

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRANSGENDERISM
AS A VALUED LIFE EXPERIENCE AMONG TRANSGENDER ADULTS
IN THE MIDWESTERN UNITED STATES

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Dedication

To Vera Friederika Van Buskirk, my grandmother,
who epitomized an inspired intellectual life.

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ABSTRACT

Barb J. Burdge

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRANSGENDERISM AS A VALUED LIFE EXPERIENCE AMONG TRANSGENDER ADULTS IN THE MIDWESTERN UNITED STATES

This study is a hermeneutic phenomenology of transgenderism as it is valued and appreciated by adults who self-identify along the transgender spectrum. As a population-at-risk due to a social environment reliant on a dualistic notion of gender, transgender people are of particular concern to social workers, who are charged with identifying and building on client strengths. Yet the preponderance of the academic literature has reinforced a negative, problematic, or even pathological view of transgenderism. The literature also has tended to focus narrowly on transsexualism, leaving a gap in our knowledge of other forms of transgenderism. The present study—grounded primarily in the philosophy and methodology of Heideggerian phenomenology, but also drawing on Gadamerian hermeneutics—sought to understand the lived experience of transgenderism as it is appreciated by a range of transgender adults. A purposive sample of fifteen self-identified transgender adults who reported appreciating being transgender was recruited using snowball sampling across three Midwestern states. Each participated in an individual, open-ended interview designed to tap their lived experience with transgenderism as a valued aspect of life. Transcribed interview data were analyzed using Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological processes as suggested by various researchers in nursing, social work, and other disciplines. The results of this study

suggest that intimate connections (with one's self, with others, and with a larger purpose) constitute the essence of the lived experience of appreciating one's transgenderism. These findings help prepare social workers to recognize the strengths of the transgender population and to engage in culturally competent practice. In addition, this research offers new knowledge for improving social work curricular content on transgenderism and for justifying trans-inclusive social policies. The study also contributes to the overall research literature on transgenderism and qualitative methods.

Kathy Lay, Ph.D., Chair

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of Research Issue.....	1
Terminology and Definitions.....	2
Prevalence of Transgenderism.....	6
Transgender Persons as a Population-at-Risk.....	10
Forms and sources of transgender oppression.....	10
Invisibility, stigmatization, and rejection.....	13
Ridicule, harassment, and microaggressions.....	15
Physical and sexual violence.....	17
Needs among the transgender population.....	20
Mental health needs.....	20
Medical needs.....	24
Economic needs.....	27
Educational needs.....	28
Social Work’s Ethical Obligation to the Transgender Population.....	29
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	32
Paradigmatic Perspectives on Gender.....	32
Biological essentialist perspectives on gender.....	32
Social constructionist perspectives on gender.....	34
Critiques of social constructionism.....	41
Postmodernism and queer theory.....	42
Tenets of queer theory.....	44
Critiques of queer theory.....	46
Theories of Gender Identity Development.....	47
Traditional gender identity development theories.....	47
Freud’s theory of gender identity development.....	47
Erikson’s theory of gender identity development.....	49
Kohlberg’s theory of gender identity development.....	50
Critiques of traditional gender identity development theories.....	51
Trans-affirmative gender identity development theories.....	52
Devor’s model of transsexual gender identity development.....	53
Lev’s “Transgender Emergence” model.....	54
Pollock and Eyre’s model of FTM identity development.....	55
Clinical Perspectives on Transgenderism.....	56
Gender identity disorder research.....	56
Sex-reassignment surgery research.....	61
Transsexual Subjectivities and Embodiment Theory.....	62
Body modification.....	64
Body techniques.....	68
Sexuality.....	70

Transgender Coping Strategies, Strengths, and Resiliencies.....	73
Research Needs and Current Research Question.....	77
CHAPTER III. METHODS.....	79
A Case for Qualitative Research.....	79
Hermeneutic Phenomenology.....	80
Heideggerian philosophical foundations	81
Gadamerian philosophical foundations.....	93
Research Design.....	98
Sample.....	98
Eligibility criteria	99
Sample size.....	100
Sampling method and participant recruitment.....	100
Participants.....	102
Data collection methods.....	106
Interview procedure.....	107
Data analysis methods.....	111
Rigor and trustworthiness.....	116
Coherence.....	117
Comprehensiveness.....	117
Plausibility/agreement.....	117
Suggestiveness/potential.....	119
Protection of human subjects.....	119
CHAPTER IV. RESULTS.....	123
Participant Profiles.....	123
Sephie.....	123
Heléne	123
Siren.....	124
Lucas.....	124
Francis.....	125
Wanda.....	125
Felicia.....	126
Melissa.....	126
Bonita.....	127
Corina.....	127
Krystal.....	128
Abby.....	128
Teresa.....	129
Fahima.....	129
Brandon.....	130
The Essential Pattern: Intimate Connection.....	131
Theme 1: Intimate connection with self.....	133
Sub-theme A: Being true.....	133
Sub-theme B: Being a unique whole.....	145
Sub-theme C: Being strong.....	158

Theme 2: Intimate connection with others.....	162
Sub-theme D: Being free.....	163
Sub-theme E: Being open to others.....	172
Sub-theme F: Being socially competent.....	177
Sub-theme G: Being helpful to others.....	181
Sub-theme H: Being in stronger relationships.....	185
Theme 3: Intimate connection with a larger purpose.....	198
Sub-theme I: Being spiritually enriched.....	199
Sub-theme J: Being part of social change.....	206
 CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION.....	 221
Nature of Hermeneutical Phenomenological Results	221
Possible Explanations for the Results.....	223
Implications for Previous Theory and Research.....	223
Research on transgender life experiences.....	223
Transgender identity development theory and research.....	225
Mental health diagnostic categories.....	226
Social constructionist, postmodern, and queer theory.....	227
Implications for Social Work Practice.....	228
Cultural competence.....	228
The importance of human relationships.....	231
Strengths-based practice.....	232
Implications for Social Policy.....	233
Implications for Social Work Education.....	234
Methodological Implications.....	234
Limitations of the Study.....	236
Limitations in sampling.....	236
Limitations in data collection and analysis.....	237
Directions for Future Research.....	240
Summary and Conclusion.....	242
 APPENDICES	
Appendix A. Diagnostic Criteria for Gender Identity Disorder.....	243
Appendix B. Researcher’s Fore-Structure.....	244
Appendix C. Demographic Questionnaire.....	247
Appendix D. Informed Consent Statement.....	248
 REFERENCES.....	 251
 CURRICULUM VITAE	

Chapter I. Introduction

Statement of Research Issue

The transgender population is a marginalized social group often targeted for mistreatment and discrimination. Such experiences contribute to numerous psychosocial challenges facing transgender persons. Despite pervasive oppression of the transgender community (NASW, 2012) and social work's commitment to serving oppressed groups (NASW, 1999/2008), transgenderism has only begun to be explored in the social work literature (Burdge, 2007; Markman, 2011; McPhail, 2004; Morrow, 2006). The majority of research into transgenderism has been clinical in nature and has presumed gender atypicality to be pathological (Cromwell, 1999; Hill, 2005). Much of it has focused on gender-nonconforming children or on transsexuals seeking sex reassignment surgery (SRS) (Gainor, 1998; Riley, Wong, & Sitharthan, 2010), and has often had the aim of determining causal factors that could point toward a "cure" (Lewis, 2008). Such literature contributes little to the understanding of the subjective experiences of transgender persons or the complexities of negotiating lives that do not fit neatly into the dominant two-sex/two-gender paradigm.

For social workers to provide effective, culturally competent services to transgender clients, the profession needs sophisticated contemporary knowledge of gender and of how transgender individuals experience and negotiate their gender identities in a society which insists gender is an invariable, biologically determined, binary phenomenon (Burdge, 2007; Markman, 2011; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). My research interests, therefore, do not lie in the etiology, assessment, categorization, or clinical treatment of transgenderism, but rather in the acquisition of authentic insights

into transgenderism as a lived identity subjectively experienced by transgender individuals living within a society that relies on a two-sex/two-gender construction of reality. To comprehend and report the nature of that subjective experience, I used in-depth qualitative interviews with transgender individuals. In part to counter the overwhelming emphasis in the social sciences on the problems and difficulties of transgender individuals, I am particularly interested in understanding transgenderism as a phenomenon experienced as a valued aspect of life. The appreciation of being transgender is a dimension of transgender experience that has been virtually invisible in the academic literature, yet holds promise to inform social work practices that are sensitive to the value of gender diversity and attuned to the strengths and hopeful possibilities of transgender people.

Terminology and Definitions

Any discussion of transgenderism requires terminology with which persons outside the transgender community are often unfamiliar, and the language may seem confusing (Xavier, 2000). Complicating the matter is the fact that the language of transgenderism continues to evolve as more transgender individuals articulate their experiences (Kenagy, 2005; Kenagy, Moses, & Ornstein, 2006). Because transgenderism poses profound challenges to the hegemonic notion of a gender binary, and because the English language reflects this dichotomy, discussions of transgenderism from the standpoint of transgender people themselves can quickly reveal the limitations of current mainstream terms and concepts. Transgender persons have also begun to resist the pathologizing language of clinical treatment and research in favor of language that validates and more accurately communicates their experiences (Denny, 2004). As a

result, it is common for transgender people to use terms describing sex, gender, and gender identities differently than they might be used by professionals (Martin & Yonkin, 2006). I attempt to use such terms precisely and in a manner that privileges transgender perspectives. Definitions of basic terms and concepts, including *sex*, *gender*, *gender identity*, *transgender*, and *transsexual*, are offered tentatively; I intend for them to provide a basis for understanding while recognizing the importance of remaining open to new definitions that may emerge during this research project.

Sex refers to the biological aspects of maleness and femaleness, including chromosomes, chemistry, and anatomy (Diamond, 2002; Kessler & McKenna, 1978).¹ *Gender* is often conflated with sex, but it is a distinct concept. Gender refers to the social or cultural expectations for persons based upon their sex (Diamond, 2002; Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Gender involves the different traits and behaviors which any given society attributes to, or prefers from, males and females (Cohen-Kettenis & Gooren, 1999). In Western societies, infants are assigned a gender at birth, usually as the result of a genital inspection. In other words, *sex* makes us females or males, but *gender* makes us women or men.

Gender identity refers to “the person’s self-concept and how individuals perceive themselves, that is, self-image and the subjective sense of self” (Cromwell, 1999, p. 8). It refers to “one’s basic conviction of being a man, a woman, or another gender such as

¹ As Fausto-Sterling (1985, 1995, 2000) has argued, however, even human biology is not essentially divided into two sex categories. Intersex persons can display genetic, biological, and anatomical variations that make it difficult to categorize them as either male or female. Her research, therefore, suggests bodies are interpreted through the presumptive lens of the gender dichotomy. In this way, even the notion of biological sex may more accurately be considered a social construction.

transgender” (Bockting, 1999, p. 3). The term has been used by a few researchers to refer to one’s gender as it is perceived by others (for example, Diamond, 2002), but it is more commonly used by transgender persons and most social scientists to refer to the internal sense of one’s own gender. *Gender expression*, then, is the outward display of gendered signs and symbols (such as clothing, gestures, hair styles) that are interpreted by others in society. It is important to note here that neither gender nor gender identity need necessarily be related to biological sex (Wilson, Griffin, & Wren, 2002).

The word *transgender* is most commonly used today as an intentionally broad umbrella term referring to anyone whose gender identity does not align with one’s biological sex or assigned gender in traditional ways (Gender Education & Advocacy, 2001; Mallon, 1999; Rothblatt, 1995; Xavier, 2000). Put another way, transgender people are those “who were assigned one gender at birth based on their genitals, but who feel that this is a false or incomplete description of themselves” (Simmons, 2005).

The term transgender is relatively new (Diamond, 2002). It was preceded by the narrower term *transsexual*. The first use of the word transsexual has been attributed to Hirschfield in 1923 (Cohen-Kettenis & Gooren, 1999), who used it to describe hermaphroditic individuals who today would be called *intersex*. Cauldwell (1949) was the first to use the term transsexual in its current sense—to describe persons who seek to alleviate gender dysphoria (distressful conflict between gender identity and biological sex) through medical alterations of their bodies (Brown & Rounsley, 1996; Cohen-Kettenis & Gooren, 1999; Israel & Tarver, 1997). The term entered the popular lexicon through the high-profile male-to-female (MTF) transsexual Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s (Meyerowitz, 2002) and the work of Dr. Harry Benjamin (1966). In 1980,

transsexualism became a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* (APA, 1980), only to be replaced by gender identity disorder (GID) in more recent editions (APA, 2000). Transsexualism remains a diagnostic category in the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10)* (World Health Organization, 2007).

The term transgender came into use in the early 1990s as persons with gender-nonconforming identities—but no desire for medical interventions—began articulating their experiences of gender (Cromwell, 1999; Denny, 2004). It became clear that transsexual was too narrow a term to encompass the range of possible non-traditional gender identities. Today, an increasing number of transgender people are living out their non-traditional gender identities without pursuing surgical interventions (NASW, 2012). The adoption by many of transgender as an identity has “shifted the discourse on transgenderism from a personal disorder to a cultural one: the inability of society to move beyond narrow gender categories” (Beemyn, 2003, pp. 39-40).

The transgender population is a diverse one, made of up of individuals whose identities bend, cross, violate, reject, resist, transgress, or otherwise transcend traditional gender categories (Beemyn, 2003; Bockting, 1999; Riley et al., 2010). The meaning of the term transgender is fluid, and it has been adopted by persons with various gender identities (Diamond, 2002), including transsexuals, non-operative transsexuals, crossdressers, transmen, transwomen, drag kings and queens, gender radicals, gender outlaws, gender benders, gender blenders and transgenderists, as well as those persons identifying as intersex, bigender, two-spirit, genderqueer, androgynous, third gender, genderfree, gender variant, gender-gifted, MTF, female-to-male (FTM), or otherwise gender-nonconforming (Bockting, 1999; Bornstein, 1994; Feinberg, 1998; Gainor, 1998;

Hunter, Joslin, & McGowan, 2004; Kenagy et al., 2006; Kuper et al., 2012; NASW, 2012; Trans Alliance Society, 2008). Some transgender people identify as both male and female, others as neither; some wish to challenge the two-sex/two-gender system intentionally, while others simply want to live as a member of the “other” sex-gender category (Kenagy, 2005).

The labels for various transgender identities remain in flux and are actively contested. Ringo (2002), for example, discovered the use of 33 distinct gender identity labels in use among a sample of 19 FTM transsexuals. Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski (2012) found that transgender adults commonly claim multiple gender identity labels simultaneously. From the perspective of social work ethics, the label preferred by any particular transgender person should be self-determined. Membership in the transgender population is likewise a matter of self-determination; most persons violate gender norms in some way, but the label transgender is accurately applied only to those who claim it for themselves. The term transgender will be used in this report to refer to people who self-identify as transgender. It should also be noted that the term “cisgender,” which has come to mean conventionally gendered people (Schilt, 2010), will be used as needed to refer to non-transgender people in this report.²

Prevalence of Transgenderism

The lack of data on the number of transgender people is a consistent theme in the literature (Kenagy et al., 2006; National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, 2000). Anecdotal

² Beemyn and Rankin (2011) explained that the Latin prefix “cis-” means “on the same side as.”

“Cisgender,” then, refers to a person whose assigned gender and gender identity have always been in alignment. Stryker (2008) suggested the utility of the term “cisgender” lies in its ability to disrupt the normative assumption that a person is non-transgender unless explicitly labeled as such.

evidence suggests increasing numbers of youth and adults in the United States are openly identifying as transgender, but there are no reliable statistical counts (Beemyn, 2003; Cromwell, 1999; Kenagy et al., 2006). Attempts to count transgender people are complicated by various factors. First, many transgender people are invisible as transgender because they are seen by others as simply men or women (Cohen-Kettenis & Gooren, 1999; Cromwell, 1999). Second, as with any stigmatized population, some transgender people will choose not to self-identify to researchers (Meezan & Martin, 2003). Third, the variety and fluidity of transgender identities make any accurate count difficult. This includes, for example, those post-operative transsexuals who may consider themselves simply men or women and actively reject the “trans” label (Lombardi, 2007). These factors have left us with primarily clinical data (from medical or psychotherapeutic sources). The full range of transgender experience is not reflected in such data, but they are provided here as the only available estimates of the prevalence of gender-nonconforming persons.

Gender identity disorder (GID) is listed as a mental disorder in the *DSM IV-TR* (APA, 2000). The controversy surrounding this diagnosis will be addressed later. The existence of the GID category, however, gives clinicians one (albeit limited) way to count some gender-nonconforming people. Still, the precise number of children and adults meeting the *DSM IV-TR* criteria for GID (see Appendix A) is unknown, as there have been no large-scale epidemiological studies in this area (APA, 2000; Bradley & Zucker, 1997; Cohen-Kettenis & Gooren, 1999).

Counting persons who meet GID criteria is complicated by the nature of referrals for services, especially among children. Not all parents will seek clinical intervention for their child's gender nonconformity. Some parents are more tolerant of gender atypicality, while others may be too embarrassed to seek services for their child. Nevertheless, Bradley and Zucker (1990, as cited in Minter, 1999) argued that GID occurs in 2-5% of all children. This figure is problematic, however, as "subclinical" manifestations of GID were included. Zucker, Bradley, Owen-Anderson, Kibblewhite, and Cantor (2008) claimed a nearly 100% increase in childhood GID referrals to their Toronto clinic from 1984-88, and a tripling of adolescent GID referrals from 2000-2004. It must be remembered, too, that meeting the criteria for GID is not equivalent to being transgender; the most common psychosexual outcome for those diagnosed with GID in childhood is bisexuality or homosexuality, not transgenderism (APA, 2000).

Green (1995, as cited in Minter, 1999) estimated the incidence of GID in males to be between 1.5% to 3% of the general population, and the rate among females to be approximately half of that. Bakker, van Kesteren, Gooren, and Bezemer (1993) offered an even lower estimate for GID in biological adult females: 1 in 30,400. Wilson, Sharp, and Carr (1999) calculated the prevalence of gender dysphoria (often conflated with GID) among persons older than 15 years as just over 8 per 100,000, with the experience being four times more likely in biological males.

Another means of counting transgender people is through counting those who request sex reassignment surgery (SRS) (increasingly known as "gender affirmation surgery" or "gender confirmation surgery" [Kuper et al., 2012]). The APA (2000)

estimated that “roughly 1 per 30,000 adult males and 1 per 100,000 adult females seek sex-reassignment surgery” (p. 535). Cloud (1998) reported at least 25,000 U.S. citizens had undergone SRS.³

Intersexuality is often included under the transgender umbrella, and its prevalence is more easily counted, at least among those intersex conditions that are obvious at birth due to atypical genitalia (other conditions are discovered as late as puberty) (Lee, Houk, Ahmed, & Hughes, 2006). Kimmel (2008) reported that approximately 1,000 babies per year in the United States are known to be intersex. A more recent estimate places the rate at approximately 2,000 visibly intersex infants born per year in the U.S. (Accord Alliance, 2013).

³ International reports offer additional prevalence rates of transsexualism in those over 15 years of age. Out of every 100,000 persons, 1.9 transsexuals have been reported in England and Wales (Hoenig & Kenna, 1974), 2.25 in Germany (Weitze & Osburg, 1996), 2.38 in Australia (Ross, Wålinder, Lundström, & Thuwe, 1981), 4.72 in the Netherlands (van Kesteren, Gooren, & Megens, 1996), and 23.6 in Singapore (Tsoi, 1988). Differences in prevalence rates between nations are likely due to varying levels of cultural acceptance of gender nonconformity and availability of transsexual-specific health care (Cohen-Kettenis & van Goozen, 1997; JSI Research & Training Institute, 2000). It is also notable that across these studies and others (van Kesteren, Asscheman, Megens, & Gooren, 1997), the ratio of MTF transsexuals to FTM transsexuals was approximately 3:1. GID, transsexualism, and transgenderism are consistently reported as being less common among biological females. This may have more to do with the relative invisibility of transgenderism among females and acceptance of greater gender flexibility for females than an actual difference in prevalence (Kenagy et al., 2006).

The remaining persons falling under the transgender umbrella remain uncounted. Relatively few transgender people have SRS (sex reassignment surgery) (Kenagy et al., 2006), and it cannot be assumed that most have come to the attention of physicians, mental health clinicians, or other researchers. Despite the many difficulties involved in determining the exact number of transgender people in the United States, there is no doubt that social workers need to be aware of the needs and capacities of this group, and it is an aim of my dissertation to begin to offer possible ways to understand the reported life experiences of this population.

Transgender Persons as a Population-at-Risk

Forms and sources of transgender oppression. The gender dichotomy is a ubiquitous component of Western society. It penetrates virtually every aspect of social life (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). It is rooted in our laws, our languages, and our moral systems (Rothblatt, 1995). Virtually every infant is assigned one of two mutually exclusive gender roles at birth, and the implications on the child's life trajectory are undeniably profound.⁴ Goffman (1977) described this initial gender assignment as “the beginning of a sustained sorting process whereby members of the two classes are subject to differential socialization” (p. 303). Knowing the gender of a person is often a prerequisite for knowing how to interact with that person (Lorber, 1994); it can allow us to determine the meaning of another's behavior (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Everything

⁴ A few birthing facilities have partnered with intersex advocacy groups, such as the now defunct Intersex Society of North America or its successor Accord Alliance, to provide intersex-sensitive care and support as needed to newborns, their families, and medical professionals (Accord Alliance, 2012).

a person does will be interpreted and evaluated through the lens of gender. In short, the social process of gendering creates persons who are perceived as competent social actors (Butler, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gender differentiation can also be understood as a process of distributing various rights and responsibilities—each person must be clearly gendered in order to receive the “appropriate” rights (Lorber, 1994). The traditional gender dichotomy, then, “has become a powerful ideology to which all of us, as social actors, are held accountable” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 139). Gender nonconformity is interpreted as a fundamental threat to others’ senses of self and definitions of a well-ordered society (Gagné, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; Gainor, 1998; Norton, 1997).

This state of affairs can create significant difficulties for transgender people. The gender dichotomy leaves no room for gender identities that are somewhere between or outside of the categories “woman” and “man.” Such persons can routinely be rendered invisible, unworthy, or pathological (Gainor, 1998). Discrepancies between perceived biological sex and expressed gender may rarely be tolerated in everyday society (Gagné & Tewksbury, 1998), and individuals may feel empowered, even obligated to “police the gender boundaries” (Feinberg, 1998) as a means of asserting their own gender “normality.” In this sense, gender becomes a discipline—a means of social control enforced through constant surveillance (Butler, 2004). Transgender people regularly elicit hostile responses from others (Gainor, 1998). Transphobia, the fear and hatred of transgender persons (Norton, 1997), manifests in a variety of ways and creates unique challenges for transgender people, for, as Goffman (1977) reminded us, “although gender is almost wholly a social, not biological, consequence of the workings of society, these

consequences are objective” (p. 330). The research on various forms of transphobia and their consequences is explored in the following sections.

Transgender people are an oppressed social group that is at a disadvantage in most contexts. Young (1990) delineates five forms of oppression—marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, violence, and exploitation—the first four of which the transgender population clearly faces. First, transgender people are marginalized by a lack of discrimination protections, leaving them vulnerable to exclusion from the labor force and much of social life. This contributes to distributive injustice and limits transgender people’s opportunities to develop their skills and capacities. Second, the transgender population has been affected by powerlessness. Others—often medical professionals, but also therapists, politicians, and voters—have typically made the decisions about the conditions of transgender people’s lives. Transgender people have lacked the authority to make decisions for their own well-being. Third, the lives of transgender people are shaped by a context of cultural imperialism. “To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other” (pp. 58-59). Historically, transgender people have had few opportunities to define themselves, to assert the meaning their own lives hold for them, and to be visible as valid, authentic human beings. Finally, transgender people are too frequently targeted by verbal and physical violence. This violence is systematic. It sends a message of intimidation to the entire transgender community, and transgender people in general live with the knowledge that they could be targeted by ridicule, harassment, intimidation, or physical and sexual attack at any time

simply for being transgender. As illustrated in the following sections, research has revealed the oppressive social environment transgender people face.

Invisibility, stigmatization, and rejection. In a culture still largely operating with a binary conception of gender, transgender people easily become invisible and stigmatized (Cromwell, 1999). Their gender expressions may be confusing and therefore misread by others (Kenagy et al., 2006). Others, not anticipating a transgender person, will likely assume they are presenting their gender identity as clearly as possible with the traditional signs and symbols indicating a particular sex (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In these cases of “passing,” a transgender person may not be recognized as such (and, indeed, some transgender people prefer this mode of being in the world). Beemyn and Rankin (2011) reported a majority of a sample of 3,474 transgender adults “sometimes” or “often” hide their transgender identities out of fear of harassment or violence. As a result, with the exception of a few special contexts, most people do not consider the possibility of a transgender person in their midst as they go through everyday life. It is typically assumed that outward presentation reflects biological sex (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006), which is then assumed to indicate one’s “true” identity.

Society’s policies and procedures commonly segregate persons into two—and only two—gender groups. Examples include segregation in public restrooms, college dormitory assignments, sports team membership, certain organizational memberships, and even asking women and then men to stand during a workshop intended to “celebrate” diversity (Beemyn, 2003). Such ubiquitous practices render transgender people invisible and set them up for stigmatization if they seek accommodations for their non-traditional gender identity.

Unfortunately, rejection by families is common for transgender people. In one large study ($n = 6,456$), 57% of transgender respondents reported “significant family rejection” (Grant et al., 2011, p. 7). A majority of parents have negative reactions upon learning of their child’s transgender identity (Grossman, D’Augelli, Howell, & Hubbard, 2005). This may contribute to the high homelessness rate among transgender youth (Mottet & Ohle, 2003).

Unfortunately, homeless shelters and other social services are often poorly equipped to serve transgender clients as they continue to routinely classify clients based on traditional gender categories. Gender-segregated services in homeless shelters (Mottet & Ohle, 2003), drug treatment programs (Haymes, 2005, as cited in Grossman et al., 2005), and domestic violence shelters (Cope & Darke, 1999) present daunting obstacles to transgender people who need their services. For example, Grant et al. (2011), found that more than half of those transgender people who had sought the services of a homeless shelter reported transphobic harassment from shelter staff or residents, and 29% were denied services altogether.

Transgender people may also face rejection from organized religion. A small study of 32 MTF transgender Christians found that 14 of them had been actively rejected by their church homes (Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). Twelve respondents had chosen to remain closeted to avoid potential discrimination from their churches. Just two participants in this study reported positive experiences with their churches after coming out as transgender. While more than a third of participants described a deepening of their personal faiths and relationships with the divine in their coming out and transition processes, this commonly took place either away from or in spite of religious institutions.

The threat of discrimination is very real to transgender people. In two large studies of transgender people ($n = 515$ and $n = 6,456$, respectively), more than 60% had experienced some type of discrimination based on their gender identity (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Grant et al., 2011). Gender discrimination was defined in the first study as (1) being fired from a job, (2) having problems getting a job, (3) being denied or evicted from housing, and (4) experiencing barriers to accessing health care due to gender identity or expression. Grant et al., on the other hand, defined gender discrimination more broadly as any type of unequal treatment in housing, education, employment, public accommodations, health care, family relationships, or dealings with strangers or officials due to gender identity or presentation.

Ridicule, harassment, and microaggressions. Transgender people are often targets of ridicule and harassment in public and private spaces. Eighty percent of two urban transgender samples ($n = 515$ and 244 , respectively) reported having been harassed or verbally abused because of their gender expression (Clements-Nolle, et al., 2006; Reback, Simon, Bemis, & Gatson, 2001). Fifty-three percent of another large sample ($n = 6,456$) reported public harassment because of their gender nonconformity (Grant et al., 2011). Similarly, Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, and Malouf (2001) found that a majority of their large sample ($n = 402$) of transgender people had experienced transphobic harassment at some point in their lives. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found that a quarter of 3,474 transgender respondents had been the target of gender-based derogatory remarks within the previous year. Gender-atypical youth may also be verbally assaulted in their homes, as Grossman et al. (2005) found a significant positive correlation ($n = 55, p < .01$) between parental verbal abuse and youths' gender nonconformity.

The school environment, in particular, is a rigidly gendered environment in which gender nonconformity is routinely ridiculed (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Kenagy et al., 2006). One large study ($n = 6,456$) reported 78% of transgender adults who expressed gender nonconformity during grades K-12 experienced gender-based bullying or harassment at school (Grant et al., 2011). Problematic enforcement of gender roles is also evident among the experiences of gay and lesbian students: those who visibly deviate from gender norms are targets of more harassment in schools. In fact, gender nonconformity has been found to be a significant predictor of in-school harassment among lesbian and gay students (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). In-school harassment has been shown to be a central factor predicting young transgender adults' psychosocial adjustment (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010). Not surprisingly, Grant et al. found a significant correlation between harassment in school and suicide risk among transgender youth.

Given all of the above findings, it is hardly surprising that transgender people frequently experience microaggressions within their social worlds. Microaggressions have been defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups" (Nadal, 2008, p. 23). From interviews with a small sample ($n = 9$) of transmen and transwomen, Nadal, Skolkin, and Wong (2012) discovered experiences of at least 12 distinct categories of microaggressions. These included the exoticizing of transgender people, denial of bodily privacy, denial of transphobia, familial microaggressions, discomfort or disapproval of transgender experiences, the assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality,

systemic/environmental microaggressions, the use of transphobic/incorrectly gendered terminology, and the endorsement of binary gender assumptions. Even in such a small sample, one can see the broad range of negative and unwelcoming signals transgender people may routinely receive from society.

Gardner's (1995) work on the public harassment of women provides valuable insights for understanding the possible harmful effects of such treatment on transgender people. Public harassment reveals the "contempt, displeasure, and veiled loathing and hostility" (p. 15) the harasser holds toward the harassed. Such mistreatment can erode various intrapersonal and social connections:

Public harassment can result in an alienation of the individual in public places from fellow citizens both female and male, undermine the trust and civility that many analysts now hold up as the cure for urban ills, and create both a gulf between private and public realms and a gulf between the individual's private and public selves. (p. 11)

Likewise, uncivil treatment in public sends a clear message to targeted persons that they are unworthy of "the small courtesies of life due every stranger" (p. 44). Insult is then added to injury, because, in the public arena, harassed persons can plainly see that others are treated better than they are.

Physical and sexual violence. Transgender people appear to experience significant rates of physical violence. The larger studies, with samples sizes of 515 (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006), 6,456 (Grant et al., 2011), 184 (Kenagy, 2005), 380 (Nemoto, Sausa, Operario, & Keatley, 2007), 252 (Xavier, 2000), and 271 (Testa et al., 2012) place the percentage of transgender people who have experienced physical (non-sexual) violence somewhere between 20% and 51%. Seventeen percent of participants in another large transgender study ($n = 3,474$) (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011) reported having

been physically assaulted specifically due to gender identity/expression in the past year. The temporal constraint of this measure makes it somewhat difficult to compare with other researchers' findings.

In studies of violence directed toward transgender people, it is not always clear whether the respondent attributes the violence to the perpetrator's attitude toward their gender identity. A few studies have made this clear, however. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) specifically asked about harassment and violence due to gender identity and/or expression. Clements-Nolle et al. (2006) reported that the entire 36% of their sample who had experienced violence attributed it to their gender presentation. This is similar to Testa et al.'s (2012) finding that nearly 98% of transgender victims of violence attributed at least one of their past assaults to gender identity or expression. In Xavier's (2000) survey, 75% of those who had been a victim of violence attributed it to the perpetrator's bias against gender variance. Nemoto et al. (2007) reported that 20% of their sample of MTFs had been targeted by physical violence because of their transgender status. Grant et al. (2011) reported that 35% of transgender respondents who had been gender-nonconforming in grades K-12 had been physically assaulted in school for that reason. In a smaller study, Grossman et al. (2005) ($n = 55$) found physical abuse by parents to be significantly correlated with gender nonconformity in transgender youth.

Research further suggests that sexual assault may be another significant concern for the transgender population. Two sizable urban surveys of transgender adults ($n = 515$ and $n = 184$, respectively) found that 50-60% reported having been raped at some time in

their lives (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Kenagy, 2005). A third study (Testa et al., 2012) reported that nearly 27% of a sample of 271 FTMs and MTFs had a history of sexual victimization.

Transgender people also appear to be at greater risk of hate crime victimization than lesbian, gay, or bisexual people. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP, 2010) calculated a total of 2,503 hate crimes committed against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and HIV-affected people in the United States in 2010. Within this group, transgender people were 1.5 to 2 times more likely to be victims of intimidation and assault than cisgender people, with transgender people of color being at highest risk. Strikingly, MTFs accounted for 44% of all murder victims but only 11% of the overall sample. Transgender people were also less likely than cisgender people to seek medical treatment or report hate crimes to law enforcement, even though they were more often injured than cisgender victims. Another transgender advocacy organization, the International Transgender Day of Remembrance, which tracks anti-transgender murders around the globe, identified 324 transgender murder victims in the United States between 1970 and 2011 (St. Pierre, 2011).

The actual numbers of anti-transgender hate crimes may be even higher than these reports suggest. No comprehensive anti-transgender hate crime statistics are available—gender identity was just added to federal hate crime definitions in 2010—leaving the NCAVP to rely on reports from its member organizations, which represent only 15 states. It is also reasonable to conclude that such incidents are generally under-reported due to fear, stigma, and invisibility.

Finally, there is reason to believe that younger transgender people may be at greater risk of violence than older transgender people. In their sample of 3,474 transgender adults, Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found that young adults reported a significantly higher rate of gender-based violence than older participants. This appeared to be associated with higher levels of visible gender nonconformity among younger adults. The older transgender adults much more often reported being closeted.

Needs among the transgender population. The widespread mistreatment and marginalization of transgender people leaves the population facing significant challenges to their psychological, physical, and socioeconomic well-being. In light of the serious and extensive needs of the transgender population, it has been referred to as a “desperate population” (Xavier, 2000, p. 6). While this generalization is neither strengths-based nor applicable to every transgender person, the sentiment is understandable. Research on the needs often experienced by transgender people is summarized here.

Mental health needs. Transgender people have been caricatured as “sick” or “crazy” by virtue of their atypical gender identities. A growing assumption, however, is that transgender identities are as sane, valid, and authentic as cisgender identities (see for example Brown & Rounsley, 1996; Burdge, 2007; Langer & Martin, 2004; Lev, 2004, 2005; Lewis, 2008; Markham, 2011). Social workers must also remember that the transgender population—as with any group of people—experiences a range of mental health concerns, many of which have nothing to do with gender identity. However, due to marginalization and mistreatment, this population may be at elevated risk of developing certain mental health problems. Mustanski, Garofalo, and Emerson (2010) found that 35% of the transgender youth in their sample ($n = 246$) had received at least

one psychiatric diagnosis in their lifetime. Of course, diagnosis does not necessarily indicate actual illness, and the ultimate “treatment” for many transgender people’s mental health concerns probably lies in the general work we all need to do to effect sociocultural change. An emerging theme in the literature articulates the need to seek environmental changes as a means of preventing negative outcomes for transgender people (see for example Burdge, 2007; Markman, 2011; Russell, 2010; Ryan, 2010). Gender nonconformity *per se* is not a problem; repressing it, being ostracized for it, or being discriminated against because of it, however, can lead to a range of mental health concerns (Kenagy et al., 2006).

Depressive symptoms have been noted as commonly leading transgender people to mental health services. Gender-atypical children frequently come to the attention of school social workers because of their depressed mood (Kenagy et al., 2006). Mustanski et al. (2010) found that 20% of transgender youth in their sample ($n = 246$) had been diagnosed with major depression. Other studies have more directly examined depressive symptoms among transgender adults. In a large study of transgender people ($n = 515$), 60% met the criteria for depression using the Center for Epidemiology Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006). In a smaller study of MTF sex workers, Nuttbrock, Rosenblum, and Blumenstein (2002) reported significant negative correlations ($n = 43, p = .01$) between depressive symptoms and family and friends’ support for their transgender identity.

Some transgender people—especially transsexuals—experience distress because their physical bodies conflict with their gender identities. Such individuals may resent having those body parts that signify an undesired sex or gender (Lewins, 1995; Rubin,

2003). Occasionally, this leads to self-mutilation, such as cutting the genitals or breasts (Burgess, 1999). Self-mutilation has been estimated to occur in 8% of MTF transsexuals and 1% of FTM transsexuals ($n = 435$) (Cole, O'Boyle, Emory, & Meyer, 1997).

Abuse of alcohol and illegal drugs appears to be a concern among the transgender population. A national survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2011) found that 8.7% of the U.S. population age 12 and over reported using illegal drugs, 6.7% reported heavy drinking, and 1.6% reported participation in treatment for drug or alcohol use. The numbers available for transgender people look quite different. In a large and diverse sample of transgender people ($n = 515$), 28% reported participation in drug or alcohol treatment (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006). In another study, more than 30% of transgender people surveyed ($n = 252$) considered themselves to have a drug or alcohol problem (Xavier, 2000). Sizable studies ($n = 515$ and 184, respectively) have suggested that 18-20% of MTF transgender people inject street drugs (Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, & Katz, 2001; Kenagy, 2002), while the percentage is 6% among FTM transgender people (Kenagy, 2002). Nuttbrock et al. (2002) asked 43 MTF sex workers about their substance use in the month prior to the study. Seventy percent had used alcohol, 47% had used marijuana, 30% had used crack cocaine, and 14% had used powder cocaine. Elevated rates of substance abuse among transgender populations are likely related to physical and sexual violence. Testa et al. (2012) determined substance abuse was significantly associated with histories of sexual victimization among transwomen and with histories of both physical and sexual victimization among transmen.

When compared to the general population, the reported rate of suicide attempts among the transgender population is astonishing. Between 1990 and 2010, overall annual suicide rates in the U.S. have ranged between 10.7 and 12.4 suicides per 100,000 people (American Association of Suicidology, 2010). The same source reported that no national suicide attempts statistics exist but that a reasonable estimate is 25 attempts for each completed suicide. This would suggest an annual rate of as many as 310 suicide attempts per 100,000 people, or about 0.3% of people in the U.S. attempting suicide each year.

A recent measure of suicide attempts among transgender people comes from a very large study ($n = 6,456$), in which 41% of respondents reported at least one previous attempt (Grant et al., 2011). Earlier research reported lower rates among transgender people. Kenagy et al. (2005) ($n = 184$) and Clements-Nolle et al. (2006) ($n = 515$) found suicide attempts among 30-32% of transgender people. Xavier (2000) reported an even lower rate of transgender suicide attempts—16% ($n = 252$). However, 35% of this sample reported a history of suicidal ideation. Of those, 64% saw gender identity as a contributing factor, and nearly half of that sub-group had attempted suicide. Similarly, gender-based victimization and gender-based discrimination (in employment, housing, and/or health care) have been shown to be significantly correlated with suicide risk among transgender people (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Grant et al., 2011). As might be expected, suicide attempts have also been shown to be significantly related to past physical and sexual violence in MTFs and FTMs (Testa et al., 2012).

Transgender youth appear to be especially at risk of suicide. The APA (2000) noted teens diagnosed with GID are at heightened risk for depression and suicide. Clements-Nolle et al. (2006) found nearly 50% of 18- to 25-year-old transgender people

in their sample ($n = 515$) had attempted suicide. Similarly, Mustanski et al. (2010) identified a 45% suicide attempt rate among a sample of transgender youth ($n = 246$). Various researchers have also identified gender atypicality as significantly correlated with suicide among lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1994; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnik, & Blum, 1998).

Medical needs. Medical providers are frequently ill-equipped to provide sensitive, culturally competent services to transgender patients.⁵ Many simply lack trans-specific medical knowledge (Hussey, 2006; JSI Research & Training Institute, 2000). Others express disbelief or shock upon discovering their patients' transgender identities, and some insist on using incorrect pronouns (Hussey, 2006). Providers sometimes focus on gender issues unnecessarily when providing unrelated services, while others humiliate their transgender patients (JSI Research & Training Institute, 2000). Xavier (2000) found that 32% of 252 transgender respondents had been treated with insensitivity or open hostility by medical professionals. Similarly, Nemoto et al. (2007) identified a pattern in which transgender people were frequently met with discriminatory treatment in medical settings. In other studies ($n = 6,456$ and $n = 184$, respectively), 19-26% of transgender people reported having been denied medical care due to their atypical gender presentation (Grant et al., 2011; Kenagy, 2005). In extreme cases of provider insensitivity, the result has been death: One transwoman died following a car accident because medical personnel took time to laugh at her male body instead of providing immediate care (Feinberg, 2001).

⁵ Wilkerson, Rybicki, Barber, and Smolenski (2011) offer helpful suggestions for creating culturally competent clinical settings for LGBT patients.

Given the evidence of these studies, it is not surprising that some transgender people avoid health care settings. Many say they do so because they fear being treated rudely (Hussey, 2006) or simply because they do not feel safe disclosing their transgender identity to their providers (Xavier, 2000). Data suggest that between 47% (Xavier, 2000) and 64% ($n = 244$) (Reback et al., 2001) of transgender people lack health insurance (compared to a nationwide rate of 15.7% at the same point in time [U.S. Census Bureau, 2001]). In a nation with an employment-based health insurance system, a high number of uninsured is perhaps not surprising among a population prone to employment discrimination. Even among transgender people who do have insurance, some fear disclosing their transgender identity will lead to being denied benefits or losing their coverage altogether (Hussey, 2006; JSI Research & Training Institute, 2000).

While the medical system falls short of meeting the needs of transgender people, the population faces unique health concerns as a result of its position in society. Gainor (1998) noted transgender people who repress their feelings and identities may develop ulcers, severe headaches, eating disorders, or panic attacks. Those who avoid using gender-specific public restrooms due to safety concerns have developed urinary tract infections and kidney damage (San Francisco Human Rights Commission, 2001). FTM transgender people report marked anxiety and embarrassment when seeking the gynecological care they need (JSI Research & Training Institute, 2000). MTF transsexuals taking hormones risk blood clots, liver disease, gallstones, and pancreatitis (Lawrence, 2007), as well as thromboembolism and prostate cancer (Lee, 2000). FTM transsexuals on hormones risk developing insulin resistance and liver disease (Lawrence, 2007) as well as heart disease and endometrial hyperplasia or cancer (Lee, 2000).

Transgender people—and especially transwomen—are at increased risk for HIV infection. To date, at least five studies have estimated the prevalence of HIV infection among the transgender population. In the largest of these, 2.6% of a diverse sample of 6,456 transgender people reported being HIV-positive (Grant et al., 2011). People of color, especially African-Americans, reported much higher rates. In a different study, 6.2% of 184 transgender people reported being HIV positive (Kenagy, 2005). Another cluster of studies reported significantly higher rates. Reback et al. (2001), for example, found that 22% of 244 transgender respondents were HIV-positive. Xavier (2000) reported a rate of 25% ($n = 252$), and Clements-Nolle et al. (2001) placed the rate at 27% ($n = 515$). Despite the discrepancies among these results, all of these rates are drastically higher than the overall HIV infection rate in the United States, which is estimated around 0.6% (UNAIDS & WHO, 2007).

Both economic and psychosocial risk factors appear to contribute to the high rate of HIV infection among transgender people (Bockting, Robinson, & Rosser, 1998). Economic factors revolve around the economic disadvantages faced by the population (such as employment discrimination, or homelessness). As a result of economic hardship, some transgender people engage in prostitution or “survival sex” (in other words, sex for food, shelter, or other basic necessities). If unable to afford hormones through the medical system, some transgender people turn to needle-sharing for injecting hormones obtained on the street. Estimated rates of non-prescribed hormone use among transgender people range from 32% of a sample of 515 (Clements-Nolle et al., 2001) to 58% of a sample of 252 (Xavier, 2000). Reback et al. (2001) found that 72% of 244 transgender people currently injecting hormones were using needles from non-medical

providers. Psychosocial factors increasing the risk of HIV among transgender people include (1) avoiding medical treatment due to fear or shame, (2) engaging in sexual experimentation as adults because of a delayed developmental trajectory, and (3) coping with stress through substance use, which can lead to needle-sharing and risky sexual activity (Bockting et al., 1998).

Economic needs. Data suggest transgender people are notably economically disadvantaged in the United States. In an extensive survey of a large, national transgender sample ($n = 6,456$), Grant et al. (2011) found an unemployment rate twice that of the national average, with transgender people of color facing unemployment at four times the national rate. Further, Grant et al. found transgender people to be four times more likely than the general population to live in households earning less than \$10,000 annually.

Grant et al. (2011) also determined that 47% of transgender people in their sample had experienced employment-based gender discrimination (such as being fired, not hired, denied promotion, or paid unequally). Beemyn and Rankin's (2011) large study of 3,474 transgender adults suggested a lower rate. About 25% of that sample reported gender-based workplace bias or discrimination, with 10% reporting "often" experiencing such treatment at work. A qualitative study of 54 transmen (Schilt, 2010) further illuminated the workplace experiences of many transgender people. Within this study, those particularly vulnerable to workplace discrimination were transmen who were racial minorities, in entry-level jobs, visibly gender atypical, and in locales which lacked anti-discrimination laws. Another small sample of 16 MTF transsexuals (Schilt & Wiswall, 2008) found an average post-transition wage decline of one-third. Grant et al. found that

16% of their sample had turned to selling sex or selling drugs out of economic necessity, but as many as 50% of 244 transgender people in another urban sample reported sex work as their primary income source (Reback et al., 2001). MTFs may be at especially high risk of employment discrimination and resorting to sex work (Clements-Nolle et al., 2001, Nemoto, 2007; Seil, 2004).

Homelessness and lack of adequate housing are also significant concerns for the transgender population. Home ownership rates among Grant et al.'s (2011) transgender sample was half that of the national average. The same researchers discovered a homelessness rate among transgender people that was twice the national average, and 19% of their sample reported being homeless at some point due to being transgender.

Educational needs. Finally, transgender youth are at risk of dropping out of school, which undoubtedly contributes to their economic marginalization. They may leave school due to ostracism at both school and home (APA, 2000; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Seil, 2004). The high school drop-out rate among the transgender population was 40% in one sample of 252 (Xavier, 2000). Fifteen percent of Grant et al.'s (2011) sample of 6,456 transgender people reported dropping out of school due to harassment. MTF persons appear to be at greatest risk for educational underachievement. Seil (2004) noted that nearly two-thirds of 144 MTF respondents had either dropped out of school or not gone beyond high school, while more than 50% of 41 FTM participants had pursued a college education.

Social Work's Ethical Obligation to the Transgender Population

Given the generally oppressive social environment facing transgender people, and the multiple psychosocial needs present in the population, social workers have an ethical obligation to serve the population and work toward improving its overall well-being. In 2008, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) specifically added “gender identity or expression” to its statements on advocacy, cultural competence, and non-discrimination in the profession’s *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1999/2008).

A fundamental value of the profession is the dignity and worth of the individual (NASW, 1999/2008). It follows that social workers should avoid treating transgenderism as a disorder (Burdge, 2007; Lev, 2004; Markman, 2011). Instead, we are obligated to seek accurate understandings of the nature of transgenderism and the lived experiences of transgender people. Similarly, social workers can promote the dignity and worth of transgender people by identifying the strengths present in the population. Kenagy et al. (2006) highlighted social work’s unique commitment to transgender youth by reminding us that social workers often must take responsibility for educating teachers and other students to promote respect for transgender students.

The principle of self-determination follows from the value of dignity and respect. In this regard, McPhail (2004) argued social workers would do well to uphold the *International Bill of Gender Rights* (IBGR) (International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy [ICTLEP], 1995). This document lists, among other rights, the right for every person to define one’s own gender identity, to express one’s own gender identity, to obtain employment, to receive competent professional care, and to be free from unnecessary psychiatric diagnosis and treatment.

As further suggested by the *IBGR* (ICTLEP, 1995) and the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1999/2008), social workers must be prepared to provide culturally competent services to the transgender community. Kenagy et al. (2006) suggested three components for cultural competency with transgender people: awareness, knowledge, and skill. Awareness includes taking responsibility for one's own biases and assumptions about gender. Knowledge comes from listening to the perspectives of transgender people. Culturally competent skills involve the abilities to empower transgender people to navigate the gendered social environment and to work for social change with and on behalf of the transgender population.

