans-identity as a medical condition, not a psychological one, indicting the body with the problem instead of the brain. This meaning is consistent with this discourse as many potential causes for trans-identity as a disorder have been offered, including hormonal and chromosomal issues. This transsexual discourse further entails that transition is a treatment necessary to remedy the ailment of a body that does not fit with the mind's conceptualization of the sexed self. As Denny (2004) points out, many who adopt the transsexual model describe trans-identity as being "trapped in the wrong body" (p. 26), which implies that to achieve comfort, a trans-identified person must transition clearly from one sex category to another (i.e., female to male or male to female). Many participants in this study described their relatives/partners as having severe discomfort or struggle in relation to their bodies, and most of the trans-people represented by relatives/partners in this study were reportedly transitioning or had transitioned from one sex category to another, but not all.

### Discourse of Transgenderism

The opposing discourse of trans-identity might be called a social or cultural model, or as Denny (2004) calls it, a transgender model. This discourse holds that trans-identified people are not defective, but simply represent another way of being or an alternative way of expressing gender. Working from the transgender discourse, a person who is trans-identified does not necessarily feel discomfort or the need to make physical

changes to the body, but instead lives a life that is outside of traditional gender roles and even sex categories, in some cases.

As discussed in Chapter One, there are some important implications that follow from each of these models. First, the transsexual discourse does depict trans-identity as a problem, as a disorder or defect, but the source of that problem is psychological, physiological, or biological. Therefore, within this view, and especially if the attributed cause is physiological or biological, neither the trans-identified person nor anyone else is responsible for the condition. Further the treatments, like hormone therapy and surgeries, are not optional or cosmetic but are necessary to the extent the trans-identified persons feel they need them. The transgender model also does not imply that the trans-identified person is in some way morally wrong, but holds that the socially constructed binary of male/female, masculine/feminine is to blame for the marginalization of other existing identities like transgender or intersex. However, some participants called up this choice or path oriented view to indict the trans-identified person as morally wrong, and some acknowledged that others use this discourse to create such meanings. So, in effect, the de-pathologizing of trans-identity can work against trans-people and those in relationships with them if trans-identity is also constructed as morally wrong, and choice is used to incite blame.

Clearly, the ways these discourses are used and positioned in relation to each other has implications for the meaning of trans-identity and transition, as well as for constructions of the character of trans-identified people and their relational partners. Participants in this study recognized this, creating meaning from existing cultural discourses of trans-identity at the distal-already-spoken site of the utterance chain, but also by responding to a superaddressee (Bakhtin, 1986) at the distal-not-yet-spoken site as well. Parents, and especially the parents of young transgender people, addressed how they might appear to others in making the choice to support and aide their transgender child or not. For parents of young kids, especially, any blame that others might charge

would fall on their shoulders, as they are legally responsible for their children and were the ones making transition possible for them. The recognition of this fact seemed connected to the discourses privileged by these parents in the meaning making of trans-identity.

### Demonstrating Competition

The existing literature on trans-identity presented in Chapter One demonstrates well that the transgender and transsexual discourses of trans-identity are competing viewpoints, which is especially evident in Denny's (2004) clear explication of these models. Further evidence that these are competing systems of meaning comes from their presence in the talk of participants. Participants engaged in negating, countering, and entertaining with regard to these discourses and in doing so created a centripetal-centrifugal struggle for meaning of trans-identity.

### Countering

An example of countering comes from my interview with Sofia, mother of Elijah, a female to male transgender person:

SOFIA: The only thing that is confusing to me is that Elijah says that she's never, she never felt that she was in the wrong body, unlike anything I've read.

INTERVIEWER: How does she describe it?

SOFIA: She – she, he said that um, it's a gender thing. She doesn't believe in gender.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that it would have been less confusing for you if he had said, "I was born in the wrong body? I've always felt like a man inside?"

SOFIA: Well, it would have confirmed what I read (laughs). I mean, on the other hand I kind of agree with the whole gender thing...I think we all have different genders in us, you know, it's just where we are on the spectrum, is you know, depending on individuals you know? So, intellectually I understand that and agree with it, um, it's just psychologically it's a little hard to understand, uh, because this you know, Elijah's the only one who has said that. Everyone else I know has said, "Yes,"

they felt like they were born in the wrong body, basically.  
(Interview #2)

Three times during this part of the conversation Sofia's talk positions the transsexual discourse as the dominant model for understanding trans-identity in the cultural at large. First she tells me that Elijah's explanation of his identity goes against everything she has read about trans-identity and says that she was confused by that. She again mentions things she has read about it and lastly tells me that everyone else she knows who is trans-identified has said that they were born in the wrong body, and therefore Elijah is in the minority because he does not. Sofia's talk acknowledges that the transsexual discourse occupies the centripetal position in lay person and scholarly understandings of trans-identity, but counters this with the transgender discourse when she says, "on the other hand, I kind of agree with the whole gender thing," and then gives voice to the transgender model, which Elijah endorses. These are clearly opposing viewpoints for understanding the nature of trans-identity.

### Negating

An example of direct negating comes from my interview with Karrie:

KARRIE: ...but I knew Toby was different. And I figured, "Okay, well I'm gonna have a lesbian daughter. And I was okay with that because I know it's not a choice, you know? And that is one thing that I think infuriates me more than anything is when people tell me that my son *chose* to be transgender, because it is *not* a choice and if it was, who would choose to go through what a transgender person goes through?"

Karrie gives direct voice to the discourse of transgenderism, and shows how this discourse can be invoked by some people to place some sort of blame on trans-people. It seems that if a speaker wants to construct trans-identity as morally wrong, then the transgender discourse in which trans-identity is not a disorder and therefore is something a trans-identified person has control over can be used to create negative meanings of trans-identity. Karrie points to this use of the transgender model and her talk negates both when she says it "infuriates" her when people say that because it is "not a choice." She

emphasizes the word “not” which works hard to negate the transgender discourse. Then, the talk disqualifies the transgender discourse by making it seem ridiculous that anyone would elect to go through the difficulties that trans-people face. With this, it is implied that people will choose to do what is in their best interest and trans-identity is something that is not, which further negates the notion that choice has anything to do with trans-identity and transition. At the same time, Karrie’s talk shows that the transgender model is a competing view that some might privilege.

### Identifying the Interplay

#### Privileging the Transgender Discourse

While the vast majority of participants privileged the transsexual discourse through their talk, a few did center the transgender model, or at the very least constructed trans-identity as a choice, not a disorder that a person is born having. However, this meaning of choice or path was invoked in vastly different ways. It was clear in Isabella’s talk that she and her transgender sibling centered the transgender model in their meaning making processes. As we discussed the fact that her sibling, Jess, identifies as female to gender queer, Isabella elaborates on why that is:

ISABELLA: Um, it was very explicitly, “It is not that I feel like a man trapped in a woman’s body,” um, it was more, “I wanna, I feel like I don’t fit into traditional gender norms and feel more comfortable operating in a more nuanced space as far as gender goes.” Um, so you know, some things Jess has said to me are, um, “I don’t identify as a woman or a girl, but I equally don’t identify as a man or a boy. So, Jess likes the term “trans” or “gender-queer,” kind of likes the term “transgender,” but doesn’t identify as transsexual.

Isabella’s talk clearly outlines both models of trans-identity in this utterance. Her talk positions the transsexual model as the dominant cultural view when she reports that her sibling said, “It is *not* that I feel like a man trapped in a woman’s body.” The use of the phrase, “it is not that” indicates that the feeling of being trapped in the wrong body is the typical sentiment that people attach to trans-identity in U.S. culture. Isabella’s talk,



through the reported speech of her sibling, counters this model with the transgender discourse. For another example, I return to Sofia whose talk privileged the transgender model, which she reported her son Elijah endorses. After voicing the competing views on trans-identity, her talk privileges the transgender discourse through the reported speech of her son:

SOFIA: I never got that sense from Elijah. I mean, you know that he felt something was wrong with him. It was more like “This is what’s right with me.” (Interview #2)

Sofia’s talk pits the transsexual and transgender discourses as opposing views and centers the transgender discourse when she says that there is nothing wrong with her son, according to him. Another mother of a younger trans-identified person, Violet, also reported her teenage child’s view on trans-identity. What is interesting about Sofia’s communication contrasted with Violet’s is that while Sofia’s talk privileges the same discourse she reports her son to endorse, Violet actually privileges the transsexual model for her own meaning making process (an example of which will be presented later), but tells me that her child privileges the transgender model in his own meaning-making:

INTERVIEWER: Have you had conversations with people who wouldn’t describe it as a condition? Or what would you say to that?

VIOLET: I’m not sure where you’re going, but I think Kip is among them. He’s like, “I am who I am, I’m built the way I’m built, it’s okay. He didn’t have a hatred of his body when he went into puberty. He didn’t have that anger that something was wrong. He has this, “I’m a girl in a guy’s body – that’s what I am.” And I’ve seen a little bit of that as I do my research and reading, that this younger group of transgender is coming up going, “Hey, you call it a disorder, I call it me!”

Violet attributes the transgender discourse to not only her son, but to a younger generation of trans-gender people who do not necessarily adopt the transsexual model, but instead construct trans-identity as another way of being. As Violet says, under this view, a person can be a girl in a guy’s body and that is “okay” because it is simply a variation in sex and gender and the fact that it does not fit into the binary of male/female

does not make it wrong. What is perhaps most interesting about Violet's interview is that it highlights the importance of the distal-not-yet-spoken site of the utterance chain for parents, and especially parents of young trans-kids. Violet reports that her teenager adopts the transgender view, but as I will show later, she adopts the transsexual model herself, calling her son's identity a medical condition, explicitly. One interpretation of this discrepancy is that Violet, as a parent who is still legally responsible for her child who is under 18 years old, has more at stake in the meaning of trans-identity. She could be indicted by others for being responsible for her child's identity or as being too lenient, allowing her child to go down this path. As I will demonstrate subsequently, this was a concern for many parents whom I interviewed.

Before moving to Violet and others who privileged the transsexual discourse, it is important to present an excerpt from my interview with Chuck, once again, because Chuck also constructed trans-identity as a path or choice, but did so with a very different tone to create a different characterization of trans-identified people than Sofia, Isabella, and Violet offered:

CHUCK: I think what Alexandra is trying to do – I don't know if she just wants attention, "Oh, how far do I want to go to get attention?"...I think maybe she got in with the wrong crowd or she, she didn't think things through for herself. I still say this is not, this is something that – it's a huge mistake, but it's something that- she's a very stubborn person. When she gets her mind set to something, look out! You know?

Chuck's talk constructs trans-identity as something his daughter has decided to do either to garner attention or because she has been influenced by others, or both. Chuck refers to the possible influencers as "the wrong crowd," a phrase usually used when someone is influenced to do something to break rules or otherwise behave badly. The use of this phrase constructs transgender identity and transition as something that is bad for his daughter. Further, Chuck's talk dismisses the idea that his daughter might have a need to transition when he suggests she "just" wants attention. If someone does something just for the sake of getting attention, it is not considered something they must, have to, or

need to do. Finally, Chuck's talk constructs trans-identity as a choice when he says that his daughter has set her mind to it, depicting it as a deliberate way of life, which centers the transgender discourse of trans-identity.

#### Privileging the Transsexual Discourse

The majority of participants dismissed the transgender model, instead placing the transsexual model in the centripetal position. In describing trans-identity as a condition, most said specifically that it is a medical condition or birth defect. Participants likened trans-identity to any number of other defects and diseases that people might experience. Violet explained to me that she sees her child's identity as a medical condition and that she looks for comparisons to make with other conditions in order to make outsiders understand:

VIOLET: Yeah. I'm trying to find another disease – I think it's like MS or something that has about the same incidence...but I'm trying to come up with something so I can say to people, "Well, you know, my child has a disorder that puts him at greater risk of violent death prior to the age of 25," and I want to say, "It happens to the same amount of people as MS or whatever, and it's called, you know, transgender." ...I present it completely as a condition – as a medical condition – or a variance of nature.

