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K. H.

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CHAPTER I  
THE OTHER SIDE OF METAMORPHOSIS: AN EXPLORATORY  
STUDY OF HOW PARTNERS OF TRANSSEXUALS  
EXPERIENCE TRANSITION

Interest in, and research within, transgender studies has exploded in recent years. The majority of the research, however, has focused primarily on the experience of transsexuals<sup>1</sup> themselves. Romantic partners of transsexuals, though, have remained unexplored within the literature. Details of their experiences in the romantic relationship and during their partners' transitions have yet to be investigated within scholarly research.

Contrary to the partner's absence throughout the literature, high membership and frequent activity in online forums and blogs indicate that this population as a whole has a voice to be heard and a story to tell. The content of these venues suggest that partners' experiences can be difficult, confusing, and also joyous. While these sources are not socially scientific in nature, they provide evidence that this growing population is in need

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<sup>1</sup> In their relatively short history, the terms "transgender" and "transsexual" have been hotly contested, resisted, and modified (see Vidal-Ortiz 2008). In general, "transgender" refers to those who refuse to commit to the male/female gender binary; the transgender experience tends to be one that emphasizes a more fluid definition of "gender." The term "transgender" is often used loosely as an umbrella term for a variety of gender expressions (e.g., cross-dressing, transsexuality, drag kings/queens) that lie outside (or somewhere in between) the traditional male/female gender system (Vidal-Ortiz 2008). The term "transsexuality" originally emerged in the psycho-medical arena during the early/mid-twentieth century to account for those who wished to change sex. (Vidal-Ortiz 2008). Transsexuals, then, are those who seek to transform their physical bodies to "match" their gender identities. Given that there is no universally accepted term, I will use the term "transsexual" and I apologize in advance if its use here offends anyone.

of attention that it is not currently afforded. Popular media sources such as newspapers and magazines have contained some mentions of partners of transsexuals, but these sources tend to only discuss partner issues that are directly related to the trans-partner. Overall, there appears to be an overwhelming concern for whether or not transsexuals' biological sexes should be made known to necessary others (specifically, their romantic partners) as well as whether trans-people and their partners should have equal access to legal marriage. However, these sources are mostly episodic and lacking the systematic or scientific analysis contained in scholarly research.

Scholarly research on partners of trans-people, however, has been similarly negligible. Research has been mostly therapeutic in nature, focusing on clinical considerations for service providers working with partners of transsexuals (Brown 2009; Erhardt 2007; Samons 2009; Zamboni 2006). However, with little existing research on this specific population, it is unclear whether or not counselors and therapists can be effective in working with a population of which so little is known. The current research project serves to increase scholarly understandings of this population in order to provide non-transitioning partners with more effective and much needed support services.

Other academic research on partners of trans-identified individuals has focused on how transsexuality affects the sexual relationship between the trans-person and his or her non-transitioning partner (Brown 2010; Erhardt 2007; Pfeffer 2008) and management of sexual orientation identity during the transition process (Anastasia 2006; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). This research has been effective in beginning a dialogue that places partners of transsexuals in its center and provides interesting insights to specific aspects of the transition experience for partners of transsexuals. However, this research is,

undisputedly, in its initial stages and is consequently narrow in its focus. My guiding research questions are as follows:

- What are the experiences of partners of transsexuals as their partners transition? That is, how do non-transitioning partners experience their transsexual partners' transitions?
- What challenges and opportunities do the non-transitioning partners face as a result of the transition? How do they respond to these?

Transition, of course, is not one single occurrence but rather an on-going process or series of events. For the purposes of this study, the initial disclosure to the non-transitioning partner marks the beginning of the transition. Because the term "transsexual" can be applied to anyone who transitions to living full-time as a gender that is different from his or her biological sex and may or may not include medical intervention, i.e., hormone replacement therapy or sex-reassignment surgery, the transition process can often take place over several years or perhaps for the rest of the trans-person's life. Therefore, an end point was not specified. Further, I define "experience" as the most basic understanding of what non-transitioning partners are thinking and feeling throughout the transition.