The notion that social workers must be aware of and take responsibility for our own biases begs that question, "To what extent are social workers transphobic?" To date, no significant study has answered this question. It is promising for our transgender clients that homophobia among social workers appears to have declined in recent years (Crisp, 2005), because it is fairly well-established that homophobia and transphobia share common roots in their adherence to traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Norton, 1997). Another glimmer of hope in the helping professions generally comes from a small sample ($n = 7$) of transmen and transwomen in psychotherapy who all reported positive, affirming relationships with their mental health professionals (Bess & Stabb, 2009). To promote similar helping relationships and guard against transphobia in the social work profession, social work educators have a responsibility to prepare new professionals for competent practice with transgender people. However, it appears that very little

transgender content is included in social work curricula, and graduates report feeling unprepared to serve the transgender community (Erich, Boutté-Queen, Donnelly, & Tittsworth, 2007).

Finally, social workers have an ethical obligation to work for social justice for the transgender population. This includes working for civil rights and family protections, as well as striving to change societal attitudes toward gender diversity. The journey toward transgender rights will have implications for the whole society. As Bockting (1999) stated, “the transgender movement has the potential to liberate us from the confines of seeing gender as either male or female and thereby transcend the ‘us versus them’ paradigm” (p. 6). By expanding transgender rights, the freedoms of all people will be enhanced (Wilchins, 2004). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons would undoubtedly benefit from a society with more flexible notions of gender roles. Ethical social work practice, education, and research include activities that challenge oppressive structures, including the gender dichotomy itself.

It is in the spirit of these professional values, and in the context of the stigmatization and marginalization of transgender people, that I have embarked on the current project. This research endeavor is intended to challenge the dominant discourse of “transgenderism-as-problem” by providing social workers with authentic knowledge of the lived experiences of transgender people for whom “transness” is a source of joy, strength, and meaning—for whom gender atypicality is a potentially positive aspect of being human.

Chapter II. Literature Review

Chapter I provided a basic context for understanding the nature of the transgender population and the particular challenges and needs its members may experience. It framed transgender people as a population of concern to social workers and provided a fundamental argument for the necessity of the present study. I now turn to reviewing the body of research literature most directly relevant to the current project—that which explores the subjective experiences of transgender people. Such writings examine, from a variety of perspectives, what it is like to be transgender. Within the relevant literature are conflicting models of transgender identity development, clinical research that views gender nonconformity as a disorder, research on the experiences of transsexuals who have had SRS, and a few inquiries into the strengths present among transgender people.

Transgender research is generally divided into those studies grounded in an assumption of biological essentialism (gender as a biological imperative) and those informed by a social constructionist view on gender (gender as a social process). Postmodern scholars have also contributed to an understanding of transgenderism through the lens of queer theory. In the literature review that follows, I first summarize the broad, paradigmatic perspectives on gender underlying the various branches of the literature. I then explore and critique the relevant research on gender identity development, GID, SRS, transsexual embodiment, and transgender resiliency.

Paradigmatic Perspectives on Gender

Biological essentialist perspectives on gender. Common understandings of gender, as well as research such as that on GID, generally emerge from the positivist or post-positivist paradigms. The ontology of these paradigms assumes the existence of an

objective reality—one which exists independent of any observer (Guba, 1990). In the realm of gender studies, this ontological position undergirds biological essentialism—a view of gender which is grounded in the belief that biological influences precede and limit cultural influences (DeCecco & Elia, 1993). It assumes that gender is a natural, inevitable, biologically determined phenomenon and that the forms of gender are universal and unchanging. Consequently, biological essentialism assumes there is some “essential” difference among individuals that allows them to be clearly classified as women and men, boys and girls.

On an ontological level, GID researchers operate under the assumption of biological essentialism that the gender dichotomy is an objective fact, and that the body is the best indicator of this fact (Burke, 1996). These clinical researchers search for variables that will point to the “true” etiology of gender identities, presumably so they can then predict and control individual outcomes. They are confident in their own objectivity and do not examine the possible influence of their own gender-related values on their research. When viewed through the lens of biological essentialist research, gender expressions and identities that are seen as violating the “biological imperative” are suspect, undesirable, and even disordered.

The assumptions of biological essentialism are targets for some of the most compelling critiques of the clinical gender identity literature. In short, critics argue that gender identity researchers in the biological essentialism tradition fail to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of gender.

Social constructionist perspectives on gender. Social constructionism is a theoretical framework which largely rejects the notion of an objective truth and the resultant search for natural “facts” (Kitzinger, 1995), especially within the social sciences. It is concerned not with biological or physical “realities,” but rather with the ways in which humans construct their own realities through interpretive and symbolic processes (DeLamater & Hude, 1988). Social constructionism assumes phenomena have no inherent meaning, only the meanings human beings ascribe to them. As such, social constructionism presents a challenge to empiricism and positivism, which have dominated the natural sciences and early social sciences. Social constructionism not only stems from alternative epistemological assumptions than traditional science and questions the categories of inquiry used by science, but it seeks to analyze science itself as a socially constructed phenomenon (DeLamater & Hude, 1998).

The work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) is recognized as the foundation of social constructionism. Their work demonstrated the means through which the world of everyday life is taken for granted as reality, even though that sense of reality emerged from and is maintained by human thoughts and actions in the social sphere. Individuals are not, however, free to interpret the world in any way they choose. On the contrary, because we are each born into a world that has already been interpreted by those who came before, we are at least partially constrained by those interpretations, while each individual also perpetually interprets and recreates interpretations according to her or his own experiences. Those interpretations generally appear to us as objective facts; we are frequently unable to see them as the social constructions that they are (Maines, 2000). “Facts’ are “given their sense of objectivity and reality through the course of social

interaction” (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. vii). The gender dichotomy, for example, is generally experienced as an unalterable “fact” in everyday life, despite its socially constructed nature. A person is considered competent only when she or he can function within reality as it has been interpreted by society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Social constructionism is a theoretical movement which poses substantial challenges to biological essentialist understandings of many aspects of social life, including gender. In contrast to biological essentialism, social constructionism sees phenomena as *external* to the individual (DeLamater & Hude, 1988). It sees phenomena as existing in social understandings and patterns of discourse. It assumes that humans’ experience of reality is ordered primarily by our perception and interpretation of it. As might be expected, social constructionists have asked new questions about gender and transgenderism and have led the way to more humanistic understandings of the transgender population (Lewis, 2008).

Much of the work on the social construction of gender has been carried out by sociologists. Kimmel (2008) provided a particularly useful summary of the contemporary sociological understanding of gender as a social construction. He pointed out that sociologists today tend not to be interested in differences between men and women *per se*, but rather in asking why society considers the notion of gender differences to be so important in the first place. He further argued that scientific studies aimed at showing how “innate” gender differences produce social inequalities is thinking in reverse, because sociological research has shown socially constructed gender inequality produces (rather than results from) observable differences between gendered groups. In other words, sociologists recognize that “gendered institutions produce the very

differences we assume are the properties of individuals” (p. 112). Gender is no longer understood as an innate quality or learned role. It is instead seen as a set of social practices for representing people as belonging to two significantly different categories and organizing unequal social relations based on those differences. If nothing else, these arguments show that what Goffman (1977) called “the questionable doctrine of biological influence” (p. 304) is insufficient to explain the phenomenon of gender.

Understood as a socially constructed phenomenon, then, gender is not so much an attribute of an individual as it is the product of social interaction. Gender is a “situated accomplishment” that emerges out of every interaction (Kimmel, 2008, p. 122). Our gender identities, being socially constructed, are “fluid assemblages of the meanings and behaviors that we construct from the values, images and prescriptions we find in the world around us” (p. 100). Social constructionism assumes that individuals are active participants in building their sexual and gendered identities within certain parameters presented by the social environment. This does not mean that identities are changed quickly, easily, or carelessly. Rather, it means that identities are constructed as the person interprets their options, desires, demands, and penalties (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Bem (1995) suggested there is “no inherent reason why biological sex has to be at the core of individual identity” (p. 329), other than the fact that society has socially constructed it to be so.

Ethnomethodologists have contributed much to our understanding of the social construction of gender. These researchers view gender as a set of patterned activities situated in a social context (Erich, Boutté-Queen, Donnelly, & Tittsworth, 2007). Ethnomethodologists look upon the ordinary as if it were strange (Cahill, 1986) in an

attempt to discern the methods people take for granted in constructing their sense of shared realities (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). When this perspective is applied, the gender dichotomy is revealed as resulting from “the socially shared, taken-for-granted methods which members use to construct reality” (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. vii). All members of society learn the rules for perceiving a world of two and only two genders (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Children learn these rules, learn to accentuate them in their own behaviors, and thus help perpetuate the gender dichotomy (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Garfinkel (1967) first applied ethnomethodology to the study of gender through his study of a transsexual woman (Agnes) and her quest to be recognized as a “real” woman in social life. By using these ethnomethodological principles, Garfinkel illuminated the social processes comprising the “natural attitude” toward gender—the unquestioned conceptualization of gender taken for granted by regular persons as they go through everyday life. In studying Agnes’s experiences with gender, Garfinkel identified eight “rules” that make up the “objective facts” of gender in Western society. To the extent Agnes was able to satisfy these rules, she was experienced by others as a “real” woman. The same holds true for each individual, who must play by these rules in order to be perceived as a “real man” or “real woman”, and, by implication, as a “real person.”

Kessler and McKenna (1978) furthered the ethnomethodological exploration of gender. Their primary study looked at the methods used in everyday life to make gender attributions (to classify a person as a woman or a man). They presented participants with drawings of human figures possessing various combinations of physical sex signifiers and asked each participant the gender of the figure. The data revealed a central rule we

follow in making gender attributions: Consider someone male unless it is impossible to do so. Thus, Kessler and McKenna determined men are society's default gender construction. Women are perceived as exceptions to the rule.

A different study by the same researchers illuminated the extent to which we socially construct gender as synonymous with genitalia. Kessler and McKenna (1978) played "twenty-questions" with participants who were trying to determine the gender of a fictitious person. Although participants were instructed that they could ask any "yes" or "no" question apart from "is the person a man or woman," participants avoided asking about genitals. During the debriefing, participants claimed that they thought such a question would be cheating.

Another of Kessler and McKenna's (1978) studies examined how transsexuals accomplish gender and "pass" successfully as a member of the desired gender group. They chose to interview transsexuals because "it is easier for us to see that transsexuals 'do' (accomplish) gender than it is to see this process in non-transsexuals. The transsexuals' construction of gender is self-conscious; they make obvious what nontranssexuals do 'naturally'" (p. 114). In this respect, the authors acknowledged that "passing" is not unique to transsexuals. Everyone "passes," because gender is something we all do. In this study, the researchers concluded that transsexuals adhered to Garfinkel's rules of gender. They managed appearances, behaviors, speech patterns, bodies, and personal stories in keeping with those roles. They did not challenge the idea of two genders; each possessed either a male or female gender identity. In this sense, transsexualism paradoxically reinforces the gender dichotomy.

It should be noted that since the time of Kessler and McKenna's research, the "transgender model," which acknowledges gender possibilities outside of Garfinkel's rules, has largely replaced the "transsexual model" in contemporary transgender studies (Devor, 2004). Kessler and McKenna (1997) later recognized their previous inability to imagine anyone not wanting to achieve a credible gender presentation. Nevertheless, their earlier work is valuable for being among the first non-pathologizing, non-positivist research into transgender identities.

West and Zimmerman (1987) contributed much to an ethnomethodological understanding of gender by describing the processes by which people in Western societies actively *do* gender. They emphasized gender as an *accomplishment*, something one must work at in order to achieve, and in so doing, each person contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of the gender dichotomy. They saw gender as the sum of activities in which one must engage in order to be perceived as a valid member of one of the sex categories. Also important was their point that one cannot avoid doing gender.

West and Zimmerman (1987) highlighted the concepts of gender assessment, gender regulation, gender as ideology, and "omnirelevance" (a term originally used by Garfinkel [1967]). Sex and gender were described as omnirelevant—being of consequence in virtually every social situation. Similarly, each person is accountable for their gender display in social situations, for their legitimacy is continually assessed by others. In other words, "gender among strangers must always be 'proven'" (Gardner, 1995, p. 10). Each person is also vulnerable to the consequences of being perceived as failing in their gender display. A person perceived as failing to achieve the gender category in which others believe them to belong risks devaluation:

We value whatever the person does if it is an authentic representation of the category we momentarily consider essential to the individuals' being *and* is defensible. Thus, we also value the individuals' loyalties to the social categories with which we believe she or he should identify. (Gardner, 1995, p. 3)

Children learn at an early age that they must do gender in certain ways, and as they learn these rules, they begin monitoring their own gender displays and those of people around them. The result is that gender and gender differences come to be perceived as objective facts—facts which people generally come to feel justified in enforcing, although their sense of “rightness” comes from social validation. West and Zimmerman (1987) concluded that the gender dichotomy is more *ideology* than natural fact; it is a powerful *idea* to which all people are held accountable.

Lucal (1999) expanded the notion of gender as a patterned form of social control. Using her own life story as data, she examined how public bathrooms and other gendered places are “policed” by regular people who feel compelled to challenge unclear gender displays. Atypical gender expressions call the socially constructed nature of the gender dichotomy into question, and this makes people uncomfortable. Gender non-conformists must develop strategies for responding to such challenges to their social legitimacy. Not responding allows the “challenger” to maintain their sense of being a competent social actor; calling attention to their “mistakes” results in anything from embarrassment to violence.

The ethnomethodological tradition connects to the performative theory of gender. This perspective, made popular by J. Butler (1990, 2004), reveals everyone's gender as a performance. It is something done for an audience which requires the masterful use of props, costuming, and gestures. A person either gives a convincing gender performance,

or they do not. Although we often think of “drag” as something male/female impersonators do, their performances actually reveal the artificial nature (or equal authenticity) of all gender displays.

Critiques of social constructionism. Social constructionism is not without its critics, and it is not without certain weaknesses. Such criticisms are generally aimed at “strong” versions of social constructionism, which maintain that every phenomenon is socially constructed, as opposed to “weak” forms, which allow for the objective reality of physical and biological phenomena. A common criticism is that strong social constructionism “tend(s) to depict the individual as an empty organism filled and shaped by culture and society and...devoid of consciousness and intention” (DeCecco & Elia, 1993, p. 1). A strong version of social constructionism can paint individuals in an overly passive role, accepting whatever society hands to them (DeLamater & Hude, 1998). Strong social constructionists have been criticized for buying into “cultural essentialism,” or theorizing that culture causes everything (DeCecco & Elia). In answer to these criticisms, some social constructionist researchers studying gender have emphasized the individual’s active role in co-creating the social reality (e.g., Rust, 1993; Weinberg et al, 1994). Whether cultural or biological factors are emphasized, it seems unlikely that a phenomenon as complex as gender can be explained by a single source.

Cromwell (1999) cautioned against taking an either/or position on the biological essentialism vs. social constructionism debate within sex and gender research. He pointed out “both sides of the coin contribute to the whole” (p. 43). Further, he argued that transgender people often experience gender as biologically determined—something about which they had no choice—while simultaneously acknowledging that social

identities depend on culturally gendered signifiers. He resolved this debate by stating that many transgender people realize the socially constructed nature of apparent biological essentialisms. In this way, social constructionism remains the primary framework for comprehending (trans)gender experiences. Even if a biological “cause” of gender identity is eventually discovered, individuals still live in societies that imbue bodies and behaviors with gendered meanings and gendered realities (Devor, 2004).

There is a risk that social constructionism can become a “disembodied” theory—a set of abstractions separated from the physical realities of human beings. Vance (1989) found this challenge helpful in pushing social constructionism toward further refinement. She encouraged researchers to find ways to connect the material body with constructionist insights. In response, some researchers (Weinberg & Williams, 2010, for example) have explored the theoretical space created by the concept of “embodiment” for its potential in bringing the physical body into our understanding of how social life is created and experienced. Because the social significance of the body is especially salient to understanding transgender subjectivities, embodiment theory as it has been applied to transgenderism is examined later in this paper.

Postmodernism and queer theory. Postmodernism is primarily a philosophical stance. It claims to question all “meta-theories” or “grand narratives,” especially positivism and rationalism. Postmodernism maintains that realities and knowledges are multiple, socially constructed, and locally determined (Lather, 1991). Postmodernism originally emerged as a perspective critical of the grand narrative of the Enlightenment—that rationality and science represent the noble march of inevitable human progress. Suspicious of false dichotomies, postmodernism is concerned with deconstructing

hegemonic narratives that wield power over how individuals view themselves and act in the social world. As such, it has been seized upon in the field of transgender studies.

Queer theory is a postmodern framework that undermines the biological essentialist models of gender and sexuality and posits both as fluid, contextual, and performative (Eliason & Schope, 2007). In doing so, queer theory poses serious challenges to the epistemological assumptions of the traditional gender dichotomy and the power granted to traditional notions of gender. It also subverts the traditional gender discourse by questioning it, while re-centering discourse to the perspective of those sexualities and gender expressions which have previously been considered “queer.”

Foucault’s (1978) analysis of the coercive power of the dominant sex-gender discourse laid the foundation for today’s queer theorists. He argued sexual categories are the products of certain arrangements of knowledge and power—in other words, the results of discourses. These discourses, then, act in such a way as to have coercive power over individuals, their behaviors, and even their senses of self. They both restrain and produce individuals as social actors. According to Foucault, the dominant discourse on sex today is the medical-scientific discourse. This meaning-making system renders sex a matter of great import, carrying revelatory truths about our real selves. Sex has become something to monitor and manage for the sake of maintaining society, and science and medicine are believed to be the rightful overseers of sex.

Queer theorists are inspired by Foucault’s deconstruction of the dominant discourse and the possibilities it opens for alternative—even liberating—sex-gender discourses (Wilchins, 2004). Queer theory was initially applied in sexuality studies, but Gamson (2000) suggests the construction of transgender identities became a valid

research area largely because of queer theory's emergence. Queer theory is particularly useful as it sheds light on transgender people seeking "free expression of gender outside of the binary system" (Gagné et al., 1997, p. 501).

Queer theory can be organized under a set of core assumptions. Stein and Plummer (1996) outlined four primary tenets, each of which will be explained below:

1. an idea that (gendered and sexual) power runs throughout social life and is enforced through boundaries and binary divides;
2. a problematization of sexual and gender categories as inherently unstable and fluid;
3. a rejection of traditional social change strategies in favor of deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and anti-assimilationist politics; and
4. an interrogation of areas normally not seen as within the realm of sexuality and gender.

Tenet 1: Gendered power as ubiquitous in social life and enforced through divisions. This tenet links clearly to the previous discussions of ethnomethodology. Personal gender identities are under constant scrutiny in society, and we are each evaluated on the basis of our gender displays. Exhibiting gender is unavoidable, and at any given time, we are judged by others on the "success" of our individual performance (West & Zimmerman, 1987). We risk punishment from others for transgressing widely accepted gender boundaries (Lucal, 1999).

Tenet 2: Gender categories are unstable and fluid. Here, queer theory enters into the conversation of social constructionism. As Gamson (2003) described it, queer theorists do not think in terms of static subjects who exist as such and are subsequently

represented in society as good or bad. Rather, queer theorists argue that individuals, as gendered subjects, are continually under construction. Queer theorists' ultimate argument goes beyond the limitations of binary categories and challenges the very existence of sex-gender categories themselves. Queer theory seeks divergence from the norm (Salamon, 2009), whereas modernist theories seek the norms themselves. Queer theorists commonly write about the ways in which individual identities are “multiple, contradictory, fragmented, incoherent, disciplinary, disunified, unstable, [and] fluid” (Gamson, 2003, p. 386). When the validity of all sex-gender categories (and their corresponding personal identities) is called into question, a chaotic but simultaneously liberating context is imagined. Within queer theory, lives outside the norm become livable (Salamon, 2009).

Tenet 3: Deconstruction, decentering, and anti-assimilationist strategies. To accomplish the aforementioned goal, queer theorists engage in a campaign of problematizing current sex-gender categorization; they intentionally confuse conventional understandings of sexuality and gender (Doty, 1993, as cited in Gamson, 2003). In this struggle of gender politics, one strategy is to refuse self-identification as either male/female (Namaste, 1994). These labels are rejected and unrecognized in queer discourse. The label “queer” is adopted to signify an anti-assimilationist stance—a rejection of conventional sex-gender categorization (Epstein, 1994). Queer theorists and the self-identified queer community turn to “camp, parody, pastiche, and exaggeration” (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994, p. 454) as well as anti-assimilationist gender performances (Gamson & Moon, 2004). In general, the central queer strategy is to assert

“the centrality of marginality” (Epstein, 1994, p. 197). This places transness at the center of inquiry; it becomes a valid starting point for knowledge building.

Tenet 4: Interrogating areas not typically considered gendered. Queer theory refers not to the examination of minority parties defined by sexuality or gender nonconformity, but to a portal offering a critical angle from which to consider broader social relationships of power and shared meaning (Epstein, 1994). Sexuality and gender *per se* are not the targets of queer analysis; they are the lens through which queer theorists analyze phenomena. To queer theorists, no aspect of the social world can be comprehended in its fullness without exploring its relationship to structures of sexuality and gender.

Critiques of queer theory. Both feminist and gay rights movements rely on certain assumptions about gender which are directly called into question by queer theorists. This has led some feminists (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994, for example) to reject queer theory outright and even warn others against its dangers. That queer theory has been informed by feminist thought is clear, though, especially in its analysis of sexuality and gender as “terrain(s) of power” (Stein & Plummer, 1996, p. 131). This is one point of seeming agreement between queer theory and feminism. Beyond that, however, queer theory stands accused of having evolved to a point where it is straining the outward limits of feminism and the lesbian and gay sociopolitical movement. Queer theory destabilizes gendered categories (such as women, men, lesbian, gay) upon which identity politics and civil rights claims depend. Queer theorists assert that conventional women’s and gay rights strategies depend on a gender dichotomy and, therefore, do not threaten the root cause of their own oppression (Gamson & Moon, 2004).

Finally, queer theory has been criticized for being too ephemeral. It is charged with a lack of connection to real lives, in which individuals have identity commitments and obligations and rational reasons to conform to the sex-gender hegemony. However, being a postmodern framework, queer theory does not aim to predict, control, or capture absolute truth. Rather, it seeks to ask new questions, open new avenues for inquiry, and critique hidden power structures. Queer theory informs the current inquiry inasmuch as it creates space for alternative gender discourses, anticipates gender fluidity, and centralizes queer experience.

Theories of Gender Identity Development

Traditional gender identity development theories. Traditional theories of gender identity development, such as Freud's, Erickson's, and Kohlberg's models, tend to marginalize and stigmatize transgender identities. These theories and their implications for transgender people are explored here.

Freud's theory of gender identity development. Sigmund Freud's theory that human beings develop through a series of psychosexual stages permeates traditional thinking about gender identity and transgenderism, although few social workers today claim a predominantly psychoanalytic perspective (Lewis, 2008). Despite its original reception as a revolutionary perspective that brought human sexuality "out of the closet," psychoanalytic perspectives have since been used by researchers and practitioners to pathologize much of the human sexual experience, including transsexualism and transgenderism (Thurer, 2005).

Freud proposed a psychosocial, yet anatomically determined, model of gender identity development, in which female children learn to be girls through a process shaped

by feelings of anxiety and inferiority due to the lack of a penis (Freud, 1905). Similarly, male children learn to be boys through the struggle of the Oedipal complex, which leads to an eventual identification with the father. Freud argued that disruptions in the process of gender identity development led to “inversion”—or homosexuality. To Freud, the adult with homosexual propensities was a psychological invert; she or he had failed to develop the “correct” gender identity, and instead had the psychological constitution of the “other” gender. (Today, of course, social scientists draw different distinctions between the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity.)

Freud considered cross-gender behavior, then, a pathological condition arising from a disordered psychosexual developmental process. Even though he recognized the natural occurrence of anatomical hermaphroditism—“a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism really belongs to the normal” (Freud, 1905, p. 558)—Freud maintained that gender expressions that crossed anatomically determined boundaries were fundamentally pathological. Crossdressing and other “sexual perversions” were the result of unfortunate psychosexual experiences in early childhood that derailed the normal development of the human being. These Freudian “perversions” were assumed to be indicators of deep-seated anxieties over repressed, often incestuous, desires.

Later research with transsexuals convincingly debunked Freudian assumptions about transsexual etiology. Bolin (1988), for example, in an extensive anthropological field study, found that the family histories of her 16 FTM transsexual participants failed to reveal overbearing mothers, missing fathers, effeminate childhoods, or exclusively homosexual preferences. The psychoanalytic predictors of cross-gender “perversion” simply were not there.

Erikson's theory of gender identity development. Erik Erikson (1950) built on Freudian assumptions of human development through psychological conflicts, but placed increased emphasis on the developing person's inter-relationships with the social environment. For this reason, Erikson's theory of human development—especially the “Eight Stages of Man” model and the concept of identity formation—is commonly found in social work curricula. Erikson's eight stages suggest humans develop throughout the lifespan according to a series of eight psychosocial crises: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role diffusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and ego integrity vs. despair. Each crisis disrupts the individual's sense of equilibrium and demands resolution. To the extent that each crisis can be successfully resolved, the individual's ego and identity will emerge stronger and more mature.

Erikson (1950) theorized that sex role differentiation was accomplished through the resolution of the early childhood crises, with the initiative vs. guilt crisis being perhaps the most central. Erikson generally accepted the reality of the Oedipal complex and discussed the psychosocial struggles it presented for children. Male children, as Erickson saw it, are compelled to divest of “feminine identifications” (p. 211) in order for the father to see them as competent initiators of masculine action. In doing so, they develop a masculine gender identity. The opposite is true for female children, whose gender identity is colored by the recognition they lack a penis. In general, according to Erikson, by seeing which social roles are “worth imitating” (p. 81), boys and girls learn to

distinguish themselves from each other and see their “proper” places in the economic life of society. According to Erikson’s theory, transgender behavior is again an undesirable and perhaps pathological outcome.

Kohlberg’s theory of gender identity development. Lawrence Kohlberg (1966) proposed a cognitive theory of gender identity development. This approach is distinguished from the psychoanalytic perspectives of Freud and Erikson in that it does not presume gender identity comes from innate instincts or drives, but “from a basic, simple cognitive judgment made early in development” (p. 88). Children, it is reported, develop a stable gender identity once they are cognitively capable of categorizing objects in general—approximately by the age of three. Once made, one’s gender identity determination is virtually impossible to change, according to Kohlberg. It is maintained “by a motivated adaptation to physical-social reality and by the need to preserve a stable and positive self-image” (p. 88). Further, once a child has stably categorized himself as (male or female), she or he then values positively those objects and acts consistent with (her or his) gender identity” (pp. 88-89). In other words, female children who categorize themselves as girls begin to value “feminine” things, and male children who categorize themselves as boys begin to value “masculine” things.

Children who do not demonstrate what Kohlberg called “gender constancy” are judged to be developmentally delayed. Such children—at ages 5 or older—may be unsure of their gender category, insist they are “the other” gender, or argue that their gender may change later. For example, Kohlberg found a 6-year-old boy expressing a desire to be a mommy when he grew up. Kohlberg interpreted the boy’s wish as an indicator of cognitive delay. In this way, Kohlberg equated understanding gender as a

constant and unchanging aspect of personhood with cognitive maturity. Contemporary GID researchers (such as Zucker et al., 1999) have built on Kohlberg's cognitive theory of gender identity development. They have accepted unquestioningly the equation of children's accurate and consistent application of gender category labels with more advanced development.

The assumption that the acceptance of gender constancy indicates cognitive maturity is the fatal flaw in Kohlberg's model, for it could be argued that children capable of questioning traditional assumptions of gender—who see gender's inherent fluidity—are actually the more cognitively advanced among us. Perhaps children with the wherewithal to give voice to their own experience of gender, even as that experience violates social norms, have a sense of self-knowledge that speaks a truth worth learning. It is conceivably a cognitive strength when a transgender child recognizes she or he does not fit in the available gender category and therefore expresses her or his membership in “the other” category or in none at all (Devor, 2004).

Critiques of traditional gender identity development theories. The traditional gender identity theories cited above share one assumption in common: transgenderism indicates that something has gone wrong in the person's development. Still, such linear, normative developmental models have dominated the social science literature on gender. The results have been a tendency to pathologize human gender diversity and minimize the socially constructed nature of gender categories. Linear developmental models have “been imposed on transgender individuals, who are subsequently viewed as having inappropriately negotiated important developmental sequences. Mental health professionals have used (these theories) to justify how they diagnose and pathologize

transsexuals” (Lewis, 2008, p. 46). In the process, authentic transgender voices have been silenced. There is now a call across the social sciences for gender theories that challenge the “correctness” of traditional gender identities and allow for understanding gender as a fluid, non-dichotomous, and highly varied phenomenon (see, for example, Gainor, 1998; Kenagy et al., 2006; Maurer, 1999; McGihon, 1998; Rothblatt, 1995).

It should also be noted that the value of determining the etiology of transgenderism is questionable. Some argue that knowing the phenomenon’s causes and origins would help promote understanding and acceptance of transgenderism. I suggest, however, that were the etiology ever truly known, it would be just as likely to spark a search for a “cure.” Therefore, I do not find questions about the etiology of transgenderism helpful. It does not matter to my current research *why* someone is transgender. I am more interested in recognizing that some people are, in fact, transgender, and proceeding to investigate more interesting and arguably more valuable questions that will help social workers understand transgender life experiences.

Trans-affirmative gender identity development theories. A few theorists have published transgender identity development models that were developed based on the study of transgender people’s reported life experiences. These models are distinguished from traditional gender identity development theories by their assumption that transgender identities are valid ways of being human. In making this assumption, these models challenge traditional thinking about gender identity development and offer frameworks that can reduce stigma, and illuminate strengths, and honor transgender people’s life experiences.

Devor's model of transsexual gender identity development. Sociologist Aaron Devor developed a transsexual gender identity development model based on 20 years of non-clinical field research and interactions with “a wide range of transgendered persons” (Devor, 2004, p. 2). His model does not attempt to explain etiology, but rather offers a description of 14 stages commonly experienced by transsexual persons who undergo SRS. These stages are: (1) abiding anxiety, (2) identity confusion about assigned gender/sex, (3) identity comparisons about assigned gender/sex, (4) discovery of transsexualism, (5) identity confusion about transsexuality, (6) identity comparison about transsexuality, (7) identity tolerance of transsexual identity, (8) delay before acceptance of transsexual identity, (9) acceptance, (10) delay before transition, (11) transition, (12) acceptance of post-transition gender and sex identities, (13) integration, and (14) pride.

What is notable in Devor's model is the conclusion—based on his field observations of actual transsexual people—that a transsexual identity can be successfully and satisfactorily navigated in life. At first glance it may seem that the most positive experiences—integration and pride—come only when the person is able to fit neatly into their desired sex/gender category. However, a closer reading of Devor suggests transsexual integration and pride are marked by a willingness to be open about one's transsexual journey, to speak up for transgender rights, and to live with a greater degree of personal gender fluidity. Devor also noted that pride can be experienced in any of the earlier 13 stages. In interpreting his model, Devor pointed to two specific strengths of the transsexual population: (1) transsexual people often come to appreciate the insights they gained into society's “belief systems and fears” around gender, and (2) transsexual journeys require remarkable “self-examination, bravery, and naked honesty” (p. 18).

Devor's model is limited by the nature of linear stage-models of human development. It cannot capture the individual stories and labyrinthine journeys of which life consists. The model is further limited by its exclusive focus on transsexuals who seek SRS. It offers little to our understanding of non-transsexual transgender people or even non-operative transsexuals. The model does not seek to prove a particular etiology, though. It instead gives a potentially valuable description of a psychosocial process many transsexuals may experience.

Lev's "transgender emergence" model. Lev (2004) drew her theory based on many years of clinical social work with transgender clients, many, but not all, of whom were transsexual. As a result, her model accommodates both transsexual and non-transsexual transgender people. She delineated six stages within a process of coming to know oneself as transgender: (1) awareness, (2) seeking information/reaching out, (3) disclosure to significant others, (4) exploration: identity and self-labeling, (5) exploration: transition issues/possible body modification, and (6) integration: acceptance and post-transition issues.

Like Devor's model, Lev's framework accounts for the potential of transgender lives to be whole and satisfactory. She directly pointed out that the "emergence" she described is intended to be understood as "a normative, developmental process" experienced by "adults who have been robbed of their gender identity exploration due to a repression of cross-gender dysphoria or identity" (p. 269). In other words, hers is not meant to be a model that applies to youth who have recognized or even accepted their transness from an early age. A third transgender identity model comes closer to achieving that goal.

Pollock and Eyre's model of female-to-male identity development. Medical researchers Pollock and Eyre (2012) interviewed 13 racially diverse young adults, ages 18-23, who were born female but do not identify as women. In individual, unstructured interviews, participants were asked to tell the “story of their gender” (p. 211). Interviews were analyzed according to grounded theory methods with the result being a theory of the participants’ gender identity development based on the evidence provided in their own accounts. The theory that emerged from the data consisted of three primary processes: (1) a growing sense of gender, (2) recognition of transgender identity, and (3) social adjustment. Each process involves multiple sub-processes, giving the theory added depth and sophistication, despite the small sample size. The authors pointed out that “while these steps or stages represent a developmental sequence, they are by no means discrete or non-overlapping” (p. 212).

Pollock and Eyre (2012) compared their theory directly to those proposed by Devor (2004) and Lev (2004), and found significant compatibility. For example, their model offers parallels to Devor’s stages 1-3. However, these are not accounted for in Lev’s work, as they point out. Pollock and Eyre’s participants did not relate the narrative of repression of cross-gender feelings, which was apparently prominent in the life stories of Lev’s clients. Instead, the young FTMs in the later study told of either developing gender atypical behaviors very early, or not giving gender a second thought at all until puberty. Pollock and Eyre’s work is limited in other ways by the youth of their interviewees. Neither the participants nor the reader can yet know the course of their lives beyond the age of 23. In some ways, they may not yet know how their story ends.

More work remains to be done to understand trajectories that may distinguish the various sub-groups of transgender people, including possible generational differences within sub-groups. Taken together, however, the three transgender identity models reviewed here suggest that transgender people can achieve a sense of self-worth, satisfaction, and completeness in their lives, possibilities that are rendered invisible or impossible by traditional models of gender identity development.

Clinical Perspectives on Transgenderism

Gender identity disorder (GID) research. A primary research approach to gender atypicality has been clinical and/or medical in nature. This research, relying on the medical model of assessment-diagnosis-cure, has centered on GID as a diagnostic category and the children, adolescents, and adults who have been labeled as having GID. This body of research does not form the basis for my research agenda, but given its dominance in the field, it must be acknowledged. A brief overview of the more recent literature is provided, followed by a summary of the critiques.

The primary *DSM-IV* criteria for GID are:

- A. A strong and persistent cross-gender identification (not merely a desire for any perceived cultural advantages of being the other sex).
- B. Persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex.
- C. The disturbance is not concurrent with a physical intersex condition.
- D. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (APA, 2000, pp. 537-538).

In the *DSM-IV*, Criteria A and B are followed by examples of specific indicators for children, adolescents, and adults (for complete criteria see Appendix A). The diagnosis first appeared in the *DSM-III* (APA, 1980), a few years after homosexuality was

officially removed from the list of mental disorders (Minter, 1999). GID is currently a highly contested diagnosis, with various parties calling for its removal from the *DSM* and others arguing for its validity.⁶

GID researchers report finding signs of GID in children as young as 2 years old (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfäfflin, 2003; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). Others caution that the earliest age of reliable assessment remains undetermined (Lee et al., 2006). GID in children is typically assessed on the basis of sex-typed behaviors, including “(1) identity statements, (2) dress-up play, (3) toy play, (4) role play, (5) peer relations, (6) motoric and speech characteristics, (7), statements about sexual anatomy, and (8) involvement in rough-and-tumble play” (Zucker & Bradley, 1995, p. 11).

Zucker and Bradley (1995) stated that the goals of treating GID in children are to reduce ostracism, treat underlying psychopathology, and prevent later transsexuality. At the same time, the same authors note “there are simply no formal empirical studies demonstrating that therapeutic intervention in childhood alters the developmental path toward either transsexualism or homosexuality” (p. 270). Nevertheless, the focus of their treatment is on strategies that encourage genital-based gender-role conformity.

The most common intervention model is based on behavior modification theory. The therapist assists the parents in systematically rewarding sex-appropriate behavior and withholding rewards or punishing “cross-sex” behaviors (Zucker & Bradley, 1995).

Zucker and Bradley also claimed that individual and family psychotherapy is widely

⁶ It has been reported that in the *DSM 5*, due to be released in 2013, Gender Identity Disorder will be replaced by Gender Dysphoria (Beredjick, 2012). With this move, it appears that only those who experience distress related to their gender identities—and not all transgender people—will be considered “disordered.”

used, particularly when the etiology of the gender deviance is theorized to be problems in the parent-child relationship (such as enmeshment or separation anxiety). Its effectiveness has yet to be systematically evaluated.

The GID diagnosis itself is highly controversial, with numerous activists and mental health professionals arguing for its reform or removal from the *DSM* (Hausman, 2003; Kenagy et al., 2006; Lawrence, 2007). Lev (2005), a social worker and leading GID reformer, argued that “[b]asic civil liberties for transgender and transsexual people will be elusive as long as gender variance itself is a mental illness” (p. 58). The diagnosis relies on a logical fallacy: “because cross-gender identification is assumed to be abnormal, any child who exhibits cross-gender identification must have a disorder” (Langer & Martin, 2004, p. 10-11). Langer and Martin called for the elimination of GID, pointing to the psychometric limitations of the diagnostic category and myriad ethical concerns surrounding GID treatment. Although the GID diagnosis allows many transsexuals to receive the medical interventions they desire, “an increasing number of transgender people reject the medical model and its central assumption that gender variance is pathological” (Martin & Yonkin, 2006, p 112).

Much of the research done in Zucker’s gender clinic claims to support the validity of the GID diagnosis but is conceptually and methodologically questionable. Several of these studies look for reliable differences between gender-typical children and children meeting GID criteria (see, for example, Fridell, Owen-Anderson, Johnson, Bradley, & Zucker, 2006; Deogracias et al., 2007; Owen-Anderson, Jenkins, Bradley, & Zucker, 2008; Zucker et al., 1999). These studies are questionable on a variety of grounds. First, if between-group differences do in fact exist, differences—even statistically significant

ones—do not equal a mental disorder (Langer & Martin, 2004; Wilson et al., 2002). Second, the actual presence of significant between-group differences is questionable due to methodological flaws. Some studies (such as Fridell et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2004; Owen-Anderson et al., 2008) included “sub-threshold” children (who were referred due to gender concerns but who do not meet GID criteria) in the GID group.

Another methodological concern—and one of particular relevance to the current research project—is the conflation of “gender dysphoria” with “gender nonconformity” in much of the GID research. Deogracias et al. (2007), for example, used a questionnaire asking primarily about gender *nonconformity*, but treated nonconformity as an indicator of gender *dysphoria*, even though they previously defined gender dysphoria as “subjective distress regarding gender identity” (p. 370). Johnson et al. (2004) and Drummond, Peterson-Badali, Bradley, and Zucker (2008) similarly conflated cross-gender behavior with gender dysphoria.

The assumption underlying this conflation—that gender nonconformity is inherently distressful to children—is highly questionable. Even some of Zucker and Bradley’s (1995) examples of “distress” among children with GID are actually anecdotes of youngsters’ negative reactions to being coerced to comply with gender norms. After all, it is usually the parents who are distressed, not the child who is diagnosed with “the problem” (Benestad, 2001). It has been convincingly argued that any distress that gender variant children may experience is due to stigmatization, rejection, and attempts to force them into compliance with gender stereotypes (see, for example, Langer & Martin, 2004; Spiegel, 2008).

The GID diagnosis and treatment are open to numerous criticisms on ethical grounds. Among the most frequently voiced is the concern that GID legitimates the unjust stigmatization of nonconformity and valid forms of human diversity (Corbett, 1998; Gainor, 1998; Langer & Martin, 2004; Lev, 2004, 2005; Wilson et al., 2002). The diagnosis allows the medical community to use its power to enforce gender conformity (Cromwell, 1999).

The potential for iatrogenic harm is a related ethical concern. Children who are put through treatment designed to “cure” GID may be torn between wanting to please their parents and therapists and wanting to experience life in the way it feels most comfortable to them (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). Many apparent “successes” in treatment, therefore, are likely to be children who have learned to hide or deny their gender nonconformity (Devor, 2004; Gainor, 1998; K. McQueen, personal communication, April 25, 2008). Burke (1996) provided several accounts in which children were made to feel ashamed and even suicidal from GID treatments.

For social workers especially, the presumption that gender variance is necessarily pathological is ethically questionable. Rosario (2004) noted how the medical model of gender variance pathologizes the client and places her/him in a subjugated, disempowered position. Alternative models of gender variance could highlight the strengths and assets presented by transgenderism (Hill, 2005). For example, by conceptualizing gender outside of the medical model, Lewis (2008) found that gender fluidity, far from being a source of distress, was a source of meaning and personal growth for genderqueer individuals (individuals who, by definition, express gender fluidly). The current project aims to add to this particular branch of knowledge.

Sex-reassignment surgery research. GID research is almost entirely focused on children. Virtually all adults diagnosed with GID are self-proclaimed transsexuals (Minter, 1999). As such, the clinical/medical research on GID in adults is almost exclusively conducted with self-identified transsexuals who have sought hormone therapy and/or SRS. Recent additions to the literature have come from researchers in a well-known Dutch gender clinic, who are publishing research on the success of hormone therapy and SRS for adolescent transsexuals (such as Cohen-Kettenis & Pfäfflin, 2003).

For adolescents and adults with GID and extreme gender dysphoria, an interdisciplinary intervention protocol, including supportive (as opposed to curative) individual and group psychotherapy, the real-life test (living full-time as desired gender), hormone therapy, and eventual SRS, is becoming recognized as the treatment of choice (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfäfflin, 2003; Cohen-Kettenis & van Goozen, 1997; Seil, 2004; Spiegel, 2008; Zucker, 2006; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). Regarding transsexual adolescents and adults, “there is no recent clinical evidence that the gender identity can be changed through psychotherapy...[however], the body can be changed, and when proper transition to the other gender has been completed, the dissociation of GID disappears” (Seil, 2004, p. 115).

In long-term follow-up studies, no post-operative adolescent transsexual has ever reported regretting their decision (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfäfflin, 2003). Adult SRS outcomes also tend to be positive, such as in Lobato et al.’s (2005) research. The most reliable available estimates of success rates are 87% for MTFs and 97% for FTMs (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfäfflin, 2003). These studies do tend to vary by sample size, methodology, and outcome criteria (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfäfflin, 2003), but, overall, it can

be said with confidence that SRS tends to produce positive outcomes for adolescent and adult transsexuals who undergo it. Post-SRS patients generally become “seamlessly integrated into society at large” (Devor, 2004, p. 17). When an adolescent’s or adult’s post-SRS functioning is deemed poor, the most common factors seem to be lack of social support, nonconforming physical appearance, or some form of previously unidentified underlying psychopathology (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfäfflin, 2003). This clinical research, however, sheds little light on the deeper nuances of transgenderism as experienced subjectively by the individual.

Transgender Subjectivities and Embodiment Theory

The most useful and rigorous research available to illuminate transgender subjectivities can be captured under the conceptual umbrella of embodiment theory. As mentioned previously, a central criticism of social constructionism is that it can too easily overlook the material human body. Embodiment theory has emerged to address this concern. Because of its interest in the relationship among bodies, identities, and social processes, embodiment theory has the potential to add significantly to our understanding of transgenderism. However, embodiment theory has yet to extend beyond transsexualism, so that is the body of literature discussed here. Significant exploration of transsexual embodiment is presented, as it represents some of the most complete and compelling research available into the subjective experiences of being transgender.

Bodies have not traditionally been part of the social science conversation (Crossley, 2007). However, it is now more widely recognized that the “problem” of bodies and their meanings is one every society must attempt to resolve (Synnott, 1993). In doing so, every society develops ways to understand and organize bodies (Schliefer,

2006). The body, then, must simultaneously be understood as a biological system and as a symbolic cultural artifact (Johnston, 2001). Sociologists, in particular, have been interested in understanding the processes through which the body—representing a convergence of the physical, social, and symbolic—achieves meaning in the social world (Budgeon, 2003). Bodily experience is “the basis for consciousness” (Crossley, 2007, p. 82), while at the same time, the physical experience of one’s body is shaped according to the social categories available (Synnott, 1993). This notion leads to the current understanding of embodiment theory, which attempts to locate the human body within its social context and more fully grasp its fundamentally social qualities.

Turner (2000) defined four central principles of “embodiment”:

1. Embodiment examines the ways in which we learn to use our bodies in such a way as to render us intelligible in the social world. It explores the practices which “give a body its place in everyday life” (p. 492),
2. Embodiment is concerned with the lived experience of the body,
3. Embodiment approaches the body as primarily a social project, recognizing that its processes are embedded within a network of social actors, and
4. Embodiment involves both the process of becoming a body and the process of becoming a self.

The manner in which social actors use their bodies is considered indicative of their competence and moral standing (Crossley, 1995). To achieve an acceptable presentation of self and carry out an unproblematic social exchange, individuals work to ensure that their bodies comply with social expectations (Weinberg & Williams, 2005). Our bodies must convey meanings and intentions clearly in order to be perceived as intelligible and as contributing to social order.

Society has constructed a vast array of gendered symbols and rituals which involve the body (Synnott, 1993). As such, it is nearly impossible to conceive of a

“disembodied” form of gender (Schrock, Reid, & Boyd, 2005). Gender identity, then, is simultaneously a socially constructed and an embodied phenomenon (Dozier, 2005).

This conceptualization of gender lends itself handily to a discussion of transsexual embodiment, as it draws attention to the techniques in which transsexuals—and all individuals, for that matter (Lewins, 1995)—engage in order to be interpreted as “appropriately” gendered by others.

Transsexualism arises from embodied situations such as those described by Rubin (2003), in which individuals with female bodies are not necessarily women, and other individuals with male bodies are not necessarily men. Transsexualism, therefore, raises intriguing questions about the embodied nature of—and relationships among—sex, gender, and identity. These matters will be examined by considering (1) transsexuals’ decisions to modify their bodies by undergoing physical and/or surgical interventions, (2) their work in learning to do gender in new ways, and (3) their embodied experiences of sexuality during and after transition.

Body modification. Two strikingly different narratives are common among transsexuals who have transitioned (Johnson, 2007). The first is that of “being the same person” as they were before the transition; the second is that of “being a new person” (p. 55). These patterns have intriguing implications for the relationship between self and body and for the nature of an embodied transsexual “self.” Does an essential “self” exist that is changed along with the body? Does the “self” exist as a social phenomenon which changes once the body is perceived differently? Or is there an essential “self” that continues on unchanged despite physical transformation? And if this is the case, why transition at all?

The physical transition from male to female, or vice versa, involves profound changes in the body and the embodied experience of the world. For MTFs taking female hormones, this can include breast development, reduced sexual desire, weight gain, loss of muscle mass, increased emotionality or calmness, body sensitivity, and even sensitivity to smells, tastes, and sounds (Wassersug et al., 2007). Surgical interventions for MTFs can enhance breasts, construct female genitalia, and even modify facial bone structure and reduce the Adams' apple. For FTMs, male hormones can lead to increased muscle mass and body hair, a receding hairline, a deeper voice, reduced breast size, and increased sexual desire. Surgical transitioning for FTMs can include a mastectomy and chest reconstruction/sculpting, removal of the internal female sex organs, the creation of a scrotum, and the construction of a penis-like appendage. These remarkable changes have an influence on both how post-transition transsexuals are perceived by others and how they experience their own embodied selves (Johnson, 2007).

Dozier (2005) suggested transsexuals are motivated to change their bodies by two primary desires: (1) a desire to align external appearance with an internal self-identity, and (2) a desire to align their social interactions with their internal self-identity. In short, Dozier's interviewees desired to be treated socially as a gender other than the one indicated by their physical sex. This pattern is consistent with the notion that identity is a phenomenon that arises from social (intersubjective) interactions. Without transitioning, and, therefore, making possible this new pattern of intersubjectivity, transsexuals report feeling invisible (Dozier, 2005) and unintelligible to themselves and others (Lennon, 2006). It is interesting to note that the body is considered more malleable than the sense

of self. This is consistent with Green's (2004) observation that transsexuals experience gender identity as "more real" than the material body.

