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# Trans Gender Identities and Language: Interviews with Recent College Graduates

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Running head: TRANS GENDER IDENTITIES AND LANGUAGE

Trans Gender Identities and Language: Interviews with Recent College Graduates

by

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The College of Saint Rose, B.S., 2012  
Antioch University New England, M.S., 2015

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Clinical Psychology at  
Antioch University New England 2017

Keene, New Hampshire



Department of Clinical Psychology

**DISSERTATION COMMITTEE PAGE**

The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**TRANS GENDER IDENTITIES AND LANGUAGE:  
INTERVIEWS WITH RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES**

presented on June 22, 2017

by

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## Abstract

There has been an increasingly pervasive need to gain a deeper and more individualized psychological understanding of how people experience their gender identities, as well as how they navigate the complicated and nuanced language of gender. Words carry meaning and it is vital to gain an insightful understanding of the impact of words, whether supportive or discriminatory, on trans people. The present qualitative study utilized phenomenological methods to hold interviews with three trans individuals, who had recently graduated from college, about their unique experiences with gender. Thematic analysis was used to examine common themes that arose throughout the interviews. Seven thematic clusters emerged: Positive Experiences, Language, Gender Development, Coming Out, Discrimination, Emotional Reactions, and Representation and Visibility. Twenty-one themes were organized under the seven clusters. Some of these themes include (a) fear (“that was a big step for me, and I was so scared”), (b) transphobia (“I’ve gotten ‘it’ [pronoun] a few times”), (c) familiarity with language (“I appreciate it when people either are pretty up on [gendered language], or are really receptive to learning more about it”), and (d) necessity of support (“just knowing that there are other people like you [who are trans] out there is awesome and empowering”). Exploration of the emerging themes emphasized the individuality of trans individuals and their personal experiences with and opinions of gender. Suggestions for navigating the complicated language of gender, as identified by the participants, are provided in hopes of increasing awareness and safety for the trans community. Limitations of the study included the researcher’s identity and her related biases, the small sample size, and concerns regarding one’s personal safety that may have influenced people to participate or to not participate in the study. Directions for future research include gaining additional understanding of a wide breadth of trans individuals’

intersectional identities (sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, ability, religion/spirituality, etc.), the experiences of trans individuals, generational differences in gender identities, and positive experiences related to trans identities.

*Keywords:* trans, language, cisgender, gender identity, gender expression,  
biological sex, sexuality

## Trans Gender Identities and Language: Interviews with Recent College Graduates

**Chapter 1**

Gender identity has been influenced from time immemorial by the presence and pressure of a gender binary (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015; Bucholtz, Liang, & Sutton, 1999; Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002). There is a normative understanding that people identify as either female or male and that this identity will match their biological sex. Consequently, the clinical implication is that people who do not follow this societal norm are confused or deviant with a gender identity disorder, such that they need to be corrected and redirected by professionals (Pfäfflin, 2011). The vast majority of the population is socialized to expect people to fall neatly within the gender binary, which presents challenges for trans individuals. “Trans” is currently an umbrella term used to describe all people who do not fall within the gender binary, and this term will be used throughout the present study to refer to all individuals who do not identify as cisgender; that is, those identifying with the gender which they were assigned at birth. While the trans community remains largely ignored by society, it is possible to increase their representation and presence through advocacy and social justice efforts. Trans individuals represent a small constituent of the United States population, currently estimated at 0.6% of the population and, therefore, at a societal level, experience inequitable status (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). Consequently, they are at a disadvantage for making needed social and systemic changes which would ensure that their gender identity does not prevent them from having fairness, legal justice, protection, and respect throughout their lives.

It is vitally important that psychologists work to be actively aware of and engaged with the trans community. In accordance with psychological values and ethics regarding social justice

and advocacy, there is an obligation to support people who are underrepresented and disempowered by society, which includes the trans community (APA, 2015, 2016). Additionally, it is beneficial for clinicians to understand the concept of gender identity so that they can have a secure sense of their own gender identity (Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). This self-awareness will help psychologists to recognize and respect the gender identities of their clients (APA, 2010, 2015). See Appendix D for a summary of psychologists' aspirations to be responsive to the concerns of trans clients, as recommended by APA's (2015) Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People.

Our society, like many others, has centered itself and its language around the existence of a gender binary, reinforcing feminine and masculine language rather than gender-neutral language. The present study utilizes gender-neutral pronouns (they/them/their), unless otherwise specified by the participants, in order to avoid the limitations and exclusion of the gender binary. Each of the three participants uses different pronouns, which are specified in Chapter 3 of the study.

### **The Current Study**

The current qualitative research study aimed to gain a deeper and more individualized understanding of how trans people perceive their gender identities and how they navigate the complicated, nuanced, and evolving language of gender. Increasing awareness, knowledge, and understanding of gender is done in service of advocating for the trans community and reducing the discrimination that they face. The initial section of Chapter 1 introduces (a) the difficulties commonly encountered by people who identify within the trans community when approaching the complex development of gender identity and (b) the language used to describe gender identity.

### **Trans Identities**

Outside of the gender binary there are countless gender identities used by individuals within the trans community. The list of gender identities outside of the binary, a limited societal construct, is ever-evolving (Langer, 2011). New terms are constantly being developed and reformulated in order to accommodate the fluidity of gender as it is now understood (Killermann, 2013). Such terms include but are not limited to androgynous (subscribing to feminine and masculine gender roles, interests, and behaviors), bigender (fluctuating between feminine and masculine gender identities), genderless (refusing to have a gender identity), and genderqueer (falling outside of the binary and identifying as having both or neither feminine and masculine gender identities; Killermann, 2013). Such gender identities are more inclusive and offer more options, therefore increasing the likelihood that people will be able to find an identity which describes them.

### **Individual Experiences with Gender Identity**

There are numerous ways that people choose to identify their gender, if they choose to label their gender at all. People who are cisgender (biological sex matches gender identity) represent a privileged majority in comparison to people who are trans (biological sex does not match gender identity; Killermann, 2013). Actively working to use accurate and respectful language when referring to a person's gender identity demonstrates acceptance for people who may otherwise face discrimination and violence because of their gender (Munoz-Plaza, 2002; Singh et al., 2014). Understanding gendered language and individual experiences with gender identity may help to increase compassion and acceptance and, therefore, reduce stigma.

### **Civil Rights Concerns**

Civil rights movements have become increasingly prominent in the United States over

the past several decades. One such effort has been the LGBTQA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Asexual, etc.) equality movement, which advocates for members of the LGBTQA+ community to have the same rights and protections that have always been afforded to cisgender and heterosexual individuals (Bucholtz et al., 1999). While strides are being made to give equal rights to people who do not identify as heterosexual (that is, people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer/questioning, asexual, etc.), there has been comparatively small emphasis on equal rights for gender minorities. Trans individuals in the U.S. have some protection through anti-discrimination laws, but they are still not granted all of the rights and freedoms that are available to cisgender people (Baldwin, 2013). For example, there are severe complications involving their access to healthcare, ability to accurately identify their gender on government documents, and their right to use bathrooms that are associated with the gender with which they identify (Baldwin, 2013). Such human rights are not available to trans individuals in part because they are underrepresented in society, and people remain largely ignorant of them and their needs.

### **History of Inequality**

Gender identity has been influenced for centuries and across societies by the presence and pressure of a gender binary (Bucholtz et al., 1999; Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002). There is a longstanding, general assumption that people identify as either female or male and that this identity will coincide with their biological sex. Thus, within the language of our society there is an overwhelming presence of feminine and masculine language (woman/man, she/he, her/his), with few options for nonbinary pronouns and identifying language. The movement towards gender-neutral words has largely been ignored by society in favor of traditional feminine and masculine words (Bucholtz et al., 1999).

**Explanation of gender identity.** One factor that has likely contributed to discrimination associated with trans identities is the complex nature of the identities themselves (APA, 2010, 2015). Many people are unfamiliar with the differences which distinguish biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality from one another. These concepts are often understood as being one and the same, when, in fact, they are all unique aspects of one's personhood. Biological sex is determined by one's DNA and anatomy and is not an internal sense of one's gender identity, although the majority of individuals do find congruence between their sex and gender (APA, 2010, 2015).

Gender identity is the concept of one's self as a cisgender or trans individual. Gender expression is the external presentation of one's gender through clothing, make-up, mannerisms, behavior, and speech; this may differ from one's gender identity. Many people do not feel safe expressing their gender identity due to legitimate fears about how others will react to their overt gender expression. Finally, sexuality is defined as to whom people are sexually attracted, which is again not necessarily related to their biological sex, gender identity, or gender expression (APA, 2010). Stereotypes about the sexuality of feminine men and masculine women, for example, have led people to believe that the concepts mentioned here are directly related to one another which may not necessarily be true.

### **Language of Gender Identity**

The language of gender is constantly evolving and expanding, allowing people an infinite number of options when choosing how to label their gender, if they choose a label at all. The umbrella term of trans refers to all people whose gender does not match their biological sex (APA, 2010, 2015). Under this umbrella of trans identities there are identities that describe someone who was assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman (transwoman), someone

who was assigned female at birth who identifies as a man (transman), an individual who identifies with feminine and masculine genders (bigender), an individual whose identity fluctuates between different genders (genderqueer or genderfluid), and an individual who does not identify as having a gender at all (agender or genderless), to describe a few.

Trans identities rely on gender identities falling along a spectrum rather than a binary, allowing individuals the freedom to have more than two options to describe their gender (APA, 2010, 2015). Outside of the gender binary, a limited societal construct that forces people to choose one identity or the other, there are countless gender identities used by individuals within the trans community. These identities respect and acknowledge the complexities of gender fluidity and allow for unique and personalized gender identities.

### **Social Discrimination of Trans People**

Discrimination has a powerful impact on people and can cause lasting, damaging effects. A tremendous amount of humiliation and shame may be experienced by trans individuals who are described as the wrong gender (Langer, 2011). There is clear evidence that people who identify as trans, especially young people, are at a higher risk of developing psychological disorders when compared to people who identify as cisgender (Baldwin, 2013). The discrimination that people in the trans community face may result in depression and suicidal ideation, as well as low self-esteem and feelings of isolation. Bullying and hate crimes can cause some trans people to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which often involves re-experiencing their trauma in flashbacks and nightmares (Munoz-Plaza, 2002; Singh et al., 2014). Such trauma and the feelings that accompany it may contribute to suicidal ideation, which is more prevalent in the trans community than in cisgender, sexual minority, or heterosexual populations (Baldwin, 2013).

**Increased risk of suicide.** Suicide attempts are most common among adolescents, typically decreasing in frequency as people get older, and then increasing again among the elderly. It has been suggested that this pattern does not hold true for the trans community, and that although suicide attempts are most common among adolescents, there is a less significant drop off in its frequency among trans adults (Baldwin, 2013). The prevalence of suicide across all age groups in the trans community is likely due to the unusually high levels of difficulty and bias that people in the trans community face as opposed to sexual minorities and cisgender people. Keeping this risk in mind for trans people, it is vital to understand the role that perceived and received support plays in the lives of people in the trans community.

Among the trans population, 41% have attempted suicide as compared to 10%-20% of sexual minorities and 5% of the general population (Baldwin, 2013). The majority of these attempts have been made by adolescents and young adults, and this is likely due to the difficult combination of attempting to understand one's gender identity while also coping with society's general intolerance for the trans community (Munoz-Plaza, 2002). Gaining a deeper and more personal understanding of trans people's experience with gender identity may help the rest of the population to extend more support, care, and understanding.

**Protective factors.** Social support from family members, friends, and members of the community is integral to the mental health and well-being of people in the trans community. Knowing that there is support in one's environment can provide people with a sense of security and safety, therefore reducing the likelihood that someone will resort to attempting suicide (Munoz-Plaza, 2002). People who identify as trans report that they tend to feel more supported by other members of the LGBTQA+ community, and they doubt that they will receive

comparable emotional support from cisgender heterosexuals, including their family members and friends (Munoz-Plaza, 2002).

Because of society's traditional expectation of a gender binary, many people who are questioning their gender identity may assume that their loved ones will also follow normative beliefs and will not support them. If people know that they will be accepted and supported by their loved ones, they may feel more at ease being open about their gender identity. They may also feel more comfortable advocating for themselves if they know that they can rely on support from their families and friends (Munoz-Plaza, 2002). Receiving support from one's family and friends can additionally help individuals develop a strong sense of identity and may reduce the impact of high levels of stress frequently present in underrepresented populations (Singh et al., 2014). Support from one's community and from society-at-large can also have a powerfully positive impact on members of the trans community.

**Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Mental Disorders (DSM).** In order to develop ways to provide support for people of all gender identities, it is important to understand the expectations that society has in place regarding gender. Even among highly educated professionals, ignorance prevails. The most recent DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association (ApA, 2014) has categorized "gender dysphoria" as a diagnosable problem for individuals (Pfäfflin, 2011). This diagnosis emphasizes that trans individuals may be diagnosed because of the severe distress and dysphoria that they may experience regarding their gender identity, rather than meeting diagnostic criteria due to identifying outside of the gender binary (Pfäfflin, 2011). This diagnosis of gender dysphoria is a linguistic improvement from the previous DSM-IV-TR (ApA, 2001), in which "gender identity disorder" suggested that the diagnosis related to the existence of the individual's gender identity itself (Pfäfflin, 2011). Societal support must be

derived from a place of understanding and compassion, but it cannot exist while trans individuals are still considered to be mentally ill by the psychiatric profession, and consequently, by the majority of the population.

Despite the significance of trans identities, the literature does not thoroughly examine the wide and diverse range of gender identities. Cisgender individuals and issues have been more thoroughly analyzed and studied throughout history than trans individuals and issues will likely ever be (Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002). It is difficult to accurately identify the needs of the trans community without examining them through research, and psychologists have a responsibility to try to supplement research that is incomplete and insufficient. The current study aimed to understand how trans individuals perceive and relate to their gender identities, as well as how their experiences have influenced their understanding of their gender identities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Individuals who identify as trans belong to the gendered minority in society, representing 0.6% of the population in the U.S., and they are consequently faced with innumerable forms of discrimination (Flores et al., 2016). For example, they are often asked uncomfortable and inappropriate questions, excluded from demographics on forms and insurance policies, discriminated against in their communities and at their jobs, and targeted in hate crimes (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014). Between 50% and 59% of trans individuals have been harassed while at school or work, and 57% to 61% have been harassed by law enforcement officials (Haas et al., 2014). Additionally, 60% of doctors have refused to provide medical services to trans individuals because of their gender identity (Whitehead, Thomas, Forkner, & LaMonica, 2012). The majority of trans people, estimated between 60% and 78% of the trans population, have been physically and/or sexually assaulted (Haas et al., 2014). Many are not accepted by their own

families or peers and are forced to cope with this rejection from their loved ones. Nearly 60% of trans people have been rejected by their families after disclosing their gender identity (Haas et al., 2014; Norwood, 2012).

The present qualitative study focused on interviews with trans individuals about the impact gendered language has on them, as well as how they perceived their experiences with gendered language. By inquiring about gender identity, I gained an understanding of each participant's relationship with their gender identity and became prepared to understand how the language of gender identity affected the participants' sense of their gender identity. I hope that people, especially clinicians, will gain a better understanding of and greater sensitivity to the impact of gendered language as a result of the study. By demonstrating the importance of using accurate gendered language, it may help the trans community to experience more respectful and dignifying language from the cisgender population, which may, in turn, help to reduce the discrimination and violence that the trans community is forced to cope with.

### **Research Questions**

This study recognized and addressed the discrimination that trans individuals have experienced because of their gender identities. The psychologically and emotionally exhausting experience of oppression is frequently complicated by the offensive and inappropriate language that society typically uses during conversations about gender identity. A qualitative research model was utilized to allow the individual voices of trans individuals to experience power within the study. The research questions were as follows:

1. What is the impact of gender identity on the lives of trans individuals?
2. How have trans individuals experienced their gender identity over the course of their lifetime?

3. How have trans individuals experienced society's language regarding gender identity?

### **Significance of the Study**

Discrimination is a significant concern for the trans community and addressing such discrimination directly relates to psychology's social justice values. The extent to which trans individuals are discriminated against can logically be presumed to be related to the elevated levels of psychological distress that they experience compared to the cisgender community (Haas et al., 2014). Trans youth in particular are more likely to be depressed and to attempt suicide than any other demographic population (Haas, et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2014). Coming out as trans may also impact their family and friends, who must either accept their loved one's gender identity or reject their loved one and cope with a damaged or broken relationship (Norwood, 2012). A lack of support for a trans individual may contribute to their tragic decision to attempt suicide, and this will likely complicate the grieving process of family members and former friends, infusing guilt and shame into their grief (Haas et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2014).