Violet's talk clearly centers the transsexual discourse as she tells me that she seeks to find another medical condition that occurs with the same frequency as trans-identity, so that she might present a more convincing argument to outsiders. In this way, her talk acknowledges that others may not operate from the transsexual model and see trans-identity as something that her child was born with and cannot control. Violet's talk suggests, though, that if she can make people understand that trans-identity is a medical condition that happens as often as, say, multiple sclerosis, they will be more likely to accept that her child is not to blame. Michelle, the ex-spouse of a male to female trans-identified person, expressed to me that she struggled with what she was feeling and what she thought she *should* be feeling, which indicates that she anticipates the responses and judgments of others in her meaning making process of trans-identity:

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever feel torn about anything, like you were caught between um, emotions or maybe between what you were feeling and what you thought you should be feeling at the time?

MICHELLE: Yeah. I mean, I still kind of feel that way because you say to yourself, “Well, okay. If you accept the premise that this is like a medical condition, like a birth defect or something on that line, which I think a lot of people who have this feel that they were just born in the wrong body, it was an act of God or whatever. So then you say to yourself, “Okay, well gee, so it’s the same person, it’s just the packaging is different, so why can’t I accept this?” You know, so and then I feel really bad, I feel like I’m this mean horrible person. You know, I think “Well gee whiz, if he had you know, I don’t know like Diabetes or a kidney problem or a heart problem or whatever, would, you know, I wouldn’t reject him because of that!” You know? So, you do feel like, “What’s wrong with me? I’m a horrible person because I’m having a hard time accepting this!”

With the use of the phrase “accepts the premise” to talk about trans-identity as a medical condition, Michelle’s talk acknowledges that the transsexual discourse is not the only meaning circulating for trans-identity. She then goes onto say that if one does operate from this meaning and still does not accept the trans-identified person then there is something morally objectionable about that. She compares the rejection of a trans-identified person to the rejection of someone with Diabetes and characterizes both as inexcusable. Even still, she admits that she has a hard time accepting her ex-spouse and later told me that she wants to accept the premise that it is a medical condition, but has not completely at this time.

Interestingly, Michelle’s talk connects the dots between the sites of struggle over the self and trans-identity, pointing to how one meaning construction might logically flow from another when she says, “If you accept the premise that this is like a medical condition...then you say to yourself, ‘Okay, well gee, so it’s the same person, it’s just the packaging is different.’” Michelle’s talk shows the connection between the transsexual discourse and the sovereign self discourse in which the brain is privileged and identity is owned by the individual and also implies that if the discourses of trans-identity and the

sovereign self are privileged, then relational partners should be expected to be supportive of their trans-identified relative.

Edward's talk firmly centered the transsexual discourse of trans-identity:

EDWARD: I'm a rationalist. I'm a scientifically trained person. I understand in a biological sense what homosexuality and gender dysphoria are and I understand it's a birth defect, so you don't throw people over because they have one leg shorter than the other or they're bi-polar or whatever. You understand that we're all imperfect in various ways, some more important than others and whether it's your own child or somebody's else's child or just a friend, you deal. (Interview #13)

Edward's talk centers the transsexual discourse through camouflaging, here. He describes himself as someone who is "rational" and "scientifically trained," and therefore positions himself as someone who is objective and qualified to understand the research that proves that trans-identity is an inborn disorder. He then implies that it would be morally wrong not to support someone who is trans-identified and likens that to not supporting someone who is born with one leg. This, again, works to center the idea that trans-identity is a birth defect; as something a person cannot help and should not be persecuted for. Carter, another father of a female to male trans-identified person describes both himself and trans-identity similarly:

INTERVIEWER: As you probably know, many families reject their transgender relative or they try to be supportive but find they can't be. What do you think it is about your family that separates you from those other families who struggle to the point of dissolving their relationships?

CARTER: Well, uh, I suppose some of it has to do with the person that my wife is and the person I am. I'm like a problem-solver. That's what I've done my entire life and when I'm confronted with a research problem or with any other family problem I try to understand it, I try to read about it and get all the information that I can about it and then act on that information. So, I'm kind of analytical about things and, you know, transgenderism is just another biological condition and there are things that one can do to address it and bring about more positive results for the person who is transgendered. And so that was kind of the way, it was just another really big personal problem that I was about to understand better and contribute to solving. And I think for my wife there's probably some of that too, but um, she also had a sister who was a special person and so her whole family was used

to children who are in some ways different. Her sister wasn't transgender but she, so her family dealt with some of those kinds of issues. So, I think she saw it as, "Well, this is just another natural variation in the human condition and we've got to do everything we can to be supportive and help. (Interview #16)

Carter presents himself as a "problem-solver" and therefore constructs transgender identity as a problem to be solved. He implies that there are solutions, like transition, that can help to alleviate the problem. He then compares transgender identity to other ways that people are born different or might be characterized as "special," further constructing trans-identity as a defect, but a naturally arising one, that some are born with and must face. All of this serves to center the transsexual discourse, dismiss the transgender discourse, and create a meaning of trans-identity where blame has no relevance. Liz's talk also dismisses the idea that one should be blamed or in some way ostracized for being transgender. Liz is the current spouse of a male to female trans-identified person. She describes her family's reaction to her spouse's disclosure:

LIZ: ...but family and friends, a lot of them said, "Oh, you've got to leave him immediately and go find another father for Mallory," and I'm like, "What am I supposed to do? Walk into the street and snag the next man that walks by? It's not gonna work that way. And I'm not into abandoning people because they are inconvenient, socially." And when I put it that way, people realized what they were saying.

Liz's talk attributes one construction of the transgender discourse to her friends and family, reporting that they regard trans-identity as something someone *does* that merits abandonment. This way of thinking is then disregarded in her talk when she actually charges her friends and family with wrong-doing, instead of her spouse. When she reports accusing them of abandoning someone simply because they are "inconvenient, socially" Liz's talk constructs the friends and family as the morally irresponsible parties, instead of her transgender spouse. The transsexual discourse is further privileged when she tells me about how she explained trans-identity to her daughter:

LIZ: ...we just kind of, "Oh, some people this and some people that," type of thing. And as she grew older and could

understand and learn the facts of life we explained what was going on with Beth in terms she could understand – in scientific terms. That some people are born between genders or looking like one and being the other and because we explained it as just a natural part of the world, she never felt this jolt. (Interview #36)

Liz's talk naturalizes the transsexual discourse when trans-identity is presented as "just the way it is"; as a condition that naturally occurs. Liz reports explaining trans-identity to her daughter the same way she might explain that some people are born without fingers or with Down's syndrome, for example. Amber makes a similar comparison when her talk gives voice to the idea that trans-identity is a choice through the reported speech of her husband, but then negates this meaning with the idea that it is a birth defect:

AMBER: Um, my husband, he was very prejudiced against people who were gay or lesbian. He just didn't understand why they would make that choice. He couldn't understand why a man would go out into the grocery store with a dress on... He's like, "What is wrong with these people?" But in all the research that I did and all the articles that I found that talk about, you know, this is hard-wired in the brain in utero, all of the sudden there was like a total turn around. Just like, "Oh my gosh! This is just like someone who's in a wheelchair! They *can't* help it! This is just who they are!" So, I think that really totally turned him around.

In reporting that research was the proof her husband needed to operate from the transsexual discourse instead of the transgender model, Amber's talk constitutes the discursive move of camouflaging, wherein she invokes the authority of science to present the transsexual model as an objective viewpoint; as fact. Again, trans-identity is compared to another naturally occurring disability, being in a wheelchair. This comparison serves to take away any blame that might be placed on trans-people for their identities, since they are constructed as something they cannot control. Amber's talk also disqualifies the idea that trans-people make a choice they can be blamed for by comparing the act of blaming a trans-identified person to the act of blaming someone in a wheelchair, which positions people who do so as bad and shame-worthy. Amber's talk invokes other authorities a bit later in our discussion and firmly reinforces the discourse of transsexualism as the centripetal understanding:

AMBER: So, I just don't have space in my life for people who can't acknowledge the fact that my child has a medical condition and we're doing what we can to treat it... Um, the American Medical Association has acknowledged this to be a medical condition. I don't know if you've seen that report that's come out. (Interview #18)

By telling me that a medical organization has put forth research and acknowledgement that says trans-identity is a medical condition, Amber offers scientific proof for the meaning she has constructed, which solidifies it as a valid and positions it as the correct model for conceptualizing transgender identity. Roxy's talk works at both the distal already spoken and the distal-not-yet spoken sites in the utterance chain as she also described her child's condition as a medical one, comparing it to other conditions, and then tells me she was at one point concerned about how she would be viewed as a parent:

ROXY: It wasn't our *choice*. We had this thrust on us just the same way that parents who have an autistic child or a child with cystic fibrosis. You have this situation and society doesn't just accept and accommodate and say, "Oh, congratulations!".... There is no accommodation in our culture for trans children and so we had to learn all of this ourselves... And to be perfectly honest, I had feelings of "how will he be accepted in the world and how will I be viewed? Will I be viewed as being an overly permissive parent who let's their kid have this ridiculous fantasy that's born of adolescent self-hatred or whatever?" (Interview#21)

Roxy's emphasis on the word *choice* constructs the idea as invalid. She then compares the inheritance of a transgender child to the inheritance of an autistic child or one who has a disease like cystic fibrosis. She uses the phrase "thrust upon us" which emphasizes that this is not something anyone would choose and is a condition that is difficult, but must be dealt with. Her talk then gives voice to the transgender discourse when she anticipates that others might use it against her as a parent, that they might imply that she is "overly permissive," which characterizes her support of her child's transition as her allowing her child to do something she should not be doing. Chloe, mother of a young female to male trans-child responded to a similar accusation:

CHLOE: My mother-in-law in [state] told one of my sisters-in-law that she thinks that we're pushing her into this and this is something we want.



INTERVIEWER: wow

CHLOE: Yeah. (laughs) “I think I’ll just torture my child.”  
(Interview #25)

Chloe gives voice to the transgender model through attributing it to her mother-in-law. Her talk shows how the discourse can be used to place blame, particularly on parents of young trans-kids. Chloe then responds to this idea by laughing, which shows a dismissal of the idea that trans-identity has anything to do with choice, for her child or for her as a parent. Her talk then invokes the clown and disqualifies the transgender discourse when she mocks the idea that any parent would want to “torture” a child. Referring to the situation as torturous paints trans-identity as a very difficult and trying condition. It also implies that parents, or at least Chloe as a parent, will always act in the best interest of children.

#### Trans-identity compared to Gay/Lesbian Identity

A frequent topic of conversation during interviews was the comparison of trans-identity to gay and lesbian identities. Often, this subject was brought up because participants told me that either they assumed their transgender relative was gay or lesbian before the person disclosed a trans-identity or because the person first came out as gay or lesbian and later came out as transgender. Other times, I broached the topic as a comparison point to find out more about how participants regarded trans-identity, specifically because existing literature shows that often family members express having a gay or lesbian relative is easier in some way than having a transgender relative. When I asked participants if they thought it would be easier if their relative/partner was gay or lesbian instead of transgender, most of them said it would and provided reasons for this claim. Most indicated that it was simply because gay and lesbian identities are more common, more accepted (less stigmatized), more easily understood, and less difficult (physically and perhaps emotionally) for the person who’s identity is in question. Bianca, the mother of male to female trans-identified person said:

BIANCA: I have said a number of times, “I’d trade gay in a minute!” I’d trade gay in a minute.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that is?

BIANCA: I think it’s more common and more acceptable in society.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think with time it will be the same for transgender people?

BIANCA: I hope. I don’t know. It’s tricky.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there’s anything besides time that is a factor? I mean, do you think there is just something that bothers people more about transgender identity than gay/lesbian identity?