Transsexuals' desire to physically alter the body may be a desire to experience life as a truly embodied self. Many transsexuals have reported experiencing themselves as distinctly *disembodied* prior to the transition (Waters, 1998). FTM transsexuals, for example, reported experiencing puberty as a time when their bodies suddenly turned against them by becoming increasingly female (Rubin, 2003). While other girls may have wanted to avoid sexist *objectification* as their bodies took on the physical signs of womanhood, FTM adolescents wanted to avoid their female *bodies*. FTM transsexuals used the perception of this difference between their own and other girls' experiences of puberty as a rationale for their decision to transition. This decision to transition by physically modifying their bodies was interpreted as a process of "restoring a trusting, loyal, and faithful relationship of representation between self and body" (p. 109). Physically transitioning to a male body enabled FTMs to re-experience the "carefree embodiment that characterized their youth" (p. 106).

Paradoxically, pre-transition transsexuals such as Rubin's interviewees experienced a marked sense of disembodiment while also being preoccupied by monitoring every nuance of their bodies. The fact that the body becomes extremely salient for pre-transition transsexuals seems connected to a broader trend in embodiment theory—namely, that bodies enter the awareness of their "owners" when they malfunction in some way (Crossley, 2007). For transsexuals, the physical transition allows them to relax into a comfortable embodied experience which no longer requires hyper-awareness and disciplined surveillance of the body.

Another common theme among Rubin's (2003) FTM interviewees was feeling disturbed when, upon entering puberty, others began interacting with them in uncomfortable ways. One participant described this new interaction pattern as disconcerting because "it meant that he was no longer able to socialize with others on his own terms" (p. 96). For such individuals, transitioning to male allowed them to once again interact socially in ways that were more comfortable because they "matched" their gender identity.

In some ways, transsexuals epitomize modern society's view of the body as a project open to revision (Budgeon, 2003)—an "owned" entity that can be styled according to the owner's wishes (Lennon, 2006). At the same time, "transsexuals' distress with and alienation from the bodies they were born into...suggest that the body is clearly not separate from subjectivity" (Schrock et al., 2005, p. 330). The latter assertion suggests that transsexual identities are necessarily embodied, and that the "correct" embodiment contributes to a selfhood that can be experienced with ease and pleasure (Lennon, 2006).

Johnson (2007) identified four helpful patterns for understanding how transsexuals make sense of the effects of bodily transformations on their embodied experience of self and social interactions. The first pattern is to recognize their "bodies in transition." This includes an acceptance of the fact that their bodies will be in transition for an extended period of time. This extended physical transition seemed to highlight the experience of being transsexual as "an interactive and mutable process, bound up with shifts in corporeality" (p. 63). Second, transsexuals experience their bodies as needing to learn the cultural practices of their desired gender. This includes gestures, speech

patterns, postures, etc., which will mark them as belonging to the desired gender. The third pattern is termed “body as trace,” pointing to the fact that the experience of transsexualism involves a body that will never be completely rid of the anatomical signifiers of the previous gender. The final pattern involves the “cultural practices of embodiment as trace.” In addition to anatomical traces, the body also retains cultural indicators of the original gender. Transsexuals are socialized to master the embodied practices of one gender role, and these are not easily erased. Monitoring and managing these is an ongoing embodied practice among transsexuals. In this way, it is not simply present embodied experience that accounts for transsexualism—it is also the embodied history that leads to conceptualizing transsexual identity as a process, not as an essentialist type.

Body techniques. Modifying the physical make-up of the body is insufficient for completing a transition from one gender to another. Certain gendered *body techniques* must also be mastered (Johnson, 2007). Body techniques are “the ways in which from society to society men [*sic*] know how to use their bodies” (Crossley, 2007, p. 133). They are embodied forms of cultural knowledge that convey to others that the individual is competent and knowledgeable. Body techniques take on symbolic significance and become regulated and rationalized in any society. While body techniques give bodies a place in the social arena, they also have the effect of shaping one’s own perceptions, emotions, and thought patterns.

Because body techniques are gendered in their social meanings (Synnott, 1993), transsexuals must unlearn certain body techniques (those ascribed to their “old” gender), while learning the body techniques of their “new” gender. Body techniques, however, do

not refer merely to changing gestures or movements. Rather, they point to the reflexive quality of embodied practices. Body techniques “recondition subjectivities” (Schrock et al., 2005); they alter one’s cognitions, emotions, and social roles. Transsexuals report a change in consciousness as they change body techniques. Their practical knowledge of everyday reality shifts as they embody the reality of living as their desired gender.

The term “bodywork” has been used to describe transsexuals’ efforts to transition from one gender to another. Schrock et al. (2005) suggested three types of bodywork: retraining, redecorating, and remaking the body. The process of “remaking the body”—modifying the physical body through hormones or surgery—has been discussed above. “Retraining” and “redecorating” are intimately related to the notion of body techniques and are the focus here.

Retraining the body may be more critical than redecorating the body in completing the transsexual transition successfully. Lewins (1995) found that even when MTF transsexuals looked very much like women in photographs, they continued to move their bodies in interactions according to masculine body techniques. Lewins concluded that “being *regarded* as a woman was not the same as *looking like* a woman” (p. 119). Therefore, transsexuals put forth significant effort in observing the body techniques of the desired gender. They may intentionally imitate the gestures, postures, and actions they observe (Johnson, 2007). As body techniques are necessarily social, and as they are transmitted through social interaction (Crossley, 2007), transsexuals commonly aid each other in mastering new techniques and extinguishing old ones.

Learning new body techniques requires becoming acutely aware of the body (Crossley, 2007), and bodies tend to become more awkward as their owners become

more cognizant of them. Eventually, however, transsexuals can become quite facile in the body techniques that allow for the social affirmation of their gender identity. To some, it may seem as though transsexuals are merely learning to act a part and that the act risks lacking authenticity. Transsexuals themselves, however, report feeling that it was the carrying out of embodied practices of the original gender that felt like a performance (Rubin, 2003). We might also remember the ethnomethodological observation that all gender has performative elements (Butler, 1990).

An interesting development occurs in the relationship between anatomy and body techniques as transsexuals transition. As the anatomical signifiers of their desired gender become more clear to others, their behavioral body techniques can actually become less rigidly gendered. In a study of FTM individuals, Dozier (2005) found that as their male characteristics increased, they experienced greater internal comfort with identity, and their social interactions were increasingly consistent with their identity. It was common for them to experience a new freedom to use both masculine and feminine body techniques once their bodies were clearly male. This suggests that “when sex is ambiguous or less convincing, there is increased reliance on highly gendered behavior. When the sex category is obvious, then there is considerably more freedom in behavior” (p. 305). It is not clear whether MTF individuals experience a similar relaxation of gendered behavior. Greater stigma may be placed on female embodiment errors, whereas one may enjoy more freedom in male embodiment (Weinberg & Williams, 2005).

Sexuality. Transsexuals frequently experience shifts in their experiences of sexuality during and after transitioning (Dozier, 2005). Sexual encounters present uniquely intersubjective and intercorporeal exchanges between individuals, and

transsexuals' experiences of these encounters appear to be mediated by the status of their embodied selves. They commonly experience changes in affect toward their own body and their identities during and after transitioning. There seems to be significant empirical evidence suggesting that sexuality plays an important role in creating meanings for bodies, thereby helping to establish one's gender and sex identity (Schleifer, 2006).

Wassersug et al. (2007) interviewed MTF individuals to learn their experiences with hormone therapies. They found that the participants consistently described embodied changes in their sexuality following hormone treatments. These included a shift in the focus of sexuality away from the genitals to the entire physical body. This change in focus was experienced positively by the study participants, who often noted a sense of relief from their previous male sex drive, which was experienced as distracting and burdensome. This new embodied experience of sexuality was interpreted by participants as further confirmation of their female identities.

Schliefer (2006) interviewed gay (attracted to men) FTM transsexuals and also found frequently reported shifts in their embodied experiences of sexual relations. The nature of these shifts was not identical to those reported by the MTFs, however. Several of the FTM interviewees described pre-transition sexual relations with men as painfully disembodied; they had to actively work at distancing themselves from their female bodies during sex because those bodies undermined their senses of self as male. Those participants who had achieved other signifiers of masculinity were able to incorporate their female body parts into sexual activity with men in ways that allowed for their masculinity to be reinforced. The difference between the two experiences of sexuality appeared to be the ability of the partner to perceive the FTM as men. Sexual relations

with such partners affirmed the participants' experience of their own bodies as male and of their gender identities as men. Similarly, Dozier (2005) found among FTM interviewees that the gender of the sex partner was not as important to the transsexual as that partner's ability to validate the FTM's masculinity or maleness.

Schleifer (2006) found changes in the preferred gender of sexual partners in post-transition FTMs. One participant reported he had been attracted to women when he was female, but following his transition found himself attracted to men. He made sense of this apparent "change" in sexual orientation by stating, "With gender changes you just can't predict what's going to happen. The idea of heterosexuality to me has always been very alien" (p. 69). This person did not define his experience as one of "changing" sexual orientations—he was homosexual before and after transitioning—even though he experienced a change in the gender of his desired partners. This example points to the difficulties of attempting to fit transsexual experiences into traditional notions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

All of this is to show that "sexuality is crucial to establishing gender and sex" (Schleifer, 2006, p. 68). The embodied experiences of transsexuals' sexual relations present intersubjective, intercorporeal opportunities to (re)interpret their sexed and gendered bodies. Further, this suggests that it is possible for sexuality to assume different forms as sex and gender come to be embodied differently over a lifetime. This aligns with Gagné and Tewksbury's (1998) findings that sex, gender, and sexuality are best understood as intersubjective accomplishments, rather than purely psycho-biological phenomena.

Transsexualism has commonly been described as the experience of “being trapped in the wrong body.” However, when transsexualism is examined using the conceptual tool of embodiment, it is clear that this simplistic catch phrase falls far short of capturing the dynamic social processes involved in transsexualism. In addition, Parlee (1996) suggested that some within the transgender community have rejected the “wrong body” narrative in favor of more sophisticated analyses that move beyond traditional categories of “men,” “women,” “male,” and “female.” Conceptualizing transsexualism as a process of *becoming* may, therefore, be a more useful theoretical framework. Rather than a quality possessed by individuals, transsexualism seems to be an embodied, intersubjective process involving micro-level social interactions within the ongoing macro-level processes of sex, gender, and the meanings of bodies.

Transgender Coping Strategies, Strengths, and Resiliencies

A small body of literature has examined the ways in which transgender people cope with the pressures of living in a society that insists on a rigid, anatomically based gender dichotomy. This collection of work is significant for social workers in that it begins to illuminate potential strengths within the transgender population. Two themes emerge in this literature. One points to the strategies used by transgender people who accept a conventional notion of gender (most often transsexuals and crossdressers). The other highlights the strategies invoked by transgender people who reject the gender dichotomy and express their gender fluidly (such as genderqueers or gender radicals).

The work of Gagné and Tewksbury (1998) exemplifies the first theme. Extensive interviews with a relatively large sample of MTF transsexuals and crossdressers revealed common coping strategies used by the participants as they responded to myriad pressures

to conform to traditional gender norms. Nearly all participants initially rejected or concealed their cross-gender preferences in order to maintain important relationships with family, friends, church, and employers. This often involved adopting a hyper-masculine gender expression and other attempts to “rid themselves of transgenderism” (p. 88). Eventually, though, the desire to express an authentic self to the world overwhelmed the need to avoid disrupting one’s social world. As this occurred, the participants sought private spaces in which they could express their female gender identities. Participants commonly blamed themselves for the many lost relationships that ensued. Some oscillated between embracing transgenderism and rejecting it, swearing never to appear feminine again. Faced with fear and hostility at work, many voluntarily left their jobs and accepted whatever work they could find that would allow them to maintain their desired gender presentation.

Gradually, participants were able to present their female gender identity in a wider range of social settings. Many turned to peer groups or transgender workshops and conferences for support. Forming a “family of choice” became a primary coping strategy. Throughout all of this, participants reported pressure from virtually all angles to perfect a feminine persona. Such pressure even came from the transgender support groups and conferences. Most participants worked hard at doing just that. Paradoxically, then, conforming to dichotomous gender roles became a central coping strategy.

Such research, while providing valuable knowledge of how transgender people navigate the social world, is limited in several senses. First, the results only reflect MTF transsexuals’ and crossdressers’ experiences. Gagné and Tewksbury’s (1998) study included a handful of gender radicals and ambigenderists, but their data were not reported

in the results. Second, the research may be outdated. Social changes have likely occurred in the last 15 years that altered the landscape for transgender people. Finally, such research on coping still leaves the reader with a profoundly dire picture of life for transgender people. Their lives are portrayed as a constant struggle marked by attempts to deal with fear and rejection. While it is important not to overlook these realities, we do not need more research to tell us the hardships transgender people face. The hardships are known. We do need more research highlighting the affirming and innovative ways transgender people are succeeding in living full lives characterized by joy and meaning. Such knowledge would help social workers envision transgender lives more affirmatively, recognize previously hidden sources of strength among transgender people, and instill greater hope into their transgender clients who may be facing great challenges.

I have found just three studies exploring strengths among non-transsexual transgender people. In her doctoral dissertation, Lewis (2008) studied forms of resilience among a small sample of genderqueer persons. Using a grounded theory approach, she uncovered several protective factors and strategies used by genderqueer persons to assert themselves in the social world and remain resilient in the face of pressures toward gender conformity. The internal strategies discovered were embracing difference, assuming the role of educator, self-expression through performance and activism, being agents of choice, and rejecting heteronormativity. At the familial level, the primary protective factor was being granted permission to be authentic. In intimate relationships, protective factors included role flexibility and partners' ability to "forget" about biological sex or

use role play to make it “disappear” (p. 126). At the levels of community and society, protective factors included having like-minded friends and recognizing the broad reach of sexism and homophobia.

The second such study, by Singh, Hays, and Watson (2011), involved individual interviews and focus groups with 21 transgender adults, some of whom were transsexuals and some of whom were not. Participants were asked to share their experiences of resilience. The analysis resulted in five common themes: (1) generating a self-determined definition of self, (2) embracing self-worth, (3) awareness of oppression, (4) connection with a supportive community, and (5) cultivating hope for the future. Two minor themes were also identified: (1) social activism and (2) being a positive role model.

Finally, Walinsky and Whitcomb (2010) conducted a small but distinctive grounded theory study of well-being among seven rural transgender people. This tiny sample contained a mix of FTM and MTF genderqueer, transsexual, and crossdressing transgender people. The findings suggested four factors as particularly salient in shaping a transgender person’s well-being: (1) vocation, (2) identity, (3) acceptance, and (4) personal change/coming out. The data pointed to well-being among transgender persons as a “situated and dynamic” (p. 169) experience, as opposed to static or isolated phenomenon available to some and not to others. Given that virtually all transgender research has relied on urban samples, it is also remarkable that this study relied on a completely rural sample of transgender participants.

Lewis’ (2008), Singh et al.’s (2012), and Walinsky and Whitcomb’s (2010) work illuminated factors that promote a self-affirming transgender identity and psychosocial

health among transgender people. They expand our knowledge of non-transsexual transgender people who do not seek to fit into the gender dichotomy. They also suggest the potential for transgender people to feel good about being transgender. This type of research inspires the current project, which builds on similar ideas by examining the essential features of a transgender identity that is valued by the person living it.

Research Needs and Current Research Question

Knowledge about strengths and forms of resilience among transgender people is sorely lacking (Hill, 2005; Lewis, 2008; Singh et al., 2012). Instead, we have voluminous literature on their disorders and difficulties, problems and pathologies. In the small body of “trans-affirmative” professional literature, the focus is often on how transgender people (almost always transsexuals) manage to get by in a hostile world, painting a predominantly negative picture of what it is like to be transgender. Given the state of the literature, it would be difficult for the general reader to imagine transgenderism as a potentially positive life experience.

But what about the transgender people who *enjoy* being trans? Evidence of their existence comes from my own acquaintances with such individuals as well as the writings of transgender people themselves (such as Bornstein, 1994; Boswell, 1998; Cromwell, 1999; Feinberg, 1998; Green, 2004; Halberstam, 1998). Boswell (1998), for example, pointed out that transgenderism is “a normal, recurring expression of human nature” (p. 58). Bornstein (1994) went even further toward reframing mainstream assumptions about transgenderism when she referred to herself and other transgender people as “gender-gifted.” This researcher knows transgender people who love being transgender and would not choose any other life path. Their transness seems to be among

their most cherished attributes. They celebrate their nonconforming gender experience, but the professional literature does not reflect their embrace of transness. Instead of making the stereotypical assumption that transgender people are “burdened by their sense of difference” (Lewis, 2008, p. 130), what about those who feel liberated by their transgenderism? In what ways are their transgender identities a source of joy, strength, and meaning in life? In what ways is being transgender a positive life experience, and what essential meanings constitute a positive transgender identity?

These strengths-based questions are more likely to create positive social change, promote transgender empowerment, and alleviate oppression (Hill, 2005). Answers to these questions will enable social workers to engage meaningfully with transgender clients, value and validate their experiences, and further develop empowering, culturally competent, transgender-affirmative practice approaches. The present work contributes to social workers’ knowledge of transgenderism by learning from transgender people who place value on being transgender. Therefore, the research question in the current project is: What is the lived experience of transgenderism as an appreciated aspect of life?

Chapter III. Methods

A Case for Qualitative Research

In the social sciences, the nature of the research question drives the selection of research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; van Manen, 1990). The question asked in the current project—What is the lived experience of valuing one’s transgender identity?—lends itself to qualitative inquiry, as it seeks to understand the subjective experiences of human beings. Qualitative methods are also appropriate when a project aims to render visible previously unseen social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), as in the present study.

Qualitative researchers recognize the limitations of positivism in developing an adequate understanding of the human experience. While positivistic or post-positivistic inquiries might be useful for generating certain types of knowledge, they cannot lead to the rich descriptions of the intrapersonal or social worlds that qualitative approaches produce (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Also relevant to this project is the power of qualitative research to apprehend an individual’s point of view, including the contours and constraints of their lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fook, 1996; Levesque-Lopman, 1988). Qualitative research also acknowledges the impossibility—and even the undesirability—of isolating phenomena from all values or bias in the name of objectivity (Harding, 1991). Rather, qualitative research is understood as a situated activity in which the researcher’s position and the reality of participant-researcher interactivity are examined as integral to interpretation of the project.

Qualitative research encompasses interpretive strategies, which are highly appropriate for research into transgender subjectivities. Interpretive methods are suited

for any inquiry designed to achieve “an empathic understanding of social phenomena from the...participant’s point of view” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 15). Interpretive researchers assume “understanding of the fundamental nature of the social world happens at the level of subjective experience. Hence, in the interpretive approach, individual consciousness and subjectivity are basic to understanding” (p. 16). Where positivistic gender researchers frequently err by imposing preconceived concepts, variables, and frameworks onto their transgender participants (for example, see Docter & Fleming, 2001), interpretive researchers aim to discover the unexpected that can emerge from listening to participants and learning what they experience as most salient and essential to their subjective experience of transgenderism. In bringing to awareness a fuller knowledge of human experience, there is potential for transforming the participant, researcher, reader, and perhaps the broader social world.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

All qualitative research traditions (such as case study, grounded theory, and ethnography) have something to offer to the study of transgender subjectivities. It is hermeneutic phenomenology, however, that best enables me to answer the questions I have about the essential meanings of a valued transgender identity. Various queer studies scholars (Ahmed, 2006; Cromwell, 1999; and Rubin, 1998, for example) have advocated phenomenological methods to gain knowledge of transgender people. Among the assets of the phenomenological approach for transgender research are: (1) a privileging of counter-discursive, trans-situated language and knowledge; (2) a recognition of the agency and authority of transgender people; (3) the commitment to lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge; (4) the protection it offers against researchers imposing

their own gender agenda onto participants; and (5) a philosophical structure capable of grasping (transgender) lives as they are perpetually unfolding (Rubin, 1998). Salamon (2009) further posited that “queer folks are natural phenomenologists” by virtue of their inevitable philosophical “ruminat[ion] on the ‘being’ of being queer” (p. 227).

According to hermeneutic phenomenological thought, human beings are essentially interpretive entities. From this, one can infer that social entities are not fixed, but contingent upon mutual understandings and shared interpretations. Therefore, even seemingly hegemonic social institutions are alterable (Levesque-Lopman, 1988). This is good news for the current research endeavor, as one of my primary motivations is to problematize the social institution of the gender dichotomy (Burdge, 2007). In phenomenology, the dominant, rigidly gendered version of reality is considered a malleable state of affairs; the gender dichotomy is not inevitable. In this light, hermeneutic phenomenology seems a strong fit with queer sensibilities. A queer phenomenology, as suggested by Ahmed (2006) “redirect[s] our attention toward different objects, those that are ‘less proximate’” (p. 3), such as lived experiences that are not conventionally gendered. Hermeneutic phenomenology further aligns with queer theory (as described in Chapter II) and inquiries into queer subjectivities given that Heidegger sought “to articulate aspects of existence that have never been articulated before” (Polt, 1999, p. 40).

Heideggerian philosophical foundations. Various philosophers and social scientists have been associated with phenomenology, but not all phenomenologies are the same. Husserl, for example, contributed significantly to the advancement of *transcendental* phenomenology (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009). His

underlying premises have been critiqued, however, for their reliance on Cartesian notions of the person. Such assumptions maintain that objectivity is both possible and desirable and that human beings require some degree of “decontextualizing” in order to be accurately understood (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Plager, 1994). For this reason, the current research project turns to the philosophical perspective of Martin Heidegger—that of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Hermeneutics is an intellectual discipline with roots in ancient Greek philosophy. Modern social scientists consider the term “hermeneutics” to be synonymous with “interpretive methods” (Annells, 1996). The linguistic roots of the word suggest a “bringing to understanding,” especially when language is involved (Leonard, 1994, p. 53). Heidegger (1927/1962) specifically defined a hermeneutical process as “working out the conditions on which the possibility of any ontological investigation depends” (p. 62). In other words, he saw hermeneutics as a process by which the essential “meaning structures” enabling an entity to be understood as that entity are explicated. Because shared verbal communication is the heart of hermeneutics, Grondin (1994) suggested that for Heidegger, hermeneutics “means the exposition of tidings that call for a hearing” (p. 104). Said another way, Heidegger understood that phenomena catch our attention, thereby implicating our involvement, and in doing so, they beckon to be comprehended. Heideggerian hermeneutics, then, is an explication of the web of meanings that constitute phenomena and make them knowable as such to human beings.

The term “phenomenology” can be broken into two constitutive parts: “phenomenon” and “ology.” The word “phenomenon” comes from the Greek word meaning “that which shows itself” (Polt, 1999, p. 39). Heidegger (1927/1962) returned

to this ancient meaning in defining phenomenon as “the manifest” (p. 51) or “that which shows itself as Being and as the structure of Being” (p. 91). In common parlance, the “ology” of phenomenology (or sociology, or psychology, or biology, for that matter) means “the study of.” Returning to the original Greek, however, Heidegger (1927/1962) determined a more nuanced meaning of “logos,” involving an unconcealment or a discovering, in which things are “taken out of their hiddenness” (p. 56). Logos requires “letting something be seen through discourse...by pointing it out” (p. 56).

Phenomenology, then, means “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 58). It is a process of revealing the meaning of being of entities. The way this is accomplished is through an interpretive (hermeneutical) process in which the essential meanings of the entity’s being are explicated. “The meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in *interpretation*” [italics in original] (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 61).

Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, is “the idea of grasping and explicating phenomena in a way that is ‘original’ and ‘intuitive,’ which is directly opposed to the naïveté of a haphazard, ‘immediate’, and unreflective ‘beholding’” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 61). It is a means of inquiry intended to interpret the lived experiences of human beings, which are invariably lived experiences of involvement with various phenomena (Benner, 1994). Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with understanding more fully how human beings perceive, experience, and find meaning in their lives as they go about their lives involving themselves with various phenomena.

Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to understand lived human existence, not to build theoretical models (Annells, 1996). Theory may come into play when new

meanings or possibilities for understanding emerge (Leonard, 1994), but theory is not the goal, nor is prediction or control. The goal, instead, is to open up possible new understandings of the investigated phenomenon through tactful, thoughtful engagement with the phenomenon itself. It is an approach well-suited to the current inquiry, which seeks to more fully understand the meaning of a phenomenon as it is experienced by those involved with it.

In his magnum opus *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927/1962) set out to explore the fundamental philosophical question he believed the entire Western tradition had missed: the question of what it means to *be*. This focus, which required that Heidegger take up an ontological path of inquiry, put him largely at odds with traditional philosophy that had largely concerned itself with questions of epistemology (Polt, 1999). His philosophical imperative was to “drag Being out from its everyday obscurity and get it to show itself...as a phenomenon” (Polt, 1999, p. 40), and his philosophy pointed to the interpretation of the experience of human existence as the proper channel through which to uncover the meaning of Being.

Heidegger’s ontological assumption was that human beings are much more than mere conglomerations of measurable traits and attributes. Rather, we are, at our essence, social and dialogical beings, and it is this—our essential way of being—that gives everything else its meaning (Leonard, 1994). To draw attention to this particular way of Being that humans experience, Heidegger coined the term *Dasein*. While *Dasein* is used interchangeably with “humans” or “human existence,” its strangeness prompts us to see, or perhaps remember, the peculiar way of being we humans have as our existence. The term allows us “to get a look at ourselves with fresh eyes” (Polt, 1999, p. 29). The term

illuminates that quality of our humanness which allows us to wonder at and contemplate our own existence (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009).

Dasein is essentially synonymous with “Being-in-the-world” (Polt, 1999). Humans are always already “Beings-in-the-world,” inseparable from and co-constitutive with our context (Heidegger, 1927/1962), with “world” here referring to the meaning-making systems in which we are immersed and that shapes our actions and identities (Polt, 1999). We simultaneously *are* Dasein, and Dasein is how we make sense of the world (Conroy, 2003). We (Dasein) are in constant co-creation with our environments; we cannot be understood out of context because context and person constitute each other (Plager, 1994).

A corollary of this co-constitutive way of being is that “things become visible [to us] only in relationship or in its [*sic*] relatedness” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 58). Given the nature of our being, “Dasein...has ‘ontological priority’ over every other entity....for it is the only being for which its Being is an issue” (p. 62). “Because Dasein is essentially an entity with Being-in, it can explicitly discover those entities which it encounters environmentally, it can know them, it can avail itself of them, it can *have* [*italics in original*] the ‘world’” (p. 84). Consequently, hermeneutic phenomenologists seek to understand the meaning of being by intensely examining human beings’ own ways—Dasein’s ways—of being (Polt, 1999).

According to Heidegger, Dasein’s existence is hermeneutical. We are constantly interpreting life experience and “deriving significance” from that experience (McConnell et al., 2009, p. 8). This philosophical approach assumes that human being is an activity comprising continual self-interpretation (Plager, 1994). Heidegger goes beyond an

understanding of hermeneutics as a precise method of interpretation and views hermeneutics as the essential interpretive process in which Dasein is characteristically engaged (Linge, 1976).

Given his understanding of human being as essentially hermeneutical, Heidegger rejected the notion of objectivity, purporting that “subject and object do not coincide with Dasein and the world” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 87). He maintained that “there is no viewpoint outside of consciousness from which to view things as they exist independently of our experience of them” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45). As noted previously, Heidegger rejected Husserl’s notion that the researcher’s presuppositions should be—or even could be—“bracketed” away from the inquiry (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Polt, 1999). Both the researcher and research participants, as Dasein, are always...”embodied agent[s] who [are] already engaged in a meaningful socio-historical situation” (Aho, 2009, p. 250), from which they cannot be isolated. Heidegger suggested that “the researcher is as much a part of the research as the participant, and that the researcher’s ability to interpret that data was reliant on previous knowledge and understanding” (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009, p. 9).

In Dasein’s hermeneutical existence, however, there is a tendency to overlook that which is closest, including one’s own ways and possibilities of being. Heidegger (1927/1962) summed this up by saying, “What is ontically closest and well-known...is ontologically farthest and not known at all...its ontological signification is constantly overlooked” (p. 69). This refers to human beings’ propensity to neither notice nor reflect upon the nature of being possessed by those phenomena with which they are most engaged. As a result, “instead of understanding their own interpretations of themselves,

they take up interpretations that are already available and so relieve themselves of the burden of self-elucidation” (Grondin, 1994, p. 99).

Hermeneutic phenomenologists aim to “call Dasein back to itself and its possible freedom” by “dismantling or deconstructing these traditional explications of Dasein which have become self-evident and resistant to criticism” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 99). Heidegger called for “an event of disclosure—an unconcealment” (Linge, 1976, p. i) in which new, more complete interpretations can be considered, and Dasein is the “place” or “clearing” where such disclosure happens (p. lii). Phenomena disclose themselves to Dasein, and so Dasein’s interpretive experience of phenomena is the appropriate point of inquiry. At the same time, the nature of being consists of both concealment and unconcealment—nothing can ever be totally revealed (Heidegger, 1927/1962). When we demand complete unconcealment, as objectivity does, we fundamentally misunderstand the nature of being (Linge, 1976). Hermeneutic phenomenologists recognize these limits of all research projects into human experience: “In what we say and in what is said to us, beings disclose themselves, but they withdraw from us as well and are never fully manifest, for what is spoken has about it the circle of the unsaid” (Linge, 1976, p. lv).

While Heidegger was notoriously opposed to rigid methodologies (Polt, 1999) and intentionally offered a philosophy rather than a method (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009), he did outline three general strategies of phenomenology: phenomenological reduction, construction, and destruction (Heidegger, 1954). Phenomenological reduction involves moving from an initially naïve comprehension of the participant as a being to an understanding of the nature of Being as experienced by the participant. In phenomenological reduction, one’s vision shifts from *the* being to *Being* itself—from the

physical entity to the meaning of existing as experienced by that entity. The researcher opens to a profound amazement at the wonder of the phenomenon in the world, which inspires further questioning and seeking of its true meaning (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenological construction is the process of apprehending the constitutive structures of the participant's lived experience (Heidegger, 1954). This is a mutually negotiated process in which the researcher and researched analyze the meanings of the phenomenon in the participant's life. Finally, the researcher and researched engage in phenomenological destruction—the tearing down of traditional, publicly available concepts and structures. The desired result of this de(con)struction is an assuredly more authentic character of the emerging shared meanings (Heidegger, 1954). In any phenomenological study claiming to fit within the Heideggerian hermeneutic tradition, as the present study does, the precise methods employed must be consistent with the general approaches of reduction, construction, and destruction.

To best uncover an understanding of the meaning of Being, Heidegger called for an “analytic of everydayness,” by which the inquirer takes “an unusually intense look at normal existence and develop[s] fresh concepts to describe it” (Polt, 1999, p. 36). In short, in seeking the meaning of Being, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks “a clear understanding of something that is already vaguely familiar” (p. 31). The task of the researcher is “to reflect on the description in order to explicate meanings not immediately apparent in the phenomenon” (Langellier, 1994, p. 70). The goal of hermeneutic phenomenological research, then, is to explicate the essential human activity of interpretation by uncovering daily actions, meanings, and experiences, and finding “exemplars or paradigm cases that embody the meanings of everyday practices...in such

a way that they are not destroyed, distorted, decontextualized, trivialized, or sentimentalized” (Benner, 1985, as cited in Leonard, 1994, p. 56). The phenomenological researcher seeks to “discover the essential attributes of phenomena and then express the results in verbal portraits” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45).

As stated previously, Heideggerian phenomenology seeks to understand “what it means to be” (Mackey, 2007, p. 40), with the intent of “grasp[ing] the essential meaning of something” (van Manen, 1990, p. 77). That “something” is a phenomenon—an entity that presents itself to Dasein and with which Dasein is involved (McConnell et al., 2009), and which is “never anything but what goes to make up Being” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 61). The essence of any phenomenon “lies in its ‘to be’...its Being-what-it-is” (p. 67). The essential structures phenomenologists seek are those which are “given and explicable in the way the phenomenon is encountered” (p. 61)—that is, those which make it possible for the phenomenon to be experienced as itself. By “understand,” Heidegger meant “to have possibilities” or “to project available ways to be” (Polt, 1999, p. 68). As Grondin (1994) explained, “what is at issue in understanding is not the phantom of an absolute foundation—that child of positivism and ultimately of metaphysics—but Dasein’s increased awareness of the possibilities at its disposal” (p. 107).

Understanding here is not to be conceived of as “knowledge” *per se*. Heidegger’s notion of understanding is more akin to “knowing-our-way-around” in the world (Grondin, 1994, p. 94). It involves a practical know-how of being involved with phenomena—a certain sense of “‘being-at-home-with’ something that is more like facility than knowledge” (p. 93). This way of being is rarely made explicit, but that is what hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to do.

Understanding inherently involves another feature of Dasein's essential way of Being-in-the-world—that of care or concern (Grondin, 1994; Heidegger, 1927/1962). In Heidegger's philosophy, Dasein cares for (is concerned about) the world and its phenomena in that things *matter* to Dasein. Care and concern shape the nature of our understanding, which “orients itself toward certain inexplicit projects which embody...our own possibilities, our being able to be” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 95). In formal inquiry, care draws the researcher toward a chosen project just as it draws the participants into conversations about something that matters to them.

Discourse is the manifestation of Dasein's effort at self-interpretation, and it is an expression of Dasein's care. At the same time, one misconstrues the non-technological nature of language by thinking that it is capable of expressing everything (Grondin, 1994). One mistakenly objectifies language by limiting it to its logical content. Dasein's statements are “dependent on an act of interpretive completion” such that if their meanings are to be understood, one must “constantly attend to what is tacitly meant, though not openly expressed” (p. 101). In interpreting participants' disclosures, the hermeneutic phenomenologist must “preserve the hermeneutic character of language that is manifest in the struggle to find the right words” (p. 102). As a result, when Dasein speaks, it can be understood that a “mind and soul is expressing itself to the world” and that a hermeneutical effort should “reach for what is be-fore (or better, in and behind) [these] statements” (p. 94).

To grasp a phenomenon for what it is, one's care or concern should refrain from “any kind of producing, manipulating, and the like,” and instead be in “the mode of tarrying alongside” the phenomenon (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 88). Heidegger referred

to this mode as “dwelling” (p. 89) and argued this mode of being-towards-the-world is what allows perception, engagement, and ultimately interpretation to unfold. This stance is seen in the non-directive, listening-focused interviewing style and fluid but self-reflective data analysis processes advocated by hermeneutic phenomenological researchers such as Crist and Tanner (2003), Diekelmann (2001), Ironside (2004, 2005, 2006), van Manen (1990) and others.

As a hermeneutical phenomenological researcher, I am obligated to explicate my own position, presuppositions, and prior understandings related to the matter of inquiry—what Heidegger (1927/1962) called the “fore-structure.” I have done so by explaining my knowledge base, philosophical frameworks, and methodological decisions in Chapters I-III, as well as by providing a more personal statement in Appendix B.

The fore-structure consists of three aspects: (1) *fore-having*—one’s taken-for-granted sense of what constitutes the phenomenon; (2) *fore-sight*—one’s particular point of view or interpretive perspective; and (3) *fore-conception*—one’s sense of “what counts as a question and what would count as an answer” (Leonard, 1994, p. 57). As can be seen, the fore-structure “stakes out the thematic framework and parameters of any interpretation” (Grondin, 1994, p. 92). In hermeneutic phenomenology, therefore, it is assumed that the researcher has a fore-structure shaping her/his understanding of the matter at hand.

The notion of fore-structure recognizes the inevitability of the researcher having a particular, pre-existing approach to the research question (Plager, 1994; Polt, 1999). As Grondin (1994) remarked, “in every correct interpretation the very first task must be to become reflectively conscious of one’s own fore-structure of understanding” (p. 96).

This allows researchers “to appreciate precisely the otherness of the text—that is, without allowing our uneluciated prejudices to dominate the text unwittingly and conceal what is proper to it” (p. 97). While fore-structure cannot be eliminated, it can and should be identified and scrutinized to acknowledge any influence it might be exerting on the researcher’s interpretive acts (Koch, 1995). To explicate the fore-structure, phenomenologists commonly provide a written summary of their own “location” in the project, including a description of their own identities, beliefs about the phenomenon, motivations for studying the phenomenon, and assumptions about the expected results. Articulating one’s fore-structure in this way allows the phenomenon of interest to stand out as itself against that now-explicit background of the researcher’s prior understanding.

As Dasein, my decision to pursue the present project was not a simple matter of making a free choice from all possible choices. Dasein is never in such a position. Rather, it is Dasein’s essential character to be “thrown” into a set of circumstances and then to be involved with them in an interpretive manner (Grondin, 1994, p. 95). This “thrownness” lends each Dasein its particular facticity, or historical situatedness. Having been thrown into a particular time and situation, Dasein then takes up involvement with those phenomena that beckon or disclose themselves. Dasein does this having already understood something of the world. In this way, understanding precedes interpretation (Grondin, 1994). Therefore, as Dasein, I come to the present project having some forms of pre-understanding about the matter at hand—namely, transgenderism and its value as a human experience. Had I not, I would not have understood enough to ask my research question in the first place. It is therefore incumbent upon me to articulate and consider my own pre-understanding and relatedness to transgenderism and its value. Through

such transparency, the current project can be a dialogue between my own understandings and that of the research participants, my research team and I can minimize any undue influence my preconceived ideas could have on the analysis, and any readers of my work may determine for themselves what influence my fore-structure has had on my conclusions.

Gadamerian philosophical foundations. Hans-Georg Gadamer advanced Heidegger's philosophy of hermeneutics, in particular by arguing for a hermeneutical approach to the human sciences. In his most famous work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1975) directly criticized the transfer of natural science's methods and assumptions into the human sciences. He articulated instead a compelling rationale for hermeneutics as the appropriate means of understanding human experience, and he worked out the central role of language and dialogue in achieving such understanding.

Gadamer (1975) maintained that language is our basic way of being-in-the-world. It is the means through which we constitute the world and are constituted by the world. Language contains and expresses our relationship to "the whole of being" (Linge, 1976, p. xxix). That we experience the world linguistically speaks to our unique kind of existence—our world is of a linguistic nature. Simply put, a human world is a linguistically constituted world (Gadamer, 1975). Without language, we would not "have the world" in the way that we essentially do (p. 401). Language, then, is the gateway to knowledge of our essential ways of being. It "embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened" (p. 405). What we experience as real and significant we express through language in our everyday way of being. We "preserve" and "organize" our experience of the world within language (p. 407) and through language, our world is

“always open...to every possible insight and hence for every possible expansion...and accordingly available to others” (p. 405). Through language, we “summon the world” and share it with others in our everyday-ness (Grondin, 1990, p. 120). In short, language reflects the structure of our being and, therefore, the structure of our lived experience.

Gadamer’s view is of particular relevance to an inquiry such as this one, which is based on listening to what people have to say about their own experiences. For Gadamer, interpersonal communication is “the locus for the real determination of meaning” (Linge, 1976, p. xxxiii), with meaning being “the inner structure of the thing” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 431). When a person speaks or writes, “every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole of the view of the world which lies behind it to appear” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 416). A person’s words reveal both what is said and what is unsaid, and carry within them an “excess of meaning” that “goes beyond the author’s intention” (Linge, 1976, p. xxv). As Gadamer (1975) said, “The meaning of the text surpasses the author not occasionally, but always” (p. 280). Therefore, in hermeneutics, multiple interpretations are possible and cycles of interpretation are never finished. One can never claim to have arrived at the ultimate interpretation (Linge, 1976). In the same way, one cannot necessarily claim a superior interpretation, merely a different interpretation (Grondin, 1990) that will itself be interpreted by its audience.

Given this, what does it mean to understand another’s experience as it is disclosed through language? Gadamer agreed with Heidegger that “language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human being-in-the-world” (Linge, 1976, p. xxix). It is primarily through language that one discloses an experience of an inner world to others. When one “knows a language,” one “knows how to make oneself

understood by others” (p. xxx). Understanding, then, is the dialogical process of searching for sharable words and consequently realizing one’s inner world (Grondin, 1990). It involves a “fusion of horizons” through “an essentially linguistic process” (Linge, 1976, p. xxviii). Understanding occurs through and, in fact, is dialogue. It is not a matter of grasping content, but of being in dialogical engagement (Grondin, 1990)—of participating in meaning, of participating in dialogue (Gadamer, 1975). When we understand something, we are, by definition, in relationship with it. We are changed by it and apply it to our own experience (Grondin, 1990). Understanding meaning involves “relating [something] to ourselves in such a way that we discover in it an answer to our own questions” (p. 116). Meaning, after all, is always meaning *for* someone and arises out of that relationship (Fay, 1996).

To Gadamer (1975), understanding is a hermeneutical experience in which we are “possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true” (p. 9). It entails “lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world” (p. 15). From each hermeneutic event, “something comes into being that had not existed before and that exists from now on” (p. 419), and we experience not certainty, but “illumination” or a sense of a phenomenon’s “significance” (Grondin, 1990, p. 59). In the end, any interpretive endeavor is “the process by which the significance of [something] is revealed to an audience” (Fay, 1996, p. 143).

It is in dialogue that we enter a “confrontation with another’s thoughts that could also come to dwell within us” through which “we can hope to get beyond the limits of our present horizon” (Grondin, 1994, p. 124). Gadamer maintained that interpretation—

or hermeneutics—has a dialogical character (Linge, 1976). In a hermeneutical dialogue, the interpreter “genuinely opens himself [*sic*] to the text by listening to it and allowing it to assert its viewpoint” (Linge, 1976, p. xxi). The interpreter “is prepared for it to tell him [*sic*] something” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 238). In doing so, the interpreter looks *with* the other person at what is attempted to be communicated (Linge, 1976). In this spirit, hermeneutic phenomenology is a collaborative, interactive inquiry with the researched and cannot have the aim of controlling (Annells, 1996). Hermeneutic research is not conducted *on* the participants; it is conducted *with* the participants. Interpretation in the act of social research involves the dialogical relationship between the interpreter and the interpreted and presupposes a shared understanding (Conroy, 2003; Leonard, 1994; Plager, 1994). Researcher and researched alike engage in a mutual exploration of the issues at hand and co-create a shared understanding of the meaning of being.

The hermeneutic interpreter, being aware of her/his own situatedness and finitude, brings an openness to the conversation—an openness to new possibilities that is “the precondition of genuine understanding” (Linge, 1976, p. xxi). The interpreter must remember that “the possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics” (Gadamer, 1989, as cited in Grondin, 1990, p. 124). Accordingly, then, “the hermeneutical conversation between interpreter and the text involves equality and active reciprocity” (Linge, 1976, p. xx), and the principle of reflexivity guides the dialogical process of seeking to understand how we (researcher and researched) understand (Levesque-Lopman, 1988).

Gadamer agreed with Heidegger’s idea that the interpreter’s fore-structure cannot be ignored or contained (Grondin, 1994). Instead, it is the interpreter’s task to work out

her/his anticipatory ideas to the extent possible prior to engagement with the text and to account for the nature of their influence on the interpretation. Our prejudices represent the “biases of our openness to the world” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 9). “They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby we encounter what something says to us” (p. 9). Therefore, these conditions should be made transparent (despite the impossibility of ever completing this task [Gadamer, 1975]) and continually checked against the text during interpretation. To ensure more accurate understandings, the interpreter’s anticipatory conceptions must be confirmed “by the things themselves” (p. 237). Arbitrary or incorrect prejudices will not stand up to the text and will be hermeneutically indefensible, while those that are more correct will be supported or enhanced by the meanings revealed by the text (Grondin, 1994).

In seeking to understand something hermeneutically, the interpreter enters the “hermeneutic circle,” which is a “constantly evolving interchange in which meaning...and the nature of the interpretive community change” (Fay, 1996, p. 145). Heidegger (1927/1962) introduced the concept of the hermeneutic circle to reflect the cyclical character of any hermeneutic endeavor. The term points to “the circular form of interpretation shared between persons in their interactions” (Conroy, 2003, p. 9). It is “a spiraling process of interpretation where the interpretations of...people build on each others’ understandings” (p. 9). Gadamer (1975) further developed the notion of the hermeneutic circle to describe what occurs during any act of interpretation: It is necessarily a non-linear process, meanings are revealed and concealed, new possibilities surface and recede, conjectures are put forth and withdrawn, and there is a generally

mutual interplay between interpreter and interpreted, with each influencing the other in the context of the interpreter's open attitude that allows the text to assert itself.

In the context of the present study, I, carrying my fore-structure as explicitly as I could, entered the hermeneutic circle by engaging with the literature, the participants and their disclosures, and with my research team. Likewise, any who read this report are understood to be in a hermeneutic circle as they interpret my interpretations. The processes of understanding on all of these levels are cyclical and multi-directional in nature, as described by both Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer (1975), with the result being new illuminations and possibilities that offer a less partial (but inevitably incomplete) understanding of transgenderism as a potentially valuable life experience.

Research Design

Given that there is no method agreed upon as *the* phenomenological method, it is incumbent upon each phenomenologist to draw on the philosophical principles and interpretive methods used by past phenomenologists and tailor them to present circumstances (Polkinghorne, 1989). The present study is grounded within the philosophical frameworks discussed above. It was conducted in a manner consistent with their fundamental assumptions, including those about the nature of being, understanding, and method. I now delineate the present study, which sought a hermeneutic phenomenological understanding of transgenderism as a valued life experience.

Sample. A final sample of 15 self-identified transgender adults from three Midwestern states participated in the study. Below is a discussion of the eligibility criteria, the process for determining sample size, the sampling and recruitment methods, and a demographic summary of the sample.

Eligibility criteria. Due to the fluidity and evolving nature of transgender identities, eligibility criteria can be challenging in this realm of research. No stable definitions exist, and the language used to describe transgenderism can vary across racial and ethnic lines (Kenagy, 2005). Unless the researcher is specifically targeting a particular subgroup of the transgender population, eligibility criteria should be broadly and flexibly defined, allowing for self-definition to the greatest extent possible (Grossman et al., 2005; JSI Research & Training Institute, 2000; Xavier, 2000). Therefore, to be eligible for participation in the present study, individuals were simply required to self-identify somewhere along the transgender spectrum.

Participants in phenomenological studies should be those people who have had experience with the phenomenon under investigation and who can articulate full descriptions of that experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). Therefore, current or previous experience with one's own transgenderism as a valued or appreciated phenomenon was a criterion for eligibility, as were general oral communication abilities and a willingness to recount personal experiences.

The progression toward more fully understanding transgender people requires samples that are more representative of the entire transgender spectrum. Non-clinical samples are needed, as are non-transsexual samples. With very few exceptions (such as Walinsky & Whitcomb, 2010) most transgender studies to date have drawn participants from urban areas, pointing to the need for including rural transgender participants. Therefore, recruitment took place exclusively through non-clinical contacts, and I have included both transsexual and non-transsexual adults as participants in the present study. The final sample also included persons living in rural, suburban, and urban locales.

In light of the above considerations, the eligibility criteria for the current project were: (1) being at least 18 years old, (2) self-identification as being somewhere within the transgender spectrum (regardless of the actual identity labels used), (3) ability and willingness to articulate one's life experiences (in English), and (4) experience with one's transgenderism as a valued aspect of life (although the experience did not have to be exclusively positive). Given my limited funds and commitment to face-to-face interviews, participants also needed to live within a reasonable radius of my home. This unfortunate constraint led me to exclude two interested individuals from the study.

Sample size. Sample sizes in phenomenological studies vary widely. Polkinghorne (1989) cited studies with as few as three participants and as many as 325, but most are conducted with small samples, with samples of five or six considered appropriate for a single researcher's project (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Statistical significance and generalization are not goals of phenomenological research, so the appropriate sample size cannot be determined by a quantitative formula. The sample should instead be large enough to generate a "full range of variation in the set of descriptions to be used in analyzing a phenomenon" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 48). It should also be manageable given the researcher's time and resources (Benner, 1994). With this in mind, I recruited 15 individuals for the current study. That number of participants provided a sufficient range of phenomenological descriptions and was still manageable for me as a lone researcher.