Members of the trans community and their loved ones may decide to seek additional support from a mental health professional as they come out or transition, requiring a specific type of assistance which many therapists are typically unprepared to offer (Benson, 2013). Trans difficulties are often glossed over in psychology training programs that attend to gender and sexuality concerns, leaving therapists and trans clients dissatisfied with the course of treatment offered (Benson, 2013; Bess & Stabb, 2009). These significant problems within psychological training may prevent psychologists from doing their jobs with competence, a requirement of the APA Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct (APA, 2002, updated 2010), and prevent clients from receiving effective treatment. There is a need for reevaluation and reform through all facets

of training regarding the LGBTQA+ community in order to provide support for trans people at individual, community, and societal levels. The *individual level* consists of individual, group, and family therapy; the *community level* includes neighborhood outreach, psychoeducation, and community building; and the *societal level* includes advocacy to change social norms, helping and health professions, and law and judicial systems (Shipherd, Green, & Abramovitz, 2010).

### **Implications of Discrimination for Clinical Psychology**

While some therapists are certainly competent when working with trans clients, most clients report that they had to provide their therapist with extensive trans education before they could truly begin to make progress (Benson, 2013; Bess & Stabb, 2009). Tension may exist between trans clients and therapists who act as “gate keepers” and have the power to endorse or refute the necessity of physiological treatment (Benson, 2013; Bess & Stabb, 2009; Shipherd, Green, & Abramovitz, 2010). According to one study, 52% of trans participants demonstrated psychological distress but did not seek treatment due to difficulties with health care, concerns about their therapist, or fear of societal stigma (Shipherd et al., 2010).

Additionally, many trans clients seek therapy for reasons other than their gender identity. Despite this, they have reported that some therapists tend to attribute all psychological problems to their gender identity and subsequently cast blame upon a gender identity that the client may be content with (Benson, 2013; Bess & Stabb, 2009). Due to the problems associated with therapy, many trans clients either leave treatment or refuse to try therapy at all. Instead, they hold and suppress their distress, which may ultimately lead to more severe symptoms, therefore increasing their risk of homelessness and/or suicide (Benson, 2013; Bess & Stabb, 2009; Shipherd et al., 2010). According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, 69% of trans individuals experienced homelessness at some point in their lives (Haas et al., 2014).

**APA Ethical Principles**

The provision of ineffective treatment prevents healthy functioning for many trans people who may struggle with their mental health and often choose to and are forced to struggle on their own (Haas et al., 2014). It is necessary to inquire about the ethical and professional standards that are in place and the changes that ought to be made at systemic levels in order to improve upon the current therapeutic treatment of trans individuals.

Ethical considerations ought to be in the forefront of psychologists' minds when working with any client, and particularly those who belong to the trans population. First and foremost, there is an ethical principle that trans clients should be treated with justice (APA Ethics General Principle D) and respect and dignity (APA Ethics General Principle E); psychologists must not discriminate against their clients for any reason, including their gender identity (APA Ethical Standard 3; APA, 2016). Many trans clients may not be familiar with experiencing a respectful approach to their gender identity, and being accorded this respect may provide them with substantial comfort and therapeutic relief (Haas et al., 2014).

When working with trans clients, clinicians must be able to provide appropriate and competent treatment in accordance with the ethical standards of best practice (APA Ethical Standard 2 APA, 2010). A basic understanding of trans terminology and special issues, such as pronouns, interpersonal difficulties, language, and potential hormonal and/or surgical options, are necessary for successful treatment (APA, 2010). Adequate competency may also help professionals discuss gender identities and difficulties with ease, comfort, and respect.

Another crucial ethical standard which must be met is confidentiality. Psychologists must make reasonable efforts to protect the identity of their clients and the content of sessions (APA, 2010). Confidentiality is important for all clients but must be considered especially important for

clients who belong to vulnerable populations and are often targets for discrimination and violence. Trans clients may not feel safe disclosing their gender identity at home, school, work, or in their community, and it is their therapist's responsibility to help maintain their privacy and safety. A breach in confidentiality could not only have legal and professional ramifications for the therapist, but more importantly could also threaten the safety and well-being of the client.

### **Biases**

It was imperative for me to acknowledge my cisgender privilege and identify any potential biases which might influence the study's methodology, results, and interpretations/discussions. My self-monitoring, -reflection, and -awareness were consistent with the conscious and continuous effort of qualitative research to have the primary voices of a study come from the participants, rather than from me. I was self-reflective and engaged in conversations with people of a variety of gender identities about the privileges that are afforded people who are cisgender. This was done in order to gain as much awareness and insight as possible, given the impossibility of truly understanding what trans individuals experience. My self-awareness of biases intended to minimize the impact of my perspective in organizing and reporting the data.

I had expected more negative experiences and hardships would be reported than positive experiences and joy with regard to the participants' experience with gendered language and their gender identities. The discrimination and ignorance that target the trans community have been documented in research and are more commonly reported in informal publications and online sources, therefore suggesting that negative experiences would be reflected in the themes identified throughout the interviews. More specifically, I expected that participants might have experienced a loss of support in some capacity since coming out, as compared to the support that

they had when they were perceived to be cisgender. It is unfortunately common for relationships to change, if not end, when someone comes out as trans and I anticipated that this would be an emerging theme in the data. Finally, it was expected that themes surrounding the difficulty of understanding and accepting one's gender identity would be discussed throughout the interviews. Due to the expectations regarding gender that have been imposed by our society, it is uncommon for individuals to quickly and easily develop a sense of their gender identity. I worked to be aware of these biases and how they might impact the current study, and there was a concerted effort to minimize their impact.

### **Summary**

This qualitative research study obtained interview data about how trans individuals understand and attend to their gender identities. The interviews helped me gather personal accounts of how trans individuals with a variety of gender identities experience their gender identities, while also listening to the complex language surrounding gender. I hoped that gathering and organizing individual perspectives on gender identity might increase compassion and care for the trans community, which largely faces discrimination, hatred, and ignorance from the cisgender population. This is a necessary element of social justice and advocacy work for psychologists, which aims to support and amplify the voices of those who face discrimination. The results of the study may help trans people feel supported and connected to others who have had experiences similar to theirs regarding gender identity, and this realization of shared experiences could have a lasting positive impact on the trans community.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Gender*: social construction of attitudes and beliefs based on biological sex, although in reality gender is fluid and not necessarily correlated with biological sex (APA, 2011, 2015)

*Gender Identity*: internal concept of one's gender that is not necessarily demonstrated externally (APA, 2011, 2015)

*Gender Expression*: external presentation of one's gender based on physical appearance, clothing, hairstyle, speech, gait, posture, etc. (APA, 2011, 2015)

*Sex*: biological sex assigned at birth based on genitalia (female, male, intersex, etc.; APA, 2011)

*Sexuality*: sexual attraction or lack thereof to others, which may be fluid and is not dependent on sex or gender (APA, 2011)

*Transgender*: umbrella term for individuals whose sex and gender do not "match" based on society's expectations (APA, 2011, 2015)

*Trans*: shorthand for transgender, an inclusive umbrella term for individuals whose sex and gender do not match based on society's expectations (APA, 2011, 2015)

*Cisgender*: umbrella term for individuals whose sex and gender do "match" based on society's expectations (APA, 2011, 2015)

*LGBTQA+ community*: a broad and inclusive group of people who identify within gender and/or sexual minority groups, including but not limited to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, asexual/aromantic, and many others (APA, 2011)

## Chapter 2: Method

This chapter describes the methodology that was used to collect and analyze data for the present study. A phenomenological methodology called *thematic analysis* was utilized to emphasize subjective experiences narrated by participants, which is a crucial concept when working with underrepresented groups (Mertens, 2009).

### Participants

On the basis of requirements for phenomenological sampling, it was expected that the interview sample would include a minimum of six participants (Mertens, 2009). However, during recruitment, only four interviews were obtained due to a low response. I interviewed only the individuals that expressed an interest in being interviewed. Of these four interviews, only three were considered useable due to a misunderstanding about the intention of the study. This participant believed the study to be about gender in regard to traditional gender roles rather than trans gender identities; this interview was ultimately discarded from the study. The study sample included people of more than one gender identity. The three participants reported the following gender identities: (a) genderqueer/demigirl, (b) genderqueer, and (c) transman.

### Procedures

Interviews were conducted via phone in order to be sensitive to participant comfort and geographic proximity. I provided a general description of the study in the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix A). Once participants had the opportunity to ask questions and clarify concerns, they consented to participate and the format of the interview was discussed.

**Justification for sampling method and size.** I used maximum-variation purposive sampling to gain insight into a variety of experiences and perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). This sampling technique aims to intentionally increase the diversity of the sample, which

was enacted through interviewing participants of different gender identities. Maximum-variation sampling helped to improve the variety of gender identities represented, while purposive sampling allowed an intentional selection of participants in order to satisfy the requirements of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

From a theoretical standpoint, phenomenological research aims to maximize variability and is uninterested in generalizing. Pragmatically speaking, smaller sample sizes are less time-consuming and less expensive (Mertens, 2009). Interviewing participants is a lengthy process and interviewing a small sample helps to obtain in-depth information while reducing the amount of time that I spent collecting and analyzing data.

**Ethical principles addressed.** There were two main ethical concerns with the study: (a) anonymity and (b) the possibility of retraumatization. If participants were not comfortable sharing their gender identity with other people, if they were still unsure of their identity, or if they felt unsafe in their home or community, it would be of the utmost importance to provide participants with anonymity and safety so that they might feel protected. Additionally, participants might have had a traumatic experience in regard to their gender identity, which is common among trans individuals. It would be important for participants to know that, in addition to being anonymous (i.e., their names and identifying demographics would not be revealed in the study) and having their disclosures treated with privacy and respect, they would be able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They could also choose to decline to answer any questions which they were not comfortable answering. An additional precautionary method offered to participants was a list of counseling resources if they felt the need to get support after discussing their gender identity with me (see Appendix C for a list of available trans counseling resources).

**Ethics of recruiting procedures and documents.** The initial description of the study (see Appendix A for the Recruitment Letter) emphasized the sensitive nature of gender identity in order to allow potential participants the opportunity to reflect on how they may react to participating in the study. Because of my connections with friends, family, and communities of trans individuals, participants were recruited by word of mouth. Participants were informed through a consent form and through an additional conversation with me that they were welcome to discuss any concerns that they had about participation and the study. A secure and anonymous email account was provided for anyone who sought to maintain anonymity while asking questions or submitting forms to my email account.

The Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) provided an overview of the study and my contact information, the Antioch University New England (AUNE) IRB chairperson, and the AUNE Vice President for Academic Affairs (now serving as the Provost). My contact information was provided in the event that the participant would like to contact me to ask additional questions. The contact information for university officials who are responsible for research oversight was provided so that participants could register complaints if they so chose.

### **Research Design**

The foundational element of research in thematic analysis is attending to each individual's perspective on a particular phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Understanding this procedure is crucial to the success of organizing qualitative data. The goal is to identify the psychological aspects of the phenomenon from a participant's point of view while maintaining an awareness of the participant's personal background and context of the phenomenon (Mertens, 2009). It is vital to carefully capture the way individuals experience the phenomenon that they are describing. Thematic analysis was congruent with a study on gender identity, a sensitive and

personal aspect of an individual's life, and allowed for attention to the individual's perspective of their own identity. This methodology of the present study emphasized understanding and documenting exactly how participants experienced their gender identity while being careful to remain faithful to participant perspectives. Through conscious awareness of my own cisgender privilege and biases, as discussed in the previous chapter, I refrained from allowing personal biases and expectations to interfere with gaining a truthful and clear understanding of the participants' own experiences with their gender identity.

**Interview questions.** Several questions were established in order to gain a better understanding of trans individuals' experiences. The interview questions that were asked of each participant were as follows:

1. What is your gender identity?
2. How has your understanding of your gender identity remained the same, changed, or shifted in your lifetime?
3. How old were you when you first shared your gender identity with someone else?  
What prompted you to share this information?
4. How did you first describe your gender identity to others?
5. How did people who are close to you respond to your gender identity?
6. How have people in your community and/or cultural group responded to your gender identity?
7. What have people said to you that has been helpful and supportive in regard to your gender identity?
8. What would you want people who have been unhelpful and unsupportive to have said differently?

9. What is the impact of society's understanding of gender identity?
10. What are your recommendations for language usage when communicating with trans individuals?

The thematic analysis that I conducted concentrated on identifying the major ideas and expressions that were important to the participants and not personally to me. I remained as unbiased and objective as possible, leaving my personal biases and assumptions out of the data analysis in order to leave the participant's voice intact. Self-reflection notes were written during the period of analyses in an effort to maintain this. These notes have been summarized in Chapter 3 of the study.

**Trustworthiness.** When conducting a qualitative study, it is important to present the data in a trustworthy manner. Because qualitative research lacks the objectivity of numbers and statistics, there is often a sense of doubt regarding the dependability of the results. Controls must be put in place in order to manage the quality of the research in qualitative studies. Examples of such controls in the current study included my documented self-reflection notes, my dissertation chair serving as an auditor of the coding, and the development and interpretation of the themes.

**Credibility and validity.** This aspect of qualitative research references the accuracy of my interpretation of the participants' responses to interview questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2013). This can be improved first and foremost through an open and honest expression of my biases, which can be located in the previous chapter of the current study. This helped to hold me accountable for any biases that might begin to interfere with the interviews, and it raised both my and the reader's awareness of biases so that they might recognize them quickly (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2013). It was important for me to verify my understanding of the participants' accounts with the participants themselves as well as with my colleagues and my dissertation chair so

misunderstandings could be avoided whenever possible. Transcriptions of the interviews were sent to the participants to give them the opportunity to verify that their responses were captured accurately.

**Dependability and reliability.** This component of the study describes how well I followed through with the procedures for data collection and interpretation that were initially intended in the study's proposal (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2013). All procedures for data collection and analysis were executed in the way that they were proposed. Participant anonymity and safety were considered throughout the study with the utmost care and caution. Themes were discussed with my dissertation chair and with colleagues who are familiar with qualitative research and/or gendered language.

**Transferability.** While qualitative and especially phenomenological research does not seek to generalize findings, the results from such studies are often applicable to other individuals, populations, or problems (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2013). Understanding the participants' perspectives on gender and language might help others to identify with the participants, which may inspire compassion in people, including psychologists, who might otherwise discriminate against the trans community.

**Confirmability.** This final concept refers to my ability to have removed her biases from the study in order to accurately and objectively describe the participants' perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2013). Allowing my expectations and biases into the study would contaminate the unique reactions that participants had to the phenomenon of gender identity development. This is accomplished through conscious and ongoing efforts on my part to be aware of my biases, both through self-reflection and through an open discussion of such biases in the previous chapter.

## Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were audiotaped so that I could take note of the exact language that the participants used to describe their experiences with their gender identities. The transcriptions from the audio recordings were reviewed and written comments were recorded about any notable verbal aspects of an interview (i.e., tone, speed of speech, hesitations, dramatization, etc.). Any repetition, suggesting that the participant wanted to be heard, was noted. The transcriptions, sent in advance through email and messaging systems, were reviewed with the participants in order to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions and to seek clarification on anything that I might be uncertain of. After this study is completed, a summary of the results will be sent to all participants in order to keep them informed of the study. Each interview was transcribed carefully and accurately, capturing all content, language, and pauses.

Thematic analysis is a multi-step process that allows for the development of codes and themes from interviews, narratives, clinical session notes, etc. The phases of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), that were implemented are outlined as follows:

**Phase one.** Each transcript was read multiple times in order to increase my familiarity with the data. During each reading, I made notes to document important exchanges.

**Phase two.** Broad themes, referred to as codes, were considered and recorded throughout the readings of the interviews. These codes were identified as specific thoughts and concepts that were presented by the participants, and expressed as being a significant element of the interviews.

**Phase three.** Based on the codes that had been identified, I searched for themes, or broader ideas that could describe the codes accurately and thoroughly.

**Phase four.** The initial themes were reviewed and restructured in order to more accurately describe the information reported by the participants. I consulted with Dr. Gargi Roysircar, my dissertation chair, regarding reviewing the themes in order to improve their representativeness.