BIANCA: Well, I think it has to do with changing your physical presentation too. (Interview #11)

Ann, 37 year old mother of a male to female, talked about the physical changes that often come with transition as part of what makes trans-identity a more difficult issue than a gay or lesbian identity:

INTERVIEWER: So, do you think you would have felt differently if your child had come out as gay instead of trans? Do you think it would have been any easier?

ANN: Yeah, I think so because that’s something that’s more easily hidden. A gay child doesn’t have a name change or a pronoun change or a visible change. So, but there was a period of time where if I thought about my child being gay and I thought, “Oh god, I hope that’s not true.” But then when this came out – most of the parents at PFLAG are parents of gay and lesbian children and they would talk about their angst and their difficulty and I’d be sitting there saying, “Oh, please, you don’t know. You don’t have a clue how embarrassing and difficult it can be.” Gay and lesbian people are so much more accepted now than the transgendered are so it seems like a gay child – I still see that parents would struggle with it, but nowhere near as difficult as it was for me because it’s so much less understood and still so much stigma attached and the feeling of it being a freak, you know.

Ann’s remark that trans-identity is less concealable than gay or lesbian identity means that there is a reason to hide these identities in the first place, that there is a stigma attached that one might want to avoid in some cases. Ann references name, pronoun, and visible changes that might indicate a more global change in identity that comes along

with transition that does not necessarily happen with gay or lesbian identity. This suggests a distinction between changing or revealing one's identity and changing or revealing *a part* of one's identity. In other words, while sexual orientation may be considered one facet or fact about a person, sex and gender and the physicality and behaviors implied by them, may occupy a more central role in personal identity. Olivia touches on this distinction when talking about her father:

INTERVIEWER: So, you said when she first started growing her hair out and shaved her beard and those first physical changes, you sort of suspected that she might be gay. Do you think you would have felt differently if that's what she had come out as?

OLIVIA: I actually don't think it would have bothered me as much. I don't think it would have bothered me at all, quite frankly. Not having that as the situation I can't say for certain, but I had a lot of friends who were gay. I had no problem being around them, loving them, being affectionate with them – it's not drastic, it's not radical and transgender existence is a very radical existence! Because there's so much societal conditioning that's very different if it's homosexual than if it's transgender because it's a whole person. It's a persona change, not a person change, but a persona change. There's a shock to the eye when you first meet somebody who's finally come out as transsexual or transgender because the physical presence is so changed, um, where your sexual practices are your sexual practices and that's not really something that's so noticeable.

Again, Olivia discusses how sexual orientation is but one aspect of a person's life, which he or she can choose to keep private if desired, and therefore does not have bearing on every single interaction in which the person is involved. A transgender existence, on the other hand, she describes as radical. She says it is like a "persona change," even if the person herself does not change, meaning others might conceive of the trans-identified person quite differently and relate to that person accordingly, and that there is no avoiding "coming out" because of the physical changes that transition typically entails. The comparison to gay and lesbian identities helps to show that re-conceptualizing a relational partner's sex and gender identity is considered more difficult, more complicated, and more drastic than rethinking a person's sexuality by the participants in this study, and therefore suggests that sex and gender are more fundamental to personal

identity than something like sexual orientation. It also helps to carve out the meanings attached to trans-identity even more clearly. These meanings participants created for trans-identity are quite important for matters of acceptance, understanding, and support, all matters which are central to the final struggle for meaning making over the concept of “family.”

#### Site of Struggle #4: The Nature of Family Relationships

##### Locating the Discourses

The final site of struggle in the communication of participants concerned the nature of family relationships. The central issues at stake in the meaning making for “family” are acceptance and support of the trans-identified person. The underlying matter in the talk about family acceptance and support was whether family relationships are obligatory or optional. Some participants expressed that they would never, under any condition, dissolve their relationships with their family members, nor should anyone else. Others expressed a different view, that under some circumstances, the ties that bind family members can be justifiably compromised. Within this struggle over family relationships, there also seemed to be a struggle of “self vs. other;” about whose interests should be privileged, the trans-identified person’s or the family member’s. Participants talked about their situations as being “not about me” or “about my kid.” They talked about keeping their negative emotions away from their transgender relative/partner, or being open about how they felt, even if it meant disclosing negative emotions or resistance to support. This tension between the self and other, coupled with the meanings of family as optional or obligatory, formed a discursive struggle over the nature of “family” guided by discourses of individualism and community.

### Discourse of Individualism

The discourse of individualism holds that self interests should be privileged over the interests of others, in this case, other family members. Under this view, others are seen as valuable to the extent they benefit the self, and individuals have full choice in choosing their relational partners (Baxter, 2011). Further, actions should benefit the self even at the cost of others' interests. Participants frequently talked directly about self interests versus other (trans-identified person's) interests. The discourse of individualism also anchored the struggle over how family relationships should be regarded. When the discourse of individualism was positioned as the centripetal force in making meaning of family, participants implied or said directly that there is a limit to the bonds of family - that family relationships are conditional and can be dissolved when they impede on the interests, goals, or beliefs of the self. Very few participants privileged the discourse of individualism. Instead, most privileged the discourse of community in their talk about relationships, acceptance, and support.

### Discourse of Community

The discourse of community stands in opposition to the discourse of individualism in that within this system of meaning, the needs, goals, desires, and beliefs of the self do not come before others, or a group as a whole. Privileging community means to put others before the self. In the context of this study, the "other" was the transgender relative or partner, and the group or community in question was the family. So, when the discourse of community was invoked to make meaning for the concept of "family," the good of the family unit took precedence over the good of individual family members (particularly the participants themselves). Operating from the mindset that commitment to other and commitment to family comes before commitment to self, speakers constructed family relationships as non-voluntary; as relationships that should and will remain intact without the option of or conditions for dissolution. The vast

majority of participants in this study privileged the discourse of community when making meaning for family relationships.

### Demonstrating Competition

Like the other competing discourses presented in this chapter, the premises that constitute these discourses logically oppose one another (e.g., the self should be privileged over the other vs. the other should be privileged over the self). To most cultural members, these tenets would likely be seen as competing views (Baxter, 2011). Several scholars have shown that the discourses of individualism and community are indeed opposing meaning systems that have a strong presence in mainstream American culture (Baxter, 2011; Bellah, Madison, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Sampson, 1993; Triandis, 1995). Finally, their competition as relevant to the present study can be demonstrated through exemplary data.

### Negating

Sofia, mother of Elijah (F2M transgender person) told me about the positive reaction she and the rest of her family had in response to Elijah's disclosure and transition, saying that it was not difficult for the family at all. We then discussed that not all families have the same experience:

INTERVIEWER: That's really great. It would be nice if everybody's story was as positive as yours.

SOFIA: I know. I hear others and it's just heartbreaking, you know, it really is. When I, I know when we meet with Elijah's friends, you know, the stories they tell with their families who disown them – I just don't understand it. I really don't. (Interview #2)

Sofia directly acknowledges that some families reject their transgender relatives, and so recognizes that there are some people who regard family relationships as voluntary after learning of their relatives' identities. However, her talk negates this discourse when she tells me that she simply does not understand it, which implies that it

is incomprehensible to her that a family would turn their back on someone for being transgender, and in doing so would forsake family for individual attitudes or beliefs. The interview with Bianca provides another example where the competition between individualism and community can be observed. We discussed how her son, Brendan, reacted to his sibling's disclosure and transition:

INTERVIEWER: So, you said that Brendan has been really good about it, right?

BIANCA: He wasn't initially...his feeling was, I mean initially he said to me, "If I told you that I had to take medication to feel okay, like I needed crack or whatever to feel okay, would that be alright?" And I said, "This is different." He said, "It's not different." I think he was embarrassed. (Interview #11)

Through the reported speech of her son, Brendan, Bianca gives voice to the discourse of individualism. Brendan compared his mother's allegiance to his sibling to her remaining supportive of him if he were to tell her he needed to rely on a drug like "crack" to "be okay." With this comparison, Brendan suggested that there should be limitations on familial support and that sometimes family members do things that make relationship dissolution (or at least lack of support) justifiable. Bianca's talk negates this idea when she says, "this is different," which indirectly invokes the discourse of community by implying that her other child's actions are not hurting the family, and therefore she will remain loyal and supportive. Finally, Bianca tells me she thinks Brendan was embarrassed by his sibling's situation and that is what motivated his initial resistance. This implies that Brendan was privileging the discourse of individualism by considering his own self-image more important than acceptance and support for his sibling.

## Identifying the Interplay

### Privileging Individualism

The discourse of individualism, while at play with the discourse of community across the data, rarely occupied the centripetal position in the struggle of meaning over the concept of “family.” In fact, only one participant’s talk centered the discourse of individualism, constructing family relationships as conditional and optional. When I asked Chuck (father of Alex, F2M) if he had any advice for other families, and particularly parents in similar circumstances, he said:

CHUCK: Yeah, stand your ground. If you don’t feel comfortable with this, tell them. You don’t have to accept it. There’s a major misconception in life, “Well, whatever your children do you have to love and understand, respect, bla, bla, bla, and accept it.” Would you accept your child as an ax murderer?

INTERVIEWER: So, are you saying there is a limitation on family obligation?

CHUCK: Yeah. My family doesn’t have to deal with it. The only person that has to deal with it in life is her!...If that sounds cold-hearted, I’m sorry! (Interview #6)

Chuck’s talk engages the discourses of individualism and community in direct interplay. He gives voice to the discourse of community, that whatever children do parents must love, understand, respect, and accept them, and his talk counters this view when he calls it a “major misconception in life.” This characterization shows that unconditional parental love is the dominant meaning of parent-child relationships in the larger culture, but also that Chuck constructs the idea as objectionable. Chuck’s talk dismisses the idea further through disqualifying when he inserts “bla, bla, bla” into his explication of the discourse of community, constructing it as a tired line we have heard before, and mocking it as one that holds no weight. His talk further disqualifies the discourse of community and the notion that “family is forever” through the posing a rhetorical question: “Would you accept your child as an ax murderer?” This question does hefty discursive work to further displace the discourse of community in favor of the



discourse of individualism. Chuck compares the acceptance of a transgender child to the acceptance of a child who is a murderer, and so his talk implies that both are morally abhorrent. In effect, his talk suggests that there are sometimes legitimate reasons to not support and maintain relationships with family members. At the end of this segment, Chuck anticipates the judgment of others saying, “If this sounds cold-hearted, I’m sorry!” His talk acknowledges that most would see a father’s lack of support for a child as itself a morally detestable thing, but this fact does not deter him from centering the self over the family.

### Privileging Community

The other participants privileged the discourse of community, with one or two exceptions of participants who did not clearly engage in this particular struggle. The discourse of community held a firm centripetal position in the talk of most participants. Edward’s talk, for example, indirectly negates the discourse of individualism when he posits that there are no other options but to support family members, particularly one’s children:

INTERVIEWER: What advice would you give to other parents?