## Literature Review

Presently, there are few theoretical traditions for studying partners of transsexuals simply because this is a population that has largely been overlooked in scholarly research. This study, however, was informed by a social constructionist standpoint, which posits that emotions are socially constructed, and a symbolic interactionist perspective, which understands the self and self-image as constantly undergoing an active and developmental process (e.g., Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2003). Through the use of these points of view, we can approach the experiences and emotions of partners of transsexuals within the framework of a contextual, social, and symbolic relevance.

In the social world, one single action, behavior, or object can have an array of meanings that depend directly on the response or interpretation of an individual (Sandstrom, et al. 2003). In this way, individuals rely on local understandings of everyday experiences to make sense of the world around them; the meanings that they draw from these experiences are manipulated through interpretation. However, Sandstrom et al. (2003) point out that individuals continuously run into situations that are new or ambiguous and require flexibility to interpret meanings and adjust our actions accordingly. Because this process relies on on-going social interpretation and continuous redefining of symbols or categories that are socially created and maintained, there is a certain amount of inherent leniency.

While this study does not intend to take on the complexities of identity formation of partners of trans-people, several studies discuss the tendency for partners to face identity-related concerns or crises during the transition process (see Anastasia 2006; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). This study will use symbolic interactionism to inform

matters associated with identity. Both a symbolic interactionist and a social constructionist perspective posit that the self is an on-going, active process (Epstein 1992; Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010; Turner and Stets 2005). Understanding the self involves monitoring and interpreting others' reactions to and local understandings of that self. "During the life course, the self-image of how others perceive a person build up and crystallize into a more enduring conception of the self" (Turner and Stets 2005, 101). Therefore, while changes to identity can be self-provoked, there is also an element that is shaped by social, cultural, and structural forces. Previous research shows that partners of transsexuals are aware of these external factors and have even expressed frustration as they are labeled as identities that they, personally, do not associate with (e.g., heterosexual) or by being continuously "read" differently in social situations depending on who they are with, where the reading takes place, or who is doing the reading (Anastasia 2006; Brown 2010; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009, Tesene 2011).

To gain a clearer understanding of this particular population, we will approach partners of transsexuals from three different angles: sources of popular media (including newspapers and magazine articles), current scholarly research (from mainly psychological and sociological perspectives), and, finally, personal narratives by transsexuals that detail some aspects of a non-transitioning partner's experience (these narratives come from published transsexual autobiographies). These sources serve to establish an understanding, albeit limited, of the experiences of non-transitioning, cissexual<sup>2</sup> partners of transsexuals.

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<sup>2</sup> The term "cissexual" is used in reference to an individual who is *not* transsexual and who has never experienced anything other than congruence between his or her biological sex and gender identity (see Serano 2007).



### Popular Press and Media Sources

Sources of popular media can establish for us the general image of partners of transsexuals received by a general population. While these sources possess several limitations—such as having a narrow focus (sometimes only one individual is discussed) and not being social scientific in any way, therefore lacking any type of systematic analysis—they are useful in attaining a broad understanding of how partners of transsexuals are presented to the general public via these media forums.

The contents of these sources seem to approach transgender issues in direct relation to trans-people themselves, mentioning partners as almost an afterthought in a solely subsidiary capacity. Articles (e.g., *The Lawyer* 1998) tend to focus on access to rights for both trans-people and, as a result, their partners. There is also a particular concern for cissexual partners' access to medical information of their transsexual partners that identifies them as their biological sexes. Some articles (e.g., *The Nation* 2007) argue that while transsexuals may or may not be allowed access to the same rights as non-transsexual individuals, disclosure of their biological sexes should still be available to certain people (i.e., their romantic partners). One article states:

Legal recognition of transsexuals must come with a system to balance the right to privacy of those who have undergone a sex change and a level of transparency that allows concerned parties, such as the potential partners of transsexuals, to find out their original gender. (*The Nation* 2007).

The article continues, “people...are more concerned about practical issues such as how heterosexual men and women are going to be able to accurately determine the gender at birth of their potential partners” (*The Nation* 2007). Most articles tend to support this system of full disclosure by trans-individuals to their romantic partners.