**Phase five.** The themes that emerged were defined and named, and they were organized under thematic clusters in order to present them more efficiently.

**Phase six.** Once all themes were organized under clusters, they were used to write the results of the study. The results included a description of the thematic clusters and themes as well as tables of themes.

The themes which emerged throughout the data analysis are reported and described in the following chapter.

### Chapter 3: Results

This chapter presents the thematic clusters and themes that emerged over three interviews with individuals about their gender identities. The participants identified their gender identities and pronouns as follows: (a) genderqueer/demigirl, she/her (Interview 1); (b) genderqueer, they/them (Interview 2); and (c) transman, he/his (Interview 3). The thematic clusters, their respective themes, and the table in which they are organized are followed by my notes on the tone and cadence of each participant's speech. Finally, a table of the identified gendered language and a summary of my notes that were taken throughout the thematic identification are provided.

#### Thematic Clusters and Themes

The notes at the initial readings of the interviews suggested dozens of potential themes, but these were condensed, connected to each other, and reorganized under thematic clusters throughout later readings. An effort was made to create broader clustered themes, rather than a substantial number of specific, detailed codes. These final thematic clusters and themes are summarized in Table 1. Positive Experiences are listed first, as there were more themes in this cluster than in any other cluster. Language follows due to the focus of language throughout the study. The final five themes are organized in relation to the narrative of the experiences that the participants shared: (a) Gender Development, (b) Coming Out, (c) Discrimination, (d) Emotional Reactions, and (e) Representation and Visibility.

**Cluster 1: Positive experiences.** The interviews additionally revealed a number of positive experiences that have come as a result of the participants' gender identities. They shared stories about the support that they have received and how this support has impacted them. The

themes that have emerged include (a) Community support, (b) Lucky, (c) Honesty and liberation, and (d) Fun.

**Community support.** All three of the participants discussed the impact of the support that they have received from their communities, including people that they know personally, professionally, and virtually. They explored the impact of feeling as though they would be accepted and understood by others, and how important this feeling was to their ability to understand and be open with their own identities. One of the participants discussed how hard it is to live in a conservative area of the country and to feel like there is not a lot of support or acceptance from the people she interacts with on a daily basis, emphasizing the importance of being able to find connections online. Another participant shared,

I mean, there are so many kids out there, like, I'm working for a suicide prevention group and almost every single one of the kids that I talk to is trans or on the gender spectrum or something. And those kids do not see anyone in the media that they feel comfortable relating to. And a lot of their friends are super supportive and their families are, you know, not there yet. And it's just not fair. I can't understand why. (Interview 3)

**Being lucky.** Two of the participants discussed how "lucky they feel" to be able to openly identify with their gender identity and to have a significant amount of support from the people in their life. One participant discussed his work with people through a suicide prevention hotline and how lucky he was to have the support and acceptance that others do not always experience. He went on to say,

I spoke at a Girl Scout conference last year and I started my speech with "back when I was a Girl Scout," so I feel like I've been pretty lucky. I mean I've had my fair share of moments [of discrimination], but I feel like in terms of the community it's been okay, or

it hasn't at least been shown to me. (Interview 3)

Both participants discussed how helpful and validating it is to be accepted by their loved ones and to have avoided particularly negative reactions from people.

**Honesty and liberation.** Two of the participants discussed how being honest about their gender identities was liberating for them. They explained the impact of being open with their loved ones and how this experience has allowed them to feel more comfortable with their identities. One participant explained,

...I made a statement on Facebook and to family members and stuff that I'd rather go by they/them/their, and I don't know, I guess it was liberating I guess to finally let people know what it was that I was. (Interview 2)

Both participants described their ability to live honestly in alignment with their gender and how powerful this experience has been for them.

**Fun.** Two participants discussed their process of discovering and aligning with their gender identity, describing this process as being "fun." There was a sense of joy regarding having the ability to explore and play with their gender identities, despite how serious and important this process of identity discovery has been for them. One participant shared, "it's just fun for me, the changes. Like, some days I'll identify completely as a woman and other days not at all," (Interview 2). All three participants incorporated humor throughout their interviews, demonstrating the fun and delight which they experienced throughout certain elements of the interviews. One participant joked, "[advocating for myself is] a lot of dancing, and I'm not really good at dancing either" (Interview 3).

**Cluster 2: Language.** Several concepts which broadly involve language emerged throughout the course of the interviews. In addition, a specific *language cluster* was identified.

The participants discussed the language surrounding their identities and how others have worked to understand the complex language of gender. The three themes included (a) Pronouns, (b) Familiarity with language, and (c) Evolution and complexity of language.

***Pronouns.*** All three participants discussed the importance of being addressed by their correct pronouns. They shared how hurtful and invalidating it is when people do not use the pronouns that they should use, and that they sometimes do not feel able to advocate for themselves and correct people. One participant stated,

...so I said, “I go by they/them/their” when it came to me, and my professor kind of scoffed at it? And she was like, “oh, I’m just going to call you by your name instead, because I’m an English professor. (Interview 2)

The participants expressed a variety of opinions regarding whether people should or should not ask about someone’s pronouns if they are unsure, but they all agreed on the significance of pronouns.

***Familiarity with language.*** Two of the participants discussed how helpful it is when others are already familiar with the vernacular regarding gender identities. They shared that it was helpful to have an understanding of the language as well as an openness to learning that language. One participant stated, “I appreciate it when people either are pretty up on that, or are really receptive to learning more about it. That’s helpful versus people who are intimidated by what they don’t know...” (Interview 1). One of the participants discussed how different identities and words mean different things for different people, acknowledging how overwhelming this can be for people.

***Evolution and complexity of language.*** Two of the participants mentioned that the language surrounding gender can be particularly difficult to grasp due to how complex it is and

how it is constantly evolving and changing. They discussed how identities and phrases may be considered appropriate by some people but not by others, or how identity vernacular may have been appropriate at one point in time but is not anymore. The participants mentioned how confusing this fluidity can be to understand and the openness that is required to put forth an ongoing effort to understand and keep up with the language. One participant shared,

Even kids younger than me are so comfortable with identifying as queer and everything just being, you know, it doesn't have to be black and white anymore, and parents and older people are still just like "you're ruining everything." And we're all like "no, we're making it better!" (Interview 3)

**Cluster 3: Gender development.** All three participants discussed the development of their own awareness and understanding of their identities, sharing some of the details of how they came to recognize that they are not cisgender. Three themes emerged as they shared these parts of their stories, including (a) Self-education about gender, (b) Awareness since youth, (c) Ongoing discovery and development.

*Self-education about gender.* All three participants reported that they did not learn about trans identities until they began looking into why it was that they felt different.

One participant stated,

...there were a couple times when I was, uh, I guess pre-adolescent or adolescent where something would happen and I would come across an article about somebody who was transgender and I would have this moment where I was like is that something that feels like me? (Interview 1)

The participants discussed the impact of not having the language to describe their experience with their gender until they were older, specifically sharing that a lack of language contributed

substantially to the confusion and otherness that they felt growing up.

***Ongoing discovery and development.*** Two of the participants discussed how they view their gender identities as fluid, with the understanding that they may experience their genders in different ways as they progress through their lives. One participant stated,

Over the next few years as I learned more about gender identity and what it means and how broad it can be and I guess met more people who were transgender and gender nonconforming, it makes sense to me, I guess, for the first time, that I could not be, I guess, part of a binary gender if that makes sense, and that I could I could fit my feelings and experiences into something that other people would understand and acknowledge.

(Interview 1)

They shared that while they feel secure in their current gender identities, they feel as though their perspective of their gender identities might not necessarily remain the same as they are at this point in their lives.

***Awareness since youth.*** Two of the participants discussed how they have known since early childhood that there was “something different” about them in regard to their gender identities. They shared memories that they have or that others have shared with them about being happy to not be associated with the gender that they were assigned at birth. One participant mentioned, “I think deep down I always knew. And it’s funny because there’s a really old home movie of me from when I was a baby, and my grandma refers to me as a little boy...” (Interview 3).

**Cluster 4: Coming out.** The three participants described their coming out experiences, specifically focusing on their own internal experiences as well as the responses that they received from the people around them. Each shared some of their thought processes as they prepared

themselves to be more open with their gender identities, discussing how this is an ongoing process and it will continue to be throughout their lives. Three themes emerged within this cluster, including (a) Initial comfort with sexuality, (b) Necessity of support, and (c) Differences in acceptance.

***Initial comfort with sexuality.*** All three participants reported that they felt more comfortable disclosing their sexuality to others before their gender identity. Although there is not an inherent connection between coming out with one's sexuality and gender identity, the participants who discussed this experience shared that they felt as though they had a better understanding of their sexuality than their gender identity, explaining that they felt as though other people would be more accepting of their sexuality than their gender identity. One participant described feeling confused about their gender identity but having a clear understanding of their sexuality, explaining that when they initially came out as gay they had not yet found the words to describe their gender identity. Another participant shared,

...when I came out as being gay, my mom, um, she was very, very forward about the fact that she was uncomfortable with something like Chaz Bono. And I remember her very specifically saying "just don't go have surgery like Chaz Bono." Which, and now looking at it that's a really silly thing to say because sexuality and gender identity are two different things, but I think my family kind of knew that there was something there.

(Interview 3)

***Necessity of support.*** All three participants shared that they did not come out about their gender identity until they had identified sources of support. In anticipation of familial rejection, they described waiting to tell their families until they had told friends and identified a secure support system on which they could rely. One participant mentioned, "The first time I started

talking to people was with people who were already out, which is also kind of what helped me find out, you know, find out more about myself” (Interview 2). They stated that they did not feel safe to come out until they had a better sense of how their loved ones would respond, clarifying that it was still difficult to do even when they knew that people would be supportive. One participant expressed a desire for everyone to have support throughout their process of self-discovery, stating, “I wish everyone had that opportunity, rather than finding themselves in the dark. It definitely helped” (Interview 2).

*Differences in acceptance.* Two of the participants described how different it is for them to come out to people who knew them “before” as compared to new people who they meet. One participant mentioned that now that his gender expression matches his gender identity, it is often easier to introduce himself to new people than to people who knew him when he did not use a male name or pronouns. Both participants shared that they are typically too nervous to introduce themselves to people in general, but they have noticed a difference depending on their past interactions, or lack thereof, with people. One participant stated,

My friends were perfectly fine with it. It’s still, for friends that I’ve had since I was little, it was really hard for them, and their parents were super accepting but they’ll still slip because they grew up with this person for 21 years, or this image of a person, but they were fine. People at school were mean, oddly enough, like because I was in college I thought that was over. (Interview 3)

**Cluster 5: Discrimination.** The interviews revealed discriminatory experiences that all three participants had encountered. The discrimination that they experienced revolved around challenges and verbal harassment that were directed at them because of their gender identities.

Three themes emerged, including (a) Transphobia, (b) Limitations of trans identities, and (c) Privilege.

***Transphobia.*** All three participants described having experienced transphobia. They shared some of the hurtful and insensitive comments that have been made about them and their gender identities. For two of the participants, these included being called “it” by their peers. One participant shared, “I’ve gotten “it” a few times, where they’re like “well if you want to go by ‘them’ maybe I’ll just call you ‘it’ ...” (Interview 2). They discussed how simultaneously ridiculous and upsetting these comments have been to them and the impact that they have had on their sense of safety and acceptance in the world.

***Limitations of trans identities.*** All three participants discussed how people still generally view trans identities as being part of a gender binary, ignoring the innumerable genders that exist outside of the binary. One shared that they have continued to feel pressure to put their gender in a box, despite how uncomfortable and disingenuous this feels for them. They stated,

“...some days I’ll identify completely as a woman and other days not at all. But I guess I kind of fall in the gray area a lot? It just kind of fits and that’s why I say fluid or whatever because it’s a spectrum and it just kind of changes on the day. (Interview 2)

All three participants reported having felt this pressure to profess a particular gender identity from both cisgender and trans individuals.

***Privilege.*** Two participants discussed the privilege and oppression that they have observed as a result of their gender identities. One participant shared that he has noticed that he is treated differently because of his masculinity, compared to how he remembers being treated when he appeared to be more feminine. He shared that this differential treatment has been eye-opening and surprising. He explained,

...it's still a process now, figuring out what being a guy means to me or what should it mean, you know, what privileges come with that? It's definitely been a step in a, you know I definitely have white male privilege for the most part, in a lot of ways. I can pass. So understanding what that means is a little scary and messed up, you know? It's pretty awful too, like I went from being a very proud feminist to now having those moments of "you're favoring me because I look like a guy!" I just look like a normal guy and I don't like it, I don't want it. Argh, it makes my skin crawl. (Interview 3)

Another participant discussed the privilege that cisgender individuals and trans individuals, who live in liberal parts of the world, have regarding their ability to present their gender openly. They discussed the impact of having access to resources and being from a higher socio-economic status, sharing how expensive and difficult it can be to alter one's gender expression to match their gender identity.

**Cluster 6: Emotional reactions.** The emotional reactions that surfaced as the participants discussed their gender identities were a powerful component of both the content and the tone of the interviews. These reactions were identified in all three of the participants' interviews and are described in the following two themes: (a) Fear and (b) Frustration with ignorance.

**Fear.** Fear was woven throughout all three of the interviews, specifically surrounding discussions regarding the acceptance of the participants' gender identities. As they discussed their fears of negative reactions, their voices reflected the fear that they felt, several times resulting in hesitations or breaks in their speech as they worked to find the right words to describe their experiences. One participant stated, "I made the conscious choice that I didn't want to open this box right now, I can't have something, I can't explore this right now because I

can't unsettle myself any more than I'm already unsettled" (Interview 1). The participants discussed feeling afraid of the reactions that they may receive from others once they are open about their gender identity, specifically regarding the impact that these reactions may have on their relationships and safety.

I think I remember, it took me, probably like up until 2 years ago to be like "I'm going to introduce myself with male pronouns." I'm just going to tell people to use he/him. And that was a big step for me, and I was so scared. I just wanted to be "he" and I felt like without transitioning physically it wasn't possible, so I just stuck with my name and hoped for the best and that people would use the right pronouns. (Interview 3)

***Frustration with ignorance.*** The participants all discussed the frustration that they experience when they encounter people who are ignorant of gender identities. They shared that they feel frustrated and aggravated by people's lack of willingness to understand and learn about gender, but this feeling is most prominent for them when they interact with people who refuse to respect their gender identities. One participant stated,

I think the people who don't get it are the people who don't ask, who don't care to ask, and I think it's really a matter of them not caring. Not that they don't understand, but if they cared enough to ask I think they'd start to understand. (Interview 2)

The participants shared that while they can understand the difficulties involved in gaining an understanding of gender identities, they also feel frustrated by how resistant people are to being open-minded. They stated that they wished that others could have a better understanding of the trans community and of gendered language. One participant shared, "I just wish people knew that those people who identify differently everywhere and you need to respect those boundaries" (Interview 3).

**Cluster 7: Representation and visibility.** The interviews revealed several themes that fell under the concepts of representation and visibility, their importance, and the vulnerability that is involved in being more open about one's gender identity. The participants discussed their thoughts about representation as well as their own comfort with the visibility of their gender identities. The three themes that emerged included (a) Gender identity vs. gender expression, (b) Advocacy, and (c) Visibility vulnerability.

*Gender identity vs. gender expression.* All three participants reported that they have struggled at times with a lack of alignment between their gender identities and gender expressions. They shared the various circumstances that have limited their abilities to express their gender in a way that felt completely congruent with their internal understanding of their genders. Two of the participants discussed this discrepancy in the context of professional expectations, insufficient financial resources, and their own comfort. One participant shared,

...I think sometimes, if I had happened to be born a more androgynous looking person all of this would have been easier. But, um, I'm not. And I've thought about what is the thing that makes me uncomfortable about how other people see in me and how could I change that. (Interview 1)

*Advocacy.* All three of the participants discussed their involvement in and opinions of advocacy work in relation to gender representation. They shared anecdotes about participating in panels, doing volunteer work, and being open to having conversations with others in an effort to educate. One participant shared,

I felt kind of on the spot but I was mostly so happy to be able to help people who would probably not think about these questions in any other context, and give information about queer people because that's kind of the only thing that's going to positively change

things. (Interview 1)

They discussed the extent of their comfort engaging in gender identity education, explaining that they may feel very comfortable taking on an advocacy role in some situations, but not in others.