EDWARD: Love your children unconditionally and support them in every way you can. What else can we do? The reality is the reality and if they can’t count on their parents’ love then what can they count on? (Interview # 13)

Edward’s talk is very explicit in the invocation of the discourse of community when he tells other parents to love their children “unconditionally” and to “support them in every way.” He then poses two rhetorical questions that serve to negate the discourse of individualism, which he only references indirectly. He asks, “What else can we do?” suggesting that there is no other option but to love and support family members. He then asks, “If they can’t count on their parents’ love then what can they count on?” implying that if anyone, family members and particularly parents have non-voluntary duties to

their loved ones. Another example comes from Claire. When asked what advice she would give, Claire's response centers the discourse of community:

CLAIRE: Listen to your child. Really, really listen to what they're telling you and do what's best for your child. Don't let your feelings get in the way of what's best for your child and definitely don't let other people's feelings get in the way of what's best for your child. That's how I live. That's what I go by.  
(Interview #23)

Claire's talk engages the discourses of individualism and community in direct interplay when she tells other parents not to let their feelings get in the way of what is best for their child, but instead to "really, really, listen" to them. This positions the interests and needs of the child over the need of the parent, i.e. privileges other over self. The last two lines, though indirect, imply that by living by this mantra, Claire acts as a good parent. Lilly's talk similarly implies that good parents are those who put their children before themselves:

LILLY: I don't think we're unique [in being supportive] until I hear about kids being put out of their houses for being gay, for being trans, for whatever and I look at my kids – all of my kids... They were my babies. They are mine. I look at all of them and go, "I wouldn't put them out for *any* reason! Ever!" So, this is not about me, and for a lot of parents that's what it is about. It's about them when they do that to their kids. (Interview #26)

Lilly's talk suggests that when parents dissolve relationships with their children, they are acting in their own interest, and not in the interest of their children, and indicts them for operating from the discourse of individualism. Lilly tells me that she could and would never "put them out" for any reason. She emphasized the word "any" which drove home the point that she believes there is no condition under which a parent should disown a child, which positions the discourse of community as centripetal. Liz, the current spouse of Beth, a male to female trans-identified person talked about how her relationship with the person she used to consider her husband is now more like another family relationship – a sister relationship – and talked about how family ties are ties that bind:

LIZ: Beth will always be a part of my family. There's just no other way around it... We are so very much a part of one another's families we forget there's no blood ties. It's like a sister.

INTERVIEWER: In what specific ways it is like a sister relationship?

LIZ: Well, because I think we're bound a little more closely than a roommate or friends would be, And because we've got 30 years of history now so we're very much a part of one another's lives... There does seem to be a real family tie between us which is really just our marriage, but the thing is I have in-law – Beth's entire family feels that way about me and my entire family feels that way about Beth, so in that respect it's change, but we're very fortunate in that. It's a sisterhood more than a friendship because there is a real family tie.

Liz compares family relationships to roommate relationships and friendships, concluding that family relationships are more tightly bound than others. She tells me that Beth will always be a part of her family, and implies there are no conditions to that bond, because “there's no other way around it.” This phrase indirectly negates the discourse of individualism by characterizing family bonds as unbreakable and non-voluntary. Both direct and indirect negation of the discourse of individualism in favor of the discourse of community was extremely prevalent in the data. Besides providing their own reasons for supporting their loved ones, family members also provided reasons that some families, or some members in their own families, were not able to be supportive.

#### Hindrances to Family Acceptance and Support

Although some participants reported that their entire families were aware of and supportive of the trans-identified person in the family, others had not disclosed to the whole family in fear of negative reactions or had disclosed and did experience such reactions. Often, participants offered speculative reasons for such negative reactions, either on their own or probed by me. In the cases where entire families were supportive, I asked participants to speculate what made their family different from those who are not supportive of transgender members. In the talk that came from these questions, participants discussed several demographic characteristics that they assumed kept family

members from being supportive of transgender persons, including religious orientation, political and social orientation, region of residence, sex, and age.

Often, religion generally, and specifically Catholicism and evangelical traditions were brought up when participants talked about which family member they had decided not to disclose to, or when they discussed those who were not supportive. Religion was sometimes discussed in relation to political or social conservatism, as reasons that some people do not support transgender family members. Other times, participants cited that some relatives lived in conservative areas of the country, e.g., the south, and so were less likely to be supportive of such identities. Several times, when asked why a particular family member was not supportive, participants told me that it was because the person was male and therefore had more difficulty in adjusting to and accepting gender variance. They cited cultural norms for masculinity as the root of this problem, and argued that women tend to be better at adjusting to variation or change in sex/gender. Lastly, many participants reported that they had not told older member of their families about their transgender relative because they assumed that people of a certain age and generation either cannot understand trans-identity or would not be supportive of it. All of these demographic factors that were cited as possible impediments to familial support and as reasons for not disclosing to others.

### Summary of Results

Looking through the scope of Relational Dialectics Theory, it was clear that family members of transgender persons who are transitioning or have transitioned engage in a complex meaning making process which includes construction of meaning for the salient concepts of self, sex, gender, trans-identity, and family. Through contrapuntal analysis, I was able to identify the meaning systems that were used by participants in the four discursive struggles which animated their interview talk, and I was also able to show their competition and interplay. By examining the various forms of interplay, I was able

to glean what meanings family members constructed for their experiences with trans-identity and their relatives'/partners' transition.

The centripetal-centrifugal struggle surrounding the nature of the self was informed by the discourse of the sovereign and the discourse of the social self. These discourses were voiced through both direct and indirect interplay. Most family members privileged the sovereign self discourse, concluding that their family members were the same persons throughout transition. However, others maintained that their family members were different because of transition. Interestingly, those who centered the discourse of the sovereign self often told me that at one time they had seen their relative/partner as different, and so in the past had privileged the discourse of the social self. This indicated a diachronic separation of the discourses in the meaning making progression of participants. The discourse privileged by participants was quite connected to their experiences of loss and grief, as they indicated that perceiving the trans-identified person as different brought on the feeling that their loved one was in some way gone or absent. In making sense of this process of transition, some participants engaged in transformative dialogue in the form of hybrids in which they positioned the sovereign and the social self as compatible, constructing their relative/partner as both the same and different, both here and gone in some way.

Some relevant subthemes that participants indicated affected their experiences of loss, and therefore their meaning making process of constructing the person has present or absent, were erasure vs. integration, sudden vs. gradual, and warning vs. no warning. Participants indicated that there was a sense of erasure of identity linked to feelings of loss/grief when the trans-identified person in their families asked or insisted that they take down pictures from the past and/or not refer to the pre-transition identity. When trans-identified persons and their families created more of an integration between the pre-transition self and the post-transition self, leaving up pictures from the past and freely referencing the way things used to be, the feelings of loss were much more subdued or

were absent. Also, the progression of transition changes seemed to affect experiences of loss for family members. If the changes a trans-identified person engaged in toward transition seemed sudden or drastic to their family members, the feeling that the trans-identified person was different seemed to be more common. However, if the transition changes were gradual and or not perceived to be drastic compared to the person's physical presence before transition, the feeling that the person was different were lesser or absent. Finally, participants described being able to adjust better to transition changes if there had been signs of gender variance in the trans-identified person's life leading up to disclosure. When family members were surprised by the disclosure or felt it did not make sense given the trans-identified person's past, i.e., there were no perceived signs of gender variance, the feelings of loss seemed to be greater.

The centripetal-centrifugal struggle surrounding sex and gender was informed mainly by two discourses: biological essentialism and a socio-cultural discourse. Only some participants privileged the socio-cultural view on sex and gender, concluding that sex and gender are social concepts, and therefore are not determined and are flexible. A few others privileged the traditional form of biological essentialism which holds that sex as a category is based on reproduction and is dichotomous, that the body determines sex, and that gender is built into the brain. Most participants, however, engaged in a yet undocumented form of interplay, described here as extracting, wherein they removed a component of traditional biological essentialism, transforming the discourse in a way that allowed them to invoke it while maintaining consistency with the discourse of the sovereign self and the medicalized discourse of trans-identity which they also privileged. The new biological essentialism centers the brain as the indicator of sex and depicts the body as defective when it does not match the sex of the brain.

Gender was shown to also be connected to the experience of loss, as many participants described feeling this in connection to gendered family roles and gendered expectations for their loved ones. Even when participants reasoned that their family

members were still the same persons, they often also reported feeling loss and grief over losing imagined, gendered futures or gendered roles that the person played in the family. For example, parents often discussed grieving over the fact that their daughters would not go to prom, be walked down the aisle by fathers on their wedding days, would not give birth, etc. As another example, parents, siblings, and partners mourned the gendered relationship they had with the trans-identified person pre-transition, claiming that they would not be sisters anymore or would not have a mother-daughter relationship anymore. These constructions showed that sex and gender are regarded as foundational to identity and relationships. However, a few participants engaged in another form of transformative dialogue creating aesthetic moments where they constructed sex and gender as irrelevant to personhood.

The discursive struggle surrounding trans-identity was informed by a medical discourse and a cultural discourse, the transsexual discourse and the transgender discourse, respectively. The majority of participants centered the discourse of transsexualism, constructing trans-identity as a medical condition, which eschewed any blame that their family members or they may experience from outsiders. Others privileged the transgender discourse, constructing cultural constraints as the problem, and trans-identity as simply another way of being and expressing the self. Some, however, voiced the discourse of the transgender model in a way that created another meaning: trans-identified persons do choose to live the way they live and that way of life is morally wrong. This demonstrated that discourses can be invoked to create vastly different meanings.

Finally, the struggle for meaning surrounding the nature of family relationships was constituted by the discourses of individualism and community, and given voice through two radiants of meaning that stem from these discourses (Baxter, 2011): voluntary vs. non-voluntary relationships and self vs. other. Participants almost unanimously centered the discourse of community, constructing family relationships as

obligatory, non-voluntary, or unconditional and endorsing the notion that the self interest should be forsaken for the interests of the other (in this case, the trans-identified person). Only three participants centered individualism, and therefore constructed family relationships as optional or conditional, maintaining that we can choose to be in relationships with relative or not. Trans-identity and transition were constructed as justifiable “deal-breakers” for family relationships, whereby the interest of the self should take precedence over the interest of the other (the trans-identified person). Lastly, in discussing the issue of family support, participants cited several demographic factors that may influence the decision to support and accept transgender relatives, including religiosity, political leaning, social conservativeness/liberalness, sex, age, and region of residence.



## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

It was clear from the analysis of these data that family members engage in a complex process of negotiation and re-negotiation of meanings in relation to the disclosure and transition of their transgender relatives/partners. These sites of struggle and the meanings created from them framed participants' experiences with trans-identity and transition and were very important to their emotional experiences and relational experiences. In this final chapter, I discuss the findings of the study more globally, addressing how the results satisfy the broad purposes of the study, the utility of the findings given the boundaries of the study, the connections among the sites of struggle that were present in the data, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, and lastly, directions for future research that potentially can expand understanding of this topic even further. This research brought to light several interesting connections which can inform scholarly knowledge of the imbrications of sex, gender, identity, and relationships, as well as understandings of how communication constitutes experiences. The results of the study are not only worthwhile for communication scholars, but also have implications for families with transgender members.

### Overview of Results

The results of the study showed that four sites of struggle characterized the data. Meanings of personal identity were constructed through the interplay of discourses of a sovereign and a social self. The centripetal-centrifugal struggle surrounding sex and gender was made up of a discourse of biological essentialism, a modified version of that discourse, and a socio-cultural discourse of sex/gender. Meanings of trans-identity were made from the positioning of a transsexual and a transgender discourse. Finally, meanings of family were formed through the interplay of the discourses of individualism and community. Working across these sites, the majority of participants framed their

transgender relative/partner as the same person before, during, and after transition; they regarded sex and gender as inborn in the brain; they regarded trans-identity as a medical condition; and lastly, they regarded family relationships as unconditional, non-voluntary ones.

### Meaning Making Matters: The Bigger Picture

#### The Nature and Limitations of the Texts

Taken together, the interview texts can be described as somewhat dialogically contractive. A dialogically contractive text or genre of communication is one that does not allow for a multitude of meanings; one in which alternative meaning constructions are shut down or suppressed (Baxter, 2011). This is not to say that the opposing discourses were not voiced, because they were, but the meanings that were created were usually quite similar across the interviews. For example, very few participants privileged the transgender discourse in relation to trans-identity, and most dismissed it. Similarly, the sovereign self discourse was widely privileged, meaning that most participants constructed their relatives/partners as the same person post-transition, though many said it took time and effort to get to that conclusion. Often, the same discourses were countered or negated by the majority of participants creating a dominant meaning making system across the data: the self is sovereign (person remains the same through transition), sex and gender are determined by the brain and are inborn, trans-identity is a medical condition, and families should support and maintain relationships with transgender loved ones. Though some participants did construct different meanings for their experiences, they were in the minority.