Sampling method and participant recruitment. The current project relied on a purposive sample of convenience built using a snowball sampling method. Convenience samples generated through the snowball sampling method have been consistently

recommended for research with vulnerable or hidden minority groups, such as the transgender community (Clements-Nolle, 2001; Kenagy, 2005; Meezan & Martin, 2003; Xavier, 2000). Such samples obviously limit the ability to generalize, but given the current social climate, it is virtually impossible to build transgender research samples in other ways. In addition, phenomenological studies invariably rely on purposive sampling, because participants must be selected intentionally on the basis of having experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Corben, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

I initiated recruitment through a word-of-mouth process. I provided recruiting information to several of my cisgender acquaintances who know transgender people. One very valuable contact came from this approach: a well-connected transwoman who eventually participated and encouraged seven others to do the same. In addition, I directly invited four other transgender people to participate. These were individuals with whom I had some prior contact: One I met when he came to my campus as a guest speaker in another professor's class, the second I met at a professional training, the third I met when he and I were on a discussion panel together, and the fourth I met when she had been a student at the university where I teach (she had since graduated). These four individuals agreed to participate, and the former student subsequently encouraged three of her transgender acquaintances to participate. In the end, my five initial contacts led to the final sample of 15 individuals.

I screened each potential participant to ensure s/he met the eligibility criteria. The screenings took place either over the phone or by e-mail. I asked participants where on the transgender spectrum they identified (including what labels and terminology they preferred for self-reference), whether they have valued or appreciated being transgender,

and whether they were a legal adult. I also ascertained their ability to articulate their experiences during the course of these conversations. I provided each person with general information about the nature of participation and inquired into her/his interest in being interviewed. I then provided each eligible and interested individual with a copy of the informed consent form for review prior to the interview. Finally, we scheduled a time and place for the interview.

Participants. I collected basic demographic information from each interviewee after her/his interview using a brief written questionnaire (see Appendix C). The demographic information collected with the questionnaire is summarized in Table 1 below. To give a rich description of the participants beyond their basic demographics, I have provided a brief profile of each participant at the beginning of Chapter IV.

The final sample of 15 individuals consisted of three who were on the female-to-male (FTM) spectrum (meaning they were female-bodied at birth) and 12 who identified on the male-to-female (MTF) spectrum (male-bodied at birth). Three participants—one FTM and two MTFs—were post-op transsexuals. Four others—one FTM and three MTFs—were currently taking hormones but had not had any surgery. Of these, three were pre-op transsexuals who intended to have surgery eventually, and one did not intend to have surgery. Among these pre-, post-, and non-op transsexuals, one self-identified simply as male and two as female. Another participant considered herself bigender (equally a man and a woman), and four self-identified as crossdressers. Among the MTF crossdressers, two identified simply as female. Two participants referred to their gender identity specifically as transgender. One participant self-identified as “genderqueer/FTM

spectrum.” One male-bodied participant described her/his gender identity simply as “fluid.” One MTF participant identified herself as intersex during the interview, but not on the written questionnaire. When asked how long they had identified on the transgender spectrum, the reported time range was 2.5 years to 62 years, with the median being 11.5 years.

Participants ranged in age from 21 to 67 years old, with a median age of 37. Each participant lived in one of three Midwestern states at the time of the interview: seven in State #1, seven in State #2, and one in State #3. Three were living in rural areas, seven in suburban areas, and five in urban areas. Racially and ethnically, thirteen participants identified as white, one as African-American, one as part Cherokee. One participant was originally from a non-English-speaking, non-Western country. The religious make-up of the sample was surprisingly diverse. One person identified as Wiccan/Pagan, another as Unitarian Universalist, one as a non-traditional Muslim/Deist, another as Daoist, and one as Jewish. Four identified as Christian, with one of these specifying Catholicism. Six participants reported no religious affiliation.

Educational attainment varied among the participants, but each had earned at least a high school diploma. For four participants, formal education had stopped there. Two others reported having had some college education, while four reported a bachelors degree as their highest degree. Three had earned masters degrees, and one had completed an M.D. Five participants were unemployed at the time of the interview. Four participants had previously retired. Five were currently employed, with one being self-employed. Reported annual incomes ranged from \$6,500 to \$103,000.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender Identity	How Long Trans ^b	Sexual Orientation	Race or Ethnicity	State/Comm ^c	Employed	Annual Income	Educ ^d	Relat ^e	Parent (Children)	Religion
Sephie	23	transgender (<i>MTF</i>)	3	bisexual	white	1 rural	yes	\$7,000	H.S.	yes	no	no
Helene	22	transsexual, pre-op MTF	2.5	heterosexual (<i>attracted to men</i>)	white	1 rural	yes	\$6,500	some college	no	no	Catholic
Siren	22	fluid (<i>male-bodied</i>) ^a	3	gay	white	1 rural	no	--	B.S.	yes	no	Wiccan, Pagan
Lucas	28	transgender (<i>FTM</i>)	10	queer	white	1 urban	yes	\$30,000	B.S.	yes (<i>engaged</i>)	no	no
Francis	21	genderqueer, FTM spectrum, trans	7	queer, dyke	white	1 suburban	no	--	B.A.	yes	no	Unitarian Universalist
Wanda	62	female (<i>MTF transsexual</i>)	62	lesbian	white, Cherokee	1 urban	retired	\$28,000	M.S.	yes	yes (1)	Daoist
Felicia	50	crossdresser (<i>MTF</i>)	13	heterosexual (<i>attracted to women</i>)	white	2 suburban	yes	\$70,000	M.S.	no	no	no
Melissa	67	bigender, man & woman (<i>male-bodied</i>)	10	heteromale, lesbian	white	2 suburban	retired	\$35,000	H.S.	no (<i>divorced</i>)	yes (4)	no

^a Italicized font is used when information is provided for clarification beyond what the participant wrote on the survey.

^b "How long trans" indicates length of time (in years) participant has identified as transgender.

^c "State/Comm." Number indicates state of participant's residence. Type of community indicated as rural, suburban, or urban.

^d "Educ" indicates highest education level/degree attained.

^e "Relat" indicates involvement in a romantic/intimate relationship.

Table 1 (continued)

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender Identity	How Long Trans ^b	Sexual Orientation	Race or Ethnicity	State / Comm ^c	Employed	Annual Income	Educ ^d	Relat ^e	Parent (Children)	Religion
Bonita	37	crossdresser <i>(MTF)^a</i>	20+	straight, attracted to t-girls	African- American	1 urban	no	less than \$25,000	H.S.	maybe	no	Christian
Corina	59	female <i>(MTF crossdresser)</i>	54	hetero to gay to hetero	white	1 suburban	retired	\$33,000	some college	no	no	no
Krystal	39	MTF <i>(post-op transsexual)</i>	39	straight <i>(attracted to men)</i>	white	2 suburban	no	--	H.S.	no	no	Christian
Abby	58	female <i>(MTF crossdresser)</i>	5	heterosexual <i>(attracted to women)</i>	white	2 suburban	retired	\$103,000	M.S.	no <i>(divorcing)</i>	yes (2)	Jewish
Teresa	58	MTF <i>(intersex, non-op TS)</i>	15	<i>(attracted to)</i> females	white	2 suburban	no	\$24,000	some college	no	no	no
Fahima	30	female <i>(MTF pre-op transsexual)</i>	26	straight woman	white, non- Western	2 urban	yes	--	M.D.	no	no	Non-trad. Muslim, Deist
Brandon	37	male <i>(post-op FTM transsexual)</i>	13	queer	white	3 urban	self- employed	\$18,000	B.F.A.	yes <i>(married)</i>	no	Christian

^a Italicized font is used when information is provided for clarification beyond what the participant wrote on the survey.

^b “How long trans” indicates length of time (in years) participant has identified as transgender.

^c “State/Comm.” Number indicates state of participant’s residence. Type of community indicated as rural, suburban, or urban.

^d “Educ” indicates highest education level/degree attained.

^e “Relat” indicates involvement in a romantic/intimate relationship.

The sample reflected a variety of family and intimate relationships. One participant was married, one was engaged to be married, and two others were in a long-term relationship with each other. Two other participants reported being in relationships. Two others were either divorced or in the process of divorcing. One participant was unsure of her relationship status. In all, eight considered themselves not in a relationship at the time of their interview. Three participants were parents, and one of these was also a grandparent.

Participants used a variety of words to describe their sexual orientations. One considered herself bisexual, one considered himself gay, and another preferred the term lesbian. Three participants preferred the term “queer” to describe their sexual orientation. One of these also used the term “dyke.” Seven participants identified as heterosexual or straight. The bigender participant referred to her sexual orientation as both “heteromale” and lesbian. One crossdresser somewhat similarly labeled her sexual orientation as “hetero to gay to hetero.”

Data collection methods. The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to understand the lived experience of the person, so the most meaningful source of data is the person’s own descriptions of their experiences (Gullick & Stainton, 2008). Therefore, in the human sciences, open-ended interviews are the preferred phenomenological data collection method (Benner, 1994; Grondin, 1994; Ironside, 2004, 2005; van Manen, 1990). The phenomenological interview is also consistent with Cromwell’s (1999) and Lewis’ (2008) suggestions to use open-ended interviews to learn how transgender people describe their own experiences.

Interview procedure. I conducted the 15 interviews between November 2010 and January 2012. I carried out one face-to-face individual interview with each participant. The decision to conduct a single interview, rather than multiple interviews as some phenomenological researchers (Benner, 1994, for example) have suggested, was based on teachings from the Institute for Heideggerian Hermeneutic Phenomenology, which I attended at the Indiana University School of Nursing during the summers of 2010 and 2011. The rationale provided at the institute was that in conducting a single interview, the researcher gains an understanding of the participant's interpretation of her/his experience to date and at that moment in time. Once an interview is conducted, the interview experience itself will have inevitably influenced how the participant now interprets her/his experience, which would be reflected in unknowable ways in subsequent interviews. Furthermore, the mere passage of time will change the participant's interpretations between multiple interviews. Given that the cycles and processes of interpretations never end, the researcher is well-advised to acknowledge the limits of any research endeavor and seek a thorough understanding of what is admittedly recognized as a snapshot in time (P. Ironside, June 15, 2010, personal communication). In other words, conduct one interview and then recognize that "the river has moved on" (R. Sloane, June 15, 2010, personal communication). With this guidance from expert hermeneutic phenomenological researchers, I decided to conduct a single interview with each participant and leave open the option of a brief follow-up contact if further clarification was needed.

Each interview was conducted at a location of the participant's choosing. For their own protection and ease of disclosure, it was important that participants be

interviewed in a setting that was safe and comfortable for them. Most participants chose their own homes or the homes of friends, while a few chose public places (local coffeeshops were a favorite). Interviews were limited to 120 minutes in length to avoid unnecessarily burdening the participants. In the end, interviews ranged in length from 25 to 120 minutes, with the average length being 68 minutes. This allowed sufficient time to explore the topic in depth as fitting for each participant. The audio from each interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder.

Each interview began by establishing rapport, as suggested by Smith and Osborn (2003), among others. In doing so, I drew on the guidance of Armour et al. (2009), who provided insight into conducting phenomenological interviews with individuals belonging to stigmatized groups. They warned that such participants have the understandable potential to be cautious around researchers and may perhaps have a tendency to give socially acceptable answers. I followed these researchers' recommendations by making a deliberate effort to put each participant at ease. I approached each interview using basic humanistic social work skills and principles: being at ease, being patient, being genuine and friendly, taking care to build rapport, and conveying an accepting attitude toward transgenderism and other forms of diversity.

After establishing rapport, it was my responsibility to initiate a dialogue through posing a phenomenological question. The nature of the phenomenological question is of great importance, as it frames the possible parameters of the forthcoming dialogue. As such, the question must, of course, be intelligible to the participants (van Manen, 1990), and it must open and keep opening possibilities (Gadamer, 1975). The question must "open the field for the participant to begin describing their experiences with the

phenomenon” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 48). My phenomenological question had been carefully crafted to invite entry into a dialogue that would reflect the lived experience of valuing one’s transgenderism. The question I asked every participant was: “As you reflect on your experience as a transgender person who values being transgender, can you please describe your appreciation of being transgender?”⁷

Following this initial phenomenological question, no predetermined questions or interview structure was used, as recommended by Benner (1994) and Ironside (2004,

⁷ Some may question my decision to ask only about transgenderism as a positively experienced phenomenon or to recruit only those participants who value being transgender. Aren’t these forms of bias in and of themselves? This is a valid question which deserves a full and direct answer. First of all, as stated previously, in hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher must select participants who have actually experienced the phenomenon of interest. If one wants to study the phenomenon of, say, “being lonely,” one must recruit participants who have, in fact, experienced loneliness. Secondly, I am following in a tradition of phenomenologists who have taken as their phenomena of interest particular states or modes of experience. Barrett-Jasensky (1997), for example, studied patients’ experiences of *caring* relationships with medical care providers, not their general experiences with medical care providers. Similarly, Mackey (2007) did a phenomenology of *wellness* during peri-menopause—not of general experiences during that phase of life. Likewise, Bradshaw, Armour, and Roseborough (2007) studied the experience of *recovery* from severe mental illness—not the experience of mental illness generally. Finally, as Dasein characterized by thrown projection (Gadamer, 1975), I had already been “beckoned to” by the phenomenon of valuing one’s transgenderism. It had already partially revealed itself to me as I noticed it in various transgender people. This phenomenon interested me, and I decided to examine formally that particular slice of transgender experience. In doing so, I was in no way denying that transgender people may also have negative experiences related to their transgenderism. That they do was made clear in Chapters I and II. Many participants in the present study spoke of such negative experiences, and these will be discussed in Chapter V.

2005). The non-structured nature of the interview allowed the exploration of new, unexpected, interesting, and significant aspects of each participant's experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Following Benner's (1994) advice, I interrupted each participant as infrequently as possible. I stayed engaged with participants through active listening strategies, which included engaged body language and asking follow-up questions that responded directly to the participants' disclosures. Follow-up questions were intended to encourage participants to provide further descriptions of their lived experiences, as described by Benner (1994) and Ironside (2005). I used restatement and reflection to check and convey my understanding and draw out further detail (Conroy, 2003). Other probing questions sought clarification, elicited greater detail, and explored the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences (Stayt, 2007). I also took care to ask questions that were free from "ready-made schemas or interpretations" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 49), and instead allowed participants' subjective experiences to emerge. Examples of follow-up questions I typically asked included:

"Can you say more about that?"

"What did that mean to you?"

"Can you describe what that was like?"

"Can you give an example of that?"

"What was that like for you?"

"What meaning did you take from that?"

"You used the word/phrase _____ a minute ago. Can you describe that further?"

As a result, the interviews took the form of a conversation—a dialogue—and allowed the participants to enter into detailed narrative accounts of their lived experiences (Benner, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Focusing and reframing questions encouraged participants to describe their actual experiences with transness as an appreciated aspect of life rather than theorizing about

the topic, because the goal of each interview was to obtain precise descriptions of their own experiences with the phenomenon itself (Benner, 1994). In this sense, follow-up questions such as, “What was that like for you?” or “What did that mean to you?” were helpful, while questions such as “What happened then?” or prompts to discuss generic or hypothetical events could have moved participants away from the meanings they attach to their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). Several participants, nevertheless, had a tendency to theorize away from their own experience. In those cases, I put forth extra effort to refocus them on their actual experiences using questions that invited them to share on that level.

Each interview ended by inviting the participant to add anything s/he believed had been left unsaid regarding their appreciation of being transgender. Once the recorder was off, I invited questions from the participant. They most commonly asked about my motivation for conducting such a study and, in some cases, about my own gender identity. I answered all these questions honestly. Virtually every participant thanked me for doing this study. Once I had transcribed an interview verbatim into written form, I provided that participant with the transcript (via mail or e-mail, as the participant preferred). Each participant reviewed her/his transcript and confirmed its accuracy as a record of the interview s/he had given.

Data analysis methods. Interpretive phenomenology is not a set of pre-determined methods or techniques, but does have a scholarly tradition that provides disciplined guidance for offering the “best possible account of the text presented” (Benner, 1994, p. xvii). Data analysis was, therefore, carried out using a blend of methods employed by various hermeneutic phenomenological researchers in this

tradition. The tradition recognizes that the purpose of data analysis is to arrive at “a description of the essential structure of the experience being investigated” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 50). The goal is not to question or “interrogate” the text, but to “let the text speak” (P. Ironside, June 15, 2010, personal communication). This involves accepting that lived experiences are often ambiguous, contradictory, or irrational (Benner, 1994). Therefore, as suggested earlier, my data analysis proceeded in a non-linear fashion, characterized by cycles of interpretation in which all interpretations were held open and problematic (Benner, 1994).

I began data analysis after completion of the 14th interview. (I had planned to wait until all 15 interviews were complete, but the final interview had to be rescheduled at the last minute.) After transcribing each interview, I checked it against the recording to ensure accuracy (Crist & Tanner, 2003). I also made any necessary corrections as pointed out by the participant. I then began the initial analysis of each individual transcript. I first read each transcript slowly from beginning to end “to gain an overall understanding of the text” (Ironside, 2003, p. 511). I made no marks or notes during this initial reading. I then returned to the text, reading it closely again, this time noting significant ideas, topics, concepts, issues, or meanings (Benner, 1994). These became my preliminary themes. A theme, in hermeneutic phenomenology, is simply a recurring notion or idea that warrants further analysis (Diekelmann, 2001; P. Ironside, June 15, 2010, personal communication). I added tentative codes to these preliminary themes for organizational purposes—for later retrieval and comparison across participants’ accounts (Ironside, 2006).

After coding a transcript, I wrote an initial interpretation of it, as suggested by Crist and Tanner (2003) and Ironside (2004). This involved writing a multiple-page description of the central ideas and meanings expressed by the participant. This narrative description was supported by excerpts from the text, which were inserted verbatim into the written interpretation document. With these interpretations, I began to “thematize”—to explicate the themes and articulate their constitutive aspects (Heidegger, 1927/1962; P. Ironside, June 15, 2010, personal communication).

I shared each initial interpretation, its corresponding transcript, and a brief description of the participant with my research team. A research team is recommended in hermeneutic phenomenology to clarify and add depth to the analysis and to enhance rigor (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Diekelmann, 2001). My research team consisted of two other people—both were doctoral students in social work: one being a full-time social work educator and the other a practicing social worker. The chair of my dissertation committee observed the team’s work. All three of these individuals had training in Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology. Because of the geographic distance involved, the team and I conducted our work primarily through e-mail, in a technologically facilitated collaborative process similar to that described by Liehr (2004).

My research team reviewed each transcript, noting the ideas that stood out to them as significant. They made their own tentative notes and codes in a transcript before reviewing my initial interpretation of the interview. In reviewing the transcripts, the team was able to verify the appropriateness of my interviewing style. They then turned to critiquing my written interpretation, as described by Diekelmann and Ironside (2006). In critiquing my initial interpretations, they checked my fidelity to the text, ensuring that I

had not injected undue bias into the interpretation. They also checked for coherence, plausibility, and comprehensiveness (Madison, 1988), while suggesting meaningful ideas I might have missed and affirming my preliminary conception of significant ideas. Each team member then returned to me her own comments on the transcripts and her written critiques of my interpretations. Here, and throughout the entire data analysis process, discrepancies and contradictory interpretations among team members were resolved by checking them against the text (Ironside, 2003). In this way, a dialogue was created between me and the research team (Diekelmann, 2001).

After this initial cycle of analyzing the transcripts individually, I entered a new cycle in which I analyzed themes across participants. Taking my team's input into account and comparing their interpretations to my own and to each other's, I returned to the transcripts and initial interpretations looking specifically for shared meanings and common experiences (Diekelmann, 1998). I began collapsing and combining similar initial themes into broader themes that reached across participants. I then interpreted (thematized) these broader themes in a similar manner as before, with rich written descriptions of each theme, but this time I drew supportive textual excerpts from across multiple interviews. I then shared these new thematic interpretations with my research team, and they reviewed and critiqued them in the manner described previously.

As these cycles of interpretation continued, the team and I used three narrative strategies: (1) thematic analysis, (2) paradigm cases, and (3) exemplars. These strategies "provide the basis for entering practical worlds and understanding socially embedded knowledge" (Benner, 1994, p. 112). Thematic analysis was used to compare, contrast, and clarify themes and patterns across and within interviews and among portions of my

interpretations and the text. It should be noted here that a pattern reflects the shared meanings and practices across all participants and, therefore, is considered the “highest level of hermeneutical analysis” (Diekelmann, 2001, p. 56). It “expresses the relationship among themes and is present in every interview text” (Ironside, 2006, p. 481). A paradigm case is a rich, often lengthy story from a participant that “best exemplifie[s] the themes” (Ironside, 2004, p. 7) and “to which the team tends to return to examine from new perspectives” (Crist & Tanner, 2003, p. 204). It is a particularly insightful or robust narrative that captures something significant about the participants’ common experiences and ways of being in the world (Benner, 1994). Finally, exemplars are shorter salient segments of the text used to illustrate themes, patterns, and paradigm cases (Benner, 1994; Crist & Tanner, 2003). As mentioned previously, I kept excerpts from the text tied to every aspect of my written interpretations, and eventually settled on the excerpts to present in this final report as supportive evidence for my claims. These textual segments are exemplars. My team and I determined them to be the best quotations to explain my interpretations of the themes, patterns, and paradigm cases. As themes and patterns, paradigm cases, and exemplars became apparent to me, I suggested them to my research team, which critiqued my rationales and sharpened the interpretations.

Throughout the data analysis, I continued reading extensively in the transgender literature as well as in the areas of social work, sociology, gender studies, qualitative methods, and philosophical and applied hermeneutic phenomenology. As mentioned previously, I also attended two week-long intensive institutes on Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology. Diekelmann (2001) explicitly recommended this practice of immersing oneself in the relevant literature during a project so the researcher may

“bring this variety of texts to bear on emerging themes” and “extend and enhance the richness and complexity of the experience being investigated” (p. 511).

In hermeneutic phenomenology, where no interpretation is ever considered final, it can be difficult to know when to stop interpreting. My data analysis continued in the fashion detailed above until the team and I discerned my interpretations had reached beyond taken-for-granted, publicly available notions of appreciating transgenderism and that they were sufficiently coherent, plausible, comprehensive, and useful. Together, we ensured that there was nothing in my interpretations that was not reflected in the text. Nevertheless, as Diekelmann and Ironside (1998) pointed out, interpretation never really ends. The report’s audience will make the final interpretations, thereby determining the study’s worth.

Rigor and trustworthiness. Interpretive studies can be seductive targets for charges of bias and flimsy knowledge claims. After all, “interpretation is not only the primary task of hermeneutic phenomenology but is also the method’s primary vulnerability” (Armour et al., 2009, p. 106). The test of any qualitative inquiry is its ability to inspire confidence in its findings among those who read it. To earn that confidence, the researcher must demonstrate sufficient rigor in the research process that leads the results to be determined trustworthy. Even hermeneutic phenomenologists, who recognize the illusion of true objectivity, must take steps to keep their own biases from unduly distorting the research project. In this spirit, I attempted to satisfy four common criteria of rigor and trustworthiness for phenomenological hermeneutics: (1) coherence, (2) comprehensiveness, (3) plausibility/agreement, and (4) suggestiveness/potential (Madison, 1988).

Coherence. To satisfy this criterion, an interpretation must have integrity within itself. Gadamer (1975) maintained that valid interpretations have a sense of harmony between the details and the whole. An interpretation must “present a unified picture and not contradict itself” (Madison, 1988, p. 29). This holds even when the text being interpreted contains contradictions, as some participants’ interviews did. In those cases, I attempted to “make coherent sense of these contradictions” (p. 29). My research team helped ensure coherence as they read my interpretations and pointed out contradictions, discrepancies, and points of confusion to be resolved and clarified. As a result, readers of this report should find that they can follow how I arrived at my interpretations (Koch, 2006). My reasoning, as presented in this report, should be sound and all parts should fit together in a logical and understandable fashion.

Comprehensiveness. This criterion requires the researcher to take account of the entirety of each participant’s thoughts. No parts of the texts that have bearing on the matter of inquiry should be overlooked (Madison, 1988). In attempting to satisfy this criterion, I had my research team point out any relevant ideas I had missed in the transcripts. I gave each transcript prolonged and repeated attention and drew from each in the presentation of my interpretations in this final report. My use of the relevant literature also bolsters the comprehensiveness of my project, in that it enabled me to incorporate a wide range of relevant understandings into the design and implementation of the study.

Plausibility/agreement. This criterion is satisfied by remaining faithful to the texts being interpreted. In other words, “an interpretation must agree with what the author actually says” (Madison, 1988, p. 30). I accomplished this first by having

participants confirm the accuracy of their transcript and then by meticulously tying verbatim excerpts from the text to my interpretations. In the end, I presented the final interpretations in this report with exemplar excerpts that best illustrate the essence of the phenomenon. There should be nothing in the interpretations offered in this report that cannot be traced back to the text and supported by it. The result is a plausible interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants as revealed by their own narratives. The research team's critiques also assisted me in staying committed to the participant data, rather than unthinkingly injecting my own bias into the analysis.

As discussed previously, hermeneutic phenomenologists recognize that complete neutrality is neither possible nor desired. Still, the researcher cannot unduly insert her own biases and concerns into the interpretation. The participants' authentic voices must dominate the findings, and as researcher, I must make my own perspectives and interests explicit. This is accomplished by the explication of my fore-structure (see Appendix B), as explained previously. This is a statement in which I locate myself in the research and reveal my motivations, my interest in the phenomenon, my experience with the phenomenon, and my various identity statuses. Such formulation of my own hermeneutical situation as I have offered in my fore-structure statement, literature review, and research log (described below) has been called "the task par excellence of the interpreter" (Grondin, 1990, p. 53). Given the transparency this information creates, readers can then interpret and evaluate the various influences shaping—and hopefully enriching—my work.

The connections between text and interpretations can further be seen in the research log I kept throughout the study. This research log includes all of the interpretive

cycles of written notes and communications carried out by me and the research team. It also includes my reflections, insights, and decisions made throughout the process. In those documents, one can see the detailed connections between text and interpretation. As suggested by Koch (2006), among others, I submitted my research log and this report to an audit. This was conducted by my research team and members of my dissertation committee. These were the final steps I could take toward verifying plausibility and agreement in my interpretations.

Suggestiveness/potential. A sound interpretation will suggest new questions for further inquiry and ideas for practical application. It will be “fertile” in that it “expose[s] real and productive questions” and “stimulates further research and interpretation” (Madison, 1988, p. 30). This is similar to Annells’s (1999) standard that the findings of any hermeneutic phenomenological study should be useful. The readers should be able to apply the findings to their own understandings of the phenomenon and their dealings with it. To further help readers determine the applicability of my findings to their own situations, I have explained my sampling procedures and nature of the final sample in some detail. This should aid readers in putting my findings in their proper context and, therefore, to make more informed decisions about potential applicability. I have offered my thoughts on the potential for future research and application suggested by my findings in Chapter V. Ultimately, however, each reader will make her/his own decision as to the utility of my findings.

Protection of human subjects. Researchers studying human beings must take steps to protect them from potential harm caused by the research process itself. This is especially true when research participants are members of a historically vulnerable or

disenfranchised group, such as the transgender population. As such, this study was conducted under the approval and oversight of Indiana University's Institutional Review Board.

One essential means of protecting participants from harm is the use of voluntary informed consent. The informed consent form used in this study (see Appendix D) explained the purposes and methods of the study as well as any potential risks and benefits to the participant. The form was provided to each participant at least one week before her/his interview, and it was reviewed again in my presence immediately before each interview. I explicitly invited participants to ask any questions or express concerns before signing the form.

Another ethical consideration in research is who stands to benefit from the research findings. For the research to be as ethical as possible—and as a matter of social justice—vulnerable populations need to be the primary beneficiaries of research in which they participate. In my case, the benefits of the research for the transgender population should outweigh the burden of participation. In the current project, participation was not particularly burdensome, as it was strictly voluntary and involved sharing primarily positive information about oneself. The potential benefits to the population included a social work profession that is more understanding of the nature of transgenderism and more attuned to the potential strengths of transgender clients. Another possible benefit was a sense of personal empowerment from reflecting meaningfully, with an open and accepting listener, on the joys and rewards of one's transgender experience.

Qualitative social work researchers must carefully navigate the potentially blurry line between researcher and practitioner (Rodwell, 1998). Because qualitative methods

require participants to make personal disclosures and enter into dialogue with the researcher, researchers must maintain clear boundaries so that the conversation does not become a therapeutic intervention. In addition, interview research with transgender people about their life experiences could have potentially led to disclosures of painful life events. In such cases, social work researchers are most ethical if they are prepared to debrief participants and/or refer them to appropriate services (Martin & Meezan, 2003). I was prepared to provide debriefing and make appropriate referrals for the participants in this study, but none were warranted. My audited research log verified that I honored boundaries and remained in the role of the researcher.

Finally, confidentiality is of course a critical ethical issue in any research involving human participants, and extra steps must be taken to protect the identities of participants from vulnerable populations. The nature of interpretive data presents a particular challenge in this regard, because the interpretive researcher must maintain privacy and anonymity while making verbatim excerpts public (Lincoln, 1990). For this reason, I was the only person to know the identities of the participants; my research team and dissertation committee saw only de-identified data and materials. Participant names were removed from all written records (transcripts, interpretations, research log, final report), each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and transcripts and interpretations were “scrubbed” of any other potentially identifying information (such as names of towns, employers, or schools). I stored all digital voice recordings, transcripts, participant contact information, e-mail communications, research journal, and other project documents on my password-protected personal computer in my private home office. I was the only person to have access to this computer. I stored the signed consent

forms in a locked cabinet to which only I had access. All digital voice recordings, participant contact information, and participant e-mail communications were permanently deleted upon completion of the study.

Chapter IV. Results

Participant Profiles

I offer here a brief descriptive profile of each of the 15 participants in the order in which they were interviewed:

Sephie. Sephie was a 23-year-old male-to-female (MTF) transgender person. She had identified as transgender for 3 years. Sephie identified as white, non-religious, and bisexual. She had a high school diploma and was employed at a fast-food restaurant in the small rural town where she lived at the time of the interview. She had been in an intimate relationship with Siren, another interviewee and primary informant, for nearly three years. Siren referred Sephie to this study. They lived together, and their interviews took place in their shared apartment on different days. Sephie was a medium-height, slender person with absolutely straight black hair that fell below her shoulders. Her voice was deep. She wore large black earrings, a black t-shirt, a bright red skirt, and black leggings. The apartment was dark and somewhat cluttered with the paraphernalia of young adults: posters of rock stars and pop culture icons, DVDs, video games, art projects, magazines, and a cat.

Heléne. Like Sephie, Heléne was referred to the study by Siren. Heléne was a white, Catholic, 22-year-old pre-op MTF transsexual at the time of the interview. She had begun transitioning socially 2 ½ years prior. She was visibly developed in the chest and said she had been taking estrogen for a year. She had completed some college, was living in a rural area, and employed in a technology-related field. She identified her sexual orientation as heterosexual (attracted to men). She was about 5'6", of hefty build,

with black, wavy, shoulder-length hair. She had a square jaw and a jovial expression. On the day of her interview, she was dressed in casual women's clothing—jeans, a pink and yellow sweater, a gold necklace.

Siren. Siren was a 22-year-old, white, MTF transgender person who identified her gender identity as “fluid” and his sexual orientation as gay (attracted to men). She used male and female pronouns freely in referring to herself, and so I have done the same. It should be noted, too, that Siren insisted I use her real name in every aspect of the study. Siren had identified as transgender for 3 years at the time of the interview. As mentioned above, she was in a long-term relationship with Sephie, and so she, too, was living in a rural community. Siren identified as Wiccan or Pagan and held a bachelors degree at the time of the interview. I had known Siren for approximately three years, and she was a primary informant for this study by helping to recruit participants. At his interview, Siren, who is at least 6 feet tall with long bushy hair, was dressed as usual in sparkly pink glasses, and black punk-style clothing.

Lucas. Lucas was a white, 28-year-old transman living in a large Midwestern city. He identified his gender identity as transgender and his sexual orientation as “queer.” He had identified as transgender for 10 years. He had a bachelor's degree and denied any religious affiliation, although he spoke of spirituality more in his interview than many other participants. I invited Lucas to participate in the study after meeting him approximately 2 years before, when he was a guest speaker in another professor's sociology of gender and sexuality course. His interview took place in the house he shared with his fiancé at the time. (They have since married.) Their home was a well-cared-for one-story bungalow in a diverse and eclectic urban neighborhood. It was cozy

and decorated tastefully with unique contemporary art reflecting the themes of peace, love, and justice; music posters; and brightly painted colors on the walls. Lucas, who is about 5'5", had become much more masculine physically since I had last seen him. He was thicker and more muscular everywhere, and his voice was much deeper. His black hair was buzzed close to the scalp, and he wore dark-rimmed glasses.

Francis. Francis was the third and final participant referred by Siren. She was a white, 21-year-old self-identified genderqueer person on the FTM spectrum. She had identified as such for 7 years. She described her sexual orientation as “queer” or “dyke.” She identified strongly as a Unitarian Universalist. She had a bachelor’s degree and was living with her parents in a relatively affluent suburb of a major Midwestern city. The interview took place in her parents’ home. Francis was about 5'8", of slight build, with short, pitch-black hair. She wore stylish dark-rimmed glasses. She was dressed comfortably in a t-shirt and cargo shorts. She seemed anxious, but told me she wasn't; she said she had actually been looking forward to the interview. She also wielded an impressive vocabulary.

Wanda. I invited Wanda to participate in the study after meeting her at a professional training. She was a 62-year-old MTF post-op transsexual. She claimed to have been transgender her entire life, but she did not transition until she was in her 40s. She was retired from a career in public service and living in a major Midwestern city. She held a masters degree, identified as Daoist, and reported having white and Cherokee heritage. She identified her sexual orientation as lesbian. She had one adult child—a daughter. Wanda was quite tall, well over 6', and rather slim with longish brown hair, which she had it tied up in a colorful scarf on the day of her interview. She selected her

favorite neighborhood coffee shop as the site for our meeting. She was in good humor and quite talkative. Wanda offered to refer other participants to my study, but none of those contacts panned out.

Felicia. Felicia was the first of seven participants referred to the study by Teresa (another participant who was also a primary informant). Felicia was a white, 50-year-old MTF crossdresser. She was living in the suburbs of a major Midwestern city and working in a fairly lucrative field. She had a master's degree in the natural sciences and denied any religious affiliation. She defined her sexual orientation as heterosexual (attracted to women). She was tall and thin with long, blonde, curly hair. She wore a tight-fitting black dress and heels. She had a vision problem, which made it hard to know where she was looking or how to make eye contact. She also spoke quite rigidly and precisely, and also lisped a little—the result being a noticeably distinct speech pattern. Her interview took place in Teresa's home, as did the interviews of all but one of Teresa's referrals.

Melissa. Melissa was Teresa's second referral. Melissa was a white, 67-year-old, retired military officer. She was divorced and had several children and grandchildren. She was living in a suburban area, denied any religious affiliation, and had a high school diploma. For the past 10 years, she had identified as bigender—equally male and female with two distinct personas in one person. She described her sexual orientation as both “heteromale” and lesbian (solely attracted to women). She was dressed as Melissa (not her male persona) on the day of her interview. She wore her light-brown hair in a fashionable, asymmetrical bob. She had on some type of fishnet stockings, a skirt, and a

loose, “ripped” shirt draped over her shoulders. Her shirt kept falling off her shoulders exposing her black, lacy bra. It was obvious she loved how she looked; she oozed confidence and self-assuredness.

Bonita. Bonita was the third participant referred by Teresa. She was a 37-year-old, African-American MTF crossdresser. She was distinguished among participants by the relative infrequency with which she crossdressed—sometimes as rarely as once a month. She reported having been a crossdresser for over 20 years. On the day of her interview, she was dressed in male garb, with a few-days-old beard and a Spiderman t-shirt and hat. She lived in an urban area and identified as Christian and straight. She clarified that being straight for her included being attracted to transgender women (“t-girls”). She had a high school diploma and was currently unemployed. She tended to speak loudly and over-articulate her words, which resulted in an unusual speech pattern.

Corina. Corina was the fourth participant referred by Teresa. She was a white, 59-year-old MTF crossdresser who had identified as such for 54 years—since she was 5 years old. She identified her gender identity as “female” and her sexual orientation as “hetero to gay to hetero,” meaning that she was solely attracted to women. She was currently retired and living in a suburban area. She had a high school diploma and some college. At the interview, Corina was in her male presentation as Carl. Carl was tall—over 6 feet—and bald except for a ring of thin gray hair. He had a single earring in each ear and wore a black t-shirt and jeans. He was quite heavy. He explained that Carl hadn’t been Corina in several years but would love to “dress” again. She hadn’t dressed as Corina recently because of her weight—she thought she was too heavy to look good as a woman. When Carl first came into the interview room, he was gruff. I went over the

nature of the interview—about its focus on appreciating being transgender. He said, “Appreciate it? It’s miserable!” I validated his perspective, and then suggested that maybe the interview was not for him, since it requires that a person does find something to value in being trans. His tune changed quickly, and he said, “Oh, there’s all kinds of things I love about it!” So we proceeded with the interview. His face absolutely lit up when he described how it had felt to embody Corina.

Krystal. Krystal was the fifth participant referred by Teresa. She was a white, 39-year-old post-op MTF transsexual who had identified as female her entire life. She identified her sexual orientation as straight (attracted to men). She considered herself Christian and was living in a suburban area near a major Midwestern city. She had a high school diploma and was unemployed at the time of the interview. Krystal was about 5’4” with shoulder length light brown hair (a wig, as she demonstrated during the interview). She wore a comfortable blouse and jeans with sandals. She had a large ring on her right hand full of pink stones. She was thrilled with the results of her surgeries but nervous about the interview. She said she had a learning disability and sometimes had a hard time putting her thoughts into words. I tried to reassure her that there were no right or wrong answers, just her story of her own experiences. Knowing she was nervous, I reassured and encouraged her throughout the interview in a way I had not done with other interviewees.

Abby. Abby was the sixth participant referred by Teresa. She was also living as Teresa’s housemate at the time of the interview. Abby was a white, 58-year-old MTF crossdresser who had begun identifying as female 5 years prior. She identified as Jewish, had a master’s degree, and was retired from a fairly well-paid career. She was in the

process of divorcing her wife, with whom she had two adult children. She described her sexual orientation as heterosexual (attracted to women). Abby was lean and tall—surely over 6 feet. On the day of her interview, Abby was dressed in a red blouse, black slacks, and a long dangly necklace with large stones draped twice around her neck. She wore a wig of medium brown bobbed hair. She seemed in a very good mood and said she had been looking forward to her interview for a long time.

Teresa. I invited Teresa to participate in this study after meeting her once before when she spoke as part of a crossdressers panel on my campus. She was a white, 58-year-old MTF, intersex, non-op transsexual, by her own description. She had identified as transgender for 15 years and lived full-time as a woman. Teresa had completed some college but was unemployed at the time of the interview. She described her sexual orientation as being attracted to females. She had a comfortable suburban home, which she graciously opened as a site for me to interview seven of her friends and acquaintances. On the day of her interview, Teresa, who was perhaps 6 feet tall, wore a bright, multi-colored sun dress covered by a black cardigan, and a straight, jet-black, shoulder-length wig.

Fahima. Fahima was the final participant referred by Teresa and the only one of that group not to be interviewed in Teresa's home. Fahima's interview took place at her own apartment, which was located in an ethnically diverse urban neighborhood. Fahima was a 30-year-old MTF pre-op transsexual originally from an Eastern country. She had fled her home country due to persecution on the basis of her gender expression. She had subsequently gained asylum in the United States, where she had now lived for two years. She described her gender identity as female and her sexual orientation as straight

(attracted to men). She began identifying as female at the age of four. She held a medical degree in her home country, but that credential counted for nothing in the U.S. She was working in a restaurant at the time of her interview. She identified religiously as a non-traditional Muslim and a Deist. At her interview, Fahima wore tight black jeans, a black t-shirt, and a patterned black jacket. She wore a cream-colored knit hat over her thick, black, curly hair. The first thing she said to me was, “I hate wearing guy clothes. I can’t walk right in them.” Her apartment was a small but comfortable studio flat with a kitchenette, a single bed, and a couch. Numerous live plants and the aromatic sage tea Fahima brewed for us made the place feel cozy.

Brandon. I invited Brandon to participate in the study after having met him twice before when he and I were invited to be panelists on the same transgender issues panels at a large state university. Brandon was a white, 37-year-old post-op FTM transsexual who had identified as transgender for 13 years. He could easily be mistaken for 25—a fact he said “drives me nuts.” He was about 5’7” and of slight build. He had a face full of freckles, gray eyes, a big smile, a small goatee, and neatly trimmed short brown hair. Brandon and his wife lived in a large Midwestern city where he was self-employed. He has a bachelor’s degree and identified strongly as a Christian (Methodist, to be precise). He described his sexual orientation as “queer.” At the interview, Brandon was dressed comfortably in a sweatshirt and jeans. He selected his favorite neighborhood coffee shop as the location of his interview.

The Essential Pattern: Intimate Connection

In the end, all significant themes with the participants' narratives revealed themselves to be constitutive aspects of one unifying pattern—intimate connection. This sense of intimate connection—an honest, trusting, affirming, contented, enriching, and meaningful experience of familiarity, closeness, and attachment—was discovered (in the Heideggerian sense of the word) at the heart of every participant's lived experience of valuing being transgender. As it encompasses the shared meanings and practices of all participants, the concept of intimate connection satisfies the definition of a hermeneutical pattern—the “highest level of hermeneutical analysis” (Diekelmann, 2001, p. 56). My primary conclusion, therefore, is to suggest that the essence of the lived experience of valuing one's transgenderism is reflected in the meanings embedded within the concept of intimate connection.

In the interpretations offered below, I explicate multiple layers of inter-related meanings that emerged from participants' narratives and eventually revealed themselves as constitutive aspects of the essential pattern of intimate connection. In describing their appreciation for being transgender, all participants spoke of being drawn into intimate relationships in three broad thematic areas: (1) Intimate Connection with Self, (2) Intimate Connection with Others, and (3) Intimate Connection with a Larger Purpose. Ten sub-themes emerged as constitutive aspects of intimate connection within these three realms. Three of these sub-themes comprised the Intimate Connection with Self theme: (A) Being True, (B) Being a Unique Whole, and (C) Being Strong. Five sub-themes constituted the Intimate Connection with Others theme: (D) Being Free, (E) Being Open to Others, (F) Being Socially Competent, (G) Being Helpful to Others, and (H) Being in

Stronger Relationships. Two sub-themes made up the Intimate Connection with a Larger Purpose theme: (I) Being Spiritually Enriched and (J) Being Part of Social Change.

A visual representation of the main themes and sub-themes is provided in Figure 1 below. This diagram should assist the reader in visualizing the structure of the essential elements of the participants' lived experiences, but the reader is cautioned against interpreting the demarcation of boundaries within the diagram as implying rigid boundaries dividing themes and sub-themes. In reality, all themes and sub-themes are inter-related within the rich narrative web provided by the participants.

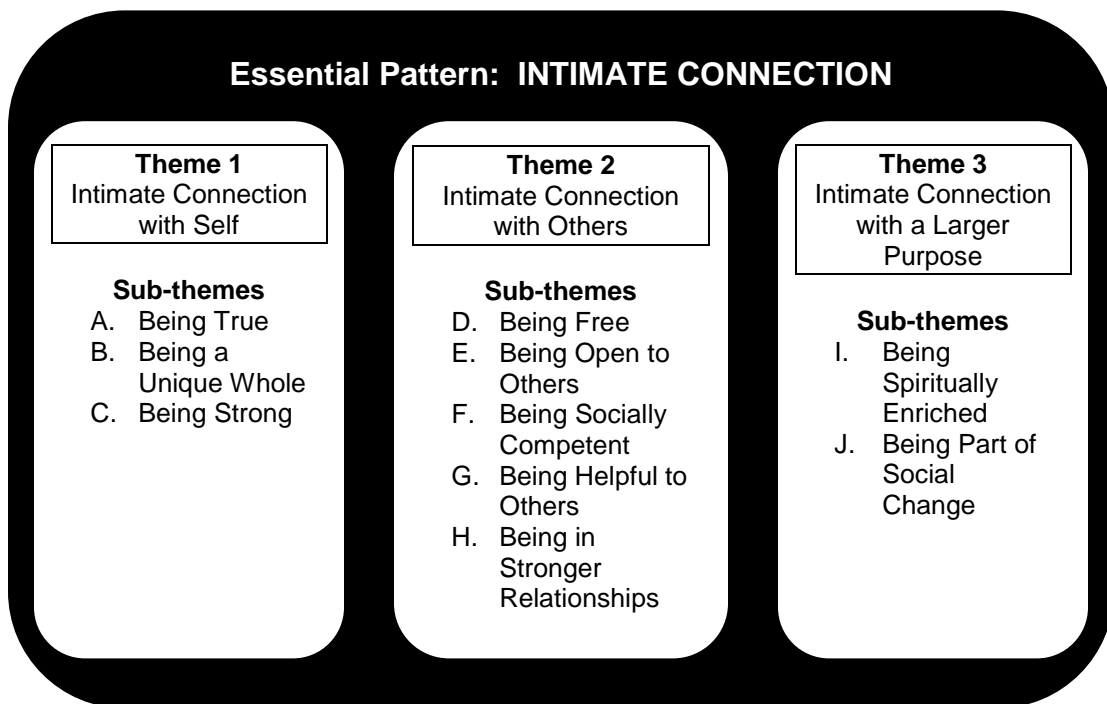


Figure 1. Essential meanings constituting the phenomenon of valuing one's transgenderism.

I further illustrate my conclusions about the essential structure of appreciating one's transgenderism by offering below a detailed interpretive analysis of each theme and sub-theme. My interpretations are supported by verbatim exemplars and extended paradigm cases taken directly from the participants' transcripts.

Theme 1: Intimate connection with self. An experience of intimate connection with one's self was interpreted as one primary aspect of valuing transgenderism. The constitutive meanings discovered in this area reflected a sense of self-knowledge, personal integrity, completeness, and strength, which may be seen as supporting intimate connections in the other two realms (with other people and with a larger purpose). In describing intimate connection with self, participants' narratives centered on three inter-related sub-themes: (A) Being True, (B) Being a Unique Whole, and (C) Being Strong. Each of these sub-themes captures different facets of participants' experiences of feeling closely integrated with a true and unique sense of self, in which they experienced profound wholeness and resilience, as described below.

Sub-theme A: Being true. Truth is required in any relationship defined as intimate. Even in relationship to one's self, intimacy is thwarted without an honest exploration of the self in which one's innermost life is laid bare, made vulnerable, and ultimately accepted and valued. In this vein, many participants described how they valued their experiences of discovering and expressing a true sense of self. These stories, which sometimes revealed the risk and challenge of being unflinchingly honest with oneself, were routinely marked by overwhelmingly positive feelings of elation, satisfaction, and peace. Narratives of being true also revealed how the experience involved a sense of integrity in which the inside and outside were finally aligned, an

affirmation of one's true self in social interactions, and a realization that life made more sense when one was being true to self. In general, participants described how the seemingly common human achievement of feeling real and authentic and expressing that to the world is heightened and made particularly sweet when it has been denied so long.

Abby's story exemplified the appreciation described by several participants of the process it took to find their true selves. As such, her story serves here as a paradigm case. In coming to know herself as transgender, Abby found meaning in the process of self-discovery. Although many other participants described similar experiences, Abby discussed with particular depth and clarity how she values the opportunity she has had to reflect intensely on who she is in her truest form. She has uncovered layers and complexities within herself that she was simply unaware of before. This inward discovery, paired with a new outward expression of self that was the result of that discovery, has brought Abby to a state of all-encompassing joy. Her self-discovery has literally been experienced as a dis-covering—removing the cover or the veil that kept integral aspects of herself buried for more 50 years. That uncovering, revealing, or unveiling is accompanied by euphoria, as Abby describes:

So, it gives me this extra layer or layers that I never really knew that I had or were there, and there's more layers still growing. There's a lot more for me to discover about myself and about others. What that is exactly, I can't tell you what it is until I have it, but...Exciting. Eureka! Fulfilling. Happiness. Joy. Glad. All those adjectives, and I just feel them all. I feel my endorphins going off, so I'm in a real pleasure state.