**Visibility vulnerability.** All three participants discussed their comfort with being out to others, sharing that as good as it can be to be open about their gender identity, it is also often scary. They explained that they all value how important representation and visibility can be, while also acknowledging the increased risk that is associated with being more open. One participant stated,

...you see [progress] when people share photos and memes regarding gender expression and gender identity, just trying to inform people. And I think it's a lot easier for people like myself to find themselves when they can see people's stories and they can hear about them and know that they're not alone. So I think that people coming to terms with themselves is more prevalent because there's more of a view on it. But I think on the other side of that, it also allows a lot of people to comment some negative stuff and you know, resist the adjustment. (Interview 2)

The participants shared negative and hateful comments that they have heard as a result of making an effort to be more open about their gender identity.

Table 1

*Thematic Clusters and Themes*

<b>Thematic Clusters</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Positive Experiences	Community support Lucky Honesty and liberation Fun
Language	Pronouns Familiarity with language Evolution and complexity of language
Gender Development	Self-education about gender Awareness since youth Ongoing discovery and development
Coming Out	Initial comfort with sexuality Necessity of support Differences in acceptance
Discrimination	Transphobia Limitations of trans identities Privilege
Emotional Reactions	Fear Frustration with ignorance
Representation and Visibility	Gender identity vs. gender expression Advocacy Visibility vulnerability

**Interview Notes Summary**

All three participants were open and engaged throughout the interviews. They seemed to be open and trusting with their identities and their stories, sharing that they value the idea of using their own experiences to help others develop a better understanding of gender identities and language. They were easy and enjoyable to talk to, and their candidness throughout the interviews was greatly appreciated.

The first participant spoke quickly and seemed to be processing some of her thoughts about gender identity as she responded to questions. She joked and used humor throughout the interview, particularly towards the end as she appeared to become more comfortable talking about gender and language. She sent additional thoughts and reactions via email after the interview was over, which suggests that she continued to reflect on the questions and the experience of discussing her gender identity outside of the context of the interview.

The second participant spoke with a calm and even tone, and seemed to reflect on their thoughts before responding to questions. They were enthusiastic about social justice and social change, and sounded optimistic about society's developing understanding of gender. They also joked and used humor throughout the interview, at times in a self-deprecating way.

The third participant spoke in a lighthearted tone but took the questions seriously, despite being somewhat distracted at times throughout the interview. He was particularly thoughtful about the widespread impact of society's attitude regarding gender. He also joked and used humor throughout the interview.

### **Language**

Throughout the interviews, a variety of language related to gender was used by the participants, either in reference to their own specific gender identity or to gender in a broader sense. Table 2 reports the words and phrases that were used in the interviews, reflecting the current language that is used by the individuals interviewed for the study.

Table 2

*Gendered Language*

affirmation/confirmation/alignment	assigned gender
binder/bind my chest	cis/cisgender
cis-privilege	demiflux
demigirl	feminine
FTM	gender
gendered	genderfluid
genderneutral	genderqueer
gender-y	gender binary
gender dysphoria	gender expression
gender identity	gender-neutral pronouns
gender nonconforming	gender roles
LGBT/LGBT+/ LGBTQ	masculine
misgendered	MTF
nonbinary	partner
post-gender	pronouns (she/her, they/them, he/him, ze)
queer	traditional binary
trans/transgender	transition
transman	trans-ness
transphobic	transwoman

**Self-Reflection Notes Summary**

Self-reflection notes were written throughout the initial efforts to identify themes in the interviews (see Appendices E, F, and G for the interviews). These notes focused on my thoughts and reactions to the content of the interviews as they were being conducted. Several notes were written regarding the number of affirming and summarizing statements that I made throughout the interviews, commenting on how drawn I felt to express support and validation to the participants. Additionally, there were a number of notes that reflected the personal reactions that I experienced, most notably anger, on behalf of the participants when they described their experiences with discrimination, as well as admiration for their bravery and humanity when they expressed compassion for their critics. I additionally noted my enthusiastic responses to statements made by the participants, which reflected my own perspectives of gender, specifically

regarding the social construction of gender and the limitations of the gender binary. I reflected on my enthusiasm in regard to how it may have encouraged particular responses from the participants. I noted my own biases of favoring the dismantling of a binary view of gender, as well as my awareness of gender as a social construct. These views may have contributed to the data that were collected through subtly influencing the content of the participants' responses.

I noted some frustration with the process of distilling and condensing the initial emergence of a large number of codes. I commented that the vast amount of information that was shared in the interviews warranted further exploration which could not occur in the current study. The interviews are included in the dissertation, so that a secondary analysis might be performed on the study's archived data.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the themes that were identified throughout the thematic analysis of three interviews with trans individuals. There were 21 final themes organized into seven thematic clusters. Descriptions were provided for each cluster and each theme, which included quotations from individual interviews (i.e., Interview 1, Interview 2, and Interview 3) that provided rich text for each of 21 themes. Quotations were included for each theme in order to demonstrate the relevance and meaning of each theme. Additional information on the interviews was reported, such as the voice, tone, and language of the interviewees. A summary was provided of self-reflection notes that I wrote throughout the data analysis on the discovery of findings, as well as how my cisgender biases might have influenced the identification of themes.

### Chapter 4: Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to establish an opportunity for trans individuals to share their experiences with gender and language, in hopes of contributing to the limited body of research which aims to obtain a better understanding of said experiences. By interviewing trans people with different gender identities, I was able to gain a broad understanding of gender identity. The participants shared their gender identities and pronouns, which include: (a) genderqueer/demigirl, she/her (Interview 1); (b) genderqueer, they/them (Interview 2); and (c) transman, he/his (Interview 3). I encountered gendered language that represented the fluidity of gender identities. It is important to continue working towards establishing support and compassion for the trans community, and one way to accomplish this is through research, specifically social justice oriented research which allows the voices of trans individuals to speak to their own experiences and express their own needs. While it is important to recognize that these individual experiences and needs are not necessarily generalizable to all members of the trans community, they provide opportunities for developing an initial understanding of the trans community and for using this understanding to work actively towards minimizing discrimination against trans people.

The research questions which directed the current study were as follows:

1. What is the impact of gender identity on the lives of trans individuals?
2. How have trans individuals experienced their gender identity over the course of their lifetime?
3. How have trans individuals experienced society's language regarding gender identity?

Thematic analysis was utilized with three interviews to answer these research questions, and the

results from the data analysis, which were presented in the previous chapter, are discussed in this chapter. The implications of the results are discussed in the context of the clinical and societal understanding of gender and language. The participants' suggestions for language usage when addressing gender identities are presented with the hope of reducing offensive and hateful conversations in the future. The limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are also addressed.

### **Research Questions Answered**

The research questions posed in the current study were broad due to limited research on transgender identities as well as the need for an open and curious stance when examining gender and language. When listening to others talk about their experiences, it is necessary to work actively and intentionally to truly listen to them and understand their experiences as best as possible. I sought to use my clinical listening skills when interviewing all three participants, such that the filters and biases of being in a position of power and of having cisgender privilege were minimized, allowing the participants' voices to carry their own stories throughout the study. Keeping this in mind, the results reported in the previous chapter are discussed here without trying to make generalizations or suggest implications about an entire population that might dilute the perspective or words of individual participants.

**Question one.** The first research question aimed to understand how the participants perceived the impact that their gender identities might have on their lives. The interviewees reported that they have been impacted in a number of ways, both negatively and positively. It would perhaps be easier to discuss the components of their lives that were not been impacted by their gender identities. As one of the participants pointed out, someone's gender identity does not change certain elements of their personality and interests, such as their love of animals, but it

does impact people's lives in a wide variety of ways.

The interviewees discussed the emotional experiences that they had in relation to their gender identities, specifically regarding feelings of fear and frustration. They all shared their individualized experiences of feeling fearful, about the uncertainty that they felt about exploring their gender identity or of the reactions that they anticipated getting from others. They described the power that this fear held, and continues to hold, and how this impacted their comfort with being more open about their gender identities. Despite the presence of this profound and justified fear, each participant was able to find ways to overcome parts of their fear at different times, their need to be open about their gender identity in some capacity outweighed the fear.

They additionally discussed frustration as they had encountered people who were ignorant and/or intolerant of their gender identities. Some of this frustration was sparked by cisgender individuals who are unaware of trans identities and language to some extent, or by cisgender individuals who are willfully ignorant, making hurtful and offensive comments. One participant, for example, described having a professor in their gender studies class refuse to use their correct pronouns because of her views about standard grammar. However, the participants reported that some of their frustration was also a result of ignorance within the trans community. The limitations of gender, even within the trans community, were presented by the interviewees. The participants shared that there are different beliefs about gender identities and how they can be expressed. One participant shared that she had experienced a generational split; while older generations of trans individuals tended to express an interest in "passing" as their gender and wanted to fit within the gender binary, younger generations of trans individuals tended to embrace the fluidity and non-conformity of their gender identities. All three participants expressed a desire to exist as they are, without the pressure of needing their gender identities to

meet anyone's expectations.

Another component of how gender identity impacted the participants related to their coming out experiences. They discussed how they had thought about coming out and what they needed in order to feel able to do so. One participant was not openly out in her life due to professional concerns, but she was able to come out to people who she knew would be supportive. The other two participants had been able to be more open with their gender identities. They described generally feeling supported by the people they had come out to, despite some difficulties regarding their parents' acceptance. All participants discussed feeling more comfortable initially coming out to people who they knew would understand and accept them based on their awareness of and experience with the LGBTQA+ community. The participants discussed their awareness of how coming out might impact their relationships, in regard to both personal and professional relationships.

The participants also discussed how their experiences with discrimination have been impacted by their gender identities. They shared that comments were made to them that they had not experienced before they came out, including being referred to by the wrong pronouns, being referred to as "it," having assumptions made about their gender based on their physical presentation, and being asked offensive questions about their body and identity. One participant discussed her decision to not come out to her colleagues because she did not believe that people in her field of science would be accepting and she worried how coming out could impact her ability to get a job once she was out of graduate school. She also shared that because many people perceived her to be female, she encountered sexism from males which was upsetting due to both the offensive nature of the comments (e.g., she did not smile enough) and also due to the feeling of being misgendered. Another participant discussed his experiences with privilege, and

adjusting to how uncomfortable it was for him to have male privilege for the first time in his life. He mentioned that he had noticed how differently people treated him due to his male gender and he had a difficult time adjusting, despite the absence of sexism that he was currently experiencing as a transman.

Finally, participants discussed how their gender identities had impacted their involvement in advocacy. They shared that they had all advocated for the trans community in some capacity, whether at an interpersonal or community level. The participants discussed how they had been able to talk to people one-on-one about gender identities, while others discussed experiences that they had speaking on panels or to different organizations about their own experiences with gender identity. One of the participants shared that one of his professors told him that knowing him had personalized issues regarding trans rights, resulting in greater understanding for the professor. The interviewees discussed how fear had influenced their comfort with being an advocate, and how they had and had not been able to overcome this.

**Question two.** This question focused on how trans individuals had experienced their own gender identities from an internal focus throughout the course of their lives. The interviewees discussed the ongoing development of their gender identities and the impact that support had for them individually.

Throughout the interviews, the participants discussed the complex and delicate process of understanding their gender identities and then working towards acceptance, whether accepting themselves and/or seeking acceptance from others. One of the participants, who was not publically out in regard to her gender identity, shared how she had been able to gauge her comfort with her current gender identity and expression, and how she anticipated that this might change over the course of her life. Another participant, who identified as genderqueer, described

the fluidity of their gender and gender expression, explaining the discomfort that they sometimes experienced because of the societal pressure to fit into a gender binary. The third participant shared how affirming and overwhelming it had been for him to openly identify and present in alignment with his male gender. It cannot be emphasized enough how important it was to acknowledge the internal thoughts and feelings that the participants had experienced as they worked to understand and process their gender throughout the course of their lives. Through their ability to be honest with themselves and others about their gender identities, they were able to acknowledge their true selves. This honesty exists both intrapersonally, through their own sense of self, as well as interpersonally, through their ability to be authentic with others.

The interviewees discussed how their understanding of their gender identities was influenced by the information that they had available to them, and how helpful it was for them to learn more about gender identity existing fluidly on a spectrum. They shared that they were able to do their own research on gender identities and find what words and identities represented them in order to gain a clearer sense of their gender. Two of the participants discussed how they felt comfortable with their current sense of their gender identity, but they were unsure of how this might change over time. One stated that their gender identity was fluid and they felt comfortable with how they were able to express their gender at this point in time, but due to the fluid nature of their gender identity this might change. The other participant shared her comfort with not being publically out, having a feminine presentation, and using female pronouns. She commented that she looked more feminine than her girlfriend, but she wondered if this femininity would always feel comfortable to her, suggesting that she might feel more comfortable having a more androgynous presentation in the future. She remembered that when she was a child, she had wanted to be called a boy and to have short hair.

The participants also discussed the impact of support on their experience with their gender identities. They described how helpful and affirming it was for them to have support from people in their lives, whether those people were part of the trans community or not. The participants shared the importance of finding genuine support wherever people were able to find it, emphasizing that this could be life changing for trans individuals. They shared their own experiences of positive and affirming conversations that they had with people, and how they still remembered the small and simple pieces of language that made them feel accepted. One of the participants discussed how she was encouraged to join an executive board for an LGBT+ organization, and the person she was talking to used the word “individual” instead of any gendered language. She discussed how this exchange had continued to stand out to her as being an affirming conversation, helping her to feel more comfortable with her own gender identity.

**Question three.** This question addressed the experience of language related to gender identities. The participants discussed their experiences with language, specifically regarding their own preferences in regard to the complex evolution of language. They also discussed the language-based discrimination that they had faced in response to their gender identities, and the importance of representation and visibility in the context of helping to expose others to acceptable language. They explained that without broader representation of trans identities in society people would remain unaware of gendered language, therefore perpetuating ignorance. The participants discussed their own experiences of discovering the language that described their gender and how this helped to affirm the validity of their own gender identities.

They discussed their own gender identities and all three participants mentioned being dissatisfied with the limitations of language just in reference to their own identities. One stated that they had two identities in an effort to more completely describe her gender identity, one

expressed some frustration with being unable to fully capture her gender identity due to its fluid nature, and one expressed a desire to have more nuance in the concept of masculinity. They all discussed the obstacles that they had expected and encountered in regard to pronoun use. For the two participants who had asked people to use different pronouns, they shared some of the resistance that they were met with and how hurtful this was. The participants all acknowledged how complex gendered language is, and while there was some sympathy expressed for people who were genuinely trying to get a better grasp of how to navigate this language, there was also frustration in response to people who refused to learn the language due to their own gender biases or ignorance.

The participants all shared their own experiences with discrimination, all of which were based in using language in an intentionally or unintentionally hurtful way. They shared that they had faced negative comments in response to their pronouns, their appearance, and their understanding of their own gender identities. Despite not reporting any experiences with physical threats or violence, the significance of verbal attacks was substantial. The participants discussed their experiences with ignorant and offensive comments, including how upsetting and invalidating it was to be targeted by them. One of the participants discussed how they had found some of the comments to be laughable because they were so clearly born of ignorance, but they remained hurtful. The impact of language was powerful, whether it was being used correctly to affirm and support people, or incorrectly to hurt and demean people. The participants expressed feeling hopeful that more and more people would learn how to talk about gender identities and there would be fewer and fewer discriminatory experiences.

Finally, the participants discussed the importance of representation and visibility as society continued to make strides towards accepting and supporting trans individuals. They

discussed how helpful it was for people in society to learn about the language that should and should not be used when discussing gender identities, describing their own experiences of having an easier time talking to people who were aware of the language. They made several suggestions regarding language use.

### **Participant Suggestions for Language**

At the end of each interview, the participants were asked for any suggestions that they could offer to people who were unsure of how to discuss topics related to gender identity. Their suggestions were given based on their own unique experiences and, as evidenced by some of the contradictions noted below, should not be accepted as a final and definitive list of suggestions upon which the entire trans community would agree. However, it is important to acknowledge that these suggestions were given by people who had personally experienced ineffective and offensive conversations and questions, and should, therefore, be read with the understanding that these were suggestions given by experts with lived experience. Although experts in any field may disagree with one another on occasion, there is truth and meaning in each expert's perspective gained from experience. The following suggestions may be helpful for people, especially clinicians, who are working towards gaining a better understanding of the language surrounding gender identity. This list is neither complete nor definitive, but it is an informative and thought provoking list of suggestions made by trans experts. Referring to a list of suggestions coming from experts, based on their personal experiences, is precisely the correct starting point for such people. I have paraphrased the suggestions, but I maintained as much of the original language as possible.