A second topic discussed throughout these sources is the availability of legal marriage and child adoption and/or custody for trans-people and their significant others (e.g., *The Times* 1996). No sources appeared to choose a “side” in the argument—which resembles that of same-sex marriage (for obvious reasons)—of whether or not transsexual men or women and their partners should be granted access to legal marriage. Again, these articles focus mainly on the trans-individual and often only include partners by default. Lastly, one article (*The Dominion Post* 2006) discusses the impact that geography can have on the transition experience, for both trans-partners and cissexual partners. Location, which can determine federal and state laws surrounding transgender issues, access to a supportive community, levels of discrimination, access to medical intervention, and frequency of hate crimes directed toward trans-people and their loved ones can influence the transitioning experience negatively or positively. One article quotes a boastful New Zealander, who states, “New Zealand [is] a tolerant nation where cross-dressers and all transgender people [can] have greater confidence than ever to reveal their gender identity issues” (*The Dominion Post* 2006). This particular article is referring to not only New Zealand’s openness to transgenderism but also the organizations that have been established to provide support to transgendered individuals as well as their partners.

Examining issues that are presented as important and sometimes universal by popular sources provides us with a context in which we can begin to understand the experiences of partners of transsexuals. Whether required disclosure, access to legal marriage, or geographical location are factors that substantially impact the experiences of partners of transsexuals is yet to be discovered. Moving now to a discussion of previous

scholarly research on partners of trans-identified individuals, we can see what issues have been analyzed academically.

### Scholarly Research on Partners of Trans-Identified Individuals

Research on partners of trans-identified individuals has focused primarily on how transsexuality affects the sexual relationship between the trans-person and his or her partner (Brown 2010; Pfeffer 2008), management of sexual orientation identity during the transition process (Anastasia 2006; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009), and therapeutic considerations for mental health providers who work with partners of trans-identified individuals (Brown 2009; Erhardt 2007; Zamboni 2006). It is important to note here that most prior studies have focused on *women* partners of trans-*men* (female-to-males) (Anastasia 2006; Brown 2009; Brown 2010; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Pfeffer 2008; Zamboni 2006) with only one study looking at *women* partners of trans-*women* (Erhardt 2007). More specifically, most have focused on sexual minority women (i.e., lesbian, bisexual, and queer). Thus, absent from the literature are: male partners of transsexuals (both male-to-female and female-to-male) AND women partners of trans-*women*.

According to previous research (e.g., Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009), non-transitioning partners have expressed that even though they are not the ones changing sex, the transition is still happening *to* them. In this way, the transition process can affect the non-transitioning partners in many significant ways. Body dysphoria is a common phenomenon for transsexuals; as a direct result of this, Pfeffer (2008) found that during the transition process, cissexual lesbian partners also began questioning their own physical attractiveness and often suffered from issues of body image (see also Erhardt

2007). Working primarily with lesbian partners of trans-men, Pfeffer (2008) attempted to draw attention to the currently incomplete scholarly understandings of lesbian body image. She argues that “body image can be a dynamic and relational process *between* partners as well as an individual problem” (Pfeffer 2008, 326). Pfeffer (2008) discovered that body dysphoria in trans-men often meant that their non-transitioning partners were granted decreased access to their partners’ bodies, which led to decreased levels of sexual intimacy. As a result, women participants in Pfeffer’s (2008) study admitted to assuming non-sexual roles in their relationships with their trans-partners.

Similarly, Brown (2010) investigated the sexual relationships between trans-men and sexual-minority women (lesbian, bisexual, queer) and found that the majority of her twenty participants reported a process of renegotiation of body image, roles, and sexual connection both during and after their partners’ transitions. Despite factors negatively affecting sexual desire and practice, Brown (2010) reported that “more often than not, partners reported greater sexual access to their partners’ bodies and greater satisfaction with their sex life as transition progressed” (p. 567). Interestingly, these findings are in direct opposition with the findings of Pfeffer (2008), who found that cissexual participants seemed to accept and adopt a non-sexual role within their relationships with their trans-partners. This difference, however, could have to do with differing stages of transition at which Pfeffer (2008) and Brown (2010) interviewed participants.

Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) identified other themes which arose throughout the transition that went beyond sexual relationships such as: the non-transitioning partner’s tendency to question his or her own identity as a result of the transition; the need for a cissexual partner to adopt a caretaking role throughout the transition, the

transition's impact on the overall relationship, the transition's impact on the mental health of the non-transitioning partner (which often included increased levels of stress, sadness, and/or anxiety); the partner's acceptance or rejection within Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (GLBTQ) communities; sources of peer support; and the effects of culture and race. As a result, the transition often compelled non-transitioning partners to search out sexual identity labels that were broader in definition and more appropriate to their specific situations. Participants expressed frustration as they realized that such a term did not exist; the lack of a term that can be applied specifically to those orientated toward trans-people is a "failure of language" (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009, 35). The need to adopt a different identity label also proved detrimental to non-transitioning lesbian partners as this sometimes resulted in rejection from their previously accepting GLBTQ community (Anastasia 2006; Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009).

Another study reiterated the conflict between non-transitioning partners' public identities and their personal internal understandings of their own identities (Anastasia 2006). The two women in this study reported a struggle to maintain their lesbian identity as their relationship with their female-to-male partner began to resemble a more heterosexual dynamic. Both women seemed to place a significant amount of emphasis on social perceptions of their identities and their assumed obligations to affirm the gender of their partner by adopting a more hetero-appropriate sexual orientation identity (i.e., straight or bisexual vs. lesbian) (see also Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Pfeffer 2008). This "sense of responsibility for affirming the identity of the partner" adds another level to the already complex identity re-creation process undergone by cissexual partners of

transsexuals (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009, 40). Cissexual partners, then, experience not only a private pressure (individually and within the romantic relationship) to renegotiate individual identity but also public, social pressures, the results of which could drastically impact both partners. Brown (2009) explains that the non-transitioning partner's level of investment in his or her identity and his or her GLBTQ community's openness to fluidity and change directly impacts the level of disruptiveness and challenge associated with adopting a new sexual orientation identity label. Also affecting the level of challenge for the cissexual partner was the amount of flexibility they expressed in terms of sexual orientation *prior to* their transsexual partner's transition; the more flexibility resulted in less disruption in terms of their own identities during the transition process (Anastasia 2006; Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Pfeffer 2008; Zamboni 2006). In other words, partners who identified as "queer" or "bisexual" expressed lower levels of distress during stages of identity renegotiation. Those who identified as "lesbian," "dyke," or "femme" expressed more difficulty during and after the transition process.

While much of the literature on partners of trans-identified individuals focuses on the struggles and difficulties of the transition, it would be inappropriate to ignore reports in which partners of transsexuals had positive experiences during the transition. In a 1997 film documentary entitled *You Don't Know Dick: Courageous Hearts of Transsexual Men*, an interview with a female partner of a trans-man depicted such an experience. Isabella, who was partnered with the acclaimed photographer Loren Cameron during his transition, stated that she was attracted to Loren's masculinity even when he was a woman and that the transition served to "crystallize" his personality rather

than change it. For Isabella, the transition was seen as a natural progression of Loren's identity. In terms of sexual orientation identity, she explains that their relationship was neither hetero nor lesbian but simply "part of the queer continuum."

While positive experiences like Isabella's do exist, many times, the transition process can be emotionally challenging for partners. As a result, some researchers have pointed to the "need for mental health and other support services for this population" (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). Accordingly, issues for partners of transsexuals have been explored by psychologists as well as sociologists. However, with little existing research on this specific population, it is unclear whether or not counselors or therapists can be effective in working with a population about which so little is known. Brown (2009) discusses the important role that therapists have in affirming the identity of the partner, whatever identity they may assume. She also warns against making assumptions that women would *prefer* being in a heterosexual relationship, and advises that therapists make special note that a cautious consideration of the visibility of their new identities needs to take place (public vs. private disclosure). Therapists, she notes, should be prepared to deal with the complex issues that this new identity will bring. As mentioned above, partners of trans-men have experienced ostracism from the GLBTQ community as their relationships begin to resemble a more heterosexual dynamic. This sudden loss of the sense of community that often surrounds identity can be extremely harrowing.