Through a journey of self-discovery, participants virtually unanimously gave voice to the goal of living a life of integrity—a life in which they *are* who they present to the world. Other participants' stories resonated with Abby's description of her intention to live with such integrity—living honestly and fully with herself in the world, while

refusing to excise any dimension experienced as part of her true nature. There is the sense of being a false and incomplete human being until that integration is achieved:

And I want that reflection to reflect the person inside of me—my inner self—because, of course, we have our perceived self and then our real self. Often those two are spread far apart, and the closer you can get the two to be closer or the same is the ideal, then you're a real full person operating on all burners, and I think you're just a lot happier for it, because you're not walking around with false illusions about yourself. And that takes time and it's often hard to realize what your real self is. It's easy to identify your ideal self, because that you think of all the time. But the reality check of "who are you really?" people don't often take a look too deeply at that, because if they did, they wouldn't necessarily like what they see. So, I'm trying to get mine even closer together continuously. It's an ongoing work to be able to do that. But, yeah, it just makes me feel just wonderful and fulfilled inside.

Many participants described an appreciation of the numerous positive emotions embedded in their experiences of being their true selves. Taken together, these rewarding emotions seem to be central to the experience of a true self. In fact, they appear to make the true self knowable as such. They are taken as confirmation that the true self is, in fact, being expressed. Participants spoke of exuberant feelings, such as joy, elation, happiness, excitement, but also of "quieter" feelings, such as calm, relief, balance, fulfillment, gratitude, and peace. Abby's description of expressing her true self reflects both exuberance and the quieter emotions present in so many participants' interviews. In "female mode," as she calls it, she has an image of herself now that she can embrace and celebrate. At the same time, she experiences a pervasive sense of calm fulfillment:

I just don't really pay attention to the mirror in male mode, but in the femme mode, I really do. And so I like the shape, the look, and I just kind of giggled to myself inside my brain that, "This feels really great. I just really enjoy this." So, yeah, walking down and looking at myself in the mirror, I just, I just felt giggly, giddy, like, "Wow! I really look great!" And I like the reflection that I see.

...and I find that more relaxing and more enjoyable to be in the female role, more than the male role... I just find it [being in female mode] fulfilling, I find it calming, I find it soothing, I find it exciting... So the overall umbrella is a calmer peace about myself, a greater fulfillment of myself. I think a better image of myself.

Krystal, a post-op MTF transsexual, provided another example of this particular emotional combination:

And now, I'm actually living my dream of being who I should have always been born as. It's an incredible feeling. It's kind of, words kind of can't always explain it, it's just, I feel so happy with who I am. I feel more confident. I feel...it's just, very happy, and it's just, it's incredible. I wouldn't want to change my way again. I want to stay who I am now.

I'm just very much at peace and I'm much more happier and it just kind of shines through me that...you know, my friends can see it and, you know, I'm at peace with my body.

Krystal's story demonstrated the commonly expressed joy involved in entering the world as one's true self. Her story also illustrated another shared notion: that having been deprived of one's true self for so long, many participants are now sensitive to the profound gift that is the ability to present an authentic sense of self to the world.

Krystal's capacity for appreciating the expression of her true self is heightened by the fact that for so many years, so had to present a false self to the world:

I feel very free being trans, I mean, being, finally living as my true self, from everybody that's in my life, them knowing me as this person, not have to hide and pretend that I'm this other person. And that's kind of how I always felt growing up—trying to pretend.

Melissa provided another example of the joy that characterizes the experience of presenting a full, authentic sense of self. Melissa shared in her interview that although she faced some very dark times, including at least one suicide attempt, she can now hardly contain her "joy of being alive" as her true, bigender self: "And it's amazing, it

really is amazing how much more I appreciate simply being alive because now I'm not repressing anything; now I'm not lost."

A similar enthusiasm for life was present in Sephie's description of the experience of being her true self. She described how her life is "brighter" and "more fun" now that she is living authentically as a transgender woman. The old burdens of imposed (hegemonic) masculinity, judgment from others, shame, and negative self-talk are "gone." Now when others judge her negatively, she has the wherewithal to counteract it. She attributes this to the good things that living authentically as a transwoman has brought into her life: a loving partner, good friends, an accepting community, a confident sense of self. In social work terms, the protective factors in her life seem to have increased since coming out, which in turn has boosted her resiliency:

It's like being able to look in the mirror and appreciate what you look like and not have to worry about anybody judging that. It's like the self-confidence, the negative self-confidence ideas that you may have are gone because you don't have to worry. They're just, they're gone. So life just feels brighter and everything just seems more fun...It's just everything in my life is now changed for the better because of it.

Corina spoke, too, of her extreme happiness at being able to dress in feminine attire, thereby expressing what she experienced as her true self. She described a particularly gleeful time when, as a young child, her older sister collaborated in her crossdressing:

...she dressed me up for Halloween and did my make-up, and I looked like little JonBenet or whatever her name was. Oh god, I looked better than her. Gave me a little beauty mark and we went out trick-or-treating, and I got to go to school like that, for Halloween. Oh, god, I was so happy, I was just the happiest kid in the world.

Heléne expressed a similar joy that comes from dressing and grooming in accordance with her true sense of self:

Every day, there's something that's so invigorating about that experience, because after I shave, it really does change how much I'm smiling. In the morning, I look at myself, and I'm just like, "Oh, I'm depressed." And the second I'm done shaving it's just like, "That looks a little bit better." And then I'll apply a small powder coat on my face, and it's like, "That's a lot better." And so it really just makes me feel happy.

This joy is sharpened in contrast to how Heléne feels before engaging in her grooming routine: "I don't feel right until it's done. I feel kind of like dirty, you know, sick, unclean, and unhealthy."

A related example came from Fahima, who similarly described the joy and satisfaction she experiences when presenting as a woman—as her true self. As she transitions, she is able to present more and more frequently as a woman, but she does not yet feel comfortable being in public generally as one. Nevertheless, when she is alone or with certain friends, she is able to express her true self, and it makes her extraordinarily happy. It brings her peace, freedom, a sense of balance, an ease of movement, and a new appreciation of her own worth. Her narrative also illustrated the profound experience several participants shared of looking in the mirror and, for the first time in their lives, experiencing an intense sense of identification with the reflected image:

...I was never, ever happier than this moment in my life. I've never been happier. And I was so comfortable with the way I walked. I felt so good. My body was balanced. And I looked in the mirror, and I was crying, because I see *me*⁸ in the mirror, you know?

...when I started the hormones four months ago, I feel very relaxed. I don't want to hook up anymore. I feel my body is precious. It's strange! Like, in the past, no, I want to give it to whomever. Now, no. The estrogen changed me that way. I have internal peace.

For some participants, the experience of expressing one's true self through clothing and grooming was characterized by an intense love of self. Corina captured this experience

⁸ Italicized type is used to indicate participants' own emphasis when it was evident in the audio-recordings.

perhaps most profoundly. When dressed in femme, she simply couldn't get enough of herself. This is not to say crossdressing was an erotic experience for her—neither Corina nor any other participant described the dressing experience as erotic. Rather, like Fahima, Corina found herself wanting to nurture herself in a way she had never experienced while in male presentation. In femme, she was someone to be cared for and cherished, and she didn't want that feeling to stop:

Oh, that started the minute I finished my first make-over. I wish I had that picture we took. And I just...I was amazed! And I was just, oh, I was in love with myself.

It's different. I mean, that, that's like picking up a little puppy and you just want to cuddle it and hold it and just...that's how you feel. You want to cuddle it, hold it, and just immerse yourself in that Corina. You don't want Carl anywhere over here—you want him away from you. You want to just, I just want to see that Corina all the time.

Another feature of being true was the perception that life had become clearer and made more sense. As with their experiences of positive emotions, the experiences of perceptual clarity and life making sense served as confirmation of the participants' sense of a true self. Abby, for example, described an unfettering of her aesthetic sensibilities as she came out as transgender. She talked of an enhanced perception or awareness of the world as part of what she had discovered on her transgender journey. It is as though her senses have been heightened, and she is now able to see the complexities and nuances of the world for perhaps the first time. A veil has been lifted and the resulting clarity allows her to immerse herself in a heightened sensory experience of life and all it has to offer:

...the liberating feeling I find allows just a greater sense of me. A greater sense of my reality, of my perception of the things that I see around me. I can't say I wear rose-colored glasses, but it allows greater clarity of what I see around me, where things I would not have noticed before, I now notice.

...in femme mode it's...I don't only see a tree, but I see the green leaves, I see the brown, I see the red on a leaf that's sitting right over here. I only perceived the tree and its movement before, but now I see its color as well. So, things are more detailed. I see the colors, the textures, and appreciate them, where before I kind of ignored them. I didn't really pay attention much to them. I mean, they were there, but it wasn't something I was really, I guess, had an interest in or realizing that there are other facets of what I'm seeing that I can really give more appreciation to. I think for me it means that I have a better outlook on the world, is how I feel. And it feels more rewarding, more fulfilling. It does, it feels more rewarding and more fulfilling. That I can perceive that clarity and, well, that I can even recognize that there is more clarity. And it's just very rewarding, very gratifying. I'm more in contact with what's around me that I had been before.

...so, that's what I mean by the clarity that I've gained. And I find that very, very enjoyable, because there's so much more to perceive and see than I was allowing myself. All that was still there in male mode, it wasn't being hidden anywhere, I was just simply not sensitive to it, because I had some kind of a film that was obscuring what was really there to be seen.

Felicia's narrative further reflected the notion of life becoming clear and comprehensible by describing how, upon coming to know and accept her true self, she began experiencing the world as making sense. The world is understandable to her now in a way it was not before she was trans-identified. There is a sense of clarity—informed by her intuition—that has come with her transgender journey:

...basically it does seem like there was an ability that I have now that I didn't have earlier, and it just makes life seem to make more sense. It's not as confusing.

I just feel like I have better intuition than I did before I was openly transgendered. Things just seem to make more sense now.

Another particularly vibrant example of life making more sense came from Teresa, who struggled for many years to be the boy—and later the man—that everyone expected of her. In describing this struggle, she used the metaphor of a prison to illustrate the

experience of portraying a false self. She was eventually “released from captivity” by a dream—a sudden vision of herself as a woman—that led her to make sense of her life in a more meaningful way:

Before, I was just a muddy little mess. I couldn’t do much about anything. I didn’t even know what was wrong. I was in a tailspin for a lot of years, I just didn’t know. It’s like you get stuck in your own prison...

I guess I’d have to say that throughout my life I have constantly struggled to be the person people wanted me to be, expected of me. And I finally reached the point in my life that it was spiraling down, things were just constantly getting worse, just...it was terrible. And then I had this dream that I saw myself in a college classroom somewhere in a red plaid skirt and white blouse, and when I woke up from that, everything started to make sense. So, after I had the dream, I was just so elated, you know, that I finally got to be myself, who I was physically. I didn’t know what life was really about until I had the dream.

Teresa experienced this dream as an unexpected gift that explained her life to her. With the dream, her life suddenly made sense, and she knew what she had to do. Now, after living full-time as a woman for many years, Teresa is certain the dream was right, and that she was meant to follow the vision it offered for her life. She has “put the shoes on the right feet” and is now living life happily, comfortably, honestly. Being true to herself as a woman has literally made her life possible. “I can’t live any other way. I really can’t,” she explained. She further described the importance of being true to herself and how life makes no sense otherwise:

What’s it really like....well, I guess you could look at it as, I think it was M. J. or one of those that said, “It’s like wearing a pair of shoes on the wrong feet. Yeah, you can do it. You can get through life, and it’s going to create problems here and there. You’ll get calluses in the worst places. But why do it? Why not just wear the shoes on the right feet?” Why be miserable all your life?

Wanda provided another compelling description of life making sense when one is being true to self. After years of struggle, searching, and self-denial, Wanda now interprets the

entirety of her life as having led up to preparing her to transition. She now understands various experiences she had, many of which appeared at first irrelevant to being transgender, as having given her the tools or the insights she needed to pursue the expression of her true self. By interpreting her story in this way, Wanda experiences an awareness that her life actually has made sense, and that her transgender journey has, at least in part, revealed her life's purpose, destiny, or ultimate meaning:

Looking back on a lot of these things, they weren't obvious at the time, but looking back it's like they were all pointing in a certain direction that I was supposed to do *this*. And the fact that once I made that decision to be true to myself, everything lined up to make that easier, for the first time in my life.

...suddenly everything just opened up and it became more obvious why I was going through this, why I had been going through it, and just...things kept happening, you know, as I would move along. A lot of the things that I had learned in various pieces of my life suddenly started coming together. Like all those years I had spent as an activist, an activist in labor and a teacher and in the counseling profession, and all these other things, they all just came together, so it was like, those were things that I needed to experience in order to make myself more effective in getting through this process.

The vital importance of having others validate one's expression of a true self was a particularly strong aspect of this sub-theme. Fahima's story illustrated the happiness and sense of release stemming from presenting her true self and having that self affirmed by others. For example, she described a time she presented as a woman in public and received affirming feedback from strangers:

So, yeah, I went out, and I felt this strange feeling, and the comments from straight guys—imagine! It was *so* good. Like, oh, my god! I just can't find words to describe it, like, I'm in heaven, you know? Like, "Yes! That's what I wanted!" [Laughs] Just the feeling of presenting *me* outside. Not like walking in this jail. I call my male body "jail."

And also, I want to try hard, I hope so, to keep my figure, so it's like, it feels good, like it raises my self-esteem when people say, like, "Wow! You look good as a girl." And then I say, "I worked hard to be that way."

Another example was when Fahima's true nature was affirmed by another MTF person:

...she [an MTF acquaintance] brought me a box, and she said, "This is a gift for *Fahima*." And I went back home that night, and I opened it, and I couldn't stop crying that night. It was...they were female high heels. Very classy, black, nice. And I was so happy, because it was a gift for *me*. Not for my external person whom people see. It was for *me*.

Abby provided vivid descriptions of how meaningful she finds social validation of her true self. She experiences herself as primarily feminine and wants others to see her as she sees herself. When this happens, Abby feels satisfaction, validation, and fulfillment. She offered several concrete examples of the social validation that has meant so much to her. In the one instance, she was doing some carpentry work on a friend's back stoop when a neighbor woman addressed her as "ma'am:"

All the sudden, a voice...comes from somewhere, and the voice says, "Ma'am?" And I'm sawing away. "Ma'am?" And I'm sawing away. "Ma'am?!" And I'm sawing away, and I stop, because I'm hearing somebody's trying to attract a woman's attention by calling out, "Ma'am." And I stop sawing for a moment and then I clearly heard, "Ma'am?" and then I realized where it was coming from. The neighbor had come out from next door, and then it dawned on me: "I am the ma'am!" And it was a fulfilling moment. I just thought that was really fulfilling, that, "Ah, I feel great!" I really do. I just loved it. That was a terrific moment that I had. I just felt elated that I was actually addressed as ma'am.

To Abby, this meant that she was being seen as she intended to be seen—that she was succeeding in presenting the self she wanted to express. She was successfully performing her feminine gender identity, because others were recognizing it as such. Another example of receiving external validation occurred when Abby and her transwomen friends were leaving a transgender gathering and ran into a group of college-aged

cisgender women coming out of a bar. These young women complimented Abby, which she took as evidence that she was successfully conveying the feminine self she intended:

...this one young lady swirled around with her drink and took a look at us and just gave us the once over, and she said, “Oh, my god! I cannot believe it! A woman who knows how to accessorize! I cannot believe this! This is fantastic!” I was like, “What do you mean?” She said, “Your gown, your shoes, your bag, your earrings, everything you’ve got on—it’s totally coordinated accessories.” And she keeps going on... And her two friends with her, she kept saying to them, “You guys have to really check this out and just appreciate it again!” And for this one person I have to say, yes, she said, “You look elegant in what you have.” And I thought, “That’s nice. I like that.” And the other person said, “And you look really great. Absolutely great.” And a third person said, “And you look so sexy, I can’t believe. I can never get that sexy.” So I’ve had some fulfilling moments where I felt even better about myself when unsolicited people, people I don’t even know, haven’t met, stop and say how good you look.

These examples of external validation confirmed for Abby that she was on the right path. She interpreted social affirmation such as this as evidence that she is beginning to live a more integrated life, in which her inner self and outer self fit together in the way that is most acceptable to her:

Well, what it means to me is that apparently I’m learning more about how to express myself in the feminine mode. And I guess it just means that I’m getting closer to my goal of what I want to achieve, is I guess, is what it means. It’s surprising when it happens. It’s pleasurable when it happens. And it means, “Yeah, I’m moving closer to the self that I want to be,” so...that’s what it means to me. I think it means that I’m getting closer to the place I want to be, which is in touch with myself, with my inner self.

As several of the above excerpts suggest, participants often described a deeply satisfying and enlivening sense of integrity from embracing and expressing their true selves. As their true selves were revealed and expressed, a solid foundation for life fell into place.

Fahima provided a related description of the personal integration that has come from trusting her decision to pursue her true self. Having recently begun her medical

transition, she has found herself feeling that her true self is now in her possession. She described being increasingly at home in her body and how that provides a stable platform from which she can consider her priorities and cope with challenges. She has gained her true self, and that is enough:

So I'm having this part-time job now, and later I will see what I can do. But I don't need, like, I used to be, oh, a prosperous life, a big house, a car....I don't care anymore. 'Cause this is a life—to be you. And not to be foreign from your own body. That's what I've always wanted. Just to look in the mirror and see *me*.

However, my circumstances are worse than they used to be. Like, [I only work] part-time....I don't know what I'm going to do next in my life here. My dad is getting older, and he might leave [Country 2] and go back to my country and lose his income. So I'm so screwed, you know? But at the same time, there's this strange happiness inside me, and a feeling of, like, oh, with all that I have, I say, "Whatever." Because I have me now. It just feels good, really.

Sub-theme B: Being a unique whole. In addition to truth, intimacy also often affords human beings a profound sense of wholeness—of being complete—and of being unique or distinctive in one's wholeness. This internal dimension of intimate connection was clearly conveyed in participants' narratives. Participants commonly described feeling increasingly complete and exquisitely unique as they came to know themselves as transgender. This involved accepting all aspects of themselves and expressing that multidimensionality openly.

Participants frequently expressed valuing their feeling of being one-of-a-kind or "special." For many, this included having a sense of self that transcends a single gender category. For some, this meant embracing a personal biography in which they have been at some points a girl/woman and at other times a boy/man. It was also common for participants to voice appreciation for having had the rich life experience of living in

multiple gender roles. In this sense, participants often referred to themselves as fortunate enough to “have it all” or to have “the best of both worlds.” Many participants described valuing their multi-gendered lives for having allowed them to acquire unique perspectives and a broader understanding of the social world. Several expressed appreciation for how knowing “both worlds” has equipped them to understand and deal with a wider range of people and situations more effectively.

Participants frequently expressed appreciation of being able to act as complete human beings in the world by virtue of not being constrained to a single, one-dimensional gender role. Sephie captured this spirit when she told of how coming out as transgender made her feel more complete:

I felt that as I started maturing into who I am now, it’s like I felt that I fit in better with talking about girl aspects *and* guy aspects more so than just guy aspects in life. So I don’t know; I just [sigh], I feel that if I wasn’t transgendered, I’d be missing a piece of my life that would not be there.

Felicia provided a particularly clear and detailed description of feeling complete by virtue of being transgender. I consider her narrative on this sub-theme to be a paradigm case. She has found a rewarding balance of masculinity and femininity within herself as a transgender person. She no longer feels required to perform one gender role or the other—she can be both or either as makes sense in any given situation. She synthesizes “the best of both worlds” and describes an unexpected sense of completeness now that she is living a transgender life:

I think in just general terms I feel more whole. And I think I felt whole before, but I didn’t really realize that there was another part of me that *could* exist, but *didn’t* exist. It just seems like the way it should be, the way I am now. It kind of reaffirms my belief that I’m doing the right thing.

Despite her strong identification with femininity, Felicia does not wish to “erase” her male self or her masculine traits. She is not interested in hormones or surgery. She values many parts of her male experience and intends to hold onto those things. For example, she describes her approach to cycling as one which calls upon her competitive spirit. She sees this as a masculine characteristic she does not want to lose:

...there are times when I'll be cruising along and I see that hill going up and I may upshift to make it harder to pedal, but you know, just go up and attack that hill. It might be what people would consider to be more of a masculine trait, doing something like that. Certainly, women are like that, too, sometimes, but I think on average women are less likely to do that than men, but to me it's just kind of continuing along, not trying to change my hormone balance or anything like that, it just made sense to me to go ahead and really push myself. I have always done that, and I don't want to lose that part of me.

At the same time, embracing her potential for femininity has opened Felicia to other activities and experiences that she might not have gone for in the past, when she felt locked into a masculine role:

So, to me, you know, if I didn't realize I was transgender and come out openly, I still might be doing some of this stuff, but...to me it's part of, it would be more likely with how I feel differently really allowing myself to be openly transgender to let certain things like yoga and stuff be attractive—something I want to do.

In making sense of her appreciation for being transgender, Felicia referred often to mental changes she has experienced. These cognitive or psychological shifts she has experienced as she has come to understand herself as transgender have brought with them a sense of improved ability to function effectively both socially and professionally. She initially described these mental changes as an “opening up of intuition,” which she considers more “feminine” than her previously “masculine” ways of thinking. In fact,

before embracing her transgender identity, her masculine self had actively avoided thinking in stereotypically “feminine” ways:

Well, before I really came out, I think I just kinda suppressed a part of me, and I didn’t allow myself to think in certain ways. I’m a scientist, and I think I try to break things down in a very analytical way, a logical way, cause and effect, you want to try to accomplish something, and you kind of look at it in a very practical and straight-forward way.

As she became increasingly comfortable with her whole self—both masculine and feminine traits—she experienced her intuition “opening up” without any particularly conscious effort or intention on her part. She simply found herself thinking and behaving in new ways that brought certain benefits:

And I think I found that I have developed intuition which really made sense from my logical side, too, in that it’s not always enough information to do analysis in a very logical, scientific manner. In those cases, you just kinda have to go with your feeling, you know, and to really, I wasn’t really very good at that, but it just seemed like I developed as I allowed myself to be more feminine and act in a different way and communicate in a different way just seemed like it was...the ability just kind of happened and developed as I worked right along over time and really kind of found myself.

Felicia described a specific situation in which her newfound trust in her intuition enabled her to be a more effective leader. It came when she was president of her homeowner’s association, and the board faced a controversial challenge. By “trusting her intuition,” she was able to better understand other people’s perspectives and concerns, and she found herself better equipped to navigate the tricky terrain of a complex social situation:

I was in the hot seat, I was president again, so I really had to pull people together, and I ended up spending a whole lot of time talking to people about it, and I just, I think that I couldn’t really logically figure out how to handle things. I just kinda had to wing it and go with my feelings. I really felt my intuition, just, and you’d listen to someone talking and really need to kind of figure out exactly what their concerns are and they may not be saying it directly, but they may be kinda hidden, maybe they don’t know their concerns exactly. And in those situations I just felt that I was able to

get this strategy and explain things, I was able to sell to a couple other board members and sell it to the people that we were really doing the right thing. And even though I was doing this dressed as a guy, acting as a guy more or less, I, it was always in the, I always, I think my basic thought process has changed over the years, and it really allowed me to analyze the situation in a different way, and it really helped me do a better job.

To Felicia, gender flexibility has contributed to her sense that she is an improved person since embracing her transgenderism. She no longer feels restricted to a traditionally masculine performance, but allows herself to complement her masculinity with attributes that have traditionally been labeled as feminine:

...being transgender has given me certain insights on things and certain abilities that maybe not everyone else has, and...I haven't always looked upon it like that, but after I became comfortable with it probably about 8-10 years ago I started really realizing that because I knew I was transgendered and really allowing myself to act in a way that would be different from a typical male, I really felt like I was a better person.

Fahima's narrative provided a similar description of a flexible and balanced approach to life that she sees as having been shaped largely by her transgender experience: "Yeah, and be flexible with dealing with both genders, and flexible with life issues. Yeah, that's what I feel like." She elaborated further:

Just understanding both, and knowing how to deal with situations. The two spirits inside me, you know, that I can't say it's a man's spirit, no. Because I lived the life of a man, so I know how to live it. Externally, not internally. So, yeah, the strength that I know, how to think and how to deal with both, and how to handle situations, like, in a more balanced way.

Abby's story represented a similar appreciation for flexible gender expression. Although thoroughly and enthusiastically engaged in exploring her feminine self, Abby does not want to transition to become a woman. She identifies strongly with her femininity, but she is happy to emphasize her maleness as needed to fulfill social roles that are important to her. For instance:

What I value are my children, and my children need a father. My son has already expressed that he wants his dad, so I want to help fulfill his need of having a dad. Somebody that he can go scuba diving with, somebody he can go paint-balling with, somebody he can go boating with and have fun with, and enjoy the fact of having a dad.

Another strong example of this sub-theme came from Melissa. She revels in the experience of expressing her whole self to the world. As bigender, she values being both woman and man, masculine and feminine. To deny either of these would be to deny her self, as she is constituted by both aspects. Only by embracing and nurturing both facets is she able to experience her being as whole and complete. No longer is her femininity repressed, and no longer does her masculine side need to worry about constantly proving and defending itself. She can now engage fully with the world with her whole being. As a result, she can contribute to the world in a variety of ways—“sending energy” into the world through multiple channels:

Now that it's been 10 years since I stopped hiding it, I very much appreciate it, because it gives me so many different outlets, so many different directions that I can send energy in, that I can participate in. It's not just all *him* any more; it's a whole new world that I can be an active participant in.

Given her experiences as a refugee fleeing from persecution in her country of origin, Fahima added a sobering twist to the idea of valuing being transgender for the flexibility of gender expression it affords. For her, the benefits of being seen as male in certain situations have been undeniable, even life saving. As much as she says she wishes she would have been born a woman, she also expressed appreciation that she was not born female in the sociopolitical environment of her native land. Being trans allowed her to live as a man when it was in her best interest to do so. She did not have to suffer as

a woman under misogynistic laws and practices in her homeland, but she is able to live as a transwoman and appreciate being transgender now that she is in a more tolerant society:

So, here [in the U.S.], I started to feel the privilege of being trans, but if I were there [in Country 2], no, I would feel I am cursed because I'm a trans there. If I was not a guy in [Country 2], I would be totally, like, my life would be totally ruined. I would be married, maybe to a man whom I don't like. So I want to be free. Free to travel, to move, to make decisions for my own. I was there. Otherwise, people will think I'm a whore or a slut or a rebellious bitch. That's how they call a woman who's independent there.

Many participants discussed the value they place on being especially “interesting,” “special,” or “unique” due to their transgender identity. Teresa, for example, told of loving the exceptional experiences that have come with being transgender. She described enjoying the “interesting life” being trans has created for her. She values all the unusual experiences that have come along during her journey as a transwoman. She looks back on her life as a man as boring—monochromatic. Her life now, as an openly transgender woman, plays out in full, vibrant, living color. It is “fun,” “interesting,” and anything but boring: “It has been a real roller coaster ride—a lot of fun. It just gets more and more fun every day.” She continued:

Oh it's just...if I was living in my old persona, you know, the way I was expected to be a man and grow up and live, I would not have experienced anywhere near the things that I have in the last 13 years. I have met the mayor, I've met and had pictures with him and the governor...not that that's anything to be proud of. [Laughs] I have pictures that I personally took of Obama, so I got to meet him. That was when he was still a senator, of course, but...yeah, it's...I go to two or three parties or six or seven sometimes every year that normally I just wouldn't experience. I would just be working a 9 to 5 job or raising kids, and that would probably be about it. But, yeah, I definitely have a lot more fun now.

Fahima also described how being transgender has enriched her life experiences and made life more interesting. She has seen and done things that few other people have,

and when her transgenderism is combined with her international travels and living, her life becomes even richer and more interesting. She lived as a boy and as a man in various nations and as a man in the U.S. She has lived as a gay man in her country of origin and the U.S., and she has recently begun living openly as a transwoman in the U.S. She described how she has learned much about herself and about the world that would not have been apparent to her had she not been transgender. She feels “privileged” for having had the opportunities to live as many lives as she has:

And so that is a strength—that I have so many life experiences. I’ve learned a lot—so much. The privilege is the journey itself. The richness of things that I saw in my life, experiences that I had.

So here, no, I start to feel the privilege...just because it’s such a rich life experience. No one can ever understand what I understand. No one can ever feel what I’ve felt, you know? Two worlds—geographically and physically. [Laughs] And, just like a new journey, you know? And the privilege of being a trans is now, after all those years, like, I know exactly what I want.

A few interviewees highlighted a decidedly subversive element to their uniqueness. Sephie, for example, values being a one-of-a-kind individual whose appearance is decidedly “outside the norm.” In describing the enjoyment she experiences as a result of her uncommon identity, she pointed to the mixed gender signals she expresses in public:

...obviously, a male individual wearing a skirt and a bra is definitely not the norm, and I’m sure that’s definitely unique in its own manner. It helps myself being outside the norm because I enjoy being out of the norm. And being unique in my own way, because I exhibit some manly things and womanly things, so it’s really cool.

Like his partner, Siren clearly enjoys the ways in which his gender identity and expression are original and unique. She loves violating or transcending what she sees as

“rigid little boxes” that people are first put in, and then keep themselves in. Notably, Siren thinks highly of himself for having rejected arbitrary restrictions in his own life:

I think originality is good and, you know, I’m always getting like everybody knows who I am and people stare at me all the time, not like that’s exactly what I wanted, but I don’t know, I guess I feel sometimes sort of elevated or better, maybe, slightly superior, occasionally.

I’ve also always sort of thought that there was value in being different in general, and I think to some degree you could say that I sort of try to be different sometimes. Although sometimes it just worked out that way whether I tried to or not. [Laughs] I think there’s something sort of empowering and fun about not being what you’re expected to be or simply being different than everyone else. I mean there’s negative stuff that can come along with that if you choose to view it that way. Like people are mean or whatever, but I think people will find an excuse to be mean regardless. So, I don’t know, I think that for me I can think of myself as being different and find that to be something admirable, I guess.

It is clear that Siren wants to be anything but “normal” or conformist. She illustrated this through the example of his biological father:

...if I had to name one person who I thought was like the ultimate “normal”, who I don’t want to be anything like and being different is a great thing, that would be my biological father. And to me, he sort of represents everything that we’re supposed to want and be, like super-masculine and his wife is all feminine and dainty and can’t do anything by herself and they have this huge house and 2.5 children and the pool in the back yard and all this money, and they are *not* happy at all. So, and I’m not saying that you can’t be hetero and have a family and be happy, because I’m open to all lifestyles. But to me they were sort of the epitome of what everyone thinks you’re supposed to do, and it’s just not for me.

Another example of valuing a sense of being special or unique as transgender came from Fahima. Being between and within more than one gender, she sees herself as being able to do things most other people cannot and of having insights into human nature that most other people do not. She described experiencing herself as rare, unusual, surprising, and even mysterious:

...wow, I feel better than being just one specific gender. That's the sense of uniqueness, you know? Best of both worlds. Sense of uniqueness... two in one. That's the uniqueness. I'll always be like this: special identity, special. It's nice to be special...Something...mysterious for others, you know? This, they always want to know about it, they always want to learn about it.

She values being transgender and does not want to deny or lose touch with her transness, even as she transitions into a female body and feminine gender expression. For this reason, Fahima adamantly identifies as a transwoman, rather than a woman:

So, I see things differently, and ...part of it, I just feel...unique. I don't feel like I am now a genetic woman, because I am not. And I'm not a man, because I'm not. But genetically, yes, I'm XY. I can't deny that. Genetically, I'm not a woman, I'm not. So, the feeling of uniqueness is a privilege. Something different.

Yes, so that's my uniqueness. In between worlds. Yeah. 'Cause I don't get it when some transwomen, they say no they want to cut their roots and, "No, I'm a woman only," and she wants to run away to another city and she doesn't want anyone to discover her past. For me, like, am I ashamed of this? I will *always* be a transwoman. Always. No matter what. No matter how sexy I look as a female. I will be always for them a transwoman. So if I can't accept me as a transwoman, it would be hard for me to deal with, like, when someone else says, "Oh, but you're a transwoman." I will say, "Uh huh. Yes, I am."

Along these same lines, Fahima described repeatedly and at length how she values being able, as a transwoman, to know the worlds of both women and men. She refers to herself as "lucky," "privileged," and "blessed" in this regard:

And for me like, it's a privilege, I feel like, because I know what you don't know. It's a personal privilege, not like a social privilege. Yeah, it's for me. It's for me and myself. I've lived both lives, and I know each how it feels and what it means. Deep inside me I was always the same, but I lived the lifestyle of a guy and as a female, so I know each, advantages and disadvantages of each, and how is it here and there to be a female and a male.

Like Fahima, Bonita experiences having "the best of both worlds." She thinks of being transgender as "having it all"—of not having to sacrifice parts of herself. As a

result, she is able to imagine new possibilities for being human, including ways to overcome arbitrary gender roles and expectations:

OK, well for me personally, I feel it's kind of, well, pretty much like the Miley Cyrus song "The Best of Both Worlds... I like to feel like I'm embracing my softer, sensitive side as which society has kinda, you know, you have to either be one way or another and even though most individuals can't embrace that softer side, especially the male, even most males who do not do this at all, I mean, they can still do that, and I feel that maybe more *should* do that...

The sense of being special was also evident in Bonita's description of crossdressing, which, interestingly enough, she described as similar to being a superhero: with new clothes come a new identity and new abilities. This dual-identity aspect of fictional superheroes is meaningful to Bonita's experience of crossdressing for the way it transforms an otherwise average person into an unusually interesting individual:

I can be plain old me in my everyday life, but there's also that other side. I can, you know, explore and pretty much do whatever and be this totally other person which is not only a part of me but also I wish some people to know about. It's kind of like pretty much being a superhero, in my opinion, which, you know, the regular, average, you know, Joe Six Pack Doe and then even though you're not fighting crime, though, you're either putting on a suit or a tie or putting on a dress in your down time which is pretty awesome as well.

Further extending the superhero metaphor, Bonita went on to describe how crossdressing affords her new abilities, including the ability to see the world in different ways and from additional perspectives:

When you're trans, as I said, you do feel empowered to not exactly take on the world, but at least try to take on a little bit more maybe responsibility for...but kind of see other people's point of view or at least see from the other half...

Several other participants also expressed an appreciation for having a "unique perspective" as a transgender individual. They distinguished their perspectives from how

cisgender people may view or understand the world. Brandon, for instance, told of how he appreciates being transgender for the unique angle it has afforded him in viewing the world. Having lived life first as a girl/woman and later as a man, he feels “special” and even fortunate for having had opportunities to see life from more angles than most people ever do:

So I think there’s a lot to appreciate about being trans—definitely. Yeah, I think that I feel a little special, because I’ve been able to look at so many different, from so many different sides in my personal experience, there’s so many different vantage points, you know?

Like, living as a woman in the world—what does that look like? And then to see it from a man’s point of view—even though I don’t really 100% really feel like a “man” —I don’t know, but, so I don’t know why I said that, but that’s the way the world treats me mostly, and so you know having those two, such different perspectives, it just, I don’t know, I just feel like I understand the world better. I mean, to me.

Sephie also shared how she has the ability to understand life from multiple perspectives because of being “both male and female.” Her description of herself in this regard seems similar to the experience of biculturalism and/or bilingualism: She now experiences herself as a competent actor in two worlds. As an example, she described feeling especially helpful when a female friend came to her with a boyfriend problem:

I’ve done both sides of the spectrum. It’s never, it leads to some good things and some bad things and so I can give her a perspective from a guy’s point of view of what’s going on with that and, like, how a girl could respond. So, it helped a lot in real life.

Fahima similarly described her appreciation for this dual perspective. She sees herself as understanding both men and women—how they think, what motivates them, what it means to be either. With this enhanced understanding, she is able to navigate male and female social circles effectively. Like Sephie, Fahima has used this ability—

this “privileged” perspective—to benefit herself and others in her life, to whom she can give insight into the workings of the “other” gender:

I see life differently. Like two colors, black and white, and gray and everything...not like just one way, that's it. And I know how to deal with guys better than genetic girls. Like for instance, when I talk to women, they can't get it, like, “Why my boyfriend thinks that way?” My mom's like, “Why your dad does this or that,” you know? They don't understand like wars and why troubles are happening by this leader. “Well, he's a man.” So I relate. I know how he thinks. And my dad keeps saying that, “Those ladies like your mom, your mom...” And I keep hearing the guys say, “Oh, the girls,” and, “Oh, they think they're playing.” They criticize this girl and that and not understand why she is doing this. ...that's why a lot of relationships end, I think, and troubles, because the man, as much as he's like understanding and wonderful, he will never understand her. You know? And she will never understand him totally. She will always keep like challenging and, “Oh, I want to be, I want to do this, I'm just like you, who you are,” you know....so, that's the uniqueness. I can deal with both.

Given this multiple-perspective experience as a transwoman, Fahima has found herself positioned to cultivate a more accepting and understanding attitude toward others:

As me, as a trans, yeah, I'm a woman, so I know it's much better just to have a meaningful thing. Now, that's the thing about strength and being unique. Now I don't blame and judge as I used to. I used to, like, judge: “Why do they do this? Lalalala.” No, this is my uniqueness and strength. See, like, trying to connect the...whereas that I don't judge anymore. Because I know why he's doing this, why she is doing that, why he reacted that way, why she reacted that way, you know? So that's how I feel. That's what makes me unique.

She considers this attitude of acceptance one of her distinctive strengths as a person, and she sees it as a meaningful contribution she is able to make to a world in need of justice.

She told of how the world could use more people with broader perspectives like hers:

A sense of uniqueness...I guess it would be because I understand both worlds, so I guess if the world leaders would be transgendered people then, oh, the world would be a good thing. [Laughs] ‘Cause we know how both think, you know? There will be no persecution for anyone, everything will be just fine.

Sub-theme C: Being strong. Intimate connection is often accompanied by a renewed sense of strength and capability. Many participants described developing exactly this resiliency as they came into relationship with themselves as transgender—relationships they experienced as being with their true selves. They commonly expressed appreciation for having become stronger and better people because of the challenges they have faced as a transgender person (for example, rejection, self-hatred, discrimination).⁹ They cited feeling that they can now “do anything” after having come through the intense self-examination and social friction involved in being transgender.

Fahima, a refugee from another nation, described an inner resiliency that has kept her going through all the challenges she has faced. She has found many Americans to be rather “whiny” about any little obstacle that pops up. By contrast, she prides herself on surviving real struggle and tragedy and still moving forward. And through it all, she has refused to sacrifice herself:

Yeah, being transgendered, suffering a lot, hiding, learning how to survive—it taught me that...the privilege also—it taught me how to survive, you know? How to hide and survive, and deal with the situation and go with the flow, but never change. Yeah, so that’s a privilege. I have never changed. Never. Ever. I was always me inside. But I learned how to deal with the situations. I learned how to keep myself away from trouble as much as I can and go with the flow, but not to change. So, that was my privilege, is to, you know, be strong and deal with things.

And I feel strong. That, you know, I made it all the way here. And I’m intact. So that’s part of my strength, too.

⁹ The challenges participants had faced were not the focus of the interviews, but not surprisingly, the topic came up as participants discussed their life experiences. These challenges, which directly align with the difficulties cited in the existing literature, are discussed in more detail in Chapter V.

Fahima described how her inner strength has grown even more prominent since she fully embraced her transgenderism and decided to undergo a medical and social transition so that she can live her life as a woman. Somehow, even though her circumstances in the U.S. remain somewhat discouraging, she began perceiving these challenges as manageable once she came out to herself and decided to transition:

Going from a full-time job to a part-time job. Losing my job at the end of December. Alone. Old parents. Transitioning on hormones. So many expenses. Living alone. New country, new culture, new language, so that's why I say I'm strong. Because I didn't lose it. I still have it all. My mind is intact. Yes, I am down many days in a week, but I am not crazy. I don't take anti-depressants, and I don't, I'm not alcoholic. I don't turn away from my troubles. That's why I say I'm strong, and [being my true self] gave me strength.

So back to the strength. Yes. Being me gave me strength. I don't know, like, why, but I just feel happy, strong, so.....yeah. The decision of starting transitioning gave me like this internal peace and strength. And I feel so good.

Siren similarly relayed how the adversity she has faced in her life as a result of transphobia has made her a stronger person. She emphatically told of valuing the adversity she has overcome, because it has brought compassion, wisdom, and confidence into her life. She described how this adversity has made her a better person:

I feel like that having had negative experiences in the past, being discriminated against, has almost been good for me. I came to that conclusion maybe a year or so ago that because I've been through hard times, I am smarter, I am wiser, I am more compassionate than other people who haven't, and that is another value in being different...But in the long run, I really do feel like I've grown and that I know things that other people don't because my life has been difficult in the past and that is worth it to me. That is *worth* it in *so many* ways.

I feel like I'm strong enough to do pretty much whatever I want to do. I can face whatever happens, whatever comes next, and that I will come out on top. I will be okay. No matter what. That's a good feeling. And I know that what I've been through being trans has in part definitely helped me get to this place.

It seems dangerous to think that the maltreatment of minorities is somehow, in the end, good for them. That borders on justification of cruelty. Good things can come from bad events—that does not mean the bad event was somehow justified. I do not think Siren is saying she is glad the discrimination happened, but she is saying she is glad she *got through it*. She loves what she has been able to *do* with those tough times, and she is thankful for the growth she experienced and the admirable qualities she has developed: compassion, wisdom, confidence, resilience. This is similar to Brandon’s appreciation of having come through his struggles because of the life lessons he was able to learn:

I think that I really appreciate the struggle that I’ve had to go through... I appreciate *that* it’s over. Right. That it’s done, and I have a life beyond it, and...but I do also appreciate the struggle—just that I had to go through it. I think that just going through it and not avoiding it was a really big learning experience.

Wanda also described the sense that she has grown tremendously as a human being because of her transgender journey. She has survived true hardship as a marginalized and misunderstood minority, and yet has come through it with an awareness of her inner strength and integrity. Now she considers being transgender a positive part of her life, a part she would choose again “because I know it’s made me a better person.” She further described the rewards her transgender journey has brought:

So all of those things, which are deadly to the soul and to spiritual development... the fact that I somehow muddled through all of that and managed to survive, and come to the realization that it had been something positive at all, rather than just a negative thing.

Well...it’s not something I would necessarily recommend to anybody. [Laughs] But at the same time, if you can make it through, if you can last long enough, if you’re, I guess, strong enough, the rewards are pretty great in terms of your personal development...those are the sorts of things that make me realize, more than I did when I was young, that living this life has been a positive thing.

Bonita contributed the particularly vivid image of the superhero to illustrate the sense of strength and empowerment she experiences as a transgender person. The superhero metaphor was meaningful to her in two ways: (1) as representative of her “dual identity” (as discussed earlier) and (2) as reflective of her sense of empowerment. She described the latter dimension as follows:

Oh boy, don't we all wish we had super powers. But it's kind of like that in a way. I mean, I'm still trying to figure out what my powers do, but I'd definitely like to fly, walk up walls, be invincible, that kind of thing, and being transgender is kind of almost like that. You feel a little empowered that you can do almost anything.

The above exemplars reflect a particular level of courage and fortitude among the participants. Being transgender has afforded them opportunities to cultivate and to demonstrate their courage as human beings. They have proven their strength and resilience to themselves and to others, and having done so, they experience a certain confidence in themselves. As Krystal said:

So it's just, you've just got to have confidence in yourself, so...a lot of the courage is just you being yourself, not being afraid of what people are going to think, and just live your life day-to-day as the woman or man that you are.

The courage Heléne demonstrated in coming out and transitioning has been meaningfully acknowledged by others who were supportive. This has allowed her to experience herself as a brave individual. She seems to relish this sense of bravery and the wherewithal she has to stand up to societal norms and give expression to her beliefs and her true self:

I've heard from a lot of people, every person that I've told, that I've gone to, they say, “That's really brave. That's a really brave thing that you did.” And I think that shows some respect there, too. Because anytime you hear the word ‘brave’ it is saying that “you didn't have to do that, but

you did.” And when I first transitioned, there were so many people who were so supporting, that that felt so respectful, too. So I think all the support as well as all the comments of saying, “You’re brave.” And you know just talking to people...it really does show this kind of supportive network that is driving you to say, “Hey, be yourself. Be yourself, screw what society thinks.”

Building on this idea, Siren spoke of the pride she has in being trans. The type of pride she experiences is not the pride that comes from accomplishing something your culture values—such as being a war hero, for example. Instead, this pride comes from being oneself despite intense pressure to the contrary. It comes from standing up for oneself and one’s beliefs, no matter how unpopular they might be:

If you could find a way to be proud of something that everyone else around you hates or is disgusted by, but you can be proud of that, then you can pretty much be proud of yourself no matter what you do.

Theme 2: Intimate connection with others. One of the most prominent themes that emerged in the analysis was that of “Intimate Connection with Others.” Every participant described an enhanced capacity for engaging in social life and building interpersonal relationships as a result of their transgender journeys. This involved feeling free to express one’s true self in the social world; “opening up” to others by feeling more alive to their worth and shared humanity; being at greater ease when socializing; and building actual relationships with significant others, family members, friends, and broader communities. Across the board, participants in this study experienced being transgender as bringing new opportunities for human connection and richer interpersonal relationships. Brandon captured the meaning of this theme when he said, “I think one of the main reasons why I like it [being trans] is that I now feel a connection to people that I didn’t have before. That’s the biggest thing. And I feel less lonely.”

Sub-theme D: Being Free. One group of meanings involved with experiencing intimate connection with others involved “being free” in one’s transgender nature and—perhaps most significantly—in one’s humanness. Just as intimacy implicates truth, it also involves freedom—the freedom to be oneself while in relationship with others. Every participant touched on this notion in some way, and the experience of freedom was implicated in most of the other thematic structures. Still, “being free” was described in enough depth and richness to justify its separate treatment here. The participants’ sense of freedom took various forms, many of which are, in essence, freedom from the restrictions of society’s traditional gender roles. In coming to understand and appreciate their transness, participants commonly experienced greater freedom in emotional expression, clothing options, thought patterns, sexuality, interpersonal relationships, aesthetic appreciation, and life choices in general. They also frequently described feeling released from the constraints of anxieties and fears and having these replaced by a liberating sense of ease, confidence, and peacefulness.

Participants commonly described the freedom inherent in expressing their true selves. Siren captured this sentiment when she said, “So I think when you can throw what other people want you to do aside then you’re probably more free to actually be more yourself and in a lot of cases, a better person.” A particularly clear example of the freedom gained from being one’s true self came from Krystal. She described a marked self-assuredness in her life that had not been there when she lived as a man. She has become more confident and moves more easily in the world. Now, able to present her true self to the world, she is experiencing freedom in various ways: freedom of expression, freedom of movement, freedom from judgment:

Very freeing. I feel like I have lots of freedom and I just feel like I can just go anywhere without feeling I'm being judged for who I am now, and I have more confidence when I'm out in public. I don't feel like people are staring at me.

It was common to hear participants describe how they experienced an emotional emancipation upon accepting their transgender selves. Abby, for example, described how, as she discovered and nurtured her feminine aspect, she found herself more easily expressing her emotions. She no longer feels “pent up,” but free to share her emotions:

...and to realize that, it is a free and liberating experience, and I'm still amazed at just how free and liberating it is. I guess I was pent up being only able to express my male self. People over time, though, have expressed to me that...how do I explain this...have expressed to me that there is no need to...unless you act femme, but that's not really what their expression is...it's I guess you don't need to show your emotions as much [in male mode].

I find that being able to express emotions...allows me to get closer to other people, allows me to express how I feel about what's going on. I find that having that ability to be able to even do that as a satisfying emotion that I can express and get out how I feel and what I think about whatever the subject may be. And I feel more at peace—calmer for being able to do that. And I can identify that in male mode I wouldn't do that, and I would keep things bottled in and locked in...

Another clear example of emotional freedom came from Melissa, who described the enjoyment she finds in expressing a wider variety of emotions. She described receiving “permission” from society to express openly a greater range of human emotions when presenting as Melissa, as opposed to her male persona. As Melissa, she no longer has to censor her emotions or act with the reservation and apprehension expected of her masculine persona. She now experiences her emotions fully and spontaneously. In doing so, she experiences the world in more meaningful ways: She is now free to connect with a wider array of human experiences:

...there are so many different things I can experience, and experience without guilt, without shame, without....in my feminine presentation that I really couldn't enjoy thoroughly if I were there in my masculine presentation. Emotional things. The beauty of a garden. The beauty of a piece of artwork. The sound of children laughing. *He* can't cry at funerals. I can bawl my heart out, and it's acceptable. And go to a movie, and if it's a tear jerker, I can sit there and let the tears flow; he can't. So, yeah, there's all these little hidden benefits because I can be, at least in the public's eyes, a man *or* a woman.