1. Ask people about their pronouns and gender identity, but first reflect on the necessity of asking. If it is not important in the context of the conversation or the relationship, it

- is not necessary to ask.
2. Use people's names instead of using or asking about their pronouns in order to avoid singling anyone out. Asking about someone's pronouns can put pressure on them to disclose information that they may not feel comfortable disclosing. Only ask about someone's pronouns if it can be done in a space that is safe and comfortable for everyone.
  3. Ask people which pronouns they use when you first meet them to normalize their ability to specify their pronouns.
  4. If asking someone about what pronouns they use, refer to their pronouns simply as their pronouns, rather than their "preferred pronouns." This word choice may suggest that the pronouns that trans individuals may use are less valid than the pronouns of cisgender individuals.
  5. Be careful with word choices, including but not limited to "gender," "gender identity," and "transition." Transition may reinforce the gender binary, implying that someone who is trans must transition from one gender identity to another. Using words such as "affirmation," "confirmation," or "alignment" may be more affirming of identities that exist outside of the gender binary.
  6. Understand and accept that gender exists outside of a binary and that the identities and pronouns which exist outside of the binary are equally as valid as the identities and pronouns that exist within the binary.
  7. If people are curious about gender identities, they should do their own research online to figure out what various terms and definitions mean. While it is sometimes important and relevant to ask people individually, it is also helpful to obtain some

- baseline knowledge through one's own research
8. If someone discloses their gender identity, ask what their identity/identities mean to them. Gender identities are complex and may have a slightly different meaning to each individual person.
  9. Do not assume that people should provide or will feel comfortable providing information regarding their gender identity. While some people are open to having these conversations in certain contexts, others may find such questions triggering and they will not feel comfortable explaining their gender identity. No one is obligated to educate others about their gender identity.
  10. Do not ask people about any surgeries or hormones that may be related to physiological changes that they are making. Such questions may be perceived as invasive and objectifying.
  11. Do not generalize individual experiences and ideas to the entire trans community.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The current study had several potential limitations. As previously discussed, my cisgender identity is a significant limitation to the study. Despite efforts that were made to minimize the impact that this might have on the study, it is likely that my gender identity shaped various elements of the study, including but not limited to the structure of the interviews, the data that was attended to, and the meaning that was made of the data.

The fatigue effect in participants is important to take into consideration due to the personal nature of the interviews. This may have resulted in inaccurate reports or in participants withholding information so that the interview would end sooner. Because of the potentially

sensitive nature of gender identity, it is possible that participants were guarded or hesitant when answering questions about their gender identity.

The participants self-selected to participate in the study, which might also be a limitation. It is likely that the individuals who decided to take the time to be interviewed felt reasonably comfortable discussing their gender identities. It is possible that these individuals might have been able to successfully overcome the tribulations that members of the trans community often face, which might have led to over-reporting. While phenomenological research does not seek generalizable data, the results of the study might mislead people to come to inaccurate conclusions about common difficulties within the trans community.

Current political and legal issues might have persuaded or dissuaded people from deciding to participate in the study. Some individuals might not have felt as though it was safe to discuss their gender identity in any capacity at this point in time, whether due to personal, interpersonal, professional, or political concerns. Alternatively, due to societal and legal pressure regarding the trans community, some trans people may feel called to action and may be more engaged in various kinds of advocacy work. These factors may have influenced the sample of participants for the present study and this should also be taken into consideration with regard to the limitations of the sample.

### **Directions for Future Research**

When considering directions for future research, there are an endless number of possibilities. The study was unique in that no previous qualitative or quantitative studies specifically sought to understand how language and communication might influence trans individuals throughout their lives in regard to their gender identity. Due to the minimal amount of research that has focused on the trans community, especially regarding language, the most

important suggestion for future research is that there is a critical need for more research on the language of gender identity. Due to the nature of the constantly evolving language surrounding gender identity, it is necessary to conduct ongoing research in order to maintain an understanding of the language that is used throughout society and how it is impacting the trans community. More in-depth research could also examine the nuances of the language that trans individuals use in comparison to the language that is used by cisgender individuals in conversations about gender identities. Research could further empower and affirm the trans community through conducting a larger and broader study about the suggestions that trans individuals have regarding language use. Again, due to the complex and changing language surrounding gender identity, ongoing research should be conducted regarding what the trans community feels is important to say and not to say in conversations about gender identity.

In addition, more research about the experiences of members of the trans community may lead to more opportunities for education about trans experiences and compassion. Awareness, knowledge, and compassion contribute to people being more supportive of communities that they do not belong to, and such support could lead to less discrimination and violence against the trans community.

Future research should examine the intersectionality of identities that individuals may hold in addition to identifying as trans. Trans individuals are commonly discriminated against and there is insignificant research to examine how other identities (i.e., sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, ability, religion/spirituality, etc.) may impact their experiences. Demographic information beyond gender identity was not gathered from the participants of the present study, but additional information might increase the understanding of a variety of trans experiences.

There were several comments made throughout the interviews regarding the generational

differences within the trans community. Observations were made that younger demographics tend to prefer language and identities related to the fluidity of gender, while older members of the trans community tend to remain within the gender binary. Further research on the perspectives that different generations have on gender within the trans community could provide additional insight to how society as a whole continues to conceptualize gender. Such research should be ongoing to continue tracking the various ways that generations understand gender, within both the trans and cisgender populations.

Another significant area for future research could include focusing on the positive aspects and experiences within the trans community in order to obtain a more well-rounded understanding regarding the experiences of the trans community. While it is important to understand the prevalence of discrimination and cruelty that is often directed at trans individuals, it is vital to learn about the benefits, successes, and joys of being trans.

### **Conclusion**

The current study sought to gain a better understanding of how trans individuals have experienced their gender identities and the language that surrounds gender identity. Interviews were conducted and analyzed through thematic analysis in order to organize the major themes identified in interviews that three trans individuals provided. On the basis of the themes that were identified in the study, researchers and clinicians may develop a better understanding of the unique experiences that trans individuals have. This study did not aim to generalize the experiences and suggestions of the participants to be true for the entire trans community, but themes regarding the profound impact, both positive and negative, that one's gender identity has on their life may be true for other trans individuals. The language that is used by people of all genders in conversations regarding gender identities is significant and should not be overlooked;

using correct and appropriate language is something that all people should strive to do when referring to gender identity. Through the power of the stories and experiences shared in this study, there is hope that people will be able to develop a deeper sense of awareness and empathy for the trans community and that members of the trans community will feel as though their voices are perhaps a little louder. Psychologists in particular have a responsibility to educate themselves on the needs and experiences of the trans community so that they may provide more competent and caring support. It is important to continue moving forward and to actively work to use inclusive language so that society can continue creating a safe place for trans individuals. One of the participants ended their interview with these words: “And progress is always nice, just taking baby steps.”

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## Appendix A

## Participant Recruiting Letter

I am a graduate student in the Clinical Psychology Psy.D. program at Antioch University New England. I am working towards the completion of my dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Gargi Roysircar.

The purpose of my qualitative study is to examine the impact of gender identity on the lives of individuals and how their exposure to the nuanced language of gender identity has influenced their experience with their gender identity. I believe that this study will help people gain a deeper understanding of how individuals interact with their gender development, as well as raise people's awareness of sensitive gender identity problems.

All people of any gender identity are encouraged to participate. If you are interested in participating in the study or in receiving more information, please contact me to express your interest or ask any questions that you have. Please contact me at xxxxxx@antioch.edu. I would like to sincerely thank you for your consideration and your time.

Kelsey Moran

## Appendix B

## Informed Consent

I am asking you to participate in a research study. My name is Kelsey Moran. This study is for my doctoral dissertation in Clinical Psychology at Antioch University New England, Keene, NH. This study is being supervised by my advisor, Dr. Gargi Roysircar, at Antioch University New England.

This study hopes to learn what people know about their gender identity. It also looks at the language that people use to refer to or describe gender identity.

**Inclusion rule.** You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

**If you decide to do this study,** I will interview you about your own gender identity and how you have understood your gender identity. The questions that I will ask in the interview will be about what your gender identity is, what language you have used and how others have communicated with you about your gender identity. I will also ask how other people have reacted to your gender identity. It should take about 1 hour to complete the interview. You will be contacted again after the interview to review a summary of your interview and to clarify or correct anything that may have been misunderstood or misstated.

**Participation in this study is voluntary.** You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You can withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequence to you.

If you take part in this study, you might also know more about how you think and feel about your gender identity. This self-knowledge could help you support people in your community. Additionally, the answers that you provide may help to give better support to people of various gender identities.

You will do the interview over the phone to help protect your anonymity. Your name will not be connected to any of the responses you give. The interview is not designed to evaluate the performance of any particular individual. If the results of the study are published, your identity will not be revealed. Once I complete the study, your responses will be saved for three years and then they will be destroyed.

This study is not expected to involve any risks that are greater than those faced on a daily basis. There is a chance that you will feel exposed or vulnerable due to the sensitive nature of gender identity. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you can withdraw from the study or refuse to answer a question. You will be given contact information in case you want to discuss gender identity with a supportive professional.

If you have questions about any part of this study or you would like a copy of this form, please contact Kelsey Moran at XXX-XXX-XXXX or at [XXX@XXX.XXX](mailto:XXX@XXX.XXX). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Kevin Lyness, Chair of Antioch University New England Institutional Review Board at 603-283-2149 or at [klyness@antioch.edu](mailto:klyness@antioch.edu). You may also contact Melinda Treadwell, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, at 603-283-2444 or at [mtreadwell@antioch.edu](mailto:mtreadwell@antioch.edu). If you agree to take part in this study, please sign on the line below.

**By finishing and returning this form I am giving my informed consent for participation in this study.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix C

Counseling Resources

**National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE)**

[NCTE@transequality.org](mailto:NCTE@transequality.org)

202.903.0112

**PFLAG Transgender Network (TNET)**

[info@pflag.org](mailto:info@pflag.org)

202.467.8180

**Trans Lifeline**

877.565.8860

**The Trevor Project**

866.488.7386

**Psychology Today**

Therapists.psychologytoday.com

## Appendix D

APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming  
(TGNC) People (2015)

1. “Psychologists understand that gender is a nonbinary construct that allows for a range of gender identities and that a person’s gender identity may not align with sex assigned at birth.”
2. “Psychologists understand that gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct but interrelated constructs.”
3. “Psychologists seek to understand how gender identity intersects with the other cultural identities of TGNC people.”
4. “Psychologists are aware of how their attitudes about and knowledge of gender identity and gender expression may affect the quality of care they provide to TGNC people and their families.”
5. “Psychologists recognize how stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and violence affect the health and well-being of TGNC people.”
6. “Psychologists strive to recognize the influence of institutional barriers on the lives of TGNC people and to assist in developing TGNC-affirmative environments.”
7. “Psychologists understand the need to promote social change that reduces the negative effects of stigma on the health and well-being of TGNC people.”
8. “Psychologists working with gender-questioning and TGNC youth understand the different developmental needs of children and adolescents, and that not all youth will persist in a TGNC identity into adulthood.”
9. “Psychologists strive to understand both the particular challenges that TGNC elders

experience and the resilience they can develop.”

10. “Psychologists strive to understand how mental health concerns may or may not be related to a TGNC person’s gender identity and the psychological effects of minority stress.”
11. “Psychologists recognize that TGNC people are more likely to experience positive life outcomes when they receive social support or trans-affirmative care.”
12. “Psychologists strive to understand the effects that changes in gender identity and gender expression have on the romantic and sexual relationships of TGNC people.”
13. “Psychologists seek to understand how parenting and family formation among TGNC people take a variety of forms.”
14. “Psychologists recognize the potential benefits of an interdisciplinary approach when providing care to TGNC people and strive to work collaboratively with other providers.”
15. “Psychologists respect the welfare and rights of TGNC participants in research and strive to represent results accurately and avoid misuse or misrepresentation of findings.”
16. “Psychologists seek to prepare trainees in psychology to work competently with TGNC people.”

## Appendix E

## Interview 1 Transcript

1. What is your gender identity?

Participant: Well um, I have two words that I usually use to describe my gender identity and right now that would be genderqueer and demigirl.

Kelsey: Okay! Are there, is there one of those that you tend to defer to more, or, um, depending on the setting and situation?

P: Yeah, I probably use genderqueer more.

2. How has your understanding of your gender identity remained the same, changed, or shifted in your lifetime?

P: Sure so, um, I don't know if you can tell from my voice but I'm pretty young, so I feel like whatever I say about this is incomplete, where I think that where my gender is now is gonna be necessarily permanent, but I guess starting from when I was like a really young kid I definitely went through a phase where I was aware that I was supposed to be a girl but I told a lot of people in my life that I want to be a boy, I want to dress like a boy, I had a short haircut. And it made me really excited when people thought I was a boy, and that was maybe when I was about 7 years old. I guess I didn't especially stop feeling that way, but I stopped saying those things to people and as I got a little bit older I just didn't really think that much about it. I guess until I was about 9 or 10 years old and then I was aware that my body was going to be changing and I was really unhappy about that. It just always felt really wrong but I didn't know what to do about it. And there were a couple times when I was, uh, I guess pre-adolescent or adolescent where something would

happen and I would come across an article about somebody who was transgender and I would have this moment where I was like is that something that feels like me? Is that who I am, is that what I want? And I was thinking about it really intensely for a while but, ultimately I wasn't so sure about that. But about that time like when I was I don't know in middle school I guess, 11, 12, 13, 14 years old, I started becoming aware that I was attracted to women and that was something that became very, um, I became obsessed with the fact that I had these attractions more so than I became obsessed with the attractions themselves, if that makes sense?

K: Yeah, yeah.

P: And, so that kind of that like obsession and feelings of confusion and otherness and guilt I guess about my sexuality kind of eclipsed my feelings about my gender for a while, but I guess at that time I really didn't want anyone to look at me in a gendered way, if that makes sense, so I guess the way that I dressed and interacted with other people I was very careful not to be demonstratively feminine, but not necessarily trying to be something else. And when I went to college I was in a much more positive environment and I was able to come out as gay to most of the people in my life and that kind of changed everything because that was no longer something that took up a lot of my mental space. And I guess over the next few years as I learned more about gender identity and what it means and how broad it can be and I guess met more people who were transgender and gender nonconforming, it makes sense to me I guess for the first time, that I could not be I guess part of a binary gender if that makes sense, and that I could I could fit my feelings and experiences into something that other people would understand and acknowledge, which was kind of interesting. But I didn't at the time and

mostly still don't feel comfortable being out about that. And I have a very distinct memory of the last term I was in college we had these discussion groups about gender and sexuality at my school and we had one called "fem sex" and that was about female sexuality, and one called "m sex" and that was about male sexuality, and that year they started one called "trans sex" and that was about, um, trans sexuality and I really wanted to join the discussion group that semester but I was having such a period of unresolvedness in every other area of my life, like I didn't know where I was going to move when I graduated, I didn't know what I was gonna do, I didn't know what relationships I was going to be able to maintain, but I made the conscious choice that I didn't want to open this box right now, I can't have something, I can't explore this right now because I can't unsettle myself any more than I'm already unsettled. Even though I knew that's gonna be, at some point, necessary. So.

K: Yeah.

P: And I guess now I've been out of college for 2 years and I probably feel about the same about my gender identity as I did a couple of years ago and I, I identify as nonbinary and genderqueer, but I don't feel comfortable being out too much with people in my life about that. Partially because I, um, because of the field I'm in, professionally, there's really not space for that I feel like. And I know that in order for there to ever be space there are going to have to be people who make that space for themselves but I don't feel like I can do that right now. And just like thinking about what that would mean to tell my parents or some of my more long term friends, like, I don't identify as female, I'm not sure that would necessarily improve those relationships, even though it would make them so much more honest. And, um, something that I suppose has complicated this is that

when I graduated from college, I went to college in Minnesota and I stayed there for a year before I moved to Kansas for graduate school. And I live in a fairly small town in Kansas that's really culturally different from anywhere I've lived before, and there's a lot more, um, street harassment here than I've ever experienced before, and when I first moved here and started experiencing that I found it really disconcerting because I think most people who get cat-called or heckled don't like it at all, but in addition to that I felt this weirdness about just, like, being aggressively gendered by, and I guess misgendered by, strangers. And that made me really uncomfortable, um, and it made me feel like I didn't want to leave my house, especially during the day time because I just didn't want to be seen in that way, and I knew it was going to happen, because I, like everywhere felt, I don't have the anonymity of being in a car when I need to get somewhere and I was pretty unhappy to have to expose myself to the potential of that every time. And I suppose I've gotten more used to it, but that's been additionally rough.