Others have expanded this research to address psychological approaches to working with not only significant others but also family and friends of transgendered individuals (also referred to as SOFFAS). Zamboni (2006) details the complex process that friends and families invariably undergo in an attempt to accept and understand their

transgendered loved ones. Romantic partners in particular often “face a unique challenge to their own sexual identity,” Zamboni points out (2006, 176). He also argues that SOFFAS need to grieve the “loss” of their loved ones; this includes a process of coming to terms with what is changing and what is remaining the same.

### Perspectives from Transsexual Autobiographies

Within the larger body of personal narrative-writing by transsexuals (i.e., transsexual autobiographies), there is some discussion of non-transitioning partner experiences. These sources are valuable in that they provide details about the cissexual partners’ experiences during the transition from those individuals who are closest to them: their romantic partners. However, these sources present three major limitations: 1) they are not scholarly in nature; 2) the accounts of non-transitioning partners are not an aspect of the transition that is widely discussed throughout transsexual autobiographies; and, most importantly, 3) they do not provide first-person accounts from the non-transitioning partners themselves. In these cases, trans-autobiographers can only discuss the details of their partners’ struggles as they understand them, or as a second-hand account of what their partners have expressed to them. Furthermore, the autobiographer may intentionally characterize the relationship in a negative or positive way for reasons unknown to the reader. In short, these sources lack one of the most integral aspects of qualitative research: the voices of those who are actually being studied. By acknowledging these limitations and using transsexual autobiographies as a starting point, we can begin to see some of the major themes of the cissexual partner experience, as understood by the transsexual partners.



One theme that emerges throughout the autobiographies is the difficulty surrounding the disclosure for both the trans-partner and the cissexual partner and the miscommunication that sometimes results. In her book, *Head Over Heels*, Virginia Erhardt (2007) interviewed heterosexually identified wives of male cross-dressers and male-to-female transsexuals and found that “the emotional intensity of a [partner’s] reaction is related to some extent to how s/he finds out [about the transsexuality], and how long the secret has been held” (p. 1). The length of time that passes in the relationship before the transsexual partner discloses his or her desire to transition has a direct effect on the difficulty the non-transitioning partner has in accepting the change and understanding his/her own identity (Erhardt 2007). Erhardt (2007) explains that once the “secret” is known (she refers to it as a “secret” because her research consisted of women who were married for several years before their husbands came out as cross-dressers and transsexuals), non-transitioning partners continue to struggle with issues related to identity, self-esteem, and trust. One transsexual autobiographer articulates these struggles: “The way [my partner] thought of it, she had lost what [I] had gained. ... [My partner] thought of the loss as a death – except that there across campus sat the murderess, alive and happy and unpunished. It was worse than a death” (McCloskey 1999, 225). While this example provides insight to how the non-transitioning partner may have felt, we cannot overlook the inherent limitations of allowing the trans-person to speak *on behalf of* his/her partner. The story is missing key elements of how the cissexual partner experiences the transition process and how s/he was *feeling* during this time. Another transsexual autobiographer explains, “There is no denying that there can be a sense of betrayal that loved ones feel when someone close changes as dramatically

as one does when changing sex” (Green 2004, 24). Again, the way in which the non-transitioning partner actually experiences these betrayals and the impact of the transition remains absent.