Lucas' narrative also revealed the idea of valuing a transgender life for the freedom of emotional expression it offers. Having lived first as a woman and later as a man, having experienced the gendered expectations placed on both, and having those gendered expectations become blatantly obvious as a consequence of having lived both ways, Lucas is now grateful that he can transcend gender expectations and behave honestly, in accordance with his true feelings in any given moment:

I think [being trans] puts me in a good place to also understand how different expressions of emotion, how men are expected to be emotionally and how women are expected to be emotionally. And trying to continue to express how I feel regardless of what is expected. So if I feel like crying, I will cry. If I need to be angry, I will be angry. And I really try to be true to what I'm feeling and not what I'm supposed to be feeling, or react the way I feel I need to react instead of how I'm supposed to react.

Much of Sephie's narrative reflected the notion of freedom in the sense of leaving old social restrictions behind. Growing up as a boy, she felt constrained and even invisible by virtue of societal expectations of masculinity that were imposed upon her:

Well, it's like, living my life as a guy for 18 some odd years and then being like, well, I'm sick of being stereotyped and I'm sick of being left in this situation where people think I'm just like every other guy out there. Why not try something new? Why not be who I'm supposed to be as a transgender individual and not be that guy; not be...the stereotype that everybody thinks a guy should be.

As she came to know herself as transgender, Sephie (like many participants) reveled in a newfound sense of freedom. She described how wearing the clothing of her choice was central to her experience of freedom:

The first time that I purchased a skirt of my very own, it was the greatest feeling ever because it's like it's mine and I don't have to worry about someone being like "That was my skirt; you owe me money for it." It's just, it felt awesome, purchasing my very first and own skirt. It just, it's like trying out a new hair style that worked.

Well, the first time that I've ever gone outside wearing what I wear now. That was a very liberating feeling. I just feel better about life in what I wear now instead of the restriction.

As Sephie's narrative suggests, clothing selection takes on particular saliency for transgender people. They are often, as Sephie was, raised wearing clothing in which they did not feel comfortable. It is not a superficial decision to "change the gender" of one's clothing as one comes out, or to "play dress up," but rather, like any cisgender person, it is a human attempt to express one's sense of self. It is a necessary step, in our culture at least, to be viewed by others the way we want to be viewed. So, when transpeople enter a period in life when they can finally choose their own clothing, they describe a common experience of liberation and a sense that life is now, as Sephie simply described it, "better." Siren further elaborated on the role clothing can play in the experience of freedom:

I also feel like I can change what I want to be whenever I feel like it, maybe what I want to be, what I want to do. Regardless, I am a big fan of self-expression and I think clothing is a major way that we express ourselves. Basically wear whatever I want; where most people won't have like one side of the store they can shop in, I can go through the whole place.

I can change my clothes, something as simple as that, in ways that most people are petrified of. Like, when I was here and studying was everything and just like walking to class and stuff, skirts were a lot more

comfortable for stuff like that. I mean, you're just like walking and sitting most of your day, so I would wear that and be really comfy but if I feel like exercising then you know skirts and like mostly feminine gendered clothing are really, really irrational, impractical for that sort of thing, so then I can put on these other clothes which have been gender masculine and do that for like jogging and playing sports...

Several participants, especially the younger ones, linked their experience of freedom to rebellion or transgression against social norms. Francis, for example, described how she experiences the freedom of doing things her own way by virtue of transgressing social expectations and embracing a queer identity. She told of how she is choosing her own path based not on tradition or others' expectations. She is guided by her own desires, even—or maybe especially—when they violate society's gender rules:

I feel like that...because I've accepted this gender variant identity for myself, it gives me a lot more freedom in how I express and dress myself. ...accepting that fact, then I can dress the way I want to dress, regardless of which section of the store I buy clothes in...

...some of it goes back to the freedom we talked about earlier, because [pause] it's like I know that I can transgress these things so I feel free and so I transgress them which reinforces like sort of like a circle of, "I know I can do this so I feel free, and so I do it because I can, and because I do it, I know I can..."

Helène described a similar appreciation of proclaiming her individual freedom through undermining gender conventions. She considers herself to be freer than cisgender people. She has more choices about how to look and act. She can break gender norms freely and with alacrity, while she sees cisgender people feeling bound to them:

...at the same time, though, being trans you almost have a choice of deciding how you want to look every day. And it's that feeling of saying, "Look, I'm breaking out of conformity because I'm not playing my sex....I'm being myself"

I personally feel that when I dress feminine, or if I've got for instance this voice right now (because I've got about 3 different ranges right now), but if I'm using this voice right now, it feels liberating in the sense that I'm doing what I want to do. It's kind of like protesting, for instance. I mean you're out there, you're doing something because you believe in what you're doing.

Because I think everyone is always so locked up and tied down to the sex-gender system that they don't want to think of the sex and gender system. So...for me at least, it's always been about that. So...every day when I get dressed and stuff, there's kind of like a rebellion factor to it, too, I think. And I hate to use the word rebellion, but it is. It's the idea that I'm not being that person society wants me to be.

It's that whole rebelling factor, because every day I get to choose which gender role I want to portray. And even if it's like a pants and a shirt type of day, or if it's a dress and some sort of really awesome blouse, I get to choose what gender role I want to portray....So, since I can't completely pass as male there's still something to be said, though, anytime I'm dressing in a feminine gender role, or just even shaving every day. It's rebelling in a sense. It's telling society, "Hey, screw you. This is who I am."

Siren also spoke eloquently about the freedom he experiences in transgressing gender norms. Her desire to be a force for good in the world (which will be explored more fully later) seems to emerge out of his sense that society places too many arbitrary restrictions on people, especially in the realm of gender. He values his own stance of resistance to these pressures. She relishes the freedom that comes with embracing queer language, breaking social norms in ways that make people nervous, and being a "freak:"

Freedom...well, with the whole "freak" thing and how I feel about that – I obviously don't like feeling limited in any way...So the fact that I reject that I have to act a certain way because of my physical sex is *huge* freedom. Like in our society and in other societies, we "gender" everything. Like in most other languages, *objects* have a gender. And I think in ours sometimes verbs do which is terrible, that like "playing sports" is a masculine thing or doing your make up is an exclusively feminine thing, and I can do both of those things if I feel like it. In fact, I quite often play volleyball with product in my hair! [Laughs] I can do anything I want!

Well, [the term “freak”] is really edgy, I guess. I think I find it one of those fun, empowering things like if I take on the label myself and say that I am a freak, it’s sort of like a mantra basically that every time I feel like I’m out of options or I have some limitation or I have to do something a certain way, I can just be like, “Oh, wait a minute, no I don’t, because I’m already a freak; I have nothing to lose; there’s really no reason I have to listen to the other people telling me what I should do because I’m a freak, so I’ll just do what I want.”

I am a big fan of word reclamation. I love it. I absolutely love the idea. I’ve had a lot of words that people think of as negative thrown at me throughout the course of my life, and I remember once upon a time it was hurtful but it’s just not even a possibility for me anymore that people could say something that’s supposed to be hurtful to me, but it’s true, and it’s something that I *like* in myself so it can’t be hurtful. So people can call me a freak, and [if] freak means that I decide gender norms and look pretty fabulous most of the time doing it, then I guess I’m a freak. If freak means that I don’t accept the status quo where people have to live in these rigid little boxes and can’t break out of them and have all these limitations, then yes, I am a freak, because I don’t like limitations.

Many participants spoke of how embracing their transness let them feel free to move around in the world. Teresa, for example, told of how she is now at peace and appreciates the freedom that comes with presenting your true self to the world. She is free to navigate her surroundings as she wishes:

And the pleasures have been that, yes, I can relax, I can be who I am, and I’m not as tense and stressed out as I used to be, by any means. And driving, I used to hate driving long trips, but now it’s nothing at all. I don’t mind it. The first two years of coming up here to the city to the groups, it was a three-hour drive, and when I started putting on a dress and coming up here, it was actually something to look forward to for the first time in my life.

Brandon shared a similar perspective. Before transitioning, he found himself unable to envision any sort of future for himself. It was as though he had come up against an impenetrable wall that kept him from having any sense of what might lie ahead. In that state, *not* transitioning was an unimaginable “non-option.” Continuing to live as a woman was a possibility that simply did not exist:

I think that if I were to say, well, “If I hadn’t transitioned, then...” It just seems like, okay, if I imagined that life where I hadn’t transitioned, there’s just like no....like it’s just in my mind, it would just like end. Like this....it would sort of just end. Dead end. Yeah, like a dead end. It just seemed like there was no....that person that I tried to be, there was no future for them. At all. There was no....nothing. Like there was no texture, there was no color, there was no...sparkle. I mean it was just very two-dimensional andyeah. So I just can’t even imagine that it would just keep going on that way.

Once Brandon accepted his transgender nature and began making it manifest through a medical and social transition, his future began revealing itself and he gained a new sense of freedom. He now feels as though he literally has more life in him: “[it’s] like my life span is longer or something.” Today, Brandon is fully engaged in living his future and aiming for new heights: “...now I feel like I have much more freedom, and I don’t have to worry about that crap.” He continued by saying, “[Before transitioning] I just wasn’t participating in a lot of things that other people were doing. But now I feel like I *am*. Like I am participating in life. You know? I’m *doing* it.” Brandon went on to describe how he now experiences a certain ease with himself that facilitates his social relationships: “I just feel much more at ease in the world...Yeah, I just feel like more easy. Things feel more easy. Connecting with people is easier, it seems like.”

Brandon’s post-transition life has taken off. He now experiences the possibilities of life as nearly limitless. He relishes the freedom and the range of choices he now has to participate fully in the world:

So now I think that I can trust more people and connect to more people, like choices are so much...I have so many more choices. And I can, like, go on vacation! I can, like, look at the map of the world and decide...my wife and I can say, “Where do we want to go, and let’s work on trying to get there.”

Participants often described the role supportive others played in making their sense of freedom possible. Francis, for example, saw her parents as integral to her sense of freedom. Their responses to her queer identity and expression—while perhaps not perfect—nonetheless empowered her to transgress gender conventions in pursuit of her own prerogatives. She also credits her parents' socioeconomic position with having provided her the security needed to take certain risks with her gender expression:

I think my mom would sort of prefer that I would dress in a way that was more normative and looked less gay or less queer or whatever, but it's like, they're okay with it, and they've been a big part of enabling that freedom and being okay with dressing how I want for me, because I know that if I need clothes, they're going to be purchased.

Yeah, but you know if my mom says, "Hey let's go get you some clothes because you need..." Like, I'm going to need new clothes for work, and I know that I could say, "Hey, I want to go buy khakis in the men's section," or, "Let's go buy men's jeans instead," and it's not going to be a big thing, she's not going to be mad at me in the middle of the store and make me pay for my own clothes. And I think that's been a big part of it for me, is that my parents have been pretty okay with me being whatever. In the sense of how I present myself. That's something that a lot of people haven't been able to do.

And so I think class plays a big role in that as well. So the security in general, obviously, the security that I can still dress the way I want and know that...I mean, sure I have to clean up a little to get a job, everybody does, but it's not in the sense of like, "Wow, I really have to tone things down to get a job, because I won't be able to eat, or I won't be able to go on and do anything."

Heléne has also experienced liberation through being embedded in a supportive network of social relationships. The positive feedback, encouragement, and perhaps even protection that this network provides sets her free—free to be herself and free to stand up for her beliefs:

And, so I guess what liberating means for me, after saying all that, is kind of that positive emotional feeling...it's this overwhelming feeling of the positive. Because when you're completely down in the dumps, like I was

several times that day. There's no doubt about that, after hearing people's harassing remarks at lunch, when you can actually be yourself and feel good about it, because you've got all these people surrounding you saying, "Hey, that's great. That's great. What you're doing is a good thing." That's what feels liberating.

Sub-theme E: Being open to others. Many participants identified the experience of "opening up" to other people as a distinguishing characteristic of their transgender journeys. "Opening up" involved, among other things, coming to view others as trustworthy. Trust is, of course, a necessary ingredient for any intimate relationship. Brandon's story revealed this idea perhaps better than any. In making sense of how he appreciates trusting and connecting with others, Brandon contrasted his current ability to trust others with how he was before transitioning. He described having a "really small life" before transitioning—a life characterized by rigid isolation and the habitual rejection of others. He now values being transgender because it has given him the opportunity to seek and receive affirmation from others and from himself, which led to the emergence of trust—a requisite foundation for intimate human connection: "Yeah, I guess just the experience of transitioning, going through those things that really...I started to trust other people and trusting me." As he understands it, this evolution began by learning to trust himself while he was in recovery from alcoholism and continued unfolding throughout his gender transition.

...so I had to learn how to trust myself, and with transitioning it started out pretty slow, like little baby steps where I would...first I told a couple friends, and then I called and told a couple other friends, and then they, we decided, or I asked them if they would call me "he" just in their apartment. You know? And then I would reflect on that, you know, how did that make me feel? You know, did I like it? And then from that those little baby steps that I could learn to trust how I felt.

Because really the world was not really saying, “Yeah, go for it! Transition!” Right? So you have to learn how to listen to yourself, you know? And so that was a big lesson for me, and for that reason I’m really grateful. I mean, transitioning taught me that...

Brandon went on to describe how, from this new foundation of trust, he came to appreciate other people and be more accepting of difference. He described how his transgender journey has taught him about valuing other people. He once used to stereotype others and assume they were either judging him or they were inferior to him. He had a habit of dismissing people out-of-hand if they had beliefs different from his own. But now, post-transition, he appreciates the complexity of human existence and is less judgmental and more accepting of different kinds of people:

So then I connected with those people, and then it just started getting bigger and bigger and now I feel like I could probably connect with just about anybody, you know? It’s like I’m able to have much more complex interactions because I have more compassion for people.

He gave the example of talking with his mother’s neighbor, who was making offensive, racist remarks. The Brandon of old would have completely discounted this person’s worth. But now, having gone through his transition, having come to terms with himself, and having experienced an opening of his own mind to the vagaries of the human condition, Brandon is able to keep this person’s full humanity in mind and allow himself to hold complex and conflicting feelings simultaneously. Post-transition, Brandon is able to see the humanity in this person and assume a forgiving, compassionate attitude:

I mean [my mom’s neighbor] was saying some things that were outrageous. And I was able to sit there and think, “Well, this person is clearly troubled, and it doesn’t have anything to do with me.” I was still able to see her as somebody...I didn’t completely put her in, like write her off in some category of I don’t ever have to talk to...I didn’t write her off as somebody who was like a piece of trash. I just thought, “Well, she’s clearly...maybe she has some other issues we can’t see,” I don’t know, maybe she’s an alcoholic, I don’t know...yeah, so I’m able to connect

with people in a more human way. In a much more human way, and especially within the last few years, in a much more human way rather than in such a small way...I'm not pigeonholing people as much.

Like Brandon, Wanda described how being transgender has opened her mind and helped her be less judgmental. This is a quality others have noticed in her:

That was a gift from [my wife] to me, when she helped me realize that, "Oh! My trans life has helped me to see people in a different way than I would have if I hadn't been trans." ...it doesn't mean I don't get pissed off at people's crazy behaviors, but at least I don't just condemn them outright like a lot of folks do.

Abby also described an expanding acceptance for others as she has come to know herself as transgender. She now finds herself more interested in all of human diversity and appreciates how being transgender has facilitated a greater appreciation of others. She finds herself being more interested in other people and the dazzling diversity of human life. She has an increased fascination with the nuances of human variety, and she now engages with diversity in new ways:

[Being transgender] gives me this heightened new perception of life around me. And when I say life, I mean just the world with people in it, the diversity of people in it. It has just heightened all of that, and broadened and widened the things that I can now perceive within that world, where I didn't really have that before.

Well, A, I find [my heightened awareness of human diversity] very rewarding. B, I'm able to appreciate more all the individual diversities that I see, because the world, as we all know, is very diverse. But it's opened up my ability to examine the diversity, to think about it, to hold discussions with people about it. Last night there was a get together and I found myself talking about different issues of diversity of people and cultures, where, yes, I always had an interest in that and would have talked about it, but not in the detail, not in the fine tuning-in...

In a related sub-theme, several participants described how being transgender has uniquely positioned them to see the good in people. Francis, for example, has experienced her transgenderism as a means of opening up such opportunities. Being out

as genderqueer has created social intersections where she has often been surprised by the support and validation others have offered: “This is kind of strange...but I think one of the reasons I like [being trans] is because it gives me more examples to be, like, surprised by the good in people.” She offered two such examples of situations in which “the good in people” came out unexpectedly in relation to her transness. The first had to do with a date that apparently went pretty well:

We were messing around and clothing was coming off and she just said, “Do you have boundaries? Do you have any rules about...?” And it was specifically related to gender, and I wasn’t expecting it... but it was like a really pleasant surprise. It was like, “Wow!” And I was taken aback, I was like, “Wait. What?” Because I just wasn’t expecting it, and that was really great. ...I appreciate it, that she thought to ask and it meant to me...I think for me it was just sort of...okay, it bodes well for the relationship.

The other scenario occurred over the course of a few semesters when she was in college. At that time, the pleasant surprises came from several professors. Francis had evidently adopted a male name temporarily and asked her professors to use it, but later changed her mind and asked them to call her Francis again:

...when I was trying to work shit out when I was in college I found professors that were really supportive, and that was good, too, you know, and when I said after a semester, call me a male name, and then I’m like, “No, this is not what I need.” I mean this one professor joked with me, but what else would he do. He’s just like that. But everyone was like, “Oh, okay.” And that was really nice. Somebody e-mailed me at the beginning of the next semester and said—it was a professor that I’d had previously, and she must have heard from somebody that I had changed names back again or whatever—so she e-mailed me and said, “Hey, what do you prefer to be called?” And that was really cool. It was just sort of, yeah, the opportunity where you see...’cause one of the professors could have been like, “No, I’m not going to, this is what it says on the roster and that’s what I’m going to call you.” And you know, yeah, it was just sort of an opportunity to see the good in people when you really weren’t expecting it.

By putting her trans identity “out there” into the world, Francis has had the opportunity to be surprised by the good in people and to receive their offers of validation and support. Seeing others overcome what at times can be a seemingly insurmountable obstacle (traditional gender boundaries) in order to affirm her life experience has left Francis with a sense that others respect her and care about her in a deep and meaningful way.

Lucas described other aspects of seeing the good in others. By his account, being open and honest has put him in a position to be “surprised” by the good he finds in unsuspected places. He has positioned himself to experience compassion and acceptance and, therefore, has opened himself to the best of what others have to offer. He attributes part of this, also, to being able to be “stealth”—to “go behind the lines” and hear what heterosexual, cisgender people say among themselves about LGBT people, because he is now perceived as a cisgender, heterosexual man on a regular basis. What he has heard as surprised him in a very good way. He has been pleasantly surprised by the open-mindedness and acceptance he generally receives upon disclosing his trans identity:

I am usually surprised, because people respond better than I thought that they would. What people have to say is that if they genuinely are allies or, you know, it’s something that’s just like, “Well, that doesn’t matter to me.” Or, you know, “Well, don’t be ignorant.” It’s amazing. Most of the time I’m really surprised by people’s compassion and the fact that they’re not out to get somebody.

Coming to know and accept himself as a trans person laid the foundation for Lucas to question his own tendency to stereotype others. He began breaking down his own stereotypes of others that kept them at a distance:

I’ve found community with a lot of allies that I don’t think I would have had previously because of my biases and because of my assumptions. So I’ve made really great friends who are allies because I got over myself [laughs] and didn’t write them off, thinking that they were going to write me off.

In the process, he was surprised by the number of allies he found and the situations in which he has found them. He discovered the possibility of connection with a wider variety of people, including cisgender men and people of faith, specifically:

And I was also really surprised by how personal a lot of male relationships are, because my assumption was that that was not how it was going to be. But I've learned that when I get to know someone, even if they don't know [that I'm trans], they just know me, they're okay with me. So I can develop emotional relationships with guys. I can have that. And, I can have that on my terms. And it's okay, now. And I just assumed that wasn't going to be it. But I was surprised.

I think that I've met people in a spiritual community because I'm trans, because I might have disclosed that to them, or I'm surrounded by people that are supportive of LGBT people in general, so I really have met people that are spiritual leaders. That are accepting and affirming. And I think that before I would have closed myself off entirely, like, "You don't accept me, so I'm not going to accept you," and I would have said that to an entire across-the-board community of people of faith...

Sub-theme F: Being socially competent. Participants spoke often of an increased sense of ease and competence in social interactions—usually attributed to presenting their true selves in public—that enabled them to better connect with others. Several described how they are simply more open to initiating conversation when they are presenting as themselves. Fahima, for example, explained:

I didn't know that the decision of starting transitioning will just change my entire mind. I start to be more, to be nicer. Like, to contact people more. I used to say, "No, they should contact me." Now, no, I can contact them. I say, "Hi," like at the place for the bus. I'm a better person. I was good, but now I'm better. I'm much better.

Felicia described how her intuition has flowered since embracing her trans identity. She experiences this new way of thinking and problem-solving as a boon to her social competence. She no longer tries to control other people's thinking, but rather leaves

herself open to hearing and understanding others through being tuned in to their verbal and nonverbal messages:

I think it helps in social situations, too, to be able to pick up on what people are saying and being...if you had just a kind of established way of thinking you're always going to be trying to force whatever people are saying into the established way of thinking, so I think it's kind of opened up my mind in a lot of other directions, too.

Abby, though, gave what I consider a paradigm case illustrating the nuances of this sense of enhanced social competence described by so many participants. Since coming out as trans, Abby has found great meaning in connecting with other people—people in general and the transgender community in particular. She described how unearthing her true self and sharing it openly with the world has enabled her to avail herself of new kinds of friendships and human connections. Her connections with other human beings are now deeper, easier, more meaningful, and simply more enjoyable after coming out as transgender and assuming a feminine social role.

In femme, she has begun reaching out to others as never before and has found within herself a surprising capacity for unburdened, spontaneous communication and connection. The dividers that she once experienced between herself and other people have melted. Now she experiences others not only as worthy of her attention—“When I meet people, I can more appreciate the person that I'm meeting”—but also as surprisingly accessible to her:

So, I find that having exposure to the transgender community, being able to really draw out the feminine self, I can banter. And I actually enjoy it—speaking with people and just...people I don't even know. There can be somebody in line next to me, and I'll just make some comment. “Hi,” you know? “This line is taking so long. Can you believe how long this line is taking?” This is just amazing to me. I would never have had that kind of conversation. My children picked up on it, and they said, “Dad, you're just talking to people you don't even know. You've never done

that before. That's a new character or attribute that you've got, and we've noticed this. What's going on?" So, it's allowed me to be able to do that, just to feel whatever walls, whatever curtain, whatever barrier that could have been there in male mode is now somewhat transparent, and I don't have a problem with just starting a conversation with somebody I don't even know. Just observations, just talk, and I find that interesting to be able to do that. So, the communication part is being able to launch these conversations and hold them on whatever level the other person wants to.

But I thought to myself that this is due to my expressing the femme side of myself with other people, to have that exposure and have that experience to meet with other transgender people, to allow that persona or that personality that I have to actually unleash. Open the door and let that person out. And so I thought that at the moment that my daughter said [that she noticed I was talking more to people]. I thought, "Oh, wow!" I didn't even realize I was doing that, this new form of communication, this opening up, this being able to just talk and say, "Hi," to someone that I don't even know and just start a conversation.

At a break in the meeting, I got up from the table, because I saw that she was sitting there, and I just walked over and said, "Hi, I haven't see you in a while. How's everything? How's it going? How's your wife?" So, I started asking those questions, and we talked, again, this communication of just getting up and going over and just....very freeing to talk to someone...and so, we did.

Abby went on to describe how she interprets this communicative freedom as something given in a feminine social role. She told of being surprised by this newfound "desire" to talk with other people once she came out as transgender:

Interesting enough, my wife [starts conversations with strangers] all the time. And I have observed that she does that all the time. And it's just something that I'm not comfortable with. I just don't do that. I just didn't. So you don't even know, you know, she'll just lean forward. Just start talking to them. Honestly, there's a need that she has that I just don't understand, and so when I opened that door to allow this transgender person to come out, I found that same need, or desire. I can't call it a need; I'll call it a desire. An interest. To have the conversation with someone because it's nice to meet other people and find out their experiences or what's going on. And again, even if it's just banter or a serious conversation.

In femme, she has found herself both interested in and capable of more meaningful conversations with others. But she has also discovered an ability to be facile in human communications, moving deftly among various levels of seriousness and triviality:

I find that when I communicate with people, I engage them more. I try to draw out from them information about them, whatever the subject is. To take the conversation to a deeper level, to a deeper depth, and sometimes take it very light and just banter back and forth. As male, though, I wouldn't banter.

As she came out as transgender, Abby experienced an emotional awakening. This newfound ability to share her emotions has played a role in her social interactions, as she has found gratification in revealing more of her experience of life to others:

And so [being trans/being in femme] has allowed me to communicate better with people. It's allowed me to express my feelings and emotions far easier, more directly. It's allowed me to engage with other people, where otherwise I wouldn't have really engaged with people.

In male mode, usually, if I cared for something I would let somebody know, but if something bothered me, I would just withdraw and walk away and just deal with it, I guess. But now being in the feminine mode, I really find that I can actually talk to people about things that I find disturbing, things that I find that I care for—express it in a nice way.

She also finds listening to be easier and more rewarding now that she is living as transgender. She experiences a heightened ability to understand others, to pick up on the nuances of human communication, and to engage in sustained dialogue:

[There's a] different clarity in my conversation with people, too, so really, and I always listen to people, I don't just hear what they say, because it's important to listen to people, but in understanding what I'm hearing from the people that the voice inflection, how it's going up or going down, besides listening to the words that they're saying, I find that I have a better understanding, more clarity in what's being said, and in what I'm perceiving of what they're saying. In male mode, I would listen, but something in my brain would filter out what was being said, and I wouldn't necessarily come away with the same perception of the person, but this clarity that I get now, I not only listen, but I have I think a better

understanding of what the dialogue is of what's being said. And I don't space out or lose part of the conversation with the person, whereas in male mode I would have.

Several MTF participants made sense of their enhanced social functioning as Abby did—by attributing it to having assumed a feminine role or interaction style. Corina, for example, described her ability to connect with others in a way she never could or would when she was Carl. She relayed how she assumed a feminine interaction style, characterized by the ability or even the desire to care about others—to be concerned about their feelings, to express support, and to be empathetic:

In looking at people through Corina's eyes, I see things different than I do through Carl's eyes. Carl's kind of always portraying a mean person or a husky person, however you want to phrase it. Corina's not looking for that, no, she's just observing and seeing what she's doing wrong and what she can do to improve herself, and she's very concerned about other people's feelings.

Like, "Here, let me clean this up for you," you know? That's the kind of feeling Corina has all the time. She, you know, tries to be friends with a lot of people, I guess. And Carl won't do that. Carl just, "Nyeh... It's a girl thing," you know?

Sub-theme G: Being helpful to others. A fourth sub-theme many participants described as an aspect of "Intimate Connection with Others" was the experience of helping others. Participants commonly expressed a sense of generosity within themselves—a sense which involved both "having something to give" and "finding value in giving" now that they are openly transgender. Teresa, for instance, described how, after coming to terms with her trans identity, she can now see what she has to give. She is now a person operating at her potential: "But I really can't think of living any other way. I really can't. It's just...I have so much to offer the world now." She went on to give two examples of how she enjoys helping out other transgender people, specifically.

One was her friendship with her new roommate, Abby, who came out just a few months before the interviews. The other was the assistance she is giving a college-age MTF transsexual who is not able to be out at home. Through these examples, Teresa revealed how it is important to her to serve as a mentor to people who are going through a process similar to her own. She clearly has great empathy for other transpeople and wants to do what she can make their lives better:

I've got a roommate now that I can interact with in a way that I've never been able to before, and we have so much in common, that's what's been so great about it. I'm really helping her along quite a bit, too...because before she'd never been able to dress up in femme hardly at all. Now it's every day. She loves it.

I'm working with a college student now that...she is just terrified, I mean, she's reached the point where she cannot stand living as the male persona anymore. It's just driving her crazy. When you get to that point, you can't concentrate on what you're really supposed to be doing. So, I've been helping her adjust to this and she actually, last time she was here she said, "Well, you know, if it does come out, if they do discover something, this place or something, and if they do kick me out, would you be able to take me in?" And I said, "Of course." There's just no way I could turn anyone away.

Similarly, Krystal described mentoring others as a central aspect of her appreciation of being transgender. She takes great pleasure in helping others in this capacity: "I feel very good about helping others. I've always kind of wanted to help people and almost try to save the world, but no one can really save the world by themselves, so, it's just what I do." She helps with concrete skills, such as make-up application, as well as perhaps more taxing challenges, such as managing medical risks and facing prejudice and discrimination. This is a meaningful avenue through which she

can express her care for others and make their lives easier—and maybe “save the world” in the process. In any case, she sees her mentoring as a way to make the world a better, safer place for transpeople:

Well, I mentioned I try to mentor other people in our community. I try to help whoever I can with this, going through the journey. Because, I guess, I know it’s not an easy place, it’s not an easy world out there for people like us. A lot of people are prejudiced against us, or they just hate us for what we are, and it’s just a very scary world out there, and I try to be there for my fellow trans sisters and fellow trans brothers, and I just, I’m there for everybody as much as I can within my means, so...I care very much for people.

Siren has also been able to connect with others through helping relationships. She described a time when a local teen-ager came into her life just as he was facing challenges similar to those Siren had faced. Siren was able to understand this youth in a unique way, empathize sincerely with him, and support him. She believes she likely played a role in saving his life:

He started telling me about bad stuff, and with what happened to him in the rapid succession that it did happen to him, I think that without me or without someone else, that he would have been in a lot of trouble and maybe could have been one of those teen suicides on the news. But he *didn't*, and I am like, I honestly don't want to be arrogant and take full credit for it, but I know that I helped him when he really needed it.

She acknowledged that she was helped in the act of helping another. It not only gave her the opportunity to experience being generous toward another human being in need, but it allowed her to work through some of her own pain. It also enabled her to experience herself as “a good friend,” as someone who puts their own concerns aside in order to be strong for someone else:

...it was not just good for him; it was good for me in so many ways. In a lot of ways, it helped me sort of resolve my own issues. And there were things that I had just put out of mind and never dealt with from the past that when he started talking about the same things, then I had no choice

but to deal with it cause it was like here in my face and this boy was crying and needed my help, so what could I do? Just be like, “Sorry, I can’t deal with this right now?” I needed to be a good friend through the whole thing.

A few participants described how they think of their helpfulness as part of a larger web of generosity. As Krystal described it:

I’m very happy that I can help other friends and they try to help out their other friends, so it’s kind of like a sharing of everybody. And it just makes me feel good. It makes me feel happy that I can help. I just, I enjoy that.

Lucas similarly told of his desire to support others generously as a way of “paying forward” the love and acceptance that has been given to him:

And so I love it when my friends who are dealing with similar issues come to me and need help with something. I don’t know if I just really want to pay it forward in that sense. Because I feel like, “Yeah, I survived it, but I was also very lucky.” And I don’t think, in fact I know that not all people are as lucky as I am, to have a family that would still support them, or to be as supportive as they can be. And friends that will support them and be as supportive as they can be. And so I want to be that for people.

He has done this on an individual basis by assisting newly transitioning FTMs “learn the ropes,” so to speak. He gives one example of helping an FTM friend learn to administer testosterone shots to himself:

...we spent 45 minutes in the bathroom, in our boxers, and I showed them how to inject, and I, it wasn’t time for my shots so I didn’t actually inject, but I stuck myself with the needle, which is not fun. I hate to do it. But you know, I just showed them, “This is how it can be.” And then I actually injected them for their first two injections until they were able to get through it. And so, then since that person expressed their gratitude that I was willing to do that, I love that I can do that for somebody. And that now that’s going to be an easier process because they know how to do it, and they feel a little more confident in themselves, and they still call me when they have a concern.

Sub-theme H: Being in stronger relationships. Building meaningful relationships with other human beings emerged as an essential feature of every participant's appreciation of being transgender. Each interviewee's narrative included a description of how their transgender journeys have enabled them to build better relationships with family and friends. Lucas' interview exemplified how the honesty demanded of someone striving to embrace their transgenderism can yield interpersonal benefits. I consider his narrative to be a paradigm case on this matter. He described in great depth how this honesty or genuineness in his emotional and behavioral life has been experienced as a facilitating factor in Lucas' ability to form genuine, well-grounded relationships with his partner, family, and friends. Having been tenaciously honest with himself in coming out as trans and distinguishing his genuine desires from the pressures of traditional gender expectations, Lucas has found himself better equipped to now be honest with others. He has experienced honesty as a way to deepen relationships—to be more intimate with the important people in his life:

Well, I think that for me, before I came to terms with the fact that I was transgendered, there was just a part of me I was completely closed off to. And that affected my friendships, that affected my relationship with my family, and my sisters and my parents and...it was just this complete denial of what I needed. I didn't listen to myself. I didn't listen to what I needed. And that was true in relationships. I didn't, I couldn't be honest with myself so how could I be honest with other people? And once I was able to identify, "Oh, this is what's going on with me. I need to explore this. I need to be open to this and be honest to myself." I've been able to be honest with other people.

And so I think [being free from gender roles] brings a good level of, a good deal of honesty to the relationships that I have in my life, because I don't do anything because it's what's expected. I do this because it's actually what I feel. I think it makes my life in general more genuine. I think I can have real relationships. And very, very honest ones.

He used the example of coming out as trans to other people to illustrate how being honest and trusting others with something precious to you can create more intimate bonds:

I just wanted everybody who was coming [to my wedding], if I love them enough to invite them, to have them in that space, then I wanted to, I wanted them to know [that I am trans]. I want to have that intimacy. And so I had to tell someone who was a former co-worker of mine and we had interacted multiple times. I knew it was never an issue of her being supportive, I knew she would be... So I just met her in person, and we talked about all kinds of stuff beforehand, and we're getting ready to go, and I said, "By the way, I wanted to tell you something before you came to the wedding, just because I care about you very much and I respect you, and you're going to be in a very intimate space, with my friends and family, so I just wanted to tell you that I'm transgender." So, it went fine. It went okay, and it felt good to—it just felt like bringing that person into a closer relationship—a closer friendship, because I was able to let them know that.

I mean, it's just like just sharing a big part of yourself with someone, and I'm going to use this even though it's probably the worst comparison ever, but anyone who's gone through anything that is traumatic, but that could be a piece of it, or just this whole idea of being a survivor, let's just put it in those terms. You've gone through something, and you've come out the other side of it. And this is what you went through. And so the good and the bad of being trans—all of it—is, like, "This is a part of my life, and I went through this, and it continues to be a part of my life, and I just wanted to let you know that."

This dedication to honesty set the stage for Lucas to have the experience of being validated, loved, and "seen" for whom he really is by the person who was his fiancé at the time of the interview (they have since married):

...it was always, since the beginning, "This is who I am, this is where my life is headed." And it was never a question of whether, "Well, I don't think I could be with you." Because I've had a relationship where I told the individual that, "You know, I think I'm transgendered." And that individual was like, "Well, I don't think I can support that." And so then I just shut it up again. So, first and foremost, I don't think I have this relationship because I'm transgender, but I think this relationship is built on the strongest foundation because I've been able to be honest about being trans. And validated and supported because of it. I've had this one amazing relationship where I have felt supported and validated all the way through. And loved through it all.

I think [my current relationship] was probably the first time in my life where I felt “seen.” And heard, and respected for exactly who I was. I just don’t think, I can’t think of a time, I mean I know my parents love me—I was their kid—and my sisters love me, certainly, and I’m sure people like me or didn’t like me because of my personality, but it was just the first time I think I felt someone love *me* who didn’t have to.

Having honestly accepted himself, and having experienced love and validation from others, Lucas now experiences himself as a person of equal value compared to others. He now expects validation and respect from people and experiences himself as deserving of those basic indicators of dignity and belonging:

And I think I want respect and I want validation from people, that I feel that I warrant that from them. If I give it to them, then I want it back. Before I don’t think, I think I would give everything and I wouldn’t expect anything in return, or I wouldn’t think I deserved anything else, which is just like, “Here’s everything that I have. Oh? For me? Okay then, well, okay.” Then I’d back away! [Laughs] It didn’t need to be reciprocal. It didn’t need to be...nothing about it needed to be equal. It was just sacrifice and I’ll take what I can get. So I feel worthy now. I feel like I’m deserving of a relationship. I’m deserving of love and acceptance.

Brandon also values being transgender for the gifts it brings to his marriage. He feels better able to understand his wife and her experiences as a woman. This leaves him feeling more compassionate and understanding toward her:

I think because my partner is a woman, and I used to be a woman, we can like get on board about some things, because I know what it’s like to put on make-up every day, you know, and I can appreciate what it’s like to have PMS. [Laughs] You know, like, I can be maybe more sympathetic to her....although sometimes it’s really annoying....but [Laughs] I think that makes it easier in our relationship, so I appreciate that. I mean, you know, I have to get to know her as a person, but there’s some common experience that we have even though my experience was different, but there is some common experience, you know, what it’s like to be a woman in the world in some ways.

Siren and Sephie, who are in a long-term relationship with each other, had no trouble independently identifying their relationship as one of the most valuable aspects of

their transgender journeys. They literally found each other because they were both transgender. As Sephie said, “I think I would definitely not be with Siren as I am today [if Siren weren’t trans].” They were able to form a strong bond with each other as they discovered their gender identities together. They were able to help one another uncover the meaning of transgenderism in their lives, and, along the way, experienced their “transness” as a central factor in their mutual attraction. As Siren described it:

...if I had to pick a first top of the list thing, then that would be Sephie. The fact that we were both transgender and sort of both figuring it out at the same time was kind of a major bonding factor, and when we first met we were both so interested in each other and that was one of the main reasons. We were figuring it out, what it meant, at the same time and we had like different information or ideas to offer each other and we were sort of the only other people that we knew who were trans and....well, I guess I found it really attractive in him, and I think he did in me too.

Wanda and Olivia were married as husband and wife and had their struggles throughout Wanda’s transition, even separating for long periods of time. Yet they remained close and connected and continued on as each other’s primary caregivers and companions. Wanda knows she received the ultimate gift of unconditional love from Olivia, and that this was all the more meaningful because this love overcame so many of society’s prejudices and limitations:

Olivia said, “You know, if I had it all to do over again, us getting married and living together and going through all this stuff about you being trans and everything, and staying married and being close....” We grew closer in a lot of ways than we ever had been before and neither of us thought that was possible, but we did. And even though our relationship completely changed, it was really amazing, and she said, “If I had it all to do over again knowing how it was going to turn out, I would do it again.” And I...that was the best thing anybody’s ever said to me. I could die today and never have to worry about whether my life was worthwhile because of that.

As a further expression of love and support, Wanda's wife organized an especially meaningful ritual to symbolize Wanda's entrance into a community of women:

Olivia had always been a very spiritual sort of person in a lot of ways, and as I got closer to transitioning, she and some of her friends got together and did a ceremony welcoming me into women's space, and it was like, "Wow! Such a thrill!"

Heléne offered an interesting angle on how she experiences being transgender as something of value because it enables her to more easily determine which people (especially potential friends or lovers) will be good for her and those who will not. As she described it:

...there's nothing else like being trans to tell you that this person's not going to be right for you, because they're probably way too conservative and their beliefs are probably going to clash with yours, and you're probably not going to get along. It's kind of like people using [their] horoscope for dating...I can use my ability as a transwoman in dating to find out who would be a better fit.

She described experiencing something akin to "gaydar" since coming out as a transwoman. She appreciates the "powers" this "real-dar," as she calls it, gives her—namely, an ability to pick up on transphobia in others and "to separate the wheat from the chaff," so to speak—to distinguish genuinely supportive ("real") people from others who may be rejecting or closed-minded. The people she experiences as "real" are those that are willing to learn, willing to be educated, and willing to admit that they do not have all the answers. She sees them as more intellectually curious and not as "locked up" in rigid patterns of thinking:

I think that is something for me, at least, it's not so much gaydar, it's kind of like "real-dar," you know? Because being who I am, and especially if you're dating, you can tell which people are real, because when you talk to them and you get to know them, and if they're accepting of you as being trans, then they are probably more real than other people, because real

people tend to be these people who aren't so locked up in their minds, in their values and beliefs.

Common wisdom tells us that transgender people are routinely rejected by their families. This does, of course, happen—and far too often. It happened to many participants in this study. But it is neither the case for every transperson nor the whole story for every transperson. Several participants shared how their family bonds have been strengthened through their coming out process. Teresa, for example, described the deeper bond she has forged with her mother. She has deeply valued her mother's willingness to embrace her as a transwoman. And beyond that, her mother has actually begun actively educating others about trans issues:

My mom and I have a really good relationship. We were close, but we've become so much closer. Her understanding of this was to the point that, I think it's been ten years now, we got asked to do a show [on trans issues] on local television. So, my mom and I volunteered for that...and she, my mom was just absolutely wonderful through the whole thing. She really enjoyed it.

Krystal had similarly been embraced by her family. Her parents directly supported her transition by paying for her surgeries and hormones. She specifically described how her relationship with her mother actually improved throughout the transition process, and her mother was able to express pride in Krystal's courage:

Well, I got closer with my mom when I transitioned, and she was very supportive of me before she passed away this year, and she really wanted me to be happy, so she went out of her way for me. Like when I went for surgeries and stuff, so I miss my mom very much.

It made me feel very good, and my mom's respect for me was very much, it was very good. She...was very proud of me for everything I went through, 'cause it takes a lot of courage to do this.

In addition to relationships with partners and family members, participants commonly described deepening relationships with an expanding circle of friends. A

major theme in Krystal's experience of appreciating being trans is how she has connected with friends through her transgender journey. She finds herself having more friends—and closer friends—as a result of being trans and going through her transition. She has also made herself available to friends in new ways since her transition, such as reaching out online to connect with other transpeople. She is now in a circle of trans and cisgender friends that support, value, and respect her:

I have more friendships after being trans than I was in my past life as a male. I have a lot more friends, more people are, you know, I'm more open and I have more support, people just enjoy being around me.

My friends are very supportive of me. They go out of their way for me. I have a lot of good friends that love me the same as...you know, I'm learning to be a girl from my genetic female friends, and they've helped me out with learning to do some of my make-up, I've gotten better. They really enjoy helping me, and a lot of my girlfriends have known me before, before I was, and a lot of my girlfriends like me better as a girl than they liked me when I was a guy.

It makes me feel more, we have a closer friendship. I have a lot closer friendship with a lot of my girlfriends now being a female than being a guy, and it's just, it makes me feel so good and it's like, you know, just a closer bond.

Heléne similarly described the experience of receiving support from friends, most of whom are cisgender. When surrounded by her friends, she finds herself feeling strong and resilient in the face of hostility:

You know, I get “queer,” “sissy,” I can't recall all the words they were using, but then again, I try not to. And I was hearing all these words, but then again, right after I heard those words, I'm sitting down with *friends*.

And you have this social group of people that are surrounding you, that actually care about you. And like you as a person. They don't really give a crap what you're doing. They're just like, “Yeah, you're portraying the gender role you perceive yourself in. That's great!”

Corina expressed similar affection for her circle of friends, although most of them were transgender. As she spoke of her many good memories of their times together, it was clear that she values them greatly. Within this circle of friends, she was able to express herself in femme and receive support, encouragement, and affirmation in her transgender experience:

I enjoy the friends. All these girls out there? I mean, I enjoy talkin' to them. All the friends I had before in, oh, I can't remember the name, in [two transgender support organizations]...I thought they were great people...We are all friends. Good friends, good people.

Those were good times. Good parties, good....get dressed up, you know, casual dress up...We were going out almost every week, you know, and that's when I met all these other friends, you know, we went to the shopping mall out west there...We just started going everywhere. Man, I was so happy. This is my life; this is the way it's gonna be.

Siren has also experienced transness as a helpful factor in the formation of other important relationships with both friends and a larger trans/trans-affirming community. She especially values her experiences with building relationships with people who are markedly different from herself. She feels enriched by what diverse trans people have brought into her life, because they have exposed her to perspectives she had not previously considered. She described how being trans has presented her with opportunities to find common ground and become good friends with people she probably would not have otherwise:

And then just knowing people like Heléne, who I think sometimes is insane but I'm glad I know her. I really am. She's so different from me and maybe if we weren't trans we never would've talked the first time we talked; maybe she never would have come to me and told me that she felt the same way that I do, and I wouldn't know her, and I wouldn't have experienced what she thinks and stuff like that. I guess it's cool to have it in common with people who are completely different than I am and might be like the starting point for us talking and exchanging ideas and knowing

about each other that maybe never would've happened. I just feel good about the other people that I've met, the other members of the trans community. I feel glad to be part of it.

Siren has been able to identify with a larger trans-identified community, and he takes “comfort” in that. She takes comfort in knowing she is not alone—that there are others fighting the same fight for dignity and acceptance. As she described one example:

But it's also good to know that there are other people out there who are dealing with this stuff, too, like there's this woman that I met at a gay bar that I think of often. She was a black drag queen, and she was gorgeous and she just had this attitude. And I remember some douche-bag grabbed her ass and she just kinda socked him and had some awesome come-back thing, or whatever. So I just think of her sometimes like, I don't know, like if I'm ever feeling weak or something, I'll just think of that black drag queen out there being sassy, struttin' her stuff, it's comforting.

Finding friends and community as a young trans adult has been particularly meaningful to Sephie. Having these human connections appears to be one factor contributing to her experience of life as more complete. Having other queer friends, who are also “outside the norm,” provides a sense of affirmation and validation to Sephie. She pondered that this camaraderie around gender nonconformity perhaps heightens the profundity of friendship in a way that cisgender or heterosexual people might not experience. Paradoxically, being with friends who all differ from “the norm” gives Sephie the opportunity to feel “normal.” She no longer has to monitor herself or move apprehensively in the world:

[Being with my queer friends], it's awesome. Being around people who are like you, it's just like going to a party and having fun, because you don't have to worry about the negative backlash of anybody being like, “You don't belong here,” or something...It's like, you don't have to worry about that, so it's just...that constant thought in your head that somebody's not going to appreciate who you are is not there. So you don't have to worry or have self-conscious issues or self-confidence issues at all.

And like showing [my new skirt] to my queer friends, being like, “This is me,” and I don’t have to worry about anybody judging me because they’re all different as well.

At other times, Sephie has experienced affirmation and validation from people outside her immediate circle of friends. She has been embraced by a larger queer community. From Sephie’s narrative, one senses the “fun” she is having now that she is out as a transwoman. Being transgender has afforded her the opportunity to build relationships with partners, friends, and a wider community that are all enriching her life in ways she did not necessarily foresee, and all the while supporting the uniqueness of her life “outside the norm.” For example:

The very first time that I went to a Pride Festival, I was wearing a skirt underneath my pants as I always do, and we were hanging out with a bunch of people and friends of mine, and so on, and we showed up and everybody was like “You’re wearing a skirt underneath your pants, right?” and I’m all like, “Well, yeah, I always do,” and they’re all like, “Then why are you wearing your pants? Go ahead, do what you do, be who you are. This is Pride, you don’t have to worry about someone judging you because everybody here is different. So you don’t have to worry,” and it’s the first time I ever got my make-up done and it was just, it was awesome.

Abby described how she, too, was embraced by a welcoming transgender community in which she was able to connect with people like her. In this, she found freedom and fulfillment:

I enjoy that because A: Now that I find that I communicate more with people, I’m looking for people—like everybody does—people who are somewhat like yourself. When I say someone like yourself, I’m talking about somebody who is sharing, giving, caring, and in the transgender community, I have found quite a few people like that. In male mode, I could rarely find people that are like that. And in the transgender community, I have found some really sweet, lovable people. The person I’m sharing this house with. That is a loving, caring person. And it is so nice to be around somebody like that. It just helps boost me and helps boost how I feel about myself. And there’s just this overall fulfilling inside that I just can’t...I just feel filled up, and it reinforces my sharing and caring and giving, and so I really enjoy that.

All I can say is that the overall umbrella word or words is that I feel more liberated, myself, by being part of the community. Liberated in all the ways we've already talked about, and it is a very nice feeling, it's a very nice place to be, and I enjoy the new appreciation that I have and the new knowledge that I've gained about the transgender community.