There are several possible reasons why the texts were contractive in the meanings that emerged and why opposing discourses appeared when they did. First, the sample of participants in the study did not seem to constitute the full range of experiences had by family members of trans-identified persons. Previous research has shown that often,

parents withdraw support, reject, and even disassociate with their children who come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Saltzburg, 1996) and that transgender individuals often find themselves rejected by their families (Hines, 2006). All of the participants reported that they were still in relationships with their transgender relative, which implies some level of acceptance for trans-identity, or tolerance at the very least. While a few participants indicated that they do not support trans-identity or transition and one spouse reported that she could not maintain a spousal relationship with her ex-husband, all were still in contact with the trans-identified person they discussed and therefore had endured the situation to some extent. Most participants said that they did support and accept their transgender relative/spouse, even if that support and acceptance did not come immediately, following disclosure. So, current and supportive relational partners probably make meaning in similar ways, generally speaking, and constitute but one end of the spectrum in family experiences with trans-identity.

Family members who are not as accepting and supportive likely construct different meanings for the salient concepts and for their experiences, and therefore the data could have been more dialogically expansive or varied in meanings if more participants like this had come forward during recruitment. Conversations with more participants like Chuck and Kay would have helped to paint a more complete picture of how families react and adjust to (or do not adjust to) transgender identity and transition. This would not only benefit scholarly knowledge, but would help to uncover what meaning making strategies and other characteristics affect a lack of support or outright rejection of trans-identified persons, thus benefiting those who are trans-identified and their families. However, recruiting such participants posed a problem because many of the outlets through which I recruited were geared toward families who were seeking and giving support (e.g., support groups and support websites). Of those support givers and seekers, the members who are more willing to talk about their experiences are likely to be those who have adjusted to the situation with positive outcomes. Even the recruitment via

my own social network members yielded mostly supportive and accepting family members.

Another reason the meanings created by participants were similar is that I did not rule out the possibility of interviewing members of the same family, and did in fact do so on a few occasions. This did increase the likelihood of similarity in interviews because some family members might have engaged in joint meaning making prior to the individual interviews. While this does factor into the contractiveness of the texts, it does not take away from the findings in any other significant way, since not only were the emergent meanings of interest, but so was the interplay of discourses which created those meanings, which certainly did vary among participants. Since individuals were the unit of analysis, the fact that a few of the participants were related did not affect their validity as meaning-makers, as their voicing of the discourses was their own, and because no individual creates meaning as an isolated entity anyway (Bakhtin, 1980).

A fourth factor that might affect the contractiveness of the texts is that the topic of discussion, trans-identity, comes with stigma attached. Asking a group of participants (who on the whole were supportive family members) to discuss their relatives'/partners' stigmatized identity might position them to defend that identity against negative assumptions that others may make. They may feel the obligation or desire to protect their relative/partner and themselves by only offering certain (more positive) meanings of trans-identity and of their experiences with it. Further, participants may have taken my identity as a researcher of transgender issues into account in discussing their relatives and partners. If participants assumed that not only was I a researcher of transgender issues, but perhaps also an ally to the trans-identified community, this could have influenced the discourses to which they gave discursive attention. In fact, Chuck apologized to me at a few points in our discussion for espousing his views, which were not supportive of trans-identity. His apologies implied that Chuck thought I might judge him negatively for

doing so. The act of presenting to a stranger, and specifically a researcher of transgender issues, might have influenced participants' communication.

A fifth and final factor that might have influenced the contractiveness and expansiveness of the interview texts was my more direct influence as the interviewer. In order to get participants to discuss the matters that were of interest in the study, I asked questions that would solicit their viewpoints on certain issues, and in doing so, often gave voice to one or more discourses that were then entertained, countered, negated, or privileged by the participants in their responses. In one sense, this is an advantage of interview data for the RDT researcher, because one can take it upon him or herself to introduce different meanings and ask that participants respond to them. On the other hand, the manner in which the interviewer goes about this can have an effect on the data that are generated. This process likely makes the texts more expansive than they would be if the participants were not in conversation with another person, but instead were to simply keep a diary about their experiences, for example.

However, the process can also help to demonstrate contractiveness if participants shut down the alternative meanings the interviewer voices. Perhaps the most interesting piece of this process - and the piece that keeps interviewer influence from being a detrimental limitation to such research - is that if participants respond to the discourses the interviewer introduces, these responses demonstrate that the discourses are recognizable to the participant, i.e. they have "heard them before" or are aware of their circulation in the culture at large. So, the interviewer merely acts as the speaker of discourses which are already being invoked by other cultural members, not as the inventor of new discourses, and in this sense can be conceptualized to represent generalized others or the superaddressee (Bakhtin, 1986).

### Meaning and Ambiguous Loss

The four sites of struggle and the discourses invoked at each of those sites provide an informative look at the communicative practices that constitute these participants' experiences with transgender identity and transition. The results confirm Zamboni's (2006) work, showing that family members engage in defining and redefining their relative/partner in light of a disclosure of trans-identity and subsequent transition. Participants' talk revealed efforts to either consciously and thoughtfully define concepts like "self" and "gender" for the first time (i.e., they had never spent much time thinking about them before) and/or efforts to re-conceptualize them in response to confusion or contradiction regarding their transgender relative/partner.

Connected to this re-conceptualization process was the experience of ambiguous loss, where participants commonly described feeling grief surrounding their relatives'/partners' disclosures and transitions. Their descriptions of grief and loss corroborated previous findings that family members of transgender persons often experience grief in reference to the trans-identified person's former identity (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Granucci Lesser, 1999; Gurvich, 1992; Peo, 1988). These researchers also suggest that this experience of grief sometimes operates as an impediment to family members' willingness and/or ability to offer support to the trans-identified person. This finding seemed to be relevant to some of the participants who described feeling grief *and* a reluctance to fully accept and support their trans-identified family member following the disclosure and transition, even if they later were able to overcome the grief as well as offer support and acceptance. What, then, were the participants grieving? Their talk of loss was wrapped up in meanings of personhood as connected to sex and gender in some complex and telling ways.

One of the aims of this study was to discover what possible discourses or meaning systems are conceptualized as incompatible that might bring about the experience of ambiguous loss for family members of trans-identified persons - the experience that a

person is somehow here and gone at the same time. In the published research on this issue and in the pilot study preceding this research, the loss was described as surrounding the trans-identified person's pre-transition self, meaning that when a person transitions from one sex/gender identity to another, family members experienced a change in personhood or identity of the trans-identified person so much that they felt grief over losing that person. The results of the present study confirmed that this is a major catalyst for ambiguous loss. Participants spoke about experiencing their relatives/partners as different, gone, and not the same person through the process of transition.

Given that the trans-identified person was changing in sex/gender and all that comes with that (e.g., gendered physicality, gendered name, gendered pronoun, gendered family relational label, and perhaps gendered behaviors), and that these changes bring about grief for family members over the perception of a lost identity, it is clear that sex and gender are foundational to the way we perceive and relate to others. In fact, through analysis of the sites of struggle concerning the self and sex/gender, it became apparent that the meanings of man and woman, and the gendered relational roles that follow from those meanings, like son and daughter were conceptualized as opposites, or as incompatible ways of being and roles to fulfill. This incompatibility fosters the sense that a (gendered) person is gone, but not dead when he or she transitions from one category to another. The vast majority of family members did not conceive of the trans-identified person as both man and woman or as both son and daughter at once. Therefore, for a family member to gain a sister, for example, via sex/gender transition, that person also had to lose a brother; for a son to exist, a daughter had to exist no longer. In a sense, transition is often conceptualized as the replacement of one sexed/gendered person with another.

This dialectical tension, the experience that the trans-identified person is both here and gone, both present and absent, would not come about if the meaning of who that person was throughout transition was free of struggle or contradiction. The fact that these

meanings of man and woman, boy and girl, daughter and son were positioned and conceptualized as incompatible opposites seems to be the root of the experience of the trans-identified person as both present and absent. For one to grieve over another who has not died, that person must be struggling with making sense of the situation, hence the ambiguity that surrounds the experience of loss.

As demonstrated in the data, participants constructed the experience of ambiguous loss in several ways. Some separated the sex/gender transition from the trans-identified person's self, concluding that the person remained the same throughout transition. Others reconciled the grief of the pre-transition self by committing to embracing the post-transition self. Others still, transcended the discourses connected to sex/gender and personhood and constructed their relatives/partners as having selves that exist free from sex and gender.

Interestingly, family members described not only grieving the (gendered) person that they knew or thought they knew before disclosure and transition, they also talked about grieving the gendered role the person held in their family (e.g., father, husband, or sister), the gendered relationship they had before (e.g., mother-daughter), and the gendered life they expected their relative to lead in the future (e.g., a daughter getting married and having children). Even when participants constructed their relatives/partners as the same person throughout transition, which would seem to relieve the experience of grief, they often told me that they still did grieve over one or more of these other kinds of losses, each connected to gender in some way. This not only demonstrates the paramount place that sex and gender hold in our conceptions of others' identities and our relationships to them, but also it shows that the identities of individual family members are connected to the identities of their relational partners. This explains why some participants reported feeling loss over their *own* identities as fathers of little girls, or as the brother to a sister, for example.



The fact that loss was described as occurring in reference to the trans-identified person's pre-transition self, as well as gendered roles, gendered relationships, and gendered futures, illustrates another source of ambiguity. Family members may struggle over where to situate the loss: Is it the trans-identified person who lost an identity? The family member who lost the experience of the trans-identified person's identity? The family who lost a role filled by the trans-identified person, e.g., a sister/daughter? The family member who lost an identity (e.g., father of a daughter)? The family member who lost what he or she imagined the relative/partner would be like or do in the future, or, perhaps all of the above? Sex, gender, identity, and relationships are so much intertwined that the experience of loss that surrounds them can be quite complex and difficult to pin down. Not to mention, most of what participants described losing is intangible in the first place, which also contributes to the confusing sense of grief they experienced.

The transition from a sex/gender category or another or the transition away from one to a more ambiguous identity often leaves family members struggling to make sense of the experience among and in relation to feelings of grief. These feelings of grief and the renegotiation of the trans-identified person's identity by their relational partners may keep some family members from being able to accept and fully support their transgender relative/partner. Therefore, the connections between meaning making, emotions, and relational outcomes that are made visible by studying ambiguous loss through Relational Dialectics Theory have the potential to add to theoretical understanding of the role of communication in experiences and have the potential to add to family members' repertoires for working through the experience of having a trans-identified relative/partner.

### The Web of Meaning

The sites of struggle and the discourses that animated them create an intricate web of meaning that holds potential for understanding both practically and theoretically how

speakers create and manage multiple meanings to frame their experiences. These sites and the discourses which constituted them were connected in vastly important ways that called participants to take into account the meanings they had created or would eventually create at the other sites when they constructed meaning at any given site. In other words, since the discourses and sites were so tightly connected, speakers had to create meanings at each site that were consistent with the meanings they created at others.

For example, if a participant privileged the medicalized model of trans-identity, casting the body as a birth defect, that person could not also privilege the socio-cultural discourse of sex/gender because a glaring inconsistency would occur: the socio-cultural discourse maintains that the brain is not sexed, and therefore the transsexual discourse would have no foothold in the context of this discourse. Another example: if a participant privileged the meaning of traditional biological essentialism (without extraction), creating the meaning that the body determines sex, then the medicalized discourse of trans-identity would also not find any traction in this context because the body would not be characterized as defective if it were a reproductively functioning (male or female) body. As another example, the discourse of community was constructed as connected to the transsexual discourse as well, in the sense that if a participants' talk constructed trans-identity as a disorder or condition, like multiple sclerosis, then that family member could not refuse support to the trans-identified person without facing moral indictment.

Further, since a transition of sex/gender identity was the experience in question, the sites of struggle concerning self, sex/gender and trans-identity were absolutely connected. To make sense of the experience of trans-identity and transition from any one of these sites, participants must also take into account the others. Specifically, there is no reason to even consider the meaning of personhood in light of trans-identity unless personhood is considered to be connected to sex and gender, and none of these constructs would be salient in the first place if not for the presence of trans-identity. To further

illuminate the connections about the sites, the discourses which constitute them, and the importance of coherence in the web of meaning present in the data, Figure 2 is presented.