K: Yeah, yeah like I think being cat-called and heckled is already such an uncomfortable experience just in general as like a baseline, but then adding to that being misgendered and the aggression of it, and not feeling maybe so safe with your gender already and then having someone really be focused on that as they're shouting at you across the street, that's really intense.

P: Yeah.

3. How old were you when you first shared your gender identity with someone else? What prompted you to share this information?

P: I think the first time was probably my best friend who's also my college roommate and

I think I told her around the time when I first found the word “genderqueer” and I was like yes, this is awesome, I want this word. And I shared it with her and she didn’t really understand it but still had a pretty positive reaction, like “okay, that’s cool, I don’t really know what that means but I’m glad you have this.”

K: Yeah!

P: And I told some other friends in the context of, they’re people who know a lot about social justice and I wanted to know what their opinions were, like, when is a good time to like, be that, I don’t want to use the word maverick, but that maverick, that first person to like, put yourself out there to live your truth even if it makes things harder, or to just focus on what you need to get done and what you feel, but professionally it’s important to keep your head down a little bit more. And they’ve had pretty good reactions to that. And I told my partner about it, mostly because she was in Costa Rica doing research and the person, she was staying at a field station, and the person in charge of the field station kept trying to set her up with his son, and she kept saying “no, I have someone back home,” but she wasn’t sure how the whole gay thing would go over in Costa Rica, so she kept referring to me as her boyfriend. And she asked me if that was okay and I told her “well that’s fine, I’m genderqueer” and she was like “oh perfect.” And then we didn’t really talk about it after that. And she kept slipping up when she was trying to talk about me in Spanish and saying “novio” which means boyfriend instead of “novia” which means girlfriend, and the guy she was talking to was like scrupulously trying to figure it out and saying “no, you mean novio, you mean to say your boyfriend.” But I think the other time I came out to people was last year. I was invited to be on a panel for gender and sexuality for an undergrad class.

K: Oh cool!

P: And they asked us about our sexuality and gender identity when we were introducing ourselves to the class, and I went “well I don’t know any of these people so I’m going to be completely honest!” And, um, so.

K: How was that?

P: It was a really interesting experience. There were probably like 6 of us on the panel and then this class had like 40 students or whatever, and it definitely felt like they were engaged, and they asked really interesting questions and some potentially problematic questions, but. And I felt kind of on the spot but I was mostly so happy to be able to help people who would probably not think about these questions in any other context, and give information about queer people because that’s kind of the only thing that’s going to positively change things. To be able to address these misconceptions and just to let people who have always wondered about this, I need to know, and I guess just kind of seeing that we’re all just regular people.

K: Yeah, absolutely.

P: So hopefully that helped. I would definitely do it again, it was such a good experience.

4. How did you first describe your gender identity to others?

P: Um, yeah, there’s a couple people who I’ve discussed it with. Some of my friends from college who have the vocabulary and the mindset to kind of understand what it means to not, um, identify with a binary gender, who I’ve talked to about this. And at one point I mentioned it to my partner but it’s not something we really talked about and I don’t think it affects our relationship that much. And something that’s kind of ironic is

that um, since I've been a graduate student, I joined this organization that's about, like, gender identity and how we can make the university a better place for transgender students but I'm not out in that group, because I guess I don't necessarily feel close enough to anyone in it, and I also have this feeling that they would think of me as, like, not a fully trans person. Because I am, I use female pronouns, I have not done any of the things that you would traditionally associate with transitioning, and this is something that I've decided to just kind of live with for this time being. And I know that for some people that's something they can't do because needing to live as their correct gender is such a powerful need that they can't kind of put it to one side like I've been able to. And I feel weird taking space in the conversation away from those people.

K: Like there's something that isn't enough about being genderqueer that means you don't get that space, maybe?

P: Yeah, yeah. And I know people who are genderqueer who have, who go by gender neutral pronouns or who have chosen to modify their bodies in some way to externally present their gender in ambiguous ways more than I do, and, um, I feel like that is kind of what's more expected for people who are nonbinary but they really want to constantly challenge gender in their everyday lives and this is something that they are willing to kind of sacrifice cis-privilege for, and I kind of see that as a standard that I'm unable or unwilling to meet right now. And it's kind of a hypocritical thing because if I met somebody else who was in my position who had to present it, mostly it's the gender thing, where if they didn't want to make it about their gender that would be totally fine, but somehow because it's me it's totally different and it feels like I'm not doing enough or I'm not trans enough or something.

5. How did people who are close to you respond to your gender identity?

P: Um, generally pretty positively, because I've been very selective about who I've told, and I guess they are supportive about it and it doesn't change anything. I don't really want to change anything so I guess that's good.

K: For people that you're not out to, um, has gender ever come up with them, like maybe at work or with friends and family that you're not out to, where you think they might suspect that you don't identify as cisgender?

P: Um, so I guess, I don't have an especially close relationship with my parents, but I do see them sometimes and I stopped shaving my legs a few years ago and my mom gave me kind of a hard time about that for a while, but I just so didn't care what she thought that it wasn't really an issue.

6. How have people in your community and/or cultural group responded to your gender identity?

P: I've actually had some weird problems with my boss, or my Ph.D. advisor, because, uh, there's 2 other students in my lab who are very traditionally male and like to do guy things and I think my advisor was like "oh, cool now I have this girl in my lab and we can like girl bond and stuff" and I surely didn't want that at all.

K: Yeah, right.

P: And I think she kind of figured out that I didn't want that over time. And I've had some weird experiences with her where she's like "make sure to mention when you're applying for this grant that you are mentoring other female students, because they're an

underserved group in science” and I don’t want to do that. I’ve never felt underserved in science because of my gender and I don’t want to invoke that. It doesn’t matter to me that the students I’m mentoring are female.

K: Right, it sounds like your advisor is looking for some kind of girl power thing, which does not fit.

P: Yeah, and I know the field is traditionally male-dominated but I’m in biology and that is, um, I’ve never experienced that that field or that major is more than half men in my undergrad institution. And I know that in the past that’s been the issue but I feel like it is much less now. And I know it stinks for some people but not for me so I feel weird claiming female marginalization as a biologist, especially since I don’t necessarily feel female. But there is a chance that I might at some point apply for a grant for women in science because there’s not a lot of funding out there. And I don’t really know how I feel about that, but I guess I’m not a straight white man, so it feels okay.

7. What have people said to you that has been helpful and supportive in regard to your gender identity?

P: Um, I guess I’ve mostly been appreciative when I can talk to someone who has the same level of vocabulary about gender identity, because I feel like it’s constantly evolving and incredibly complicated, and sometimes I’ve felt surprised when I read something about “oh, this is the word for x, y, and z, and this is a word you should never use, and this means not what you think it means.” So I appreciate it when people either are pretty up on that, or are really receptive to learning more about it. That’s helpful

versus people who are intimidated by what they don't know, or want to say things like "oh, well trans people are born in the wrong body" or whatever. And I guess I also have a somewhat different conception of sex and gender because I'm a biologist and I know a lot more in detail about how sex works in humans than most people do. Like, I went to a conference on trans issues recently and they were talking about your sex versus your gender identity versus your gender expression, and they were using genetic sex and biological sex interchangeably, and I raised my hand and said "those aren't exactly the same thing." And nobody seemed to appreciate that contribution, but that's fine.

K: Yeah, it's so nuanced and so detailed, where unless people are really totally engulfed in the gender world, it's such a complicated thing to just casually walk into and be able to, like, have those conversations and use that vocabulary the way that it should be used.

P: Yeah, and actually one of the most affirming moments I've ever had with gender identity is when I was talking to this other person who I met through some of the LGBT+ organizations at my university, and they were talking about trying to get a more diverse executive board for the organization the following year. And they were like "we would really like it if you considered running for one of these positions, because we really want to diversify it and get more, um, individuals involved." And having her use that word instead of female was incredibly affirming for me. And I know that she did that because she's also nonbinary, but that's never something I would ask someone to do, but it was still kind the most supportive thing she- the most supportive way she could've said it.

8. What would you want people who have been unhelpful and unsupportive to have said differently?

P: I haven't really had many negative experiences because I don't really put myself out there to experience things that I think are going to be negative, in terms of being open about my gender identity. But I know that there's a lot of people on the internet who get, like, really hostile toward people who they feel like are taking attention and credibility away from more traditional binary trans people and identities. And so, like, if you don't, or if you are a nonbinary person or someone who doesn't want to transition, then you are a fake trans person, and that's super shitty.

K: Yeah.

P: And, I guess, in general people who are either like generally hostile towards trans issues don't understand or choose not to understand that gender's not the same as sex, or gender assigned at birth, and all of those are sort of complicated. And on the other side people who are militant about, um, how being transgender should and must work. And, I think there's a lot of people who just get frustrated with, like, I don't know how to talk to anyone anymore when I can't use gendered pronouns based on what I assume, and I don't know how to describe these things. And I have a lot of sympathy for that because some people get so angry if you don't use the right terminology, and they see it as an act of violence. And I understand where they're coming from but at the same time you're asking people who may have never had to consider this before to acquire a whole new vocabulary and use it perfectly overnight. And I don't think that's fair either. So I feel conflicted about that.

K: Yeah, it sounds like, like with gender in general, with the binary it feels like there has to be an all or nothing kind of a mentality to it. And with the language too, people either have to know it all, or if you don't know everything or you're a little unsure about some

of the terminology or something, that you should just stay away from it all together, instead of trying to work towards an understanding and honoring that middle-ground process for people who are trying to learn more and understand more. And honoring that identifying outside of the binary or somewhere in the middle of the binary is an equally valid space to be in.

P: Yeah, exactly. It was the same thing that happened to me at this conference, because there was kind of a divide between these older trans people, mostly transwomen, who felt very validated when people would assume that they wanted female pronouns and would not at all question it, and then some younger trans people who just wanted to fuck gender in general and they think it's offensive to ever assume someone's pronouns. So there was kind of this divide in understanding and how people are feeling about that. And it's hard to say who's right because everyone's right, but it's hard to honor the wishes of everyone.

K: Absolutely.

9. What is the impact of society's understanding of gender identity?

P: I guess it seems like there's been almost as much backlash as there's been awareness and understanding. And both of those things, with the visibility and the backlash, and there being so much of them at the same time, I'm not sure if things are getting better or getting worse. I think we've hit some kind of threshold where this is not going to go away and I think that that's very important. And, I think that there are people who are looking for community in terms of gender identity, especially nonbinary and trans identities, there's a lot more of that available. Especially online if there are people who don't live in

areas where there are large and open communities. And for people who aren't especially out, like, to make connections with definitely some bloggers and just knowing that there are other people like you out there is awesome and empowering and whatever. And I personally was very surprised when I went to Kansas, and I didn't think that I was going to find anything in terms of an LGBT community and there's actually quite a lot here, and I don't know how true that would have been, like, 5 years ago. And, I guess it feels like I'm not really sure where this is going to land because so much of what is needed to have gender be something that's inclusive for everyone is a complete reconstruction of how we use language and how we look at and describe and classify other people. And I don't know how or when that's going to happen, but I think that until then we're going to have a lot of divisions between people who are 110% on board with that idea, and people who are really recalcitrant towards it, and then people who would be recalcitrant but then their kid comes out as transgender and then they have to rethink everything. And I guess personally I'm happy that there's more people who, for lack of a better term, get it now. But I'm not sure how much of an advocate I can be and how much I'm willing to push, given the circumstances of my life right now and given what I feel is important for me to accomplish in my life.

K: Yeah, absolutely.

10. What are your recommendations for language usage when communicating with trans individuals?

P: I suppose a lot of people are unsure what to do when they encounter someone whose

gender they can't immediately identify, and I've heard people say that the best thing to do is ask. And I think that before you ask them, ask yourself if it's necessary to know this person's identity, and if it is, how can you ask about it in a way that is respectful and not invasive. And I guess don't assume that just because you find out that someone has a gender identity that you're not familiar with, that they will be willing to educate you in detail about it and that they'll be willing to answer detailed and personal questions. Because some people are incredibly willing to talk about those things and then some people find it triggering or hurtful and they don't want to. And it's really not their obligation to educate other people about that. And something that is very difficult is that a lot of people, especially nonbinary people, have a variety of words that they use to describe their sexuality and gender identity, some of which are not very mainstream. I just learned the word demiflux last week and I didn't know that word before. So if you're talking to somebody about their gender identity or their sexuality and they use words you don't know, or even if they use words you think you know, it's good if you ask them "what does that mean to you?" because there are some words that people use to mean different things. Like, I used the word demigirl earlier and I think that some people who are, um, assigned female at birth use that word if they do not, so they were assigned female at birth and they don't identify with it but don't necessarily identify as male and don't really know what to do with their assigned gender, but aren't comfortable in that intermediate space. But then people who were assigned male at birth may use that word to mean that they feel mostly female but they don't feel entirely female. And I think there are a lot of words that mean different things to different people, which is confusing, but I guess at this point necessary because the language is evolving really fast and language is

limited.

K: Right.

P: And there's lots of good resources on the internet for some terminology and some general concepts about gender and what it means to different people. So if you have a conversation with someone and you don't feel like you can ask them certain things, you can always look that up. And this is kind of cliché, but just because you've talked to one transgender/gender nonconforming person about their experiences doesn't mean that you understand everyone else's experiences. You shouldn't assume anything about other people or think that you know everything about trans-ness, I guess.

K: Sure, sure. Well, so those are all the questions that I have; do you have anything either that we didn't really talk about or maybe skimmed over that would be important for you to talk about or important for you to share?

P: Um, I had something and I lost it. Was there anything I said that you had more questions about?

K: There was something, I forget what it was exactly that we were talking about earlier, but I guess I'm interested in your coming out process and how your gender identity now is maybe not necessarily what you expect it to be later down the road. And I'm wondering as your gender identity continues to grow with you, how you anticipate that being more or less present in your life and how you see yourself being more or less open about that in your life.

P: Yeah, yup, so I mentioned before that when I was in undergrad I had intentionally not gone to that group because I knew that it was an experience that would force me to

confront my gender and what it meant to me in more depth. And I feel like I still haven't really done that, just because of circumstances, and I think at some point it might become necessary. Either because I get frustrated with the way things are now or because I gained some additional clarity somehow in terms of how I want to live and how I want to be seen. And I don't really know how that would go; if that would mean finding a group of people who I can trust and work through this with, or if that would mean finding a therapist who I could, um, have those conversations with, or I just sat down with myself for a while. But, I guess lately I've been questioning whether I will continue to feel comfortable presenting as female or if I will try to change my appearance and make it more ambiguous, and kind of, I guess more authentic to me.

K: Yeah!

P: Like, I had some experiences in college where I was dressed up for something and I was like "this is fun, I feel like I'm wearing a costume," and other people took it as if your body looks this way and you're presenting it this way, that means you are this way and I'm going to interact with you as such. And that made me incredibly uncomfortable. And just wondering "what am I doing that is attracting this attention?" And I think sometimes, if I had happened to be born a more androgynous looking person all of this would have been easier. But, um, I'm not. And I've thought about what is the thing that makes me uncomfortable about how other people see in me and how could I change that. And I've been thinking about getting a binder for a while now, so I could look like I don't have breasts, and I think I would personally really like that. But given that I mostly interact with people I know, I don't know how that would go over, if I just showed up to work one day and I was like "I don't feel like having breasts today!" And I don't know

how people would respond to that and I don't know how I would handle that conversation, even if that would make me feel more comfortable with myself. And I've had long hair for most of my life and I like it, it's fun to play with, I like braiding it and stuff, but I think that that's also a very gender-y thing. And I would like to see if I could have people respond to me differently if I cut my hair, but. That's also something that I feel like I would have to explain and my girlfriend also likes my hair long, so I haven't decided about that.

K: Right, right.