A few interviewees told of their initial formal entries into the transgender community as a way to illustrate the acceptance they have received. Melissa spoke of the first transgender support group meeting she attended in such terms. When she was desperate, this circle took her in and offered her complete and unquestioning acceptance:

...when I opened the door and walked in, I had never been as universally accepted anywhere in my life as I was the moment I walked through that door. My new life had completely started. And it's been uphill, fun, exciting, one experience after another, positive, very few negatives, very few—there have been a couple of things, I mean, there are people out there—but it's been a positive trip for me all along.

Wanda similarly described attending a transgender support meeting for the first time as a transcendent experience of homecoming and acceptance:

And it was just like I had come home. And it was like the spiritual vibe, the atmosphere was just like, "Whoa!" I don't know, I just... And I met two, three people there that night who became my best friends, and each of us helped the others in transitioning. When everyone else who was close to us rejected us, we were there for each other, and that made it really possible in a lot of ways. I never would have made it through transition had it not been for that, because there were a lot of times when it was just so stressful and depressing.

Other participants also spoke of a sense of mutual support and empowerment within the transgender community. Francis, for example, quickly identified community as one of the best things about being transgender. Her narrative serves as a paradigm case for the way it captures the shared meanings of what so many participants described as the value of community in their lives. Francis has a sense of herself as being part of—as belonging to—a social group that would otherwise be more or less off limits to her.

This social group (the trans or genderqueer community) is central to how she makes sense of her identity and her life experience. It is of special significance to her that her community is a minority culture in U. S. society. She has found meaning in not being part of the dominant group of cisgender people. Her group's minority status sharpens its meaning and makes it particularly salient for her: "[Being trans] gives me another group of people that I can, with whom I can build solidarity and build community in a way that I think a lot of cis people don't have."

Belonging to a minority group offers a sense of solidarity for Francis. This solidarity among the trans community seems to give her a profound sense of togetherness and mutual validation, both of which are heightened against the backdrop of a mainstream society that renders trans people invisible. In her community, she has access to certain resources—empathy, understanding, learning new ideas:

...these are people with whom I share an identity, and that identity happens to be something that isn't dominant, it sort of just gives me another group of people with whom I can network and talk about issues that affect me, and gain perspective and that sort of thing. So I really value that, it gives me access I guess to another social network.

I value the fact that I am able to have closer connections with people based on the shared identity in a way that I think cis people can't form strong connections with people because they're cis or whatever, I, like, I don't form stronger connections with people because we're both white in the same way that I form connections with people because we're both gender variant.

To Francis, community, in part, means comfort—the comfort of knowing she is not alone. People like her have a name—they exist—and that shared existence provides validation. She can see her own experience reflected in that of others, and this enables her to enjoy the freedoms inherent in expressing oneself authentically:

I think that for me that was really valuable, and when I realized that there's a word for people who are generally okay with their body but not with the way that they're expected to present because of it, and that sort of thing. So, I think being able to name that and knowing that other people feel that way, it's been really valuable for me, because I feel like it makes me a lot more comfortable presenting how I want to present.

...even though I'm being transgressive of what's expected, I know I still want a group of people and a community that is like this, even if it's not immediately visible, even if it's not something that's necessarily in the eye of the mainstream. Sort of like, I know it's there, and I know there are people who don't want to have surgery but do want to only buy their clothes in the men's section.

Community has also meant connections with people to whom she does not have to explain herself. Her community of queer friends share common understandings and life experiences, and this mutual sharing opens up spaces through which their relationships can enter depths that would otherwise be unlikely. These shared understandings permeate their relationships and facilitate communication of all kinds:

Like if something is going on at a conference that we need to talk about, I know that I can find [a member of the queer community], and we can talk about it and process stuff, and there's sort of a basic understanding of what's going on and what's happening. But even when we talk about unrelated things, it's like we share this connection and so it opens up other levels...because we know we share that connection, it enables us to talk about other stuff, too, and in a way that's sort of more meaningful, because we can reflect back on our shared experience even when we're talking about other topics.

A final aspect of the "Stronger Relationships" sub-theme was how various participants described having a greater sense of connection to humanity in general. Several described how embracing their transgender selves facilitated the discovery of commonalities with others and the sense of being fully human. Brandon captured this experience with perhaps more insight and nuance than anyone else. He senses that his journey as a transman—including his struggle of coming to terms with his transness and

then transitioning—was a profoundly human experience. The fact of having had such a meaningful, yet difficult, journey has left him feeling more connected to the human family: “So I appreciate that. I feel like I’ve had a human experience in that way, and I’m able to, because of that experience, I’m able to relate to other people, too, more.” As “unusual” as a transgender life may be to society at large, to Brandon, it has been a fundamentally human experience that has heightened his awareness of his embeddedness within the human family:

I think that if I had to compare myself now to myself prior to 1999 [when he transitioned], I would say that that’s the biggest thing, of feeling...I just feel like I have so many things in common with people now, whereas before I just really felt like I was isolated, on my own, on an island inside my head.

Even though my life experience is, like, the details are pretty different than most people in the world, that type of experience is comparable to other peoples’ experiences, you know, like, decisions that they have to make. I’d say a lot of people, unless they’re asleep all the time, have to go through something at some point, and I think that for that reason I can say that I feel like I’m like everybody else.

‘Cause I’ve had to go through something. I think I feel like my ability to hold that dichotomy, or, like, if I’m talking to somebody, and our experiences are totally different, I’m still able to say, “My experience is just like yours,” because even though the details could be drastically different from mine, you know, really, mine, if you put them all down on paper, are out of the norm, but they’re still like people. If you take the details out and just look at the feeling part, they’re pretty similar to other people.

Theme 3: Intimate connection with a larger purpose. Not only did participants describe deep connections to themselves and to other people by virtue of their experiences as transgender, but many expressed how being trans contributed to a profound sense of being connected to something even larger. Many participants spoke of increasing connections to a spiritual reality and to a movement toward social justice.

Those who did speak of intimate relationships with these larger forces described them as sources of significant meaning and purpose in their lives.

Sub-theme I: Being spiritually enriched. Conventional wisdom might suggest that being transgender can be expected—at best—to complicate one’s spiritual or religious life, and at worst lead to an impasse between two incompatible ideas. Those possibilities were present in some participants’ interviews, but only partially so. More often, participants described their spiritual lives as ultimately enhanced—made better, fuller, and more meaningful—by virtue of their transgender journeys.

Among the participants who spoke of spirituality, some were members of mainstream congregations, some were members of more marginal religious groups, and others had rejected organized religion altogether while maintaining active spiritual lives. All had wrestled with religious teachings that denounce transgender people. Some had found alternative spiritual communities that nurtured them. The common thread, though, was how being transgender had ultimately influenced their spirituality for the better. Brandon, for example, wasted no time in identifying his faith in a Christian God as one of the things he appreciates most about being transgender. He experiences his faith and his connection to others—the two things he appreciates most about being trans—as being mutually dependent on one another: “Because I’m connected with others I think I can feel the love of God, and because I feel the love of God, I’m connected with others.”

Brandon has spent a lot of time grappling with his spirituality as a transman. This has included questioning his worth in God’s eyes and making sense of those who use religion as a weapon against transgender people:

And the first thing that I encountered was that I didn't believe that God really cared about me. And so I had to work through that, like what does it mean that God loves me as a trans person? I had to wrestle with that.

And again I had to really work on what do I think about all these Christians who are using the Bible for their own benefit, or like the Christian Right, how am I going to deal with that? How do I exist as a person—as a transperson—who has a faith in God? How do I exist in the same world as those people? Because those people are in the world. They're all over. Especially in this part of the country.

After transitioning, however, he was able to come to terms with both sets of questions and at the time of his interview was in a place where he experiences God's love moving through him and joining him with others:

So, with the transition, I feel better about myself, I feel more connected, and my mind is more open to letting the love of God come through me now, instead of always shutting it out.

...also I've met so many people now who are trans or queer or whatever who have a really strong faith that that has been answered, too. That it's okay. I mean, if you sit by yourself, and you have a prayer life, there's no way anybody can say, "That's not real."

Like Brandon, Lucas initially struggled with a set of inherited religious beliefs dominated by a judgmental and even vengeful deity. His spiritual life is now centered on love, compassion, acceptance, and justice. He attributed this shift in large part to the experiences along his transgender journey:

And I think in a lot of ways, too, [being trans] has really helped me on a spiritual level. I think being trans has given me this perspective of...I really just believe in the abundance of love and forgiveness and acceptance, and I really try to incorporate that into my life, to have patience, to have all those things I just said about letting people be where they are and meeting them there instead of expecting them to come to where I am and see it from my perspective. I think that does have some spiritual connotations to it.

[I am] much more connected to this idea of just love. And of community, and of justice, and I think those all have spiritual implications for me. I feel called to do something now as opposed to, "Well, it's a 9 to 5. I

should do this because I need a paycheck.” I feel like I can actually have this spiritual calling to do something, to serve a population...

Like Brandon and Lucas, Wanda has experienced her transgender journey as a spiritual quest. After rejecting organized religion at an early age, she now understands virtually her entire transgender experience as having the spiritual qualities of growth and alignment with metaphysical dimensions. She has come to see being transgender as a “gift from the universe” that prompted her growth and expanded her understanding:

And through most of my life I saw it as this burden that I... But once I started realizing that it was also a gift, because it helped me to grow spiritually, that it helped me seeing things about myself and other people that I probably would not have even thought about or looked at if I hadn't been trans.

By virtue of being “out of the norm,” and experiencing the isolation and loneliness concomitant with that, Wanda found herself in a life-long practice of self-examination.

While at times excruciating, she now values her commitment to self-examination as it has led her to understand her journey in spiritual terms:

Being trans, for me, and in talking with a lot of transpeople, I notice this is typical for a lot of people. Not all, but most it took on this whole spiritual dimension that when I was young, I never would have expected. Where suddenly, just somewhere along the line, I realized suddenly that, “Oh, there's more to this life than just being oppressed and being burdened and wanting to kill myself all the time.” There's something that I should be seeing that I'm not seeing, and suddenly I realized that what I wasn't seeing was the outcome of examining my life over and over and over again during most of it.

Wanda's experience of herself as an outsider and as an observer positioned her to question people's behaviors, motives, beliefs, and practices. For example, she found herself at the age of ten questioning the validity of traditional organized religion:

As I got older and started realizing that religion wasn't going to be an answer as a support base for me, because it was too easy to see them as people that really didn't understand their own religion. They didn't act in

accordance with it. It really pushed me inward in a lot of ways to make me ask questions about myself and other people that probably a lot of people wouldn't have. Especially at such a young age. And it caused me, I think, to be a little bit more creative in the way I dealt with the world than I would have normally have had to have been.

Witnessing hypocritical judgment and exclusion from her church inspired her to reject formal religion as a viable option and to seek alternative understandings of what makes human beings tick. She turned first to psychology:

And I'm looking at this, and I'm listening to the other side, and it's like, "This does not compute" [Laughs]. So I remember thinking very seriously, just very open...light shone on the problem and I'm thinking, "Religion is clearly not the answer here. There's something else to this." And for the rest of my life, it sort of became a quest spiritually to figure out what was going on, what motivated people in that way. And that led me toward study in psychology and other things when I finally got old enough to take those.

So [learning transsexuals existed] was a huge revelation, but of course it wasn't presented in a very positive light, and so when I went to university, I tried to find stuff that would tell me more about what this was all about and how did I end up like this, because by this time I was pretty convinced that I was really crazy and there was no one else like me, so I had to really keep this quiet.

When the psychological "insights" of the day proved to parallel the negative teachings of religion, Wanda moved toward alternative spiritualities via the study of diverse philosophies. Eventually, she made a commitment to transition into the woman she had always known herself to be. Once that decision was made, the spiritual nature of her transgender path came to the fore. Her struggle eased and obstacles dissolved as various aspects of her life fell into place to make the transition possible. She began experiencing a series of coincidences and synchronicities that she took as signs that transitioning was the path the universe intended for her. The right people would enter her life at the right time; the right books would come to her at the right time; the right dream

would come to her with the right message at the right time. She found herself receiving whatever gifts she needed to help her along the path to being her true self. It was a spiritual experience for her—one of being supported and helped along by invisible forces, of having her needs met by the universe:

But once I got on...once I got past the fear of transitioning and the world changed. I mean it just...the colors all became brighter at that point. It's hard to describe to anybody, but it was just a different way of seeing my life. And once that happened, the spiritual side opened up as well, much more than it had before.

The weird thing about deciding that—that I would eventually transition—was it sort of opened up the universe to make it easier for me to do it. It was like the universe just kept saying, “Just go this way, just a little...follow the line.” So it was weird. Things like that just kept happening over and over and over again. It was like the universe just lined up so I could get there, you know? It was a weird, weird feeling. Things just like...turned around. It seemed like the direction of my life just shifted.

And it was right about the time I was beginning to move toward being myself, toward being true to myself, and being who I really was, and letting the chips fall where they may, you know. Coming to that particular juncture in my life was just healing. I mean it was a very healing sort of thing. Right after I started hormones, like within days—sometimes it feels like it was a couple of days, sometimes it feels longer than that, but it was very soon after—I had a dream when I was waking up in the morning, and there was...it was like a child sort of curled up in the fetal position...and it started out as a child and it went backwards. It was like a small child, but it went backwards in development, and all of a sudden there was a voice that said, “You know, this is you.” And it's like, “Okay!”

I realized that in the journey that we all go through, that if we choose to accept the journey, then we will have helpers along the way, and I started realizing that all those people that suddenly started popping up in my life were the helpers that I needed to get through.

Like Wanda, Teresa is not at all religious, but she is fascinated by spiritual phenomena and possibilities. She, too, has experienced her transgender journey as a spiritual unfolding that has brought her a greater understanding of her life and a more direct connection to divinity:

I feel like I'm very blessed about the way things have gone, and I mean, if you want to talk about the spiritual side of things...It's been absolutely incredible. I mean, I want to stand up on a mountaintop and just scream at everybody, "Hey! I finally get it! I know what's going on!" [Laughs] Oh, it's incredible. And I've just grown so spiritually, so much spiritually that it's really incredible.

It's just, it's...you just become so much closer to the divine creator, if you will. I don't like putting the term "god" in there. It's more like an equal one-on-one, and I've had a few experiences that I've felt like I was in very close proximity to the almighty.

Since living as a woman, Teresa feels spiritually whole, and she senses that her spiritual path is continuing toward even greater levels of enlightenment:

There again, it's really hard to describe, but I am definitely more, if you will, my chakra is more centered, my aura has a much better color to it. I feel like it's a pearly white now, and it won't be long before it is pure white.

Teresa experiences being trans itself as living in a state of heightened spiritual awareness and receptivity. She perceives herself and other transpeople as being more spiritually enlightened by virtue of their distinctive—perhaps divinely directed—destiny to go beyond what human life typically involves. She sees herself as being further along in whatever evolution humanity may be going through in coming to understand an ultimate truth: "It's either a part of evolving to a higher state of being, I think, which I embrace whole-heartedly." She continued:

I think that [transpeople] are individuals who have been put into an area of experiencing a lot more than what the normal human experiences are, really...probably the last time when I was getting ready to come down,

God asked, “Well, what kind of challenges do you want this time?” And I probably said something stupid, like, “Well, surprise me!” [Laughs]

Being trans also played a central role in Siren’s spirituality. Her gender journey led her away from mainstream Christianity, which she described as too judgmental and patriarchal: “...in most mono-theistic, creational, Judeo-Christian, and Islamic religions, everything which is divine is a dude. And in my spiritual path, it’s not like that.” Siren has instead been attracted to an eclectic mix of Wicca, paganism, ancient mythologies, and universal archetypes. She considers herself a witch, embraces the sacred feminine, and rejects spiritualities that rely on a gender dichotomy or hierarchy. In her chosen spiritual path, she has connected to a divine in which her own transgender nature is reflected. This has made it possible for her to “more fully access” the divine and to throw herself more completely into a meaningful spiritual experience:

Refreshing. It’s refreshing to see transgender imagery in spirituality. Because if spirituality, if what is the divine encompasses all life, which I believe it does, then that includes trans people...being trans and being able to access both the masculine and the feminine as we describe it, when I believe in both a god and a goddess, sort of like experiencing both sides of the divine....

...we had more people in our coven, like on holidays we would light a bonfire in her back yard and dancing around the bonfire in like a big twirly skirt was just a blast. ‘Cause I think that being spiritual should just be like, you know, ecstatic, kind of like being swept up in something larger and being comfortable and happy there and dancing really lets you access that feeling, and dancing in a big twirly skirt is fun as hell. And, you know, being trans makes that more accessible for me than for [cisgender] males.

I don’t believe that there’s one concretely masculine god and one concretely feminine goddess up there. I believe that the divine encompasses everything. Feminine and masculine are a dichotomy that we made up. So that doesn’t necessarily mean that the divine has to encompass that; it’s everything. And if I can also be everything and blur those gender lines, then I guess that makes me closer to it? Them? Ze?

Sub-theme J: Being part of social change. Many participants spoke of valuing being transgender for the opportunities it afforded them to contribute to making a better world—one that is more just and accepting. By virtue of living a life that by definition undermines conventional assumptions about gender, participants described how they regularly bump up against rigid gender norms and double-standards in a particularly salient and obvious way. This experience has positioned them as highly motivated observers of the gendered nature of society. To many of them, society’s conventional approach to gender is troubling, and they wish to do something about it. Fortunately, they find themselves uniquely situated to do just that, and they take pride and pleasure in challenging the status quo.

As a self-described, life-long “outsider” who has been the target of mistreatment, Wanda described having had a heightened sensitivity to the mistreatment of others since she was a young child. She depicted herself as quick to tune in to any form of injustice, with a consistent desire to right those wrongs and to have empathy for the marginalized:

[Being transgender] made me really look at my behavior toward other people and other people’s ways of interacting, and the ways that people hurt other people. It really, I think, just focused that for me.

You know, it’s hard to live as a transperson and be vilified by everybody and their brother and not have some empathy for other people who are going through stuff that they wish they weren’t doing and that they wish they could somehow change about themselves.

And so, it was...and I grew up in the 60s and 70s, when the women’s movement was really gaining strength and, of course, one thing as a transperson that you realize is that you’re a feminist from a very early age. If you aren’t, there’s probably something wrong with you. Because it becomes clear about the double standards and all these things, and you get to watch it in action, and people don’t know that you’re really not one of them.

Through her experiences of being marginalized and seeing transgender people pathologized by professionals, Wanda arrived at a recognition of society's potential to be wrong and the individual's potential to be right, no matter how atypical that individual might be: "I had recognized by this time I didn't feel like *I* was wrong—it was like society was screwed up and just didn't understand me." With this insight in place, Wanda made something of a career of being willing to question unfair social edicts: She has been an activist for women's rights, transgender rights, and economic justice in a variety of capacities.

Bonita similarly described how crossdressing heightened her awareness of the unequal treatment of women and of the restrictiveness of gender roles in general:

Well, maybe [I'm] more aware of the situation and where most women are coming from. I mean, even though it's 2011, there's still that mentality among most guys that this is a man's world, like the song, and that some females even still feel that most of them should be barefoot and pregnant, even though that's completely untrue.

I mean, we should be able to do, both sexes should be able to do anything they set their minds to, it's not just a man's thing or a woman's thing. It's a people thing, it's a human thing. And that's what people should realize whether you're trans or not. You get rid of that old school mentality, maybe this would be a better world.

Bonita is obviously bothered by gender stereotypes and constraints, but she sees her experience as a crossdresser as putting her in a good position from which to educate others as a way of challenging those stereotypes and creating a better world:

In some small way, I like to think I am, in terms of trying to at least educate. Maybe when I'm not full, maybe when I'm not dressed, but as a guy I also would like to, I like to try to at least educate or at least show them that there's nothing wrong with what I'm wearing or what I am doing. And then you know, I'm just a regular guy. But as a female, also, maybe the fact, though, that I can also represent that most females, especially though, doing a little bit more or help, trying to help create a

better image and trying to create something positive than the infamous negative stereotypes one may have.

Other participants who described the value of working for social change inevitably shared examples of how they, too, educate people about transgender issues. Their stories reflected significant pride and satisfaction from educating others and challenging gender-based assumptions. Sephie offered a strong example of helping people see gender differently. Her unique gender expression frequently surprises others and makes them reconsider previous assumptions:

Seeing me then hearing my voice catches people off guard a lot. I don't want to say that I like proving people wrong by, like, seeing one thing and then being proven a different thing, but it's like that's pretty much how I've been living my life is, they'll pre-judge and then turn around and find out that I'm maybe something but not something else.

Here, Sephie denies “liking” this dynamic—of proving other people’s assumptions wrong—but she nonetheless finds value in the experience of challenging assumptions and opening people’s minds. In describing an experience of how her transgenderism and bisexuality challenged a friend’s traditional beliefs, she says:

It helped me consider the idea that maybe even the most closed-mind individual can open their eyes and see, even everything, I mean they could be changed if they experience something different in their life.

This suggests a certain optimism, based on her actual experience, that closed minds can be opened and that people can learn not to reject, but to approach “the other” with some semblance of care. Sephie has witnessed the dissipation of transphobic and homophobic fear in others, which has allowed important relationships in her life to continue:

...one of my best friends, he was very homophobic. He used to live his life, like, hating people because they were different, and then I came out of the closet. He got angry at me, said that he didn't want to be my friend and so on, and then I talked to him and I go, “look....I stayed the night at your house a week ago. I was out before then and have been bi-sexual for

about a year now and nothing's changed between me and you. Why are you making it any different?" And he opened his eyes and realized that he was being really ridiculous....and then I showed up one day in a skirt and he was like, "Well, it's cold outside so that's the only discomfort that you might be feeling; I'm not going to be having a problem with it," but it's like he completely changed.

Sephie was the catalyst for this change of heart and mind, and that fact is not lost on her. She appreciates her transgenderism in that it can be a force for change in the world. Her gender identity and sexuality position her to challenge traditional understandings of gender and suggest a wider range of possibilities for being human than U.S. culture has generally thought possible.

As a person who had grappled intensely with her own gender all her life, it was easy for Wanda to pick up on sexist practices, and she liked being able to challenge sexist thinking. When living as a man, she was in a unique position to call out male privilege when she saw it among her peers:

And I got pretty involved with the women's movement people during that time and did my bit by undercutting male attitudes in male spaces [Laughs] "Gosh, you guys, I talk to a lot of women on my job, and if you guys would just realize what your actions create, there might be some way to get past that," you know. It was fun to sit in places—break rooms and whatever—and during the 70s in particular, you know, and guys were just completely baffled by why women would want to change anything. And male privilege was like, "Well, shouldn't they want us to have that?" Duh! [Laughs] So that was kind of a neat part of that period for me.

Wanda also spoke of valuing the opportunity to educate others in an effort to reduce transphobia, specifically. One particularly poignant episode occurred with a psychologist she and her wife once saw at a couples' retreat:

...we talked for awhile and it came out fairly quickly that I was transsexual, and this psychologist seemed really kind of amazed at that, and eventually told us she had worked with a number of transgender people in Canada, and she generally didn't like transgender people, and she was amazed that she hadn't initially spotted me, and secondly that she

thought I was a decent person. She was misinterpreting a lot of rebellious or angry trans behavior as something that was innate to being trans, rather than a reaction to the social stuff that you put up with. So I explained about trans rage and all that stuff to her. And when we left, she actually came and thanked us for helping to change her way of looking at transpeople, because seeing us as a couple and seeing me be supportive of her—it turned her stereotypes upside down.

Lucas sees himself as working toward justice when he provides sexuality education to various populations through his job. He values being able to change the way people think about gender and about sexuality. He particularly appreciates being in a position to serve as a role model to young men. He told a particular story about a time when he was presenting a sexuality education session to a group of young, inner-city men. One young man made misogynistic comments, and Lucas was able to effectively challenge that mindset. In this act, Lucas brought to bear his past experiences as a girl and young woman, his ability to be seen as a heterosexual man, his spiritual motivation for justice, and his commitment to helping eliminate the various forms of injustice:

And one of them made a really general comment about all women are bitches or whatever it was....whatever it was, it was derogatory. So I was like, “What do you mean? So all women are this? Why do you say that? What about your mom? Is she that? Do you have sisters? Do you have cousins? Aunts? I mean you can’t say that about all women. I don’t think you really want to feel that way about all women. I mean, you had a bad experience, but not all women are....you know?” And I think I can say that, they’re looking at me as this guy, and I’m saying something really positive about women, and the same kind of thing has happened when somebody’s been like, “Oh, that guy’s a fag” or whatever. And I’m like, “Let me ask you what you mean by that.” Or “that’s so gay.” Immediately we stop. And if it were coming from, if they saw me as a gay guy and I was trying to defend gay guys, I don’t know that the interaction would happen like that, [but] because they know that I’m in a relationship, and they know that it’s with a woman, and so they assume that I’m heterosexual, so they are like, “Oh, this guy who is in this relationship,” so whatever they’re thinking, they’re like, “Oh, he’s cool. So there’s no reason why I can’t be, too.”

So I think in those regards I get to be an example. You know, little do they know, but...Well, I like it. I like that they can, if it helps them be more accepting, if it helps them change the way they think about something or the language that they use, then it makes me real happy. I really feel like I'm influencing their lives in a positive way. And that makes me feel good.

Heléne similarly values being able to educate others and challenge mainstream assumptions about gender. She described experiencing an “overwhelming feeling of the positive” from the way she conceives of her gender nonconformity as a form of protest or rebellion, in which she visibly asserts her beliefs on a daily basis:

And I think me being a part of [social change] is standing out, saying, “Hey, I want my individuality, my freedom, too.” Because I'm not locking myself down to what my sex stereotypes my gender as...I'm not locking myself down, to, you know, my penis equals masculinity.

Heléne relayed one particular story about a time she formally addressed college administrators and fellow students, and she did so intentionally dressed as a man (after living full-time as a woman for several months) in order to make a point about the arbitrariness of gender and the real inequities at work in a binary, misogynistic gender system. Her “play” with her gender expression was a form of protest that challenged people's common, everyday assumptions about gender and resulted in her finding support from somewhat surprising corners:

I walked up to the podium and one of the first things I said was, “Since no one would probably take me seriously as a transsexual woman standing in front of you here today, I've decided to come as a white, heterosexual, cisgendered male.” And I had a whole bunch of the people just clapping and just laughing, because they were just like shocked that I'd done it. They were really shocked that I did it... over the next couple of weeks I was walking around on campus and one of the deans stopped me and she was like, “I don't know what to say.” She's like, “I'm proud of you.”

Heléne values being in a position to educate others about gender and sexuality as a means of effecting social change. A particularly poignant example came in her telling

of a time she confronted a fellow video game player for his repeated use of homophobic slurs during an on-line gaming session. She described her optimism for how the potential benefits of this single interaction may ultimately have larger effects:

...I finally said, "So I've got a question for you." And he's like, "What's that?" And I'm like, "Are you going to do this again?" And he said, "Well, no, I'm not going to do this again." But he's like, "More than likely, what I'm going to do is to tell my friends to stop doing it, too." And, I was like, "Oh, okay." So I draw back even more. And I was like, "Why are you going to tell your friends to stop doing it, too?" And he's like, "Because of what you just told me, it's the truth."

So, it wasn't just the fact that it just meant a lot; it's the fact that I know I've impacted one person. And now that I've impacted this one person, they're telling me they're going to try to impact others. So it's kind of like that movie *Pay It Forward*...they'll pay it forward because you told them, or they'll pay it forward because you've done something for them. Then we could have so much in the sense of a better world. But for me it didn't just mean a lot in regards to I just impacted one person, but I think I might have impacted more than just one person.

Siren also talked at length about the experience of valuing her role as an agent of social change. For her, being transgender is not only about transforming herself as an individual—it is ultimately about transforming society. This takes several forms. First of all, simply by virtue of her nonconforming gender expression, combined with her significant drive to be involved in the world, she challenges assumptions and beliefs about gender and changes the way people think:

...in my life since high school, when I didn't really identify as trans but it was just sort of obvious, I guess, when I was *beyond* gay, because the gay kids didn't get me at all. I was too loud and out there. But anyways, aside from all that, I had a lot of people say things to me like, "When you were first involved in this or that or whatever, I was really skeptical and really grossed out by the fact that you there, but then by the time it was over, I was really glad that you were there and you made me see things differently," and stuff like that. I've gotten that from so many people.

A specific example of this came when she played the role of Howie Newsome in her high school production of *Our Town*:

And I remember there was this one senior who was all masculine and blah and we had scenes together, and it was obvious that he was really against working with me in the beginning, but then at the cast party he came up to me and told me that he was so glad that I had been there, that I had changed his mind about people like me.

It was just a really good feeling that just by being myself and being somewhere that I could maybe take somebody who was a little bit or a lot homophobic and sort of turn that into something better. That maybe by interacting with me this person would go on and maybe treat other people better than he or she necessarily would have. And that's like, god, one of the best ways you could ever leave your mark on the world, really, I think, is to like turn hate into not hate, tolerance, acceptance – whatever you want to call it. I mean tolerance isn't exactly the goal, but it's better than hate, right?

Siren takes particular pleasure in teaching others about gender nonconformity and the arbitrary nature of conventional gender roles and expectations. She sees this as a way for her to “do good in the world,” which, she admits, is very important to her. One particularly poignant example of this came when she did a presentation to her college's gay-straight alliance about the meaning of the word “transgender:”

... we had such a huge turnout. There were not enough chairs in the room; I can't estimate how many people were there, but people were sitting on each other, it was so packed in that room. And everybody just came because they really wanted to *know* and *understand* what transgender meant. And I got to...actually explain to these people what it means. And, you know, they all *cared* about it, and so that was awesome. And so many of them were friends of mine who didn't get it, what it meant, who had just never asked me or something. So, I don't know, I feel like I did some good work there. I felt good about myself, because obviously, I *am* trans and what people think of trans people occasionally matters to me, particularly when it involved legislation and stuff like that. I just felt like I'd done a really good deed, basically. Education is so often the cure for prejudice. So, disseminating education is always a good idea.

In educating others, and in standing up for her beliefs in general, Siren has cultivated the power of her voice to effect change in the world. Her voice is particularly important to her, as she chose the name “Siren” because of its reference to the mythological creatures with voices powerful enough to kill humans. While she hopes to use her voice for good, this idea of “voice-as-power” resonates deeply with her:

And the reason that I chose Siren was because I wanted my voice to matter, and I wanted to use my voice to—basically going back to making my mark on the world—I wanted to change things. I wanted to speak up, and I wanted people to have to hear and not be able to ignore things that I was saying.

When asked to describe a particular instance of using her voice for good in the world, Siren relayed the following:

A friend and I, we performed in the *Vagina Monologues* together and sort of made college history in doing so because we were the first two people with a Y chromosome to ever be in the *Vagina Monologues*, and we did the piece that was about being transgender, oh, I mean about being transsexual, more accurately. And that was a big deal for both of us. I mean, from the monologues that I saw before we performed that piece, the audience response was different, and I think that was because we were actually living and meaning what we were saying as opposed to the females who have read it before. I feel like it hit everybody harder that we did it and that the things that we were saying, while they were from an approved script that we couldn't change, were still maybe somewhat true.

Siren had the sense that the audience appreciated his “truth-speaking” and this was a “rush,” a significant moment in his life. He was educating others about gender and sexuality, and he was putting himself into the world as a highly visible transperson who embraced his transness.

Melissa also places special value on her ability to educate others directly about trans issues. She has been part of a transgender outreach team for many years. In this capacity, she serves as part of a speakers' bureau, providing panel presentations on trans

issues to a variety of community groups. She sees the values of this work as two-fold: (1) she gets to be an agent of social change working to make a better world for the trans community, and (2) she receives affirmation of her bigender identity from her co-panelists, hosts, and audiences. In describing the meaning she finds from doing this type of outreach and education, she says:

I'm not afraid of anybody. If somebody makes a comment to me that's a little off color, I say, "Hey, I'm transgender, what can I say?" I'm not hiding it. Why? It would be counter-productive for me to hide it now. It's better that people start learning and become familiar and comfortable with what transgender really means.

Well, when I first came out publicly, I volunteered to get into the outreach programs with [two transgender support organizations]. And I made a commitment, before I even did that, I made a commitment to myself: If I'm going to do this, there will be no unanswered questions, there will be no lies, there will be nothing hidden. If I can't be completely, totally, and thoroughly honest, it's not worth standing there and wasting people's time. So outreach has been a very major part of my participation in the community, because it's...I'm not everybody in the transgender world; I'm one of many different kinds of people, but at least the common areas that we have, I can explain, and I can demonstrate and people can see, you know, I'm not the butcher from Barcelona, I'm a human being, a loving, caring person who enjoys life and just simply wants you to understand. I get a lot back from that, too. As much as I invest in it, I'm also getting so much back, so much reinforcement, so much acknowledgement of me that I never got for 58 years. 58 years.

Melissa finds further meaning in her social change efforts because they are a way for her to give back to the community that embraced her and even saved her life. She appreciates the experience of giving back—of providing leadership to trans organizations, of participating in as many trans events as she can, and of advocating for trans issues so the world will be a better place for transpeople:

I've been to every event that [a transgender support organization] has had since I've joined it. I've been to every event that [another transgender support organization] has had since I joined it. I was 7 years the hospitality suite help for [a transgender convention]. This past year, I was

the coordinator for seminars at [the convention], and next year I will be the assistant coordinator of seminars...I've been in 10 pride parades since I came out. I have been very active in the transgendered community; I have been down to the state capital three times for [an LGBT rights advocacy group]. The first time was to lobby for the, what became the Human Rights Act of 2005, which included gender identity, gender presentation, and sexual orientation in the protections of the state about discrimination law and hate crimes law.

And the reward given back is the service to the community; it's the buying the ticket for every event that either group has, attending all the functions of every group, being there, being active, being part of. I'm a past president of [a transgender support organization]. I was 3 years on the board as a member and VP of outreach for [a transgender support organization]. This activity and this support, this participation, is kind of my way of paying back for my life, almost literally.

As a genderqueer person, Francis values violating and undermining the gender dichotomy. She describes herself as enjoying “transgression for transgression’s sake” and “going against society’s goals and expectations for the sake of going against society’s goals and expectations:”

And I think for me there's a really important aspect of like queer identity that's sort of always going to be there, and I *want* for the queerness to be present...even if I were to transition...I think I'd be someone who still has trans as a primary identity, because for me a lot of it is going against societal norms. And I'm not saying that those are the reasons why I identify outside the gender binary...but I think that for me an important part of that is because the sense of going against societal expectations or norms—that's really important to me.

Notably, Francis was the lone participant to express mixed feelings about educating others. She described herself alternately as someone who finds meaning in educating others:

And, so, we did a workshop [at my church's national youth conference] on gender-neutral pronouns and presented, like, a handout that now gets sent out with a lot of leadership materials, and we also came up with a different way of doing that exercise, which is now, like, the way that it's done. I mean, I don't know how it's done, like, in every district, obviously, but at least in, like, the national-continental level, we've made a little difference.

And as someone who tires of it:

I mean, I get sick of educating people, and I get sick of being in a position of, like, “This is what this means,” and, “This is how you use correct pronouns,” and, you know, “This word often means this, but it’s often used to mean this or this, but this is, really it means,” and, you know?

Nevertheless, to Francis, her trans identity is a means of social change in and of itself. She experiences being genderqueer as way of breaking down oppressive structures such as gender role boundaries that constrain people unnecessarily. She values being subversive and undermining an oppressive system simply by being who she is. She enjoys experiencing that transgression as part of her “everydayness.” She does not need to “go out of her way” to challenge social norms, she needs only to show up and be seen going about her daily business of being Francis:

I think to an extent it’s sort of a bonus, this transgressive thing. Oh god, this sounds really terrible...it’s a way for me to transgress boundaries in order to breakdown problematic structures in society that doesn’t necessarily interfere with my everyday life. I mean, it sounds terrible, but obviously I dress the way I want to dress because this is how I feel comfortable dressing, but sort of like the bonus is that there’s this extra transgression there, and I can go against society and break down norms that I think are problematic, and you know constricting or whatever, and it’s an extra when it’s not really extra on my part. Because sometimes I’ll say, “Oh, yeah, I want to be extra queer today and I will.” I’ll do whatever I decide to do to be extra queer that day. [Laughs] But it won’t be like, yeah, I don’t know, it’s sort of like I don’t have to put out a lot of extra effort.

She experiences the socially transgressive dimensions of her genderqueer appearance as a “bonus”—an extra prize or reward, something unexpected and unasked for, but which she receives—a surprise gift of sorts. The bonus is “extra” value, so it implies there being value in what came before. In Francis’ case, what came before was being genderqueer. This suggests she values being genderqueer enough as it is, but throw in the fact that being genderqueer also transgresses societal norms, and to her that is something special.

Several participants spoke of experiencing themselves as being part of a larger social movement that is making headway toward a just society. Heléne, for example, does not think of her acts of protest, rebellion, or confrontation as isolated cases. Rather, she conceives of herself as part of a larger social change movement toward greater acceptance of the diversity that is humankind. She frequently cited Martin Luther King, Jr. and the women's movement as her cultural legacies. She sees herself as continuing their work, or at least continuing to promote a progressive mindset that all people have equal value and that society is obligated to treat all people justly:

Heléne: But then again, I think liberating can go a little bit further than that. I think liberating can also mean progressive. And you see more and more people coming up to rise and becoming more progressive in a sense because you see this...but you see this more open country, too, more open ideas at least.

Interviewer: And you experience yourself as a part of that?

Heléne: Yeah, I think I do.

A specific instance of Heléne having the sense of being part of a larger movement toward progressive social change came when she saw the "It Gets Better" video posted on YouTube by the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles. Seeing the video inspired Heléne to make and post her own video. This was a new way for her to let her voice be heard, stand up for herself and her beliefs, and be an agent of social change on a wider scale:

So people just watch it. And I think right now my video is sitting on nearly 1,300 or 1,400 views. Yeah, so it was kind of cool. I submitted it to the "It Gets Better Project" on YouTube, and they accepted it. They accepted it, and it got even more publicity that way. But it was really amazing. So you see, it's not just the fact that I've influenced one person. It's the fact that when you influence one person you influence many. So, it's an incredible feeling. It's just something unreal.

Through the Internet, whether posting her video on YouTube, challenging fellow video-gamers, or coming out in chat rooms and forums, Heléne has been able to experience her efforts as part of a global progressive movement toward acceptance of human diversity:

I got quite a few replies to that, too, as well, and people were just impressed. And mind you, this forum, I think we've hit 16 different countries with it, so it's impressive enough. And mind you, I really hit some really conservative countries like Iraq, Palestine, and these other countries. And mind you, these people were just saying, "That's great." They're like, "What may not have been accepted by our parents is being accepted by us."

Siren connected this sort of "activism" to a larger social context by experiencing herself as a representative of her queer community. She strives to be a positive representative—both in the sense of being a "good example" of queer people, but also in the sense of being effective in making the world a better place for "her people:"

I sort of have always wanted to like, I don't know, not be the face of my community, but represent it at least. And I think, I would like to think, that I've represented the trans community or the GLBT community as a whole in a positive way and I think that's good because people have all these attitudes that will never change if they're never exposed to anything different so I go out there in public and force them to be exposed to something different. And I would like to think I do so in a good way. Basically my message would be that trans people like everyone else, or mostly everyone else, are beautiful, fabulous, deserve respect and we're not going to put up with your shit.

Siren is committed not only to justice for the LGBT community, but for all minorities.

He has a sense that all forms of discrimination or oppression are related, and he wants to do his part to eliminate them all. He is a unifier and refuses to take sides:

...if I were to say that I would have one life goal, it would be to, I don't even need to be, like, known or renowned for it, but at least while I was alive, to like make things better in any way possible, including but not limited to, changing people's minds for the better about all their "isms." I hate the "isms:" homophobia and sexism, you know, apply to me specifically, but classism and racism and all the other "isms," able-bodied-ism, I'm against all of it. So if there's anything I can do that I can in some

way change the way people feel about other people then that's good, and I feel like I've done something worthwhile if I've done that.

Finally, Lucas also connected with a larger conception of serving others, which is driven largely by his experiences as a transman and through his spiritual focus on love, compassion, and justice. He sees himself as situated within a larger web of inequality and part of a larger movement toward greater justice for all people:

...it's like this belief that when you're in a group of people, like this subgroup of people, and you experience inequality, it's for me it's easier to see how that inequality is across the board. So I know, you know, I've been chased out of bathrooms, and I've been yelled at and called a fag, and many other things, and so I don't draw, like there's not a difference to me in somebody who's a person of color getting called a derogatory name, because they're a person of color. Or women making less money than men in the same job, because they're women. Or poor people not having access to adequate health care. There's no difference between me getting called those names or chased out of a bathroom or smacked in the face than it is those individuals facing whatever inequalities they're facing. It's all part of a bigger problem, and that's, to me, I can see that connection, because I've experienced what I've experienced.

And in large part because I'm out and queer, gender non-conformist, or trans, I mean, take your pick, but having experienced that, I don't see a difference, so it's really, I'm able to, I want to work toward justice. And to me justice includes fighting on behalf of those who experience those things, and pointing out when things are unequal, and working toward equality, working toward justice.

Chapter V. Discussion

In this chapter, I will discuss the implications of the results presented in Chapter IV. To begin, I will frame this discussion by describing the nature of hermeneutic phenomenological results. I will then discuss the nature of my findings and offer possible explanations for them. After this, I will review the findings' relationship with previous theory and research. This will lead into a discussion of implications for social work practice. Following that, I will explore the study's methodological implications. Finally, I will review the study's limitations and suggest directions for future research.

Nature of Hermeneutic Phenomenological Results

The final results of any hermeneutic phenomenological study consist of in-depth, nuanced, written interpretations of the "understanding and meaning" (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009, p. 9) of the lived experience of the phenomenon of interest, with the phenomenological goal being to increase understanding of the meaning of human experience (Cohen & Omery, 1994). Phenomenological results reveal what it means to be human in relationship with the phenomenon. In addition, phenomenological findings are always a "product of the co-constructive process between participants and researcher" (Stayt, 2007, p. 625), and as such, are suggestive rather than conclusive.

Phenomenological results suggest new insights, possibilities, meanings, and questions about the phenomenon at hand.

Heidegger (1927/1962) instructed that every revealing necessarily involves a concealing. Revealing and concealing are two sides of the same coin. Dasein is characterized by this principle: Some things are necessarily hidden by the virtue of other things being made visible. It is important to keep that hermeneutic principle in mind

while interpreting the results of this study. This study may illuminate, or reveal, some aspect or essence of the phenomenon, but in doing so, other aspects are concealed.

This study contributes to a growing body of Heideggerian phenomenological research, all of which by definition explores the ontological foundations of human Being. As such, the present study broadens conventional notions of human experience and subjectivities to encompass also the lived experiences of transgenderism within the scope of what it is to be human in the world. It contributes to our understanding of transgenderism in the Heideggerian sense of “knowing-our-way-around” (Grondin, 1994, p. 94), thus promoting greater facility with the phenomenon of transgenderism.

Further, it seems that participants were ultimately not simply describing their appreciation for being *transgender*, but their appreciation for *being* at all. In this sense, the results suggest insights into an overarching understanding of what it means to appreciate human Being—to find value in being Dasein. This brings the discussion back to the fact that as a Heideggerian phenomenological study, this research contributes to a more complete ontological understanding of general human experience.

From the results of the present study, then, readers should gain new, nuanced understandings of appreciating transgenderism—understandings of “what it is like, from the point of view of the participants” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51) to value transgenderism. At the same time, the results do not represent in and of themselves, a complete representation of transgender life. The results can only suggest new possibilities for understanding. If the study is successful, social workers and others

should be able to read this final report with the sense that it reveals rich, new possibilities for understanding what it is like to experience transgenderism positively and, perhaps, for understanding what it is like to value human Being.

Possible Explanations for the Results

The results suggest that a human experience of being intimately connected to one's self, others, and a larger purpose characterizes the essence of valuing one's transgenderism. It may be that coming to appreciate one's transgender nature involves a process of such intense self-scrutiny, of searching for affirmation and similar others, and finding one's place in spiritual and social spheres when none has been laid out in advance, that the journey is in essence one of establishing connections—touch-points of consolation, security, affirmation, pride, acknowledgment, and discovery.

In some ways, the participants of this study were describing not their appreciation for being transgender *per se*, but for *coming out* as a transgender person. This corroborates previous evidence of a positive effect on one's experience of well-being of living life outside of the closet. Strain and Shuff (2011), for example, recently demonstrated a positive correlation between living openly and overall well-being among transsexual women.

Implications for Previous Theory and Research

Research on transgender life experiences. This study should be seen as complementing, and not necessarily contradicting, the previous body of transgender research that has delineated the many risks, obstacles, and disadvantages transgender people face. It is important to remember the Heideggerian principle of revealing and concealing here. Although the participants in this study valued being transgender and

were asked questions to elicit descriptions of the appreciation they had for being trans, the results do not imply that the transgender population is not oppressed.

Participants' backgrounds included all types of struggle and disadvantage that came out during casual, "off-the-record" conversations and during some of the interviews. There were stories of self-loathing, depression, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. There were stories of verbal taunting, physical abuse, police harassment, workplace discrimination, and other injustices. Several participants had been rejected or otherwise mistreated by people important to them, such as their own partners, parents, or children. Those losses were very much in line with those well documented elsewhere and summarized in Chapters I and II (see, for example, Grant et al., 2011). The lesson of the present study, however, is that a story of loss, struggle, burden, and disadvantage does not capture the whole truth of transgender lives. That is the primary contribution this study makes to the literature—dis-covering additional dimensions of transgender lives that make our understanding of transgenderism less incomplete.

The present study addresses another significant gap in previous transgender research by drawing on a non-clinical sample that also includes rural and non-transsexual transgender people. In this way, the study contributes to a better understanding of the diversity existing within the transgender population. By including a range of transgender identities (FTM, MTF, pre-op, post-op, non-op, genderqueer, bigender, etc.), the study suggests common elements of human experience, or a common set of meanings and understandings, shared among a variety of transgender people. At the same time, by including a range of transgender identities, the study sheds light on the diversity present

within the transgender population—diversity that is invisible in much of the previous literature that has focused on clinical and transsexual populations.

Transgender identity development theory and research. The results of this study undermine the credibility of traditional gender identity development models. Clearly, as the results of this study suggest, people do not have to embody the gender they were assigned at birth in order to live satisfying, meaningful lives. The results of this study intersect with trans-affirmative gender identity development models in interesting ways.

First, the results can be interpreted as fleshing out the final stages of the trans-affirmative gender identity development theories outlined in Chapter II. Devor's (2004) model of transsexual identity development, for example, culminates in the stages of "integration" and "pride." Similarly, Lev's (2004) transgender emergence theory includes "integration" as a final stage. The narratives provided by participants in the present study not only illustrate identity integration and pride, they suggest rich and multi-dimensional understandings of the lived experiences of human beings in those stages of development. The results here offer new ways of comprehending the realities of identity integration and pride among transgender people.

In addition to painting an instructive picture of the later stages of identity development, participants' narratives suggest that a transgender experience can have positive aspects even in the earlier stages of development. This was perhaps most obvious in Abby's narrative. She had only very recently come out as transgender, and was only beginning to explore what being transgender might mean in her life. She would probably best fit the recognition/exploration stages of transgender identity development

(Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004; Pollock & Eyre, 2012), and yet, she was in a state of euphoric excitement and already loving the fact that she was transgender. This suggests that not all transgender people necessarily experience a prolonged, ambivalent, and apprehensive self-discovery process as can be suggested by stage-based identity development models.

Mental health diagnostic categories. The results of this study lend support to the upcoming revisions in the *DSM 5* regarding *GID*. Under the *DSM IV-TR*, virtually all people on the transgender spectrum could be diagnosed with a mental disorder. The findings of this study challenge such a general assumption of pathology among the transgender population. This study included transgender adults who were not disturbed or distressed by their cross-gender desires or expressions. Through their examples, the participants provided compelling evidence of the compatibility of gender nonconformity and mental health.

There is reason to believe that such experiences will be better reflected by the removal of *GID* and the addition of gender dysphoria as a diagnostic category in the *DSM 5*. The new category of gender dysphoria will not pathologize all transgender people, but will recognize the pain and distress some transgender people experience when their physical bodies or assigned gender identities do not align with their internal sense of self in a way that is comfortable for them. Criteria for gender dysphoria will reportedly require “a marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender” (Beredjick, 2012, ¶2). This revision should allow a sub-group of transgender people to receive the medical and mental health care they need to alleviate the distress of dysphoria without defining all transgender people as mentally ill.