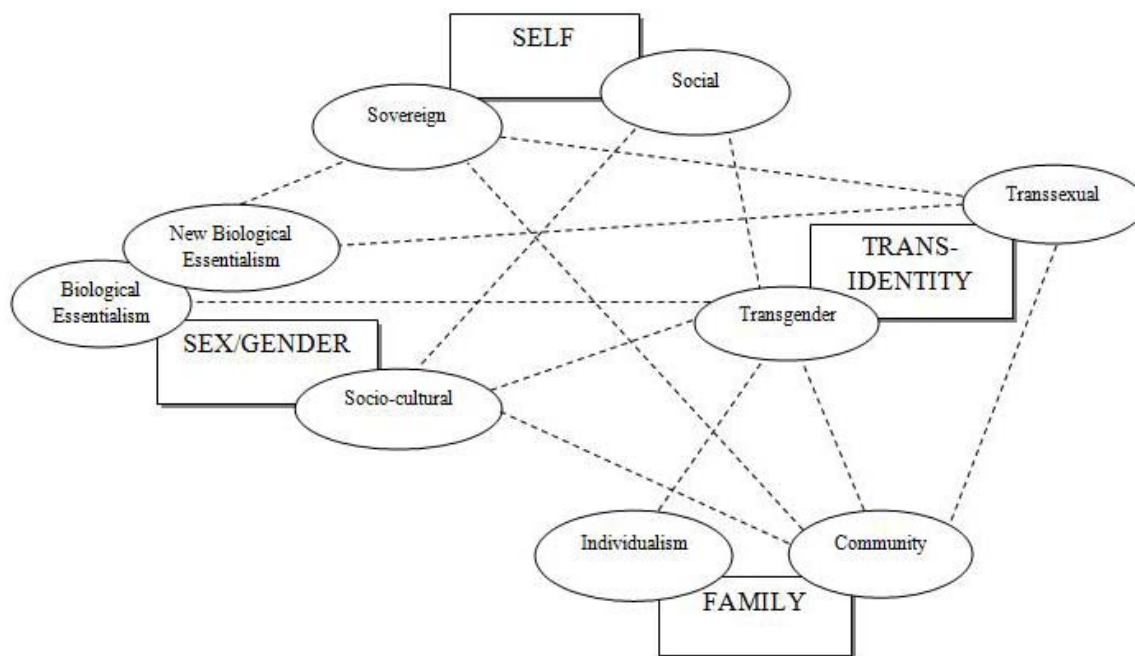


Figure 2. The Web of Meaning

### Theoretical Implications

#### Communication and Experience

Besides providing an informative look at the layering of sex, gender, identity, and family relationships and solidifying their connections, the results of this study hold other theoretical implications, as well. First, in this study, I approached ambiguous loss from a communicative standpoint, examining how the invocation and interplay of discourses brings about a profound and confusing emotional experience. In previous research on ambiguous loss, the meanings that are positioned as incompatible which create the emotional experience have been ignored, leaving communication and meaning making

out of the picture. Even communication researchers have not gotten at the communicative source of this experience, only going so far as to characterize ambiguous loss as a dialectical tension between presence and absence, instead of indentifying the meaning systems at play which create the experience of simultaneous presence and absence of a relational partner (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Golish, & Olson 2002; Sahlstein, 2004; Toller, 2005).

Focusing on the communicative sources of this experience showcases the central place that communication holds in constituting emotional experiences; that the way we feel about a situation hinges on the meanings we attach to or construct for that situation. In other words, the way we understand and respond to any person, relationship, event, or circumstance is determined by the way we create meaning for it, and thus by communicative practices. Relational Dialectics Theory allows scholars to closely examine those practices, and therefore is a theory that allows us to study how communication functions in relational life, where individuals are commonly faced with the navigation of competing meanings, whether mundane or profound.

#### Fruitful Sites for Dialogic Research

This study is among the first to utilize the most recent iteration of Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter, 2011) and to use contrapuntal analysis to focus on the centripetal-centrifugal struggles present in interpersonal communication. The results from the study extend RDT in that they make the connections between meaning making, emotions, and relational outcomes discussed above, but also they demonstrate the usefulness of applying RDT to situations where rupture, change, and even stigma are present. Baxter advises researchers to attend to sites of change, because such sites can make glaringly obvious the competition of discourses. When change occurs, relational partners are faced with making sense of that change, and in sense-making, will call up different meanings systems. This study shows that RDT is a very useful tool for

understanding communication in relation to change, especially change that brings about the sense-making of constructs which are normally taken for granted.

The study also demonstrates RDT's utility in studying stigmatized relationships and identities. When speakers are aware of the stigma (Goffman, 1963) attached to their relationships, identities, or situations, they are likely to not only call upon the distal already-spoken (DAS) discourses relevant to their circumstances, but they are likely to do this in the context of what is considered "normal" (Baxter, 2011). In other words, speakers addressing a stigmatized identity or relationship will anticipate the judgment of others in their own narratives, which allows for an interesting look at how the distal-not-yet spoken (DNYS) link the utterance chain and the DAS link are implicated together and sometimes simultaneously in communication. Interview data is especially appropriate for using RDT to study stigma, as the act of presenting a stigmatized story or explaining a stigmatized identity or relationship to a stranger positions speakers to do discursive work at both the DAS and the DNYS sites in the utterance chain.

### Coherence in Meaning Making

Another way the results of the present study extend Relational Dialectics Theory is by illustrating the web-like nature meaning making, in which discourses form coalitions, not isolated pockets of struggle for speakers in a given situation. These data particularly call attention to the importance of coherence and consistency among the sites of struggle. In the present situation, speakers were called to construct meaning for the constructs made salient by transgender transition: the self, sex/gender, trans-identity, and family. The participants did not normally keep the meanings of each of these concepts neat and separate, but instead talked about them together. Even when the constructs were brought up singly, the participants still had to construct meaning for each of them while taking the other constructs into account. The meaning they constructed for one had to not contradict the meaning they created for another, or else there would be inconsistency in

their beliefs about and orientations to their experiences. Further, if the meanings they created were incoherent, they would come across as nonsensical communicators, which would undermine their credibility.

For example, if a participant created the meaning that trans-identity is a medical condition (privileging the transsexual discourse) then that participant could not also construct the meaning that gender is external and socially created, taught, and learned. This pairing would not make sense because within the medical meaning of transsexualism, the brain is hard-wired for gender and the trans-identified person desires the body to match the brain. So, through looking at the web of meaning that participants created, we can not only see the connections among different sites of struggle, but also we can see the importance of consistency in meaning across those sites. This provides researchers with another interesting component of meaning making to attend to in RDT informed studies.

#### Achieving Coherence through Extraction

This coherence might be relatively easy for some speakers to reach, but others might experience struggle in achieving consistency if well-established cultural discourses do not quite work for the meanings they attempt to create. In these data, it became clear that the majority of participants privileged the sovereign self and the transsexual model of trans-identity. In effect, these participants placed heavy importance on the brain as constituting the self. Further, through the transsexual discourse, they depicted the body as wrong or defective. Taking these meanings into account, participants could not sagaciously privilege the socio-cultural discourse of sex/gender because that would mean that the brain is not hard-wired for gender, and therefore a mismatch between the brain and body would not be possible. On the other hand, they could not logically privilege the other dominant discourse of sex/gender circulating in the culture at large, biological essentialism, because within this discourse the body is a key indicator of sex. Not only

that, but a body that is clearly male or female and reproductively functional is not seen as wrong or defective in any way.

This demonstrates a meaning making conundrum wherein speakers are faced with (apparently) two circulating discourses, neither of which would allow for complete consistency in the web of meaning they were constructing if it were centered. In this situation, speakers engaged in a discursive tactic that I have called *extracting*. Extracting involves the reworking of a discourse by removing one or more components of the meaning system so that it can be centered without causing inconsistency in the broader meaning making effort. I have argued that the form of extracting performed by participants in this study is transformative. The two types of transformative dialogue outlined by Baxter (2011) are hybrids and aesthetic moments. These are transformative for different reasons. The hybrid is transformative because the competition between the discourses is erased; once opposing discourses are positioned as compatible. The aesthetic moment is transformative because the discourses themselves are dissolved or transcended and meaning is created that reaches beyond them. The extraction performed by participants in the data is transformative for a similar reason, though not quite in the same way.

By extracting a *core* component of biological essentialism – one that matters and makes the discourse what it is – speakers transform the discourse itself into what I have called in Chapter Three, a “new” essentialism. This new essentialism was then privileged over the socio-cultural discourse of sex/gender in both direct and indirect synchronic interplay. The competition between two discourses is still present, which means extraction is unlike the hybrid, and only one discourse has been fundamentally changed, which makes extraction unlike an aesthetic moment. So, extraction as a form of interplay probably belongs somewhere between polemic, synchronic interplay and the hybrid on the spectrum of communication (see Figure 1). Extraction as a discursive move may well be used in a non-transformative way by speakers in other situations if the component they

extract from a given discourse is not a central component that makes the discourse what it is, but is more tangential to the meaning system. An example of this was not present in the data for this study. Regardless, the data yielded a new form of interplay, which adds to Relational Dialectics Theory and Contrapuntal Analysis.

### Broader Knowledge Contributions

The present study contributes not only to the work which applies and extends Relational Dialectics Theory, but it also contributes to scholarly literature in several broader domains. First, it contributes to the literature in family communication by bringing to light a non-normative family stressor, transgender identity and transition. The results show how the experience of this stressor is communicatively framed, how that framing leads to the experience of ambiguous loss, and how family relationships are affected by such a stressor. Further, the results show that some family stressors might make the meanings of family relationships salient and for some might lead to family relationships being seen as non-voluntary or optional, which corroborates the work of Green (2000), which suggests that some identity disclosures lead to a view of family relationships as voluntary.

Second, this research contributes to the study of communication and gender, by providing a look at how gender plays into our orientations toward identity and relationships. Lastly, by demonstrating that family members' experiences of ambiguous loss were wrapped up in perceptions related to sex and gender, this research showed how sex/gender underwrite personal relationships. A shift in these aspects of identity often leads to a shift in the conceptualization of the person as a whole. These are not simply "throw away" features of who we are.

Finally, the findings of this study contribute to literature that examines transgender identity. It is an especially valuable addition because it focuses on issues and parties that are often absent from investigation: the relational implications that follow



from transition and the family members and partners who experience trans-identity in less direct, but still very important ways. What this study tells us about trans-identity is that it can be experienced as problematic or not, depending on how family members/partners conceptualize trans-identity itself, as well as sex/gender in relation to personhood. Even accepting family members can struggle emotionally with their relative's/partner's transition. Further, transition can impact relationships in a variety of ways demonstrated by this study, from changing the (gendered) ways in which parties relate (e.g. mother-daughter to mother-son) to a more monumental relationship change in categorization (e.g., spouses to ex-spouses; spouse to sister) (Hines, 2006). Many participants talked about the ways that they were able to bypass negative feelings or to overcome them in order to offer unconstrained acceptance and support for their family members, which can be helpful for other family members who discover their relative/partner is trans-identified.

### Practical Applications

Interviews with these family members and partners of trans-people yielded several findings that could potentially be helpful for other family members and trans-people themselves, with regard to family experiences. The first and most important is both simple and complex: meaning making matters for experience. A family member's reaction and adjustment to trans-identity and disclosure will depend in large part on the meanings that person assigns to personhood, sex/gender, trans-identity, and family relationships. Additionally, as evident from several of the interviews, people have the capacity to create and recreate meanings for these concepts over time. For example, many participants reported that when they first learned of their family members' identity and first experienced transition, they felt grief, sadness, fear, anger, confusion, and even reluctance to accept the change. However, over time, many of these same family members were able to construct meanings that allowed them to experience trans-identity

and transition differently than they did before, and more positively. In effect, family members might do well to attend to the connections between communication, meaning, and emotion.