P: And I've just noticed, being with my current partner, that I tend to think about this more because she identifies as female but also presents in a much more masculine way than I do. So, like, when I'm with her I definitely look more fem than she does, which doesn't really bother me but it does, I guess, make me more aware of how people are perceiving me and perceiving us together. And I don't know exactly what I'm going to end up doing. I'm working on my Ph.D. right now and I still kind of want to go into academia, but I'm not sure yet and I don't know, um, 10 years down the road, if there's gonna be more space for less conventional sexual orientations and gender identities in academia. And if there is will I feel comfortable being a part of it, and if it isn't, how much am I willing to push for that. Because it's really hard to get jobs right now, especially with so many people with degrees, and I don't need to complicate myself when I'm talking to people who may or may not want to hire me. So, I don't know if I answered your question about that, those are just the thoughts I'm having about that.

K: Yeah, absolutely. I think in college counseling, where I've worked a lot, the different opportunities and acceptance that I've seen at different universities is pretty variable. And

the culture is so complicated that I imagine it would be hard enough to just understand the culture on campus, let alone if that's something that you feel comfortable and safe being part of it and then to what extent you feel comfortable and safe being part of it.

P: Right, and I think I've been really privileged to know a lot of people who are genderqueer or who are very queer in other ways, but I think most of those people I know, who are almost entirely through the internet, are either artists, mostly, or activists and organizers, which is all awesome, but it also means that it seems like there are only certain communities where there's space for the knowledge and the language and the understanding for that. And that is not at all the community that I am in professionally, and also not what I feel would be the most important thing for me to do, so. That's something that I've wrestled with for a long time, and haven't really found people who share this with me. We're trying to start something that's called oSTEM, I don't know if you've heard of it?

K: Nope, I haven't.

P: It's through the university, it stands for "Out in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics," and it's a national organization with chapters at different universities that's for LGBT+ individuals, and I'm going to a conference for that in November.

K: Oh cool!

P: Yeah! And I'm excited about that. But it still doesn't necessarily seem like that is a space for being queer either. And one of my regrets is that I didn't take more classes that would've given me more information on how to navigate social justice and stuff. And I had the opportunity, I just chose to take science classes. But I took one class where we talked, it was a terrible class, that should've been good but it wasn't. And I remember one

thing we read and it was about optional identities and how if you're a white person you can choose to be, like, Polish-American or Italian-American, but if you're a person of color the label of Asian American or African American is imposed on you and it's going to be how people read you no matter what you do. So, optional versus mandatory identities. And when I think about myself and some of my identities, I feel like my sexuality is in some ways an optional identity because I don't have to tell people unless people don't necessarily read me as queer, but at the same time there was a point in my life where I was not open about that and I was incredibly unhappy, and I think if I hadn't been able to come out I would be in a much worse place right now. So I think in that way it's not optional, but right now at least I feel like my gender identity is very much optional in that it doesn't hugely bother me that I pass for cisgender on a daily basis. And I appreciate that privilege and I feel weird about taking advantage of that privilege, but it also sometimes feels necessary in order for me to get done the things that I need to get done in my life. And so, I guess right now anyway that feels optional, but I don't know if that will always feel that way. And I also, recently I met this transman who, I don't know how old he is, probably like 50s or 60s, who said that he's known for a long time that he was a transman, but he didn't start feeling, like, really uncomfortable with it until he started aging and his body started changing in that way, and then he could no longer live with that. So at that point it became necessary for him to transition. And I think that even if your gender identity isn't necessarily changing over time, your circumstances and the way that you do and do not feel comfortable presenting might change. And I think that's probably going to happen to me at some point.

K: And it's so hard to predict how your personal and professional comfort might change

over time and how your job may or may not allow for that.

P: Yeah, definitely.

In an email exchange after the interview:

P: Naturally, after we hung up, I thought of a few more things I wanted to say in response to your last question. A few years ago, it was standard to ask "What are your preferred gender pronouns?" but this has since been changed to "What are your pronouns?" It's a small change, but it counters the idea that trans people's gender is somehow more subjective or less real than that of cis people. Additionally, it's important to be careful about the terms gender and gender identity, because using exclusively "gender identity" to describe trans people can enforce this misconception. Both cis and trans people have gender and gender identity, which may be confusing to cis people who have never thought about it before. I have also met some trans people who prefer not to use the term "transition" or MTF/FTM because these imply a switch in gender, whereas these individuals feel that they have always been the same gender. They instead use terms like affirmation, confirmation or alignment to describe this process (as in "I am having gender confirmation surgery" or "I began presenting in alignment with my gender 5 years ago.") I think that this language is also helpful to other people who are trying to understand what their trans friends or relatives are going through. Both the media and some people trying to be allies tend to fetishize the physical aspects of trans people's gender and experiences, which is generally not helpful. It's never appropriate to ask trans and gender non-conforming people about whether they have had certain surgeries or are on hormones unless the individual brings it up first. I think a lot of people do this because

they are simply curious or because they are struggling to overcome implicit ideas about certain body parts being a necessary component of certain genders, but it comes across as invasive and objectifying. You've probably heard some or all of this before, but I think they're always good things to keep in mind.

P: Since I talked to you, I've been thinking a lot about how, in certain communities, people seem to be approaching a place of being post-gender and post-sexuality, or at least past the point where traditional labels are useful. Many of the words we used to define sexuality are based on the assumption of binary gender, and neither sex nor gender are actually binary, so then I start wondering whether everyone is necessarily pansexual and why we can't just all say "queer" and be done with it. And then I wonder whether gender even exists, or if it is just a weird product of assumptions about biology and societally enforced stereotypes.

After I start to get really caught up in all of this, something usually happens that reminds me that I live in Kansas and my thoughts do not at all reflect where mainstream society is at. A few weeks ago, I was walking to the football stadium with my partner and two female friends. A car full of young men drove by and several of the occupants leaned out the windows to yell and bark at us. My partner flipped them off and I yelled, "My dick is bigger than yours!" I then wondered if this come back was transphobic, than decided that this was probably not relevant due to the context. I was pissed off and extremely uncomfortable about the incident all day.

The next week, one of my students (I am a teaching assistant at my University) told me that he had made a bet with another student about whether they could get me to smile. He then told me that, if I smiled, he would split the money with me. I really didn't know how

to respond to this. I don't think this student intended to be sexist, but I am certain that he would not have said that to an instructor he perceived as male. I was able to talk to my supervisors about the incident and make sure it was addressed, but it still very much served as a reminder that many people have very traditional views of gender and gender roles.

## Appendix F

## Interview 2 Transcript

1. What is your gender identity?

Participant: I just say genderqueer, but it's more fluid, I guess, I don't really know how to explain it, I just say genderqueer because it's easier to explain.

2. How has your understanding of your gender identity remained the same, changed, or shifted in your lifetime?

P: Yeah, well, you know for a long time I just went by female/girl/woman, whatever, and it wasn't until I went to college and started learning about it. I took gender theory and had a WGSS (Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies) minor, and it really opened my eyes to a lot of it. I was always a tomboy growing up and I guess that society pushed the more girly aspects on me, and I don't really like to say girly but you know, like the expected stuff. And um, I don't know, going to school and seeing that it was okay to not really fit into certain boxes was cool for me. You know I also went by bisexual and now as pansexual because of all the gender stuff, which is also cool for me, and I don't know, it's just fun for me, the changes. Like, some days I'll identify completely as a woman and other days not at all. But I guess I kind of fall in the gray area a lot? It just kind of fits and that's why I say fluid or whatever because it's a spectrum and it just kind of changes on the day.

3. How old were you when you first shared your gender identity with someone else?

What prompted you to share this information?

P: I guess I started thinking that I was different, I wouldn't necessarily say if I knew what it was, but I was in middle school, and that's when I started, um, kind of figuring out my sexual orientation as well. And I kind of just put it to the side because, I don't know, the area I grew up in wasn't very open, so like I was one of the few queer kids in school. But definitely, I guess about two or three years ago was when I was open to it and came out to everybody.

K: Cool!

P: And I guess there was a moment where I didn't like the binary anymore and being called "she" or "her" and it feels weird because some days I'm cool with it, but there are definitely days where it really bugs me. So I made a statement on Facebook and to family members and stuff that I'd rather go by they/them/their, and I don't know, I guess it was liberating I guess to finally let people know what it was that I was. And be able to correct them and for them to go "oh, okay, sorry," and to have them be reminded that I'm not in this little box anymore.

4. How did you first describe your gender identity to others?

P: The first time I started talking to people was with people who were already out, which is also kind of what helped me find out, you know, find out more about myself. I guess at that moment I thought it was a little odd just because I was, you know, 21 years old and just coming out to people about my gender. I don't know, it took me a little while to get there. But yeah, there are a few people who I worked with who identified as genderqueer or, I don't know, genderfluid, and a few of them have progressed and now changed

themselves and I have two friends who are transmen and started as saying “oh I’m genderqueer or genderneutral.” And then a few of the friends that I talked to beforehand, just trying to figure out who I was and to get the whole gender thing under wraps with myself. And then some of the people I worked with were more open I guess because I saw them every day, but um, it was more of a talk about gender and what it means, and I think a lot of them took it very well and were understanding of it. Some of them weren’t and that’s okay, people are learning still. But my boyfriend’s cool with it! My parents kind of don’t really get it, which is annoying. But yeah, the first conversation I had about it was definitely with people in the community that also got it, and it really helped me.

K: Yeah. Yeah, that sounds powerful, having people around who really understand and you can talk to about everything.

P: Yeah! I wish everyone had that opportunity, rather than finding themselves in the dark. It definitely helped.

K: Yeah, absolutely.

5. How did people who are close to you respond to your gender identity?

P: I’m fortunate that everyone has been really great about it. The people, um, there are some that don’t get it, you know, but they’re not vocal about it. They’re just kind of like “ehhh,” when I correct them or if someone correct them with my pronouns, and they kind of just get quiet. But other than that, everyone is really awesome. Yeah, they get it, they’ll fix their pronouns and, well, they use them now. I don’t know, they’re not mean, they’re not malicious about it. I’ve been very lucky, very fortunate.

6. How have people in your community and/or cultural group responded to your gender identity?

P: There have been more than a few who have been jerks, I guess. I don't know how else to say it. Which was surprising for me, you know, because I went to a pretty big school where most of them are liberal Democrats and stuff, and, you know, smart people. People that I would think that were able to think outside of the binary, you know, just think more for themselves. Like I was saying how just a month ago I deleted this kid off of Facebook because we were talking about "they" and "their" and he got into the whole argument about how it's a plural form and you can't use it in the singular.

K: Hmm.

P: And even though I pointed out that, you know, that the American Dialect Society voted in to use it as a singular word in 2015, he was like "no, no one uses that." And this kid graduated second in our class in high school and you know, our high school, the graduating class was 850 so this was a big class. So he's a smart kid, he's a really smart guy, and for him to be so belittling and so close-minded about it was just really surprising for me. I think it just opened my eyes a lot that there's still a lot more work to go with it. And there's still a lot of people who want to argue, like my dad isn't vocal about me, but he does say stuff. Mostly when I'm not around, but I definitely hear it from my sister, that he'll go on to say things like "you're either a girl or a guy, there's no in-between, there's nothing else different from what you're born with, that's who you are." Which also hurts, because it's my dad. But he doesn't say anything to me, which is I guess because I'm his kid. But for the most part, luckily, people are pretty nice. I guess in my friend circle anyway. I did have, and this was surprising, but I took a class in gender studies, which

was one of the electives that I had to take, and this was in syllabus week so we're going over introductions. And someone was like, "oh, I go by she/her," and I was like okay, so I said, "I go by they/them/their" when it came to me, and my professor kind of scoffed at it? And she was like, "oh, I'm just going to call you by your name instead, because I'm an English professor." And I was just like, you're in the WGSS department and you're going to this liberal university and you're going to be like that?

K: Right!

P: I wrote a very mean evaluation, I'll say that much. And I know that I'm very feminine, and feminine looking and stuff, but for a professor to say that to a student I thought it was, just, not cool. I felt like it made my experience in that class not so great from the start.

K: Yeah, and especially for a class that sounds like you would expect it to be pretty open and accepting, and like, at least somewhat aware?

P: Yeah! Yeah, exactly.

7. What have people said to you that has been helpful and supportive in regard to your gender identity?

P: Yeah, I think the coolest thing that I have noticed from people who aren't, you know, I feel like people who are part of the LGBTQ community are much more aware and accepting of gender identity, but for people who aren't part of the community have been really awesome about just asking. And you know, asking in a nice way to try to inform themselves. Which I think is really great, that people are generally asking questions because they want to know. And that I really appreciate. I really appreciate when people

want to know more so they don't, you know, offend anyone and it makes people feel more accepting. And I guess there are some days when I'll bind my chest and just dress more masculine or whatever, and just getting compliments like "you look really great today!" That's just cool. And when people are aware of my gender identity and they make sure to call me what I'm comfortable with, in the workplace and with my friends, I really appreciate that support.

K: It sounds like the people who really get it have picked up on things quickly and that the people who don't, they're interested in trying to learn more so that they don't use the wrong name or pronouns or anything.

P: Right. And I don't know if it's because it's a liberal area and that's just kind of the culture over there or what, but I'm just lucky enough to have cool people who I've met. I think my friends were a little slow to it at first just because my friends are mostly dudes and they can be idiots, you know. But I think for the most part, I don't know, but they're trying now. For the most part they go by the pronouns that I want and whatever. And I don't know, I think the more that people try to try is cool.

8. What would you want people who have been unhelpful and unsupportive to have said differently?

P: I think the people who don't get it are the people who don't ask, who don't care to ask, and I think it's really a matter of them not caring. Not that they don't understand, but if they cared enough to ask I think they'd start to understand. Like I've gotten "it" a few times, where they're like "well if you want to go by 'them' maybe I'll just call you 'it'," and I just like, I don't even know.

K: Wow.

P: At that point it wasn't even so much insulting as it was, I don't even know how to explain it, but I just laughed at it. I was so aggravated and it was so absurd to me that it couldn't even really phase me. And I guess it was good that I could just kind of brush it off. But I think that there are definitely people who just don't want to. They're just so comfortable with how things have been that changing isn't really something that they care to do, which is sad. It just feels sad and it's ignorant. Like, it's 2016, you know, and we're still fighting this, and it's something that's baffling.

9. What is the impact of society's understanding of gender identity?

P: I was a media major and yeah, I think it has a lot of influence on society and people's lives in general. I definitely think that people are more aware of stuff, you know, because there are screens everywhere, in people's pockets, and I think that the more people share, the more people talk, it's definitely going to gain more traction. Or at least it should, anyway. And you see that, you know, you see that when people share photos and memes regarding gender expression and gender identity, just trying to inform people. And I think it's a lot easier for people like myself to find themselves when they can see people's stories and they can hear about them and know that they're not alone. So I think that people coming to terms with themselves is more prevalent because there's more of a view on it. But I think on the other side of that, it also allows a lot of people to comment some negative stuff and you know, resist the adjustment. And you can see that in the comments, which, you know you should never read the comments, but it's hard not to. But I hope that people are more accepting and that just outweighs the people who are

resisting it. But I do think that as society progresses it's going to be more and more of getting away from that binary.

K: Right, like dealing with the balance of representation meaning that people are more visible but also more vulnerable, and trying to handle that while also keeping society moving forward.

P: Mhm. Yeah, it's a battle of moving forward and there are going to be some steps back, but I think as people and allies continue it'll all work out in the end. It's so new and for a lot of people it's going to be really hard at first, but I think that that adjustment is definitely for the better.

10. What are your recommendations for language usage when communicating with trans individuals?

P: I think that what society should just do, and what we've already been doing more and more, is asking pronouns when you meet someone. I think that that'll just simplify everything. It's something that we don't think about, but I definitely notice a lot in school, when we were introducing ourselves to each other and stuff, that more and more people in classes other than the WGSS classes, would say their name and where they're from and would also say these are my pronouns. And I've noticed it more that when I meet someone, like if I ask first about pronouns then they'll ask it back. Or, you know, someone will ask me, and that is just so key. That's just so important and really awesome, whether the person identifies within the binary or not, but for them to go out of their way to be like "hey, what're your pronouns?" It's just really nice! It's really

awesome to hear that, especially for people trying to find themselves and just trying to figure out who they are. And I think the internet is a great place to read, and that's what I did, I just read for a long time and you know, sifted through the phrases or the words that would best describe me. And I kind of created who I was with myself. I don't know, I guess genderqueer or genderfluid isn't that big, people just kind of do nonbinary or whatever, but it fits and it works for me. And I think if someone wants to figure out their identity, just find out what works for you and know that it's going to be different for everyone. And that's okay! It's okay to be different.