Social constructionist, postmodernist, and queer theory. This study provides examples of human beings who, like all humans, are engaged in the continual work of gender identity construction. This process is perhaps more apparent among transgender individuals than cisgender persons, given that transgender identity work stands out as figure against the background of dominant gender discourses.

It is interesting to note the various gender ideologies represented among this study's participants. Several expressed a strong commitment to a biological essentialist explanation for their transgenderism (Krystal, Melissa, and Teresa, for example). This is not necessarily surprising, given how the discourse of biological essentialism pervades our society. Others (Cooper, 1999; Swann & Herbert, 1999; for example) have previously noted this paradoxically conventional gender ideology among some transgender people. Other participants, such as Francis, Wanda, and Siren, seemed more skeptical of biological essentialist explanations of gender. In revealing a range of gender beliefs among transgender people, the findings of the present study do suggest an interesting mixture of ways in which the transgender population can embrace and perpetuate the dominant gender dichotomy while also challenging and resisting it.

This study adds to postmodern and queer discourses on gender by centering on queer lives and privileging the perspectives of queer persons. The nature of the current research assumes that queer lives are a valid starting point for building knowledge and understanding, and the interpretive nature of the results presented with verbatim exemplars brings queer voices to the fore. To the extent that this study has emphasized "the centrality of marginality" (Epstein, 1994, p. 197), it has stayed true to queer praxis and made a contribution to queer literature. It offers possibilities for understanding

beyond the dominant gender discourse, and in doing so, may contribute to undermining the power carried by that discourse and clearing further conceptual space for considering human experience more completely.

Implications for Social Work Practice

By enhancing social workers' facility with transgenderism as a lived human experience, the results of this study can influence social work practice in a variety of ways. First, the findings can help social workers become culturally competent in their service to transgender people. This involves developing the capacity to foster strong, respectful, and empathetic helping relationships with transgender clients, as well as having as much knowledge about the transgender population as possible. Further, these findings have implications for strengths-based practice, maintaining a holistic view of transgender people as complete human beings, and the promotion of the profession's stated value of the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2008). Finally, this study can help social workers envision a society in which transgender people are no longer disadvantaged or oppressed and inform advocacy efforts toward achieving such justice.

Cultural competence. Under the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics*, social workers are obligated to be culturally competent in their professional practice. Cultural competence involves responding individually and systemically to diverse human beings in a manner that is respectful of their values, worth, and dignity (NASW, 2001). Further, culturally competent practice is practice that is *effective* within the cultural context of a particular population. To be culturally competent with transgender clients, social workers must have knowledge, values, skills that enable us to effectively and respectfully

respond to their needs. The results of the present study have much to contribute toward that end. Here, I discuss how this study has relevance for certain standards of cultural competence.

The NASW (2001) cultural competence standard of “Ethics and Values” (p. 15), requires social workers to be aware of how personal and professional values may conflict with or complement the values of a client or client population. The present study sheds light on potential discrepancies between dominant, cisgender values related to gender and gender expression and values within the transgender population. Social workers should be aware of their own values related to gender conformity or nonconformity, and this study can help raise that type of awareness. Further, social workers should be aware—and prepared to respect the fact—that transgender clients may not place the same value on gender conformity or nonconformity as the dominant culture.

In a related standard, social workers are called on to be as self-aware as possible in their work with diverse clients (NASW, 2001). In addition to recognizing one’s own value base, this involves being aware of one’s biases and assumptions. This study has the potential to assist social workers in examining their own beliefs about gender and transgender people, and position them to confront any personal biases against transgender people and gender nonconformity. It can also help social workers question any assumption that transgenderism is inherently problematic or pathological. Reflecting on the ideas presented in the participants’ narratives and my interpretation of them can further aid social workers in identifying and critiquing dominant assumptions about gender and open the profession to alternative perspectives on gender and its possible manifestations in human experience. For example, after reading this study, social

workers should be better equipped to notice and question instances in which they or their colleagues may use language that reinforces the sex-based gender dichotomy or privileges cisgender identities. Such language would at least alert transgender clients and colleagues to the speaker's ignorance and would likely offend and marginalize them. This study can also promote a greater appreciation of the significance of a transgender person's gender identity and/or gender expression to that person's life experience. Finally, the study contributes to a more complete understanding of the humanity of transgender people beyond the limits of common stereotypes. In doing so, the results of this study can contribute to the reduction of transphobia among social workers and incline professionals toward trans-affirmative social work practice.

A third standard for cultural competence is "Cross-Cultural Knowledge" (NASW, 2001, p. 18). This calls on social workers to know about the "history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions" (p. 18) of client populations. The present study provides insight into some of the shared understandings and values among at least one small, yet rather diverse, slice of the transgender population. It suggests a remarkable history and tradition of mutual aid and empowerment, for example, and it points to ways in which transgender people form and maintain families and friendships.

The current study also offers a foundation upon which social workers can enhance their skills for cross-cultural practice with transgender clients, in keeping with the fourth cultural competence standard (NASW, 2001). First, the study helps prime social workers for expressing "genuineness, empathy, and warmth" (p. 19) in their work with transgender clients. These humanistic principles are fundamental to building strong working relationships with any client, but especially with members of populations that

routinely face stigma and rejection, such as transgender people. Empathy requires a capacity for seeing things from another's perspective, and this study seems distinctly useful in expanding social workers' ability to see the world through transgender eyes. The narratives resulting from this study further offer opportunities for readers to connect with the humanity inherent in transgender people, thus promoting greater acceptance of and willingness to work with transgender clients. The overall project also suggests culturally appropriate language (terminology) for use in practice with the transgender community.

In addition to promoting these standards of cultural competence, the present study contributes to other forms of cultural competence. For example, participants' narratives promote sensitivity to ways in which transgender people can be empowered by providing examples of how empowered transgender people look, think, and act. The study could further incline social workers toward greater inclusion of transgender colleagues so that the professional workforce can become more diversified in terms of gender. This research can also assist in preparing social workers to take greater leadership in efforts aimed at reducing transphobia, promoting understanding and acceptance, shaping trans-affirmative organizational policies, and advocating for transgender rights and social inclusion on a broader scale.

The importance of human relationships. The importance of human relationships is one of the core values of the social work profession (NASW, 2008). In some ways, the profession's focus on relationships is one of social work's most distinctive attributes. The findings of this study shine a spotlight on the importance of interpersonal relationships when working with transgender clients. The results suggest

both unique and universal ways in which human connection is at the heart of a transgender person's well-being. Practitioners working with transgender clients would do well to intervene in ways that strengthen a transgender client's social network. This may sound like a trite suggestion, but it takes on added significance when understood within the context of the participants' rich narratives on the role of human connection in their own lives.

The results of this study can help prepare social workers to accept and empathize with transgender clients by understanding transgender journeys as profoundly human experiences. The participant's narratives bring transgender experiences to life in a way that should allow the reader to grasp and appreciate the humanity of transgender people, and perhaps even to begin comprehending trans identities within the "normal" range of human experience rather than as alien phenomena, thereby placing transgender people firmly within the human family.

Strengths-based practice. In contrast to practice models that focus on problems and deficiencies, social workers have largely adopted a practice framework that emphasizes the strengths, capacities, and assets in clients and their environments.

Saleebey (2012) described the strengths perspective in social work as:

predicating everything one does as a social worker...on helping to discover and embellish, explore, and exploit clients' strengths and resources in the service of helping them achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgiving, and society's domination. (p. 1)

The present study has much to contribute to a strengths-based practice approach with transgender clients. The narratives interpreted in this study reveal myriad assets, resources, and resiliencies upon which social workers can build their efforts to enhance

the well-being of transgender people. These strengths include, but are not limited to, attributes such as self-knowledge, spiritual growth, insight into problematic social norms, sensitivity to the difficulties others may face, a keen eye for unfairness and injustice, the capacity for believing in oneself despite cultural messages to the contrary, an impulse toward self-determination in expression of one's humanity, and compassion for one's fellow human beings.

The participants' narratives and subsequent interpretations also suggest possibilities for helping reframe a transgender client's self-defeating beliefs and perceptions, such as those that may manifest as internalized transphobia. Using the examples of the participants in this study, social workers may be more inclined to spot areas of strength and potential amidst the self-doubt and self-loathing that can come from internalized oppression.

Implications for Social Policy

I have previously argued that social workers should work for change in social conditions for the benefit of transgender people. One strategy for changing social conditions is to change social policy. Currently, transgender people—like lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons—are not assured basic civil rights uniformly across the United States. Likewise, many transgender people are hampered by discriminatory marriage laws that undermine their relationships, social status, and financial security. By suggesting the centrality of freedom, interpersonal relationships, and integration into a social network to transgender persons' well-being, the results of this study are certainly consistent with calls for greater legal protections and equality for transgender individuals.

Implications for Social Work Education

This study should help fill the curricular gap identified by Erich et al. (2007) by giving social work educators additional information and understanding about gender, transgenderism, and the lived experiences of transgender people. The current Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008), which guide curriculum development in all accredited bachelor- and master-level social work education programs, defines “diversity” as including dimensions such as gender, gender identity, and gender expression. This study provides much knowledge about these three phenomena. It also offers educators content relevant to Core Competencies 4 (engaging diversity and difference in practice), 7 (applying knowledge of human behavior and the social environment), and 10(b) (assessing client strengths). The study also supports CSWE’s definition of generalist practice, by preparing social workers with the knowledge necessary to identify and build on client strengths. Finally, this study may also be helpful to educators in their efforts to create a more trans-affirming implicit curriculum.

Methodological Implications

This study reaffirms the utility of snowball sampling among stigmatized populations, as has been recommended by Martin and Meezan (2003). Using this sampling method, I was easily able to recruit a relatively diverse sample of 15 transgender adults who met the eligibility criteria. Without exception, I found that the participants in the study were eager to encourage their acquaintances to contact me and also be interviewed. Also without exception, I found that potential participants were enthusiastic about joining the study upon learning about the nature of the study. It

became apparent in off-the-record conversations that the positive angle of the research question helped build trust and enthusiasm among participants.

Participants had a good deal of autonomy in this study. For example, they were asked to self-identify using their preferred terms rather than pre-determined labels. As a result, the demographic questionnaire revealed a wide range of self-definitions related to gender identity. This diversity would have remained hidden had I asked participants to “check a box” indicating their identities according to categories I could have generated in advance. I also designed the study so that participants determined the location and timing of their interviews. I believe this went far in equalizing power and promoting the overall comfort level of participants. All of this suggests the usefulness of research methods that empower participants, respect their autonomy, and engage them as collaborators in research rather than subjects.

I was struck by the ease of fit between basic social work interviewing skills and a phenomenological interviewing style. Both require the interviewer to be a skillful active listener, to convey genuineness and warmth, to pose open-ended questions, to encourage elaboration, to avoid imposing one’s own assumptions or values, to be open to whatever it is the interviewee says, to follow the interviewee’s lead while keeping the interview focused and purposeful, and to convey that there is no “right” answer other than an honest sharing of the individual’s perspective. I found myself using all of these basic social work skills during these phenomenological interviews. This experience leads me to conclude that phenomenological research may be a particularly accessible research modality for social work researchers.

The influence of my own identity on the study requires some discussion here. Many participants asked me directly about my gender identity—usually after their interview, but occasionally before. As explained in Appendix B, I identify and present as a genderqueer lesbian, and I was always honest and forthcoming in describing my own identities when participants asked. I would argue that this had a positive effect on the participants' feelings about the study. I believe my own minority-status gender expression and identity generally fostered rapport and reduced apprehension; that I was viewed as an “insider” was explicitly stated by more than one participant. While it is impossible to know for sure, it is my sense that my presence as a visible member of the LGBT community facilitated more honest disclosures and reduced self-censorship among participants. In addition, nearly all participants thanked me for doing this research, and some specifically thanked me for approaching transgenderism from a position of positive assumptions and for educating helping professionals about their lives.

Finally, my positive experience working with two peer readers lends credence to this practice in phenomenological data analysis. The peer readers and I were able to carry out meaningful collaboration via e-mail and electronic documents during the data analysis period. Their scrutiny helped minimize undue effects of my own bias on the interpretive process, and their ideas opened my mind to alternative ways of understanding the data and the emerging thematic structures.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations in sampling. This study is not without limitations. The sample was limited in certain ways which should caution readers from taking the study's results as a reflection of a universal transgender experience. First of all, the sample was temporally

and geographically restricted. Secondly, it was marked by the absence of any person in their 40s. A third limitation of the sample was that the majority of participants identified on the MTF spectrum, with just a few being on the FTM spectrum. Over-representation of MTF transgender people compared to FTMs is an ongoing theme in the transgender research literature. I was able to recruit a few FTMs into this study, but having more equal representation might have led to different findings. Given the snowball sampling method used here, the study could also be criticized for relying too heavily on a small number of previously established social networks. The participants from State #2, for example, were friends and acquaintances with each other. As such, they may have a significant number of shared experiences and common references. Perhaps interviewing a sample of participants who do not know each other would yield a wider range of meanings embedded in the experience of valuing transgenderism.

Limitations in data collection and analysis. As a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, this study focused exclusively on one aspect of transgender life, not the entirety of transgender experience. Again, the results should not be taken as describing the totality of transgender experience. They do not even reflect the entirety of the participants' experiences, let alone the experience of all transgender people.

Some phenomenological researchers, and qualitative researchers more generally, use member checks as a way to validate the accuracy and relevance of their findings. In a member check, the participants read the study's tentative results and are asked to provide feedback to the researcher. For example, participants could be asked, "Do the

preliminary results resonate with your experience? Is there anything you would like to add to or correct in these preliminary results?” The researcher would then incorporate that level of feedback into the final results.

I did not do this. I was dissuaded from doing member checks by the veteran researchers of the Institute for Heideggerian Hermeneutic Phenomenology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (P. Ironside & R. Sloan, June 15, 2010, personal communications). In Chapter III, I explained the rationale against multiple interviews, and the rationale for forgoing member checks is much the same. Time alone will change a participant’s interpretation of their experience. In addition, the initial interview itself, as well as any subsequent reading of results will influence the participant’s interpretations in unknowable ways. At some point, the researcher must recognize the limits of any phenomenological endeavor and decide where to stop in the midst of unending interpretive cycles. In the end, I simply asked participants to verify the accuracy of their interview transcripts, but not give feedback on preliminary results. I decided to accept those limitations and base my results on what is admittedly one snapshot in time.

The study’s reliance on participant self-report also poses limitations. All that can be claimed from such a study is that the results reflect the experience *as the participants reported it*. Evidence from self-report might, of course, lead to different conclusions than evidence gathered by other means (surveys or field observations, for example). Any study relying solely on self-report is limited for at least two reasons. First of all, there is the possibility that participants have inaccurate memories of past events, feelings, and thoughts. Secondly, there is a risk that participants may offer narratives distorted by a

desire to be seen in a positive light. The potential for social desirability bias is perhaps heightened among a sample of persons from a stigmatized population. This potential limitation deserves extended attention, so I will discuss it at length here.

The results of this study suggest myriad ways in which transgender people interpret their experiences and construct their realities through an ongoing process of grappling with the social meanings available to them and creating their own. Each participant's narrative can be interpreted by the reader as an example of how an individual is both constrained by previously established social meanings and also continually interpreting and creating their own meanings.

At the same time, however, hermeneutic phenomenological research such as this should be distinguished from ethnomethodological research. The goal of the present study was not to discover the social rules and processes by which the participants construct meanings, identities, and realities (although that would be an interesting line of inquiry, indeed), but rather to dis-cover the essential meanings that make their appreciation of transgenderism knowable as such, and that reveal the lived human experience of appreciating transgenderism. As spelled out in Chapter III, hermeneutic phenomenologists do not "interrogate the text," but rather "let the text speak" (P. Ironside, personal communication, June 25, 2010).

This study can be critiqued fairly from the perspective of sociological research into accounts and claims-making. These branches of social constructionist inquiry examine narratives for the rhetorical devices individuals use in attempting to be seen as credible actors. In a classic article, Scott and Lyman (1968) examined accounts as linguistic tools employed in situations in which the account-giver's actions are open to

evaluation by others. An account is a way the speaker attempts to explain, excuse, or validate her/his behavior when s/he knows the listener may find the behavior questionable, surprising, or unacceptable in some way. More recently, Ibarra and Kituse (2003) explicated several fundamental rhetorical devices people commonly use as the socio-linguistic building blocks of their worlds and which enable the speaker to be viewed as credible.

All of this could point to a limitation of the current study. In Chapter III and in explicating my fore-structure (see Appendix B), I explained the steps I took to minimize social desirability bias, including how I framed the overall study to them, how I built rapport with each participant, how I present as gender-nonconforming myself. It could still be argued, however, that participants, being aware of the stigma transgenderism carries in society, gave distorted descriptions of their experiences. It is possible they were either in the habit of employing self-protective accounts in talking about their lives or employed them during the interview thinking I was poised to judge their gender nonconformity as unsavory. It would have been a very different study had I analyzed the narrative data for the credibility-enhancing yet possibly inauthentic rhetorical devices participants may have used to make claims and give accounts of their experiences. At the same time, I must recognize that a potential limitation of this study is that participants did exactly that.

Directions for Future Research

If this study was successful, readers will find that the study has raised interesting questions, which they can then shape into formal inquiries. In my own analysis, this study highlights the value of bringing some balance to the literature by learning from

transgender people who are experiencing a sense of well-being, and not only learning from those who are perhaps overwhelmed by burden and struggle. This study suggests that further inquiry into transgender strengths will lead researchers into fertile territory and will yield new insights. The relative ease with which I recruited 15 transgender people who experience well-being in Midwest bodes well for future attempts to gather samples for such studies.

This study also highlights the importance of research into the role of relationships in promoting transgender well-being. An important avenue for research would be to learn from transgender people's successful relationships—both with intimate partners and with friends in and out of the transgender community. The present study also encourages further research into the spiritual dimensions of transgender experiences and the potential resources to be found there for promoting transgender well-being. Transgender activism and its role in promoting personal well-being could also be studied in more depth.

This study also points to the need for increasingly specific knowledge of the common and unique strengths and life experiences present within various transgender sub-populations (such as FTMs, crossdressers, bigenders, genderqueers, different generations, or different geographical locations). Overall, the study suggests the need to study ways in which social work practitioners can incorporate into their practice interventions aimed at promoting well-being among transgender people on intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal, and spiritual levels.

This study also provides fodder for future research into the socially constructed nature of gender, gender identity, and various transgender identities. More could be done to understand the social process through which identities are constructed and maintained

within the various transgender sub-groups. Further ethnomethodological studies combining narrative data with extended field observations would help uncover the social rules and patterns used among transgender groups to protect themselves from stigma.

Summary and Conclusion

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, 15 self-identified transgender adults living in three Midwestern states provided detailed narrative descriptions of their appreciation for being transgender. The essence of their appreciation was interpreted as related to experiences of intimate connections in three broad realms: connections with self, other people, and a larger purpose. Participants described how they appreciated being transgender because it has involved experiences of being true, unique, whole, strong, free, open to others, socially competent, helpful to others, in stronger relationships, spiritually enriched, and part of social change. These results paint a very different picture of transgender lives than that available from much previous research, which has tended to highlight the problems and difficulties within transgender populations. Therefore, this study contributes significantly to a more complete understanding of transgender people and provides support for the notion that human well-being and gender nonconformity can coexist. In the end, this study illuminates the potential for transgenderism to be a positive aspect of being human.

Appendix A

Diagnostic Criteria for Gender Identity Disorder (APA, 2000, pp. 537-538)

- A. A strong and persistent cross-gender identification (not merely a desire for any perceived cultural advantages of being the other sex).

In children, the disturbance is manifested by four (or more) of the following:

1. repeatedly stated desire to be, or insistence that he or she is, the other sex
2. in boys, preference for cross-dressing or simulating female attire; in girls, insistence on wearing only stereotypical masculine clothing
3. strong and persistent preferences for cross-sex roles in make-believe play or persistent fantasies of being the other sex
4. intense desire to participate in the stereotypical games and pastimes of the other sex
5. strong preference for playmates of the other sex

In adolescents and adults, the disturbance is manifested by symptoms such as a stated desire to be the other sex, frequent passing as the other sex, desire to live or be treated as the other sex, or the conviction that he or she has the typical feelings and reactions of the other sex.

- B. Persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex.

In children, the disturbance is manifested by any of the following; in boys, assertion that his penis or testes are disgusting or will disappear or assertion that it would be better not to have a penis, or aversion toward rough-and-tumble play and rejection of male stereotypical toys, games, and activities; in girls, rejection of urinating in a sitting position, assertion that she has or will grow a penis, or assertion that she does not want to grow breast or menstruate, or marked aversion toward normative feminine clothing.

In adolescents and adults, the disturbance is manifested by symptoms such as preoccupation with getting rid of primary and secondary sex characteristics (e.g., request for hormones, surgery, or other procedures to physically alter sexual characteristics to simulate the other sex” or belief that he or she was born the wrong sex.

- C. The disturbance is not concurrent with a physical intersex condition.
- D. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Appendix B

Researcher's Fore-Structure

As described in Chapter III, a Heideggerian hermeneutic researcher is obligated to make her or his own fore-structure visible to the reader. Much of my fore-structure has surely already been apparent to the reader of Chapters I-III. These chapters revealed the ways in which I framed my inquiry, interpreted the existing literature, and grounded my methods in particular philosophical assumptions. I continue to develop my fore-structure here further revealing my previous understandings and relationships with the phenomenon of inquiry from perhaps a more personal angle.

I am a gender-nonconforming person. I am female-bodied with an androgynous-to-masculine gender identity and expression. I cut my hair short and wear only “men’s” clothing. I am comfortable identifying as genderqueer, but I generally label myself as a woman/female for “official” purposes. Throughout my 40+ years of life, I have routinely been perceived as a boy or a man. This occurred as long ago as 1974 and as recently as last week. I am used to having my gender challenged in public spaces. Cisgender women and girls in public restrooms, for example, frequently give me questioning looks or ask whether I am in the right place. I do not know that such interactions have ever disturbed or embarrassed me. I have generally found these situations humorous and paradoxically empowering. Even as a young child without the words to articulate it, I have always felt satisfied knowing I am challenging people’s pre-conceived ideas by making them face a non-traditional gender expression.

As early as pre-school and elementary school, I actively resisted teachers’ attempts to categorize, segregate, and stereotype students by gender. (For example, I

stood between the “girls’ line” and the “boys’ line” in kindergarten.) In short, I have been at odds with the binary, patriarchal gender system since my earliest memories. My life—my sense of self, my self-expression, the ways I move about in the world—do not fit a binary model of gender. I also have also identified as lesbian since I was approximately 15 years old. In this way, I have further lived a queer life—a life outside of traditional roles of sex, gender, and sexuality.

I was fortunate, as a genderqueer youth, to have my parents’ unwavering support and acceptance. I could have easily been taken to a clinic and diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder as a child. I could have been forced to wear “girls’” clothing and engage only in “feminine” activities. I could have been ridiculed for dressing “like a boy” and being interested in “masculine” things. Instead, my parents cleared obstacles from my path so that I could express an authentic sense of self at home, school, and in the community. They continue to be my staunch allies to this day. I attribute much of my self-respect as a queer person to them.

I have not faced significant bullying, harassment, or discrimination in my life. There have been small incidents, primarily in high school and college, but none that I believe left a lasting mark. During certain periods of my life, my coming out process was complicated by depression, which seems to be hereditary in my family. I have never, however, viewed my sexual orientation or gender identity as causing my depression. I have placed some blame on personal prejudices and societal structures that erase, stigmatize, misunderstand, and even punish people like me who have queer identities. For whatever reasons, I think I decided early in my life that I was fine and that it was society that had a problem.

Perhaps because of a combination of the above factors, I have never regretted being queer. In fact, it has always been something I have sincerely *liked* about myself. As I have moved through life, I have met and even befriended numerous other queer people who similarly enjoy the fact that they are queer. Most of the LGBTQ people I know are glad they are queer and would not want to live life otherwise. As a scholar, however, I quickly discovered the absence of such voices in the professional literature on LGBTQ populations.

Motivated in part by my experiences as a genderqueer lesbian, I was drawn to the profession of social work for its explicit commitment to social justice for stigmatized and marginalized populations. As a researcher, I am similarly motivated to explore aspects of queer life that are commonly overlooked by society at large. I have a desire to assert the dignity and worth of my own life and the lives of other queer people, and I am sure that desire is evident in my approach to the present study.

Given my own fore-structure, I thought participants in this study would primarily talk about how they value being different and challenging unjust social structures. I also thought they would describe a deep satisfaction with living an authentic life. In the end, such themes were indeed present in participants' narratives, but there was so much more. I did not at all foresee the unifying concept of intimate connection. I was pleasantly surprised as that began to emerge from the data in the later interpretive cycles. Now, looking back at the results, I can truthfully say the notion of intimate connection resonates with my own life experiences, but I would not have been able to reach that insight without conducting this study.

Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your current age? _____
2. What is your racial and/or ethnic identity? _____
3. What is the geographic location of your primary residence? (Please circle one):
Rural Urban Suburban
4. Are you currently employed? _____
If yes, what type of work do you do? (generally speaking)

5. What is your estimated annual income? _____
6. What is the highest educational level/degree you have attained? _____
7. Are you currently in a romantic/intimate relationship? _____
8. Are you a parent? _____ If yes, how many children do you have? _____
9. Do you belong to a particular religion? _____
If yes, to which religion do you belong? _____
10. What is your gender identity? (Please write your preferred term[s])

11. How long have you identified as transgender? _____
12. What is your sexual orientation? _____

**IUPUI and CLARIAN INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR
Transgenderism as a Valued Life Experience among Transgender Adults**

You are invited to participate in a research study of how transgender adults have experienced being transgender as a valued aspect of life. You were selected as a possible subject because you are a self-identified transgender person who is at least 18 years of age. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Barb J. Burdge, MSW, a doctoral student in the School of Social Work at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. The study is her dissertation research for the Ph.D. in Social Work.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to (1) help social workers more accurately understand transgendered persons' experiences and (2) help social workers understand how being transgender can be a positive aspect of one's life.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

If you agree to participate, you will be one of fifteen subjects who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

1. Take part in one 60-120-minute, individual interview with the researcher. You will be asked to respond to open-ended questions about your appreciation of being transgender. The interview will be audio-recorded.
2. Immediately after the interview, you will complete a brief demographic questionnaire. This will take approximately 15 minutes.
3. A few weeks later, you will be provided the written transcript of your interview and invited to confirm its accuracy and clarify any confusing statements.
4. When the study's final results are available, you will be invited to receive a copy of them.

RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

While on the study, the risks are:

1. Minimal discomfort in talking about personal experiences,
2. Minimal discomfort with being audio-recorded,
3. Minimal likelihood of being inconvenienced by the length of the interview,
4. Minimal likelihood of possible loss of confidentiality through:
 - a. Having the interview audio-recorded,
 - b. Sharing of written (but de-identified) interview transcripts with 4 faculty members of the researcher's dissertation committee (chaired by Dr. Kathy Lay of

the IU School of Social Work) and two peer researchers for data analysis and quality control.

The following measure will be used to minimize the risks listed above:

1. At any point during the interview, you can tell the researcher that you feel uncomfortable, do not care to answer a particular question, wish to change the topic, or wish to end the interview. The interview questions will also be open-ended and allow you to have significant control over the direction of the interview.
2. At any point during the interview, you may ask the interviewer to turn off the audio-recorder. Anything shared while the recorder is off will not be used in the study.
3. You will have the freedom to choose the time and place of the interview. The researcher will end the interview once the topic has been fully explored or after 120 minutes, whichever comes first. If you wish to end the interview early, you may do so.
4. The researcher will store the digital audio files in a locked private office on a password-protected personal computer. The files will be permanently deleted upon the completion of the study. No personally identifying information will be stored with you audio files or transcribed documents. False names will be used in the written transcriptions and final report. Your actual name will not be shared, either orally or in writing, with anyone—not even the research team or the dissertation committee. Other potentially identifying information you have shared (e.g., your city, your school, your employer) will similarly be removed from all project documents.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

The benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are:

1. An opportunity to educate others about being transgender,
2. A possible sense of empowerment in sharing you experiences,
3. A sense of affirmation from the researcher,
4. A group previously not represented well will have an authentic voice in the professional social work literature,
5. Others may benefit from your participation because professional social workers will be better informed about the transgender community as a result of this study.

ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

Instead of being in the study, you have the option not to participate. There are no negative consequences of a decision not to participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. The audio-recordings made of your interview will not be shared with anyone else at anytime, and they will be stored in a private, locked office on the researcher's password-protected personal computer. They will be transcribed into a word processing document within a few weeks of the interview and destroyed immediately upon completion of the project (no later than August 1, 2012). False participant names will be used in all transcriptions and written reports of the research project. Computerized transcriptions will be stored on the researcher's password-protected personal computer.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the IUPUI/Clarian Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), who may need to access your research records.

PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher Barb Burdge at 260-402-1496 or Dr. Kathy Lay at 317-278-8607. If you cannot reach the researcher during regular business hours (i.e. 8:00AM-5:00PM), please call the IUPUI/Clarian Research Compliance Administration office at (317) 278-3458 or (800) 696-2949. After business hours, please call Barb Burdge at 260-402-1496.

In the event of an emergency, you may contact Barb Burdge at 260-402-1496.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the IUPUI/Clarian Research Compliance Administration office at (317) 278-3458 or (800) 696-2949.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the University.

Your participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to your consent if you show signs of emotional distress. If this occurs, the researcher will pause the interview, ask whether you would prefer to end the interview due to the apparent emotional distress, and, if the emotional distress continues, end the interview and your participation in the study. If you express a need for supportive services, the researcher will suggest appropriate referral services.

SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

(must be dated by the subject)

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ **Date:** _____

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Barb J. Burdge

Education:

- 7/13 Ph.D. in Social Work. Indiana University.
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.
External minor: Gender Studies
Dissertation: A Phenomenology of Transgenderism as a Valued Life
Experience among Transgender Adults in the Midwestern United States
- 6/98 Master of Social Work. Indiana University.
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.
High Distinction.
Concentration: Micro (Interpersonal) Practice
- 12/94 Bachelor of Arts. Indiana University. Bloomington, IN
Highest Distinction. Phi Beta Kappa.
Major: Psychology Minor: Music

Honors, Awards, and Fellowships:

- 1/12-5/12 Sabbatical Leave. Manchester College.
- 4/11 Faculty Summer Research Grant. Manchester College.
- 4/10 Faculty Summer Research Grant. Manchester College.
- 5/09 Faculty Ambassador Excellence Award. Manchester College.
- 4/05 "Esprit: Spirit of Inquiry" Outstanding Doctoral Student Award. Indiana
University School of Social Work.
- 3/05 Indiana University Doctoral Fellowship 2005-2006.
- 11/94 Golden Key International Honor Society.
- 4/93 Phi Beta Kappa. Indiana University College of Arts and Sciences.

Professional Experience:

- 8/12-present Chair, Department of Sociology and Social Work. Manchester University.
604 E. College Ave., North Manchester, IN
- 4/09-present Associate Professor of Social Work, Social Work Program Director, and
Field Instruction Coordinator. Department of Sociology and Social Work,
Manchester University. 604 E. College Ave., North Manchester, IN
- 1/07-8/07 Interim Chair. Department of Sociology and Social Work. Manchester
College. 604 E. College Ave., North Manchester, IN

- 9/03-4/09 Assistant Professor of Social Work, Social Work Program Director, and Field Instruction Coordinator. Dept. of Sociology and Social Work, Manchester College. 604 E. College Ave., North Manchester, IN
- 8/04-8/05 Interim Chair. Department of Sociology and Social Work. Manchester College. 604 E. College Ave., North Manchester, IN
- 1/03-5/03 Acting Chair and Acting BSW Program Director. Department of Social Work. University of Saint Francis, 2701 Spring St., Fort Wayne, IN
- 8/01-5/03 Instructor of Social Work. Department of Social Work, University of Saint Francis. 2701 Spring St., Fort Wayne, IN
- 8/01-2/02 Contract Outpatient Therapist. The Otis R. Bowen Center for Human Services. 2310 Cass St., Fort Wayne, IN
- 5/01-8/01 Outpatient Therapist. The Otis R. Bowen Center for Human Services. 850 N. Harrison St., Warsaw, IN
- 1/99-5/01 Clinical Consultant. Whittington Homes & Services for Children & Families. 2423 Fairfield Ave., Fort Wayne, IN
- 5/98-1/99 Home-Based Therapist. Whittington Homes & Services for Children & Families. 2423 Fairfield Ave., Fort Wayne, IN
- 1/95-11/96 Home-Based Case Manager. Four County Counseling Center. 321 E. 8th St., Suite 204, Rochester, IN

Publications:

- Burdge, B. J. (2009). Legal discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees: A multi-theoretical model to explain an elusive civil rights law. *Journal of Policy Practice*, 8(1), 4-20.
- Burdge, B. J. (2007). Bending gender, ending gender: Theoretical foundations for social work practice with the transgendered community. *Social Work*, 52(2), 243-250.
- Decker, V., Suman, P., Burdge, B., Deka, A., Harris, M., Hymans, D., Marcussen, M., Pittman, D., Wilkerson, D., & Daley, J. (2007). Analysis of social work theory progression published in 2004. *Advances in Social Work*, 8(1), 81-112.

University Courses Taught:

Manchester University

- Integrating Theory and Practice: Social Work Practice II
- Field Instruction / Field Instruction Seminar
- Introduction to Gender Studies
- Out of the Ordinary: The Lives of Sexual Minorities (First Year Seminar)
- Introduction to Psychology
- Practicum in Human Services

University of Saint Francis

- Human Behavior and the Social Environment
- Micro I: Social Work Practice with Individuals and Families
- Micro II: Social Work Practice with Groups
- Social Work Ethics
- Social Policy Analysis
- Interpersonal Communication
- Child Welfare

International Academic Experiences:

- 1/11-1/25/11 SOWK 350 Caribbean Social Work at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus in Kingston, Jamaica. Co-taught course with Dr. Brad Yoder.
- 1/13-1/27/09 SOWK 350 Caribbean Social Work at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus in Kingston, Jamaica. Accompanied off-campus course taught by Dr. Brad Yoder.
- 6/11-6/21/05 Faculty Seminar in Northern Ireland. Studied “The Troubles” and ongoing peace process in Belfast and Derry. Sponsored by Brethren Colleges Abroad.

Professional Presentations:

- 4/14/13 “Understanding Transgenderism.” Presented to LGBT Outreach Project of the Indianapolis North United Methodist Church. Indianapolis, IN
- 4/27/12 Celebrating Diversity Workshop. Presented to the Fulton Co. Council on Aging staff and other local community leaders. Co-facilitated with Dr. Tasha Williams. Rochester, IN
- 6/9/10 “Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and the LGBT Community.” Panelist for discussion at Ball State University Social Work Program. Muncie, IN

- 10/2/09 “An Extended Three-Day Field Trip as a Method of Teaching Micro and Macro Urban Social Work Practice Issues to Students in a Rural Undergraduate College.” Co-presenter with Brad Yoder and Cheri Krueckeberg. Annual Conference of the Indiana Association for Social Work Education. Anderson, IN
- 11/08-present “Social Work and LGBT Persons.” Panelist for annual discussion in Huntington University social work course. Huntington, IN
- 5/22/08 “A Qualitative Analysis of the Impact of Religious Faith and Service Experiences in a Service Learning Course.” Poster Presentation with Lindsey Bryant and Dr. Rusty Coulter-Kern. Association for Psychological Science Annual Conference and Teaching Institute. Chicago, IL
- 3/19/08 “Considerations in Hospice Services for Sexual Minority Clients.” Staff in-service. Visiting Nurse & Hospice Home, Inc. Fort Wayne, IN
- 11/14/07 “Social Policy and the LGBT Community: Marriage and Beyond.” CEU-approved staff in-service. Children’s Bureau. Indianapolis, IN
- 4/24/07 “GLBT Treatment Issues for Social Work Practice.” Panelist/Panel Facilitator. National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter GLBT Committee workshop. Indianapolis, IN
- 4/5-4/6/07 “Bending Gender, Ending Gender: Theoretical Foundations for Social Work Practice with the Transgender Community.” Paper presentation at Anderson Gender Resource Center “The Art of Gender in Everyday Life” Conference, Idaho State University. Pocatello, ID
- 3/07-present Semi-annual presentations of “Social Work’s Commitment to the LGBT Population.” Guest speaker in Introduction to Social Work, Marriage and Family courses at Indiana Wesleyan University. Marion, IN
- 2/28/07 “GLBT Civil Rights Legislation in Indiana” with co-presenter Kris Kates. National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter, Legislative Education and Advocacy Day. Indianapolis, IN
- 2/24/06 “An Exploration of Gender: Transgender Panel Discussion.” Panel Facilitator. National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter Diversity Conference. Indianapolis, IN
- 2/24/05 “Social Work’s Commitment to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Populations.” Workshop for Goshen College social work students. Goshen, IN
- 2/05-present “Celebrating Diversity” workshops with co-facilitators Dr. Gary Zimmerman, Dr. Tasha Williams, AnnMarie Santos, and Dr. Michael Slavkin. Two to four 5-hour workshops per year. Manchester University. North Manchester, IN
- 1/05-present Bi-annual presentations of “Hate Crimes: The Violence of Intolerance.” Guest speaker in *Human Conflict* Course. Manchester College. North Manchester, IN
- 11/17/04 “Social Policy and the LGBT Community: Marriage and Beyond.” CEU-approved staff in-service. Children’s Bureau. Indianapolis, IN

- 10/8/04 “Social Work’s Commitment to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Populations” with co-presenter Sharlene Toney, MSW. National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter Annual State Conference. Indianapolis, IN
- 8/27/04 “Inclusive Teaching: Reaping the Rewards of Diversity in the Classroom” with Gary Zimmerman, Ph.D. Manchester College Faculty Workshop. North Manchester, IN
- 5/13/04 “An Exploration of Gender.” Transgender panel discussion sponsored by Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Committee of NASW—Indiana Chapter. Facilitator/Committee Chair. Indianapolis, IN
- 4/23/04 “Social Work Teaching Portfolio.” Indiana University School of Social Work Doctoral Symposium. Indianapolis, IN
- 3/13/01 “Understanding the DSM-IV.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 2/13/01 “Professional Documentation.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 1/29/01 “Foster Parenting and Behavior Disordered Children.” Foster parent training. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 1/25/01 “Serving Families of Behavior Disordered Children.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 12/18/00 “Promoting Pro-Social Values among Children in Foster Care.” Foster parent training. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 12/12/00 “Infusing Pro-Social Values into Services for Abused and Neglected Children.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 11/20/00 “The Role of Foster Parents in the Treatment Planning Process.” Foster parent training. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 11/14/00 “The Treatment Planning Process.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 9/19/00 “Group Theory and Dynamics.” Indiana Association of Residential Child Care Agencies State Conference. Indianapolis, IN
- 8/8/00 “Integrating Knowledge and Skills from Play Therapy into Case Management with Abused and Neglected Children.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 7/17/00 “Implications of Disrupted Attachment in Foster Children.” Foster parent training for Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 7/11/00 “Attachment and Bonding for Abused and Neglected Children.” Staff in-service for Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 6/20-6/21/00 “Conducting Psychosocial Assessment Interviews.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 5/9/00 “Group Theory and Dynamics.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 4/17/00 “The Role of Foster Parents in the CPS Process.” Foster parent training. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 4/11/00 “Navigating the Child Protective Services (CPS) Process.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN

- 11/22/99 “Using the *Magic 1-2-3* Discipline Method with Foster Children.” Foster parent training. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 11/9/99 “Using the *Magic 1-2-3* Discipline Method.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 10/12/99 “Genograms in Family Assessment.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 8/30/99 “Introduction to Ethics in Foster Parenting.” Foster parent training. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 8/24/99 “Introduction to the NASW Code of Ethics.” Staff in-service. Whittington Homes & Services. Fort Wayne, IN
- 7/19/96 “Indiana’s Domestic Violence Laws.” Fulton County Social Services Professionals. Rochester, IN

Conferences Attended:

- 2/8-2/10/13 Midwest Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Ally College Conference. Lansing, MI
- 10/1/12 National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter Annual Education Conference. Indianapolis, IN
- 3/14-3/18/12 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 29th Annual Conference. Portland, OR
- 9/23/11 Indiana Association for Social Work Education. Attendee. IUPUI. Indianapolis.
- 6/20-6/23/11 Institute for Heideggerian Hermeneutic Methodologies. Sponsored by the Indiana University School of Nursing. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Indianapolis, IN
- 4/10-4/12/11 Higher Learning Commission Annual Conference on Quality in Higher Education. Chicago, IL
- 3/2/11 National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter “Legislative Education and Advocacy Day.” Indianapolis, IN
- 2/22-2/25/11 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 28th Annual Conference. Cincinnati, OH
- 11/12/10 “Understanding & Ethically Treating Transgendered and Gender-Variant Clients.” University of Indianapolis School of Psychological Sciences. Indianapolis, IN
- 6/14-6/18/10 Institute for Heideggerian Hermeneutic Methodologies. Sponsored by the Indiana University School of Nursing. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Indianapolis, IN
- 3/16-3/21/10 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 27th Annual Conference. Atlanta, GA
- 10/2/09 Annual Conference of the Indiana Association for Social Work Education. “Strengthening Social Work Pedagogy.” Anderson, IN
- 3/17-3/22/09 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 26th Annual Conference. Phoenix, AZ

2/09 National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter “Legislative Education and Advocacy Day.” Indianapolis, IN

10/27-10/28/08 2008 Assessment Institute. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Indianapolis, IN

10/10/08 Indiana Association for Social Work Education Annual Conference. Indiana Wesleyan University. Marion, IN

8/27/08 Safe Zone Training. Sponsored by Manchester College United Sexualities. North Manchester, IN

4/25/08 “Transgenderism: Understanding the Phenomenon and Issues Specific to the Transgender Community.” Sponsored by the National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter. Indianapolis, IN

3/5-3/9/08 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 25th Annual Conference. Destin, FL

2/8/08 “Critical Thinking: Analysis and Evaluation.” 11th Annual Fort Wayne Teaching Conference. Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

2/6/08 National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter “Legislative Education and Advocacy Day.” Indianapolis, IN

9/11/07 Indiana Association for Social Work Education. Anderson University. Anderson, IN

4/5-4/6/07 Anderson Gender Resource Center “The Art of Gender in Everyday Life IV.” Idaho State University. Pocatello, ID

2/28/07 National Association of Social Workers Indiana Chapter “Legislative Education and Advocacy Day.” Indianapolis, IN

9/15/06 Indiana Association for Social Work Education. Attendee. Ball State University. Muncie, IN

2/24/06 National Association of Social Workers Indiana Chapter Diversity Conference. Indianapolis, IN

2/8/06 “Legislative Education and Advocacy Day.” Indianapolis, IN

11/11/05 Indiana Association for Social Work Education. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Indianapolis, IN

11/2-11/6/05 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 23rd Annual Conference. Austin, TX

2/16/05 “Social Workers’ Legislative Education and Advocacy Day.” Indianapolis, IN

1/25/05 “Bisexuality.” Jean Capler, LCSW. Sponsored by Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Committee of NASW—Indiana Chapter. Indianapolis, IN

11/30/04 “LGBT Youth in Foster Care and the Schools.” Lydi Davidson, MSW. Sponsored by Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Committee of NASW Indiana Chapter. Indianapolis, IN

11/3-11/7/04 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 22nd Annual Conference. Detroit, MI

10/15/04 Social Work Legislative Workshop. Sponsored by NASW-IN Region III Steering Committee. Manchester College. North Manchester, IN

10/6-10/8/04 National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter Annual State Education Conference. Indianapolis, IN

9/23/04 "Shamanism and Peacemaking." Myron Eshowsky. Fort Wayne, IN
 9/14/04 "Civil Rights: Do You Know What You Can Do?" Panel Discussion
 sponsored by Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Committee of
 NASW—Indiana Chapter. Indianapolis, IN
 6/1-6/3/04 Conflict Transformation Institute. Manchester College. North
 Manchester, IN
 5/13/04 "An Exploration of Gender: Transgender Panel Discussion." Sponsored
 by Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Committee of NASW Indiana
 Chapter. Indianapolis, IN
 4/22/04 "Sexuality: Styles and Stories." Panel Discussion sponsored by Gay,
 Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Committee of NASW—Indiana
 Chapter. Indianapolis, IN
 4/15/04 "Reactive Attachment Disorder." NASW-IN Region III. Fort Wayne, IN
 2/4/04 "Legislative Education and Advocacy Day." Indianapolis, IN
 10/29-11/2/03 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 21st
 Annual Conference. Reno, NV
 10/8-10/10/03 2003 NASW-Indiana Chapter Annual State Education Conference.
 Indianapolis, IN
 3/10/03 "Poverty through the Lifespan." NASW Indiana Region III Annual
 Conference. Kendallville, IN
 3/5-3/7/03 "Imagine a World...Making Children a National Priority." Child Welfare
 League of American National Conference. Washington, DC
 2/19/03 "Legislative Education and Advocacy Day." Indianapolis, IN
 6/21-6/28/02 "Alternative Break Citizenship School." Break Away—The Alternative
 Break Connection. Service Learning Conference and Experience.
 Lawrence, KS
 5/14/02 "Toward an Understanding of 'Complicated' Mourning, Sudden Death,
 Disenfranchised Grief and Multiple Loss." Fort Wayne, IN
 3/6-3/8/02 "Making Children a National Priority": Child Welfare League of America
 National Conference. Washington, DC
 1/30/02 "Legislative Education and Advocacy Day." Indianapolis, IN
 10/31-11/3/01 Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors: 19th
 Annual Conference. Denver, CO
 6/15/01 "Mood Disorders in Children & Adolescents: Depression & Bipolar
 Disorder." Fort Wayne, IN
 4/27/01 "Children with PTSD." Crossroads Children's Home. Fort Wayne, IN
 1/11/01 "Neuropsychological Assessment and Diagnosis." Fort Wayne, IN
 10/19-10/20/00 "Coaching the Parents of Oppositional Youth." Nashville, IN
 9/19-9/21/00 Indiana Association of Residential Child Care Agencies State Conference.
 Indianapolis, IN
 7/1-7/2/00 "Play Therapy Techniques." Kokomo, IN
 5/20-5/21/00 "Tuning In and Turning Off the Anxiety Alarm: Cognitive Therapy
 Protocols." Nashville, IN
 3/10/00 "In the Child's Best Interest: Tools for the CHINS Process." Crossroads
 Children's Home. Fort Wayne, IN
 2/11/00 "Social Work and the Law." IPFW. Fort Wayne, IN

1/28-1/29/00 “Corrective Attachment Therapy across the Lifecycle.” Golden, CO
9/20-9/21/99 Indiana Association of Residential Child Care Agencies State Conference.
Indianapolis, IN
7/6/99 “Kids Without a Conscience.” Behavioral Health Care. Plymouth, IN
10/15/98 “Contextual Family Therapy with Sex Offenders and Victims.” Nashville,
IN
4/25-4/26/96 Prevent Child Abuse Indiana State Conference. Indianapolis, IN
9/15/95 “Understanding ADHD.” Rochester, IN

Professional/Academic Memberships and Affiliations:

9/10-present Chicago Center for Urban Life and Culture. Council of Advisors.
Member.
9/05-present Indiana Association for Social Work Education. Member.
7/03-present Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors. Member.
6/98-present National Association of Social Workers—Indiana Chapter. Member.
11/93-present Phi Beta Kappa. Member.

Community Affiliations:

11/06-present Roann’s Community Heritage, Inc. Local non-profit historic preservation
organization Founding board member. President 2/13-present; Secretary
4/07-2/13. Roann, IN
10/06-present Roann-Paw Paw Township Public Library. Board of Trustees. Secretary
1/07-present. Roann, IN
4/04-5/07 “Prevention through Education” Program Advisory Board. Stop Child
Abuse and Neglect (SCAN), Inc. Fort Wayne, IN
1/00-6/02 Outspoken, Inc. Board member. Co-chair 1/01-7/01. Fort Wayne, IN
4/00-9/01 Center for Nonviolence. GLBT Domestic Violence Initiative. Founding
member. Fort Wayne, IN
4/96-7/96 Indiana Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse—Fulton County
Chapter. Founding member. Rochester, IN