There were also more tangible things that can be negotiated by the trans-identified person and their family members. First, participants reported that sudden changes were more traumatic than gradual ones, so families should communicate about the pace of transition and perhaps try to find a speed which is conducive both to the trans-identified person's needs and desires and to the family's adjustment. Second, participants reported that it was easier for them to adjust to transition if the trans-identified family member did not ask for or in some way create an erasure of the past. The particular ways this erasure was created were that family members were asked not to display or even look at, at times, pictures of the trans-identified person before transition and asked not to refer to the person pre-transition by name, pronoun, or family role.

Participants reported that an integration of the past with the present and future made it easier for them to cope with the changes. This integration was accomplished by continuing to display pre-transition photographs and being able to refer to the person and to things that happened pre-transition. Lastly, when asked what advice they would give to other family members, many participants said they would tell others to do research on trans-identity both for educational purposes and to learn that they are not alone. Hopefully, the findings of this study have both theoretical and pragmatic value.

#### Directions for Future Research

This study represents the first step in a very rich line of research, and therefore the directions for future research are many. One benefit of the present study was the variety of relationships represented in the sample. I interviewed mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters, spouses/partners, and ex-spouses. However, this research would benefit from having a larger sample with greater representation from each type of

relationship so that comparisons might be drawn among the relational types. It would be interesting to investigate whether there are patterns in the experiences of mothers related to fathers, fathers related to sisters, sisters related to daughters, and so on, and whether meaning tends to be made differently by different types of relational partners.

Another important direction for future research is to focus specifically on parents of young transgender children. From speaking to a small group of these parents, it is clear to me that their experiences with trans-identity vary from others, even parents of transgender adults, in some quite significant ways. The differences can be attributed to the parents' responsibility for children under the age of 18. While adults can take steps to transition on their own terms, children who transition do so with the permission and assistance of their parents (if they remain at home, of course). This creates many possible issues for parents.

Most significantly, parents must decide whether to allow children to transition, which can involve getting an official diagnosis at times, putting the child on medication that prevents puberty, changing the child's name and pronouns, allowing the child to dress differently, negotiating with the child's school about allowing him or her to transition there, and disclosing about the situation to friends and family. In these cases, parents bear much burden, as they have challenging conversations with their children, other family, friends, doctors, and school administrators and make important and life-altering decisions with their children. All of this comes with risk of blame and ridicule from outsiders. These conversations and the experiences of parents of transgender children are worth further investigation.

Another worthwhile next step is to take the qualitative findings from the present study and create a quantitative questionnaire that could be distributed to a large number of family members and partners of trans-people and could further understanding of the connections observed in these findings. The quantitative instrument would contain a list of meaning making strategies generated from the qualitative data. The measure would ask

participants to indicate which meaning making strategies in which they perceive themselves to have engaged (e.g., I once felt that my trans-identified family member was a different person due to transition, but now I realize she or he is the same person). In addition, the measure would ask participants to indicate the emotions they felt in relation to their relative's/partner's disclosure and transition. If participants indicated they felt grief, they would then be asked to select from a list generated from these data (or write in), over what they felt grief. Lastly, the questionnaire would include questions about relational outcomes such as support, acceptance, relationship change, relationship dissolution, etc. as well as demographic questions. The participants' responses could then be analyzed to find potential patterns among meaning making strategies, emotions experienced, relational outcomes, and demographic variables.

Finally, to deepen understanding of communication and ambiguous loss, future research should seek out other relational circumstances where ambiguous loss is experienced and should attend to the meaning systems at play that foster such an experience. As demonstrated by previous research, families dealing with adult dementia experience something similar, but not related to sex/gender, so what is it that is seen as incompatible to cause family members to feel that the person is both here and gone? Other potential locations for investigations might be families who experience conditions like autism or who have children with mental or physical impairments. Communication researchers have much to offer the study of ambiguous loss.

### Conclusion

Observing and understanding how these participants navigated the available discourses for the concepts of sex, gender, the self, trans-identity, and family in framing their experiences with a transgender relative or partner provided a unique opportunity for studying social order through a rupture in that order, normally taken as stable and neat. The discursive work in which participants engaged and the meanings they created

illuminated the fact that we generally operate in the social world as gendered selves, and therefore we participate in gendered relationships. This was especially made clear through participants' experiences with grief and loss, which showed that a shift in sex/gender identity can have profound impact on relational partners and on the relationship itself, for some. Clearly, the place that sex and gender hold in identity and relating should not be underestimated. Lastly, participants showed that the experience of grief can be brought on by, exacerbated, and even overcome through meaning making processes, which illustrates the vital function of communication in relationships.

## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION TABLE

Table A1. Participant Information

| P# | Name     | Relation      | Sex | Age | Ethnicity | Transition | Steps taken                                                                         | Time since disclosure   | Entire family knows |
|----|----------|---------------|-----|-----|-----------|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1  | Alaina   | Spouse        | F   | 22  | Cauc      | M2F        | Name, pronoun clothing, gestures, makeup                                            | 2 years                 | No                  |
| 2  | Sofia    | Mother        | F   | 66  | Cauc      | F2M        | Name, pronoun, hair, clothing, voice, body posture, hormone therapy, breast surgery | More than 5 years       | Yes                 |
| 3  | John     | Father        | M   | 59  | Cauc      | M2F        | Name, pronoun, hair, clothing, hormone therapy, facial surgery                      | More than 5 years       | Yes                 |
| 4  | Isabella | Sister        | F   | 27  | Cauc      | F2GQ       | Name, pronoun, clothing, word choice, topic choice                                  | Within the last year    | No                  |
| 5  | Audrey   | Partner       | F   | 21  | Cauc      | F2M        | Getting close to name change, pronoun, facial hair, clothing, hormone therapy       | Within the last 5 years | Yes                 |
| 6  | Chuck    | Father        | M   | 44  | Cauc      | F2M        | Getting close to name change, pronoun, facial hair, clothing, hormone therapy       | Within the last 5 years | Yes                 |
| 7  | Kay      | Mother        | F   | 42  | Cauc      | F2M        | Getting close to name change, pronoun, facial hair, clothing, hormone therapy       | Within the last 5 years | Yes                 |
| 8  | Michelle | Former Spouse | F   | 50  | Cauc      | M2F        | Pronoun , facial hair, cosmetics, clothing, body posture, hormone therapy           | Within the last 2 years | Yes (majority does) |

Table A1--continued

|    |         |          |   |    |          |     |                                                                                                                                                      |                        |                             |
|----|---------|----------|---|----|----------|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 9  | Patty   | Sister   | F | 23 | Cauc     | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, vocal, gestures, body posture, hormone therapy, orchidectomy                                     | More than 5 years ago  | Not sure about mom's family |
| 10 | Amanda  | Mother   | F | 59 | Cauc     | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, clothing choices, body posture, hormone therapy, nose surgery, electrolysis                                             | More than 5 years ago  | Yes                         |
| 11 | Bianca  | Mother   | F | 53 | Cauc     | M2F | Name, pronoun, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, gestures, body posture, hormone therapy, sperm save                                                 | More than 10 years ago | Yes (majority does)         |
| 12 | Ellie   | Mother   | F | 68 | Cauc     | F2M | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, gestures, body posture, hormone therapy, breast surgery, hysterectomy                 | 14 years ago           | Yes                         |
| 13 | Edward  | Father   | M | 70 | Cauc     | F2M | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, gestures, body posture, hormone therapy, breast surgery, hysterectomy                 | 14 years ago           | Yes                         |
| 14 | Melissa | Daughter | F | 28 | Hispanic | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial and facial hair, clothing, makeup, body posture, hormone therapy, breast surgery, facial surgery, sexual confirmation surgery | More than 10 yrs       | Yes                         |
| 5  | Evelyn  | Mother   | F | 62 | Cuac     | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial and facial hair, clothing, vocal changes, word choice, gestures, body posture, hormone therapy, sexual confirmation surgery   | Within 2 years         | Yes                         |



Table A1--continued

|    |        |          |   |    |                 |     |                                                                                                                                                    |                         |     |
|----|--------|----------|---|----|-----------------|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----|
| 16 | Carter | Father   | M | 66 | Cauc.           | F2M | Name, pronoun, facial and cranial hair, vocal changes, hormone therapy, breast surgery, sexual confirmation surgery                                | More than 5 years       | Yes |
| 17 | Aaron  | Brother  | M | 30 | Cauc.           | F2M | Name, pronoun, facial and cranial hair, clothing, vocal changes, hormone therapy                                                                   | More than 5 years       | Yes |
| 18 | Amber  | Mother   | F | 39 | Cauc.           | M2F | Name, pronoun, clothing, facial and cranial hair                                                                                                   | Within the last 5 years | Yes |
| 19 | Elyse  | Partner  | F | 26 | Cauc.           | F2M | Name, pronoun, facial hair, vocal changes, hormone therapy                                                                                         | Within 5 years          | No  |
| 20 | Karrie | Mother   | F | 48 | Cauc.           | F2M | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothes, vocal changes, hormone therapy, breast surgery                                                  | 3 yrs ago               | Yes |
| 21 | Roxy   | Mother   | F | 59 | Cauc.           | F2M | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, vocal changes, word choice, gestures, body posture, hormone therapy, breast surgery | Within 5 yrs.           | Yes |
| 22 | Olivia | Daughter | F | 29 | Cauc & Hispanic | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, cosmetics, hormone therapy, breast surgery, facial surgery, sexual confirmation surgery                  | More than 10 yrs ago    | Yes |
| 23 | Claire | Mother   | F | 40 | Cauc.           | F2M | Name, pronoun, facial hair, clothes, posture                                                                                                       | 5 years                 | Yes |
| 24 | Ava    | Mother   | F | 31 | Cauc.           | F2M | Pronoun, hair, clothes, word choice, topic choice, body posture, gestures                                                                          | More than 5 yrs.        | Yes |

Table A1--continued

|    |        |          |   |    |       |     |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                      |                                          |
|----|--------|----------|---|----|-------|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 25 | Chloe  | Mother   | F | 48 | Cauc. | F2M | Hair, clothes, body posture, hormone therapy                                                                                                                                                      | More than 10         | Yes                                      |
| 26 | Lilly  | Mother   | F | 42 | Cauc. | F2M | Name, pronoun, facial and cranial hair, clothes, hormone therapy, wears binder                                                                                                                    | Within last 2 years  | Yes                                      |
| 27 | Gabbie | Mother   | F | 39 | Cauc. | F2M | Name, pronoun, cranial and facial hair, clothes,                                                                                                                                                  | Within last 2 years  | Yes                                      |
| 28 | Nora   | Mother   | F | 39 | Cauc. | F2M | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothes, vocal changes, word choice, topic choice, gestures, body posture, hormone therapy, breast surgery                                              | Within last 2 years  | Yes                                      |
| 29 | Violet | Mother   | F | 50 | Cauc. | M2F | Pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothes, cosmetics, gestures, body posture, hormones therapy                                                                                                  | Within last year     | Yes                                      |
| 30 | Jade   | Daughter | F | 18 | Asian | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, vocal changes, hormone therapy                                                                                                     | Within the last year | Yes                                      |
| 31 | Lois   | Sister   | F | 39 | Cauc  | F2M | Name, pronoun, facial hair, topic choice, hormone therapy, breast surgery. More interested in male bonding. Talks about martial arts/boxing events and watches them together when we're visiting" | Within the last year | Not sure about cousins, aunts and uncles |