K: Absolutely.

P: And you know, when I was trying to figure out getting away from the binary and getting away from the female aspect of what's expected. I went through this big phase of buying men's clothes and stuff, and really binding my chest and stuff, and I guess it was weird for people who knew me because it was so drastic of a change. But I think for myself, my clothes will change depending on how I feel I am on that day. And I think that's also important for people to realize, is that no, you don't have to just fit one part of your gender, and if it changes or you think your identity's not what you thought it was all that time, that's perfectly fine too, that happens. But I guess, I don't know, if you feel comfortable in whatever you're wearing, feel comfortable in it. And if you don't, you know, hopefully you have the ability to go and get something that you feel comfortable in. I know for myself, most days I'll dress very feminine, but then there are days where I dress the opposite or somewhere in-between. Like, I worked at Shoprite for a while and there were days when you couldn't really pin what gender I was for certain people. And I had this one person come up to me and be like, "sir?" and then I turned around and they

were like, "...ma'am?" And they were really confused by it, which, you know, I didn't find it offensive at all, I just thought it was kind of funny, just to see that confusion. So I guess being in that gray area is also perfectly fine if that's what fits for you. But I think, I don't know, I'd like to see a world one day where my kids don't have to worry about if their clothing fits their identity, and it's just kind of whatever they want to wear. And I think we're definitely moving towards that. That's what I hope anyway. I mean there were days when my gender dysphoria was freakin' terrible, and I just had a really bad day, a really down day. Because, you know, I think especially for myself, my gender identity can never fit my anatomy, that's just not possible unless I just hop on over into some sci-fi realm. But I think a lot of that has to deal with the binary, and we say it so much, but the binary that society made where if you're feminine you have to have boobs and you have to be a girl, or you know, you can't be fluid if you have anything that you can check off in a box. And for a long time it was a really big issue for me and I know it's been an issue for my friends as well. But I know, for the most part there are good days. You know, I myself have been finding it a lot easier to look in the mirror most days and it's progress. And progress is always nice, just taking baby steps.

## Appendix G

## Interview 3 Transcript

1. What is your gender identity?

Participant: I identify as a transman. I mean I think, in terms of acceptance level, that's where I'm at in kind of a social and public setting. I wish it would be easier to just be like "I'm on a scale of like 1 to-," but you can't really do that. I don't know what it means to grow up to be a dude. I think that I can very honestly say that, and I think that it's silly that we're raised to have different goals and different characteristics with each gender. So. That's where I'm at!

2. How has your understanding of your gender identity remained the same, changed, or shifted in your lifetime?

P: I mean I think deep down I always knew. And it's funny because there's a really old home movie of me from when I was a baby, and my grandma refers to me as a little boy, um, and I guess it was 5 or 6 years ago when I first saw that. I'm 23 now and I started testosterone when I was 21, and I knew after high school that kind of the direction that I wanted to go in, but I grew up in a household where, when I came out as being gay, my mom, um, she was very, very forward about the fact that she was uncomfortable with something like Chaz Bono. And I remember her very specifically saying "just don't go have surgery like Chaz Bono." Which, and now looking at it that's a really silly thing to say because sexuality and gender identity are two different things, but I think my family kind of knew that there was something there. But I never really, I mean, I don't know, when I was little I played with an Easy Bake Oven but I played kickball with boys. And

those are things that to me seem silly now because what does that matter, but I don't know, it's been a weird process, in terms of, I feel like I'm all over the place with this question.

K: No, go for it!

P: I think one way of making people kind of start to understand is when I dated girls in high school I never dated anyone who identified as being gay or a lesbian. And I had multiple partners who told me "I wouldn't date another girls but I would date you." Or, you know, "you seem like a guy to me," or someone would be like, "this would be so much easier if you were just a guy." Which, obviously that is not appropriate or made me feel very good about myself, but I just had always had that way about me, which was never questioned until I started transitioning. And it becomes a question of like "how masculine are you?" and people started looking at me funny. I don't know. I guess it's just like it's still a process now, figuring out what being a guy means to me or what should it mean, you know, what privileges come with that? It's definitely been a step in a, you know I definitely have white male privilege for the most part, in a lot of ways. I can pass. So understanding what that means is a little scary and messed up, you know? It's pretty awful too, like I went from being a very proud feminist to now having those moments of "you're favoring me because I look like a guy!" I just look like a normal guy and I don't like it, I don't want it. Argh, it makes my skin crawl. I probably look more uncomfortable than anything else. I'm still very much in self-discovery mode, I think everyone is, I guess it makes it a little more difficult, nowadays in the world.

3. How old were you when you first shared your gender identity with someone else? What

prompted you to share this information?

P: I guess it would've been around 18 or 19? I went to a GSA meeting at my high school and this girl talked about her cousin, who was like 3 or 4, and how he keeps wanting the pink cup and he expressed that he wasn't "he" he was "she." And I never, besides media attention, like Chaz Bono was probably the only person that I saw on the news or on the internet growing up, it wasn't as streamlined as it is now. So seeing a normal person go through that struggle really resonated and that's when I, I guess I needed that reassurance that I wasn't, that this was a normal thing.

K: Yeah.

P: I mean I guess it always felt like it was too late. Like, I think I always knew that I wanted to be a boy but I didn't know how to say it, I didn't know how it would be appropriate to say it. And I felt like high school was over and that would've been the prime time to want to be the person you always thought you were. Which, like, we're all ridiculously awkward in high school, everybody is. I actually, I remember a little while after I graduated from high school I started dating someone and I immediately had, like, on the internet it's so much easier to be like "oh I'm trans" and then kind of work your way around it to be like this is who I am and I'm not ready to tell anyone else yet, but I'm going to say it online. And then as my relationship grew with her, I realized that I needed to tell more people. So I changed my name and then slowly, it took me breaking up with her to finally transition physically or start taking testosterone or anything like that. But that was probably the biggest motivating factor was that relationship. To have that acceptance and then realize that maybe people will be okay with this and it doesn't really matter.

4. How did you first describe your gender identity to others?

P: I guess it was really hard to get people to get it. I started off with just changing my name and expecting that to be enough for people to use male pronouns. But it wasn't. And then I used my name for a while, steering away from any pronouns, and I expected people to be like "well that's a guy's name." I went to culinary school and I ran into a lot of people who were uncomfortable with it. I would email a chef because my legal name hadn't been changed, and it was like a 50/50 draw that they would even say the right name on the first day. And I just, I think I remember, it took me, probably like up until 2 years ago to be like "I'm going to introduce myself with male pronouns." I'm just going to tell people to use he/him. And that was a big step for me, and I was so scared. I just wanted to be "he" and I felt like without transitioning physically it wasn't possible, so I just stuck with my name and hoped for the best and that people would use the right pronouns. I had a professor who confronted me in the nicest way possible, she was just like "I just want to make sure that I'm doing everything correctly. Do you want me to use male pronouns?" And I said yes, and she was really the motivating force who kind of let other teachers know to do that because she realized how afraid of it I was. But yeah, I guess, it was a difficult time. And I meet a lot of people who don't transition physically or don't go through hormones, and they're really adamant about their pronouns, and they'll go by "they/their," and that to me is very powerful. Because correcting people is the most, to me it was terrifying. People around me would be like "you need to correct people, you need to be on top of it," and I would just be like "this is hard for everybody." And I feel like that's a big deal right there, you know?

K: Right, like putting yourself out there even more than you've already put yourself out there.

P: And then calling someone out and knowing when that's appropriate, like are you with a comfortable group of friends, are you in an environment where you're a student and they're a teacher, or you might have that one friend who's very nervous and very shy and they keep doing it, but you don't want to embarrass them too. It's a lot of dancing, and I'm not really good at dancing either.

5. How did people who are close to you respond to your gender identity?

P: My friends were perfectly fine with it. It's still, for friends that I've had since I was little, it was really hard for them, and their parents were super accepting but they'll still slip because they grew up with this person for 21 years, or this image of a person, but they were fine. People at school were mean, oddly enough, like because I was in college I thought that was over. I made a few very close friends, but I was referred to as "it" and people would be like "I don't know what to call it, I don't get it."

K: God.

P: Yeah, you know, those people who ask you really stupid questions, basically like "what's in your pants?" or "why do you think that's what you are?" or "what is it?" My mom, I probably didn't tell my mom the right way. She was vacuuming and I had to go back to school, so I decided that that was the right time to tell her. So she turned off the vacuum cleaner and I told her "I just want to let you know, I changed my name and I already made an appointment to talk to a doctor about hormones," and my mom just turned the vacuum back on. And we probably didn't talk for like a year after that. I mean

we talked, but we didn't really talk, you know. She would call and just ask "are you okay?" but she didn't really want to, she told me that she didn't want to have to explain me to people, she didn't want me to go where she worked because she didn't want to have to deal with that. She was just really uncomfortable with it. My parents have never been married and I see my dad very infrequently, but I kind of leaned on him for a little while, and then he went through the same kind of phase. He was like "you never gave me time to deal with this," which felt so ridiculous at the time. Like, I never gave you time to deal with this? I've been dealing with it for my entire life! You know? So it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows, unfortunately. My mom's way better now; I feel like once someone realizes you're happy it helps, but it's still. And her life has totally changed, like she has a totally different job and she doesn't see those people anymore, so I think that helped her too. So. I mean, friends for the most part were great. I still run into people from high school, which terrifies me in a lot of ways. But oddly enough there was a kid I didn't even know from high school, and I was out at a bar, and he came up to me and I thought he was going to make fun of me or say something rude because of how he approached me, but he was like "I just want to say that I have a lot of respect for you. You've been through so much and I've never had to make a serious decision like you have. You've made this life changing decision and I can't imagine having to do that." And I've never really looked at it like that, so. Some good, some bad.

6. How have people in your community and/or cultural group responded to your gender identity?

P: I mean I was pretty open at school because I was an RA, so once I got the hang of how

I felt and came out, I've always kind of, I mean people are always like "wouldn't it be easier if you just fell off the map and you were just a guy and nobody knew?" But I transitioned so publicly that there wasn't really that option, you know I was just at school and people saw changes happen week by week, month by month, and year by year. So I did a lot of outreach. I can remember as an RA there was this one time where these guys were being total jerks and they turned around and used female pronouns to be jerks. I never, I mean, for the most part I, I've heard "it" before from classmates and other people, but I mean I've been very lucky. I feel like I've never really been in a lot of situations where I've been afraid because I'm trans. I spoke at a Girl Scout conference last year and I started my speech with "back when I was a Girl Scout," so I feel like I've been pretty lucky. I mean I've had my fair share of moments, but I feel like in terms of the community it's been okay, or it hasn't at least been shown to me. It's maybe been told to like friends and they don't say it to my face, but I don't know.

7. What have people said to you that has been helpful and supportive in regard to your gender identity?

P: I guess just the people who have been like, I mean there are people who have told me to keep being proud of who I am. That makes it easier for me to embrace who I am. And I think it's helpful for people to have a reference point, which seems a little weird, but I just remember one of my teachers being like "because you are so open about your identity, next time I see something on the news that regards the trans community, I won't just think of this nameless person, I'll think of you, and how I would want you to be treated and would I want that to be done to you." So that kind of stuff has been really

great. I don't know, I mean, I guess that would be one of the most positive things that I can think of.

8. What would you want people who have been unhelpful and unsupportive to have said differently?

P: I mean I guess the thing that freaks people out is that the person who's transitioning won't be the same person that they knew before. And I wish people knew that while my body is changing and certain things are changing, I'm still the person that everybody knew me to be. I've never, I mean I'm still ridiculously dorky and I still love animals and those are things that aren't going to change. And people see it as, I don't even know what you're supposed to see it as, when you're becoming a dude or you're becoming a woman, and whichever way you transition or whichever you identify, that part of you is important but that's not a defining characteristic of who you are. And, I mean, being called "it" is just, you don't call a person "it," that's just not appropriate. You don't dehumanize people to feel like a thing, because it's really hard to come back from that. You don't really know, especially not knowing exactly who said it or why, or not knowing the whole story. It's just, it's hard to come back from that and it's hard to want to interact with that entire group of people and feel like you exist. And I guess, not that I should do it, but I've commented on BuzzFeed posts where they use gender instead of sex and I've gotten so much hate mail from just saying that.

K: Wow.

P: Just being told, like "your identity doesn't exist," or "the dictionary doesn't define gender and sex that way so I'm certainly not going to define gender and sex that way," or

“I don’t know a trans person or someone who identifies not male or female, so I don’t care about how many people kill themselves or what they do.” And it’s just like, you don’t know who you work with! There are so many people out there that you would have no idea transitioned. You know, they have access to means to do it in a way that they can be the person they always wanted to be and they don’t want you to, they don’t want that attention, they don’t want that hate. They don’t want those feelings, they just want to move on. And I was lucky enough to meet someone through school who reached out to me and was like “I just want you to know that I transitioned and I admire what you’re doing, but I could never do it and I don’t want that attention, I don’t want people to know.” So, you know, I just, it’s not fair to those people if you just want to live your life and go on. It just creates a very hostile environment where you don’t feel like you can share anything, let alone that. I just wish people knew that those people who identify differently everywhere and you need to respect those boundaries. It would be like me walking up to my grandparents, who were Jehovah’s Witnesses, with a Christmas tree and decorations and being like “well you celebrate Christmas now and I don’t really care about your beliefs or how you feel, I want to celebrate Christmas so therefore I’m putting a Christmas tree in your living room.” And that’s not right.

K: Right.

P: I mean, there are so many kids out there, like, I’m working for a suicide prevention group and almost every single one of the kids that I talk to is trans or on the gender spectrum or something. And those kids do not see anyone in the media that they feel comfortable relating to. And a lot of their friends are super supportive and their families are, you know, not there yet. And it’s just not fair. I can’t understand why. Even kids

younger than me are so comfortable with identifying as queer and everything just being, you know, it doesn't have to be black and white anymore, and parents and older people are still just like "you're ruining everything." And we're all like "no, we're making it better!"

9. What is the impact of society's understanding of gender identity?

P: I think a lot of, well, I'm super supportive of media, I think media attention is good. I'm not a proponent of the saying "all publicity is good publicity," because I do feel like the trans attention in the media is promoting still a very binary view. It's very much like Aydian Dowling being on the cover of *Men's Health*. I, I mean I guess that's achievable if that's what you want, but not every trans person is into that. And what about those people who are not, they're in the middle, you know, who just want to live their life as a person? Then their identity feels invalidated. And then you're setting the same ridiculously high standards for trans people as you are for regular men and women who are struggling with that as well. For me it's one of those it's good and it's bad things, where like it's awesome to see Laverne Cox on the cover of *Times*, you know, that was a huge deal. But I don't have money or access to the means to get myself to look, you know, to look that way. Not everyone has that and that's the frustrating part, is like what happens to those kids who, I mean there are kids everywhere, cisgender or not, who are like "who am I and where is there anyone like me doing these incredible things? I don't fit in." So I guess it's also kind of, I mean it's great to see that laws are being passed and everyone stood up to North Carolina. Those moments are so great, but we're just still so far. I don't know, it's just so far to me in a lot of ways. Even like social media, and like

the trans advocates who are streaming everywhere and they all have this great look to them, where they pass so well and they do things so well. And I just want to be recognized for being the person I am and not having to be anything else other than that. I don't know. It's nice, but I wish people would calm down about standards and things.

10. What are your recommendations for language usage when communicating with trans individuals?

P: I'm not, this is actually difficult for me too, because there's been a rise in the idea of starting conversations with "what's your preferred gender or pronoun?" But I feel like you're also acknowledging this sort of elephant in the room because how many situations are you really doing that in? I don't know, I think one of the biggest things I can say is just to use people's names. I get that pronouns are important and we use them, but if the opportunity presents itself where you can just call people by their name and they're happy with their name, I feel like that's a great way to go. I think if you can make every space a comfortable space for you to ask people what their preferred pronoun is then that's great too. I don't know, I'm trying to think of what else. I think just acknowledging that there isn't just two options. There's they, there's ze, there are so many pronouns out there, so I think exposing people to that is good too. I think the name is just a big thing, I think it just makes things easier. I've done a lot of, you don't realize how much you do it until you do an activity where you can't use any pronouns and you have to use a person's name, and then you're like, "oh, I really do do that a lot." Because I mean, everyone makes mistakes.