Table A1--continued

|    |      |         |   |    |      |     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                         |                                |
|----|------|---------|---|----|------|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 32 | Ruth | Mother  | F | 58 | Cauc | F2M | Name, pronoun, facial hair, clothing, gestures, vocal changes, body posture, hormone therapy                                                                                                                         | More than 5 years ago   | Yes except one grand-mother    |
| 33 | Kate | Partner | F | 43 | Cauc | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, hormone therapy<br>Wrote in: have not noticed, but she has expressed freedom in these areas now in reference to the communicative list of changes     | Within last 2 years     | Yes                            |
| 34 | Tony | Father  | M | 57 | Cauc | F2M | Name, pronoun, facial hair, clothing, gestures, use of body, hormone therapy                                                                                                                                         | More than 5 years ago   | Yes except one grand-mother    |
| 35 | Ann  | Mother  | F | 37 | Cauc | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, vocal changes, changes in word choice when communicating, changes in gestures, body posture, hormone therapy, Wrote in: fingernail polish and jewelry | Within the last 2 years | No, no one in husband's family |

Table A1--continued

|    |       |        |   |    |      |     |                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                        |               |
|----|-------|--------|---|----|------|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 36 | Liz   | Spouse | F | 50 | Cauc | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, vocal changes, hormone therapy, breast surgery, facial surgery | Thought she was a cross dresser when we married,30 years ago. Learned together that she is transsexual | Yes           |
| 37 | Sarah | Mother | F | 65 | Cauc | M2F | Name, pronoun, cranial hair, facial hair, clothing, cosmetics, gestures, body posture, hormone therapy                        | More than 10 years ago                                                                                 | Majority does |

## APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**IRB ID #:** 200903724**To:** Kristen Norwood**From:** IRB-02 DHHS Registration # IRB00000100,  
Univ of Iowa, DHHS Federalwide Assurance # FWA00003007**Re:** Here and Gone: Competing Discourses in the Communication of Families  
with a Transgendered Member**Approval Date:** 04/19/09**Next IRB Approval****Due Before:** 04/19/10

| <b>Type of Application:</b>                     | <b>Type of Application Review:</b>            | <b>Approved for Populations:</b>                 |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Project | <input type="checkbox"/> Full Board:          | <input type="checkbox"/> Children                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Continuing Review      | Meeting Date:                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Prisoners               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Modification           | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Expedited | <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnant Women, Fetuses |
|                                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Exempt               |                                                  |

Source of Support:

---

 This approval has been electronically signed by IRB Chair:

Jerry Suls, PHD

04/19/09 1420

**IRB Approval:** IRB approval indicates that this project meets the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. IRB approval does not absolve the principal investigator from complying with other institutional, collegiate, or departmental policies or procedures.

**Agency Notification:** If this is a New Project or Continuing Review application and the project is funded by an external government or non-profit agency, the original HHS 310 form, "Protection of Human Subjects Assurance Identification/IRB Certification/Declaration of Exemption," has been forwarded to the UI Division of Sponsored Programs, 100 Gilmore Hall, for appropriate action. You will receive a signed copy from Sponsored Programs.

**Recruitment/Consent:** Your IRB application has been approved for recruitment of subjects not to exceed the number indicated on your application form. If you are using written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped Informed Consent Document(s) are attached. Please make copies from the attached "masters" for subjects to sign when agreeing to participate. The original signed Informed Consent Document should be placed in your research files. A copy of the Informed Consent Document should be given to the subject. (A copy of the *signed* Informed Consent Document should be given to the subject if your Consent contains a HIPAA authorization section.) If hospital/clinic patients are being enrolled, a copy of the signed Informed Consent Document should be placed in the subject's chart, unless a Record of Consent form was approved by the IRB.

**Continuing Review:** Federal regulations require that the IRB re-approve research projects at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but no less than once per year. This process is called "continuing review." Continuing review for non-exempt research is required to occur as long as the research remains active for long-term follow-up of research subjects, even when the research is permanently closed to enrollment of new subjects and all subjects have completed all research-related interventions and to occur when the remaining research activities are limited to collection of private identifiable

information. Your project “expires” at 12:01 AM on the date indicated on the preceding page (“Next IRB Approval Due on or Before”). You must obtain your next IRB approval of this project on or before that expiration date. You are responsible for submitting a Continuing Review application in sufficient time for approval before the expiration date, however the HSO will send a reminder notice approximately 60 and 30 days prior to the expiration date.

**Modifications:** Any change in this research project or materials must be submitted on a Modification application to the IRB for prior review and approval, except when a change is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. The investigator is required to promptly notify the IRB of any changes made without IRB approval to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects using the Modification/Update Form. Modifications requiring the prior review and approval of the IRB include but are not limited to: changing the protocol or study procedures, changing investigators or funding sources, changing the Informed Consent Document, increasing the anticipated total number of subjects from what was originally approved, or adding any new materials (e.g., letters to subjects, ads, questionnaires).

**Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks:** You must promptly report to the IRB any serious and/or unexpected adverse experience, as defined in the UI Investigator’s Guide, and any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others. The Reportable Events Form (REF) should be used for reporting to the IRB.

**Audits/Record-Keeping:** Your research records may be audited at any time during or after the implementation of your project. Federal and University policies require that all research records be maintained for a period of three (3) years following the close of the research project. For research that involves drugs or devices seeking FDA approval, the research records must be kept for a period of three years after the FDA has taken final action on the marketing application.

**Additional Information:** Complete information regarding research involving human subjects at The University of Iowa is available in the “Investigator’s Guide to Human Subjects Research.” Research investigators are expected to comply with these policies and procedures, and to be familiar with the University’s Federalwide Assurance, the Belmont Report, 45CFR46, and other applicable regulations prior to conducting the research. These documents and IRB application and related forms are available on the Human Subjects Office website or are available by calling 335-6564.



## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Begun: \_\_\_\_\_ Time Completed: \_\_\_\_\_

*Introduction and Purpose of Interview:*

I am conducting this interview as a part of my dissertation project for a Ph.D. in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. I am interested in learning more about the experiences of families who have a trans-identified member.

You have volunteered participation in this project as an individual who identifies as a family member of a person who is transgender or transsexual and has taken at least one step to transition, is that correct? You are over the age of 18 years old as well? With your permission I would like to record this interview and take brief notes as well; is that okay?

Remember that you do not have to answer any question(s) that you are not comfortable answering and you can stop this interview at any time if you so choose. Also, please know that all information shared in this interview is confidential and cannot be traced back to you. Once our interview is recorded it will be transcribed and your information will not be attached to the recording or the transcript in any way. Your name will not appear in the data, nor will the names of your family members. Pseudonyms will be used in any papers written for the dissertation. Are you ready to begin?

First, I would like to review the information and questionnaire you received prior to our interview. Let's go over those documents now and I will answer any questions you might have about the project.

\_\_\_\_\_ Informed Consent Sheet - obtain verbal agreement to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_ Preliminary Background Information

Do you have any questions about the background information sheet? So, your relation to the transgender relative is [name, if given and transition path], right? And your relative has taken [list steps] steps to transition, right? You learned about your relative's transgender identity [confirm length of time since disclosure] right? And you currently [do or do not] have a relationship with your transgender relative, is that right? And the majority of your family members [do or do not] know about your relative's transgender identity, is that correct?

*Possible Interview Questions and Probes:*

1) Tell me your story. I'm interested in your experience as a family member (or partner) of a transgender person. You can start your story from any point. As you recount the events of the story, try to focus on telling me about *your* thoughts, emotions, feelings, and reactions to those events.

*Probe:* When did you find out?

*Probe:* How did you find out?

*Probe:* How did you feel when you found out?

*Probe:* What were the emotions you experienced?

*Probe:* Would you say your feelings were mostly negative, mostly positive or equally mixed?

*Probe:* Did you ever experience conflicting emotions?

*Probe:* Do you think you would have felt differently if the person had revealed that he or she was gay instead of transgender?

*Probe:* What was your reaction when you found out?

*Probe:* Did you speak to anyone about your feelings?

*Probe:* Did you express your feelings to your transgender relative?

2) Did you ever experience confusion or contradiction or ambiguity about your transgender relative's/partner's identity?

*Probe:* What were you confused about?

*Probe:* Did you resolve your confusion or contradiction? How?

3) Did you ever ask your transgender relative/partner for an explanation of his or her identity?

*Probe:* How did your relative respond?

4) Did you experience confusion or contradiction about your relationship with the transgender relative/partner?

*Probe:* What were you confused about?

*Probe:* Did you resolve your confusion or contradiction? How?

5) Did you ever experience tension between what you were feeling and what you thought you *should* be feeling at the time?

*Probe:* Please explain.

6) Did you ever feel one way and act another way toward your transgender relative/partner?

*Probe:* Please explain.

7) Did you ever experience feelings of grief or loss in relation to your transgender family member?

*Probe:* What do you think made you feel loss?

*Probe:* Why do you think you felt grief if the person had not died?

*Probe:* Did these feelings of grief or loss happen around any significant changes in the trans-identified person's identity?

*Probe:* Did you ever feel like [name] was not the same person you'd always known?

*Probe:* How do you make sense of having had [name] as a [family role] and now having [name] as a [family role]?

8) How do you describe your experience to others, if you discuss your transgender relative with others? If you do not discuss the person and his or her identity, what keeps you from doing so?

*Probe:* If you do not discuss it with others, how would you describe it to me?

*Probe:* Has anyone ever asked you to explain your experience or the identity shift of your relative? What did you say to them? What would you say to them if you had to explain?

9) Did your other family members discuss the transgender relative with you? Did they discuss their feelings and thoughts about the relative? What kinds of things did you talk about?

10) Do you think that your family's reaction to the trans-identity of you relative has been positive? Negative? Mixed? How so?

11) What do you think are the most significant moments, events, or turning points in your experience of the transgender identity of your family member?

*Probe:* What changed as a result of this event or turning point?

*Probe:* Why do you think this event or experience stands out?

12) Were there any identity changes that your relative underwent that you struggled to accept or that made you experience negative emotions?

13) Were there any identity changes that your relative underwent that you feel changed your relationship with that person?

*Probe:* Has your relationship changed in any way?

14) How would you describe your family's communication about your transgender relative and this experience?

*Probe:* What did you talk about it? What was not talked about?

*Probe:* Who talked the transgender identity and/or transition in your family? Who did not?

*Probe:* Where was did discussions occur? (physical or spatial location)

*Probe:* Under what circumstances, or why did you communicate about the transgender identity when you did?

15) I would like to know what you think about the way you and your family adjusted to the changes that took place in terms of the transgender transition. And more generally, how do you see the family's adjustment to the transgender identity overall?

*Probe:* How was this experience different from other events or experiences you have had to adjust to as a family?

*Probe:* What kinds of things did your family do or not do in order to adjust to the changes?

16) What are the challenges, if any, about having someone in your family who is transgender?

*Probe:* Tell me a story about a significant time or experience that was challenging in dealing with transgender identity in your family.

*Probe:* What do you do or say to manage the challenges that you have had to deal with?

17) Are there any times you can recall when you felt as though your transgender family member was not the same person you'd always known?

*Probe:* Tell me about as many of those occasions as you can. (Get details)

*Probe:* What happened to make you think or feel that way?

*Probe:* What did you do in response to feeling that way?

18) Are there times when you felt you had to relate to or communicate with your transgender family member differently than you did before he or she transitioned?

*Probe:* What made you think or feel that way?

*Probe:* What about your family member's behavior or communication made you feel that way?

*Probe:* What other emotions did you experience during these times?

19) Are there any times when you felt you had to talk about your transgender family members to others in different ways than you did before he or she transitioned?

*Probe:* What made you think or feel that way?

*Probe:* What about your family member's behavior or communication made you feel that way?

*Probe:* What other emotions did you experience during these times?

20) Right now at this time, how do you feel about your family member's transgender identity and transition?

*Probe:* Have your feelings about your transgender relative changed in any way throughout this experience? How?

*Probe:* If so, what do you think changed your feelings about your family member?

21) [if supportive] What do you think separates your family from families who are not able to be supportive of transgender relatives?

22) What advice would you give to other people or families in similar situations?

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