#### Contributions of this Research Study

Partners of trans-identified individuals have been described as a growing population that requires a similarly increasing level of support and research attention. Existing literature focuses primarily on experiences of transgendered individuals themselves, with little attention given to those who may be affected by their transitions (i.e., their romantic partners). This research project turns scholarly attention to this particular population to explore the experiences of non-transitioning, cissexual individuals as their partners transition from one sex to the other. This study will expand the area of transgender studies to include the experiences of partners by answering the following questions: What are the experiences of partners of transsexuals as their partners transition? That is, how do non-transitioning partners experience their transsexual partners’ transitions? What challenges and opportunities do the non-transitioning partners face as a result of the transitions? How do they respond to these? The current scholarly research is, at present, in its infancy. This research aims to provide richness to limited understandings of experiences of partners of transsexuals in an exploratory fashion while also giving partners the opportunity to tell their stories and have their voices heard.

## Research Design and Methods

### Population

This study is based on a convenience sample of three partners of trans-identified individuals who were involved in romantic relationships with transsexual partners who transitioned *during the relationship* and who resided in the Midwestern United States during the time of data collection. When selecting participants, I included the stipulation that the relationship must have been initiated BEFORE the start of the transition. Other factors such as age, sexual orientation, education level, or socioeconomic status were not considered determinants in selecting potential participants. I used existing contacts within the trans-community of Bloomington-Normal, Illinois to initiate a snowball sample. Contacts received a research flier detailing the study and providing my contact information. All informants self-selected to participate in the study by contacting me directly. Due to the understood sensitivity surrounding the community and the topic at hand, measures were taken to gain the trust and rapport of potential participants. For example, gaining entrance into the community by utilizing a known and trusted person was one such measure; another was to not contact participants directly, but rather provide them with information regarding the study and allow them to take the initial step to participate.

Initially, I intended to give participants priority in the following order: male partners of transsexuals who were coupled pre-transition, during transition, and who remain coupled post-transition; male partners of transsexuals who were coupled pre-transition and during transition but who have since separated; female partners of transsexuals who were coupled pre-transition, during transition, and who remain coupled

post-transition; female partners of transsexuals who were coupled pre-transition and during transition but who have since separated. However, access to this population was limited, and although male partners were preferred (due to their current absence in the literature), female partners made up the entirety of the sample due mainly to accessibility. This is not problematic, however, as female partners' experiences are both valuable and underrepresented in the research literature.

As suggested by Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009), "partner" was defined as a "spouse, girlfriend, boyfriend, or significant other and [will be] measured by the *self-report of the subject*" (p. 36, italics added). In other words, I left it up to the participants to define "partner." It is also important to note the definition that I used to delineate "transsexual," "transgender," or "trans-identified." Although these terms can often be complex and controversy-laden, for the purposes of this study, the definition will be kept simple and will refer to *a person who identifies as a sex not assigned at birth, regardless of medical or legal intervention*. Throughout this study, the words "trans-(wo)man," "trans-identified," "transsexual," "female-to-male (FTM)/male-to-female (MTF) transsexual," and "transgendered" are used interchangeably.

The sample used in this study was homogenous; all participants were white, female, and from small towns in the Midwest. Ages ranged from 22 to 29. All participants received some form of higher education varying from cosmetology school to graduate school. Two of the participants identified as lesbian and one identified as heterosexual prior to their partners' transitions. All participants were currently in romantic relationships with trans-men; the stages in their partners' transition varied

greatly. Due to the variation in their current situations, stage in transition, and relationships, each of the participants are discussed individually below.

*Emma*<sup>3</sup>

Emma, age 28, has spent her entire life in the Midwest. She recently finished a master's degree and is planning to pursue a doctoral degree program in the near future. She comes from "a very incredibly conservative, religious home," which has been a hurdle for her throughout her life. She remembers being a "good kid," but rebelled both in terms of her political stance (Democrat) and her sexual orientation (lesbian). She came out as lesbian during her freshman year of college at the age of 18 or 19; this was "a big problem" for her family.

Emma began a lesbian relationship with her partner, Jordan, nine years ago. Jordan disclosed his transgender identity and his intentions to transition from female to male three years into the relationship. Emma felt "shock" and "confusion" as a result of the disclosure. She admits that it was not her intention to continue a relationship with Jordan during his transition. Directly following the disclosure, they went through a period in which they were both "miserable" as Emma tried to deal with the transition, during which time she remembers acting more supportive than she actually was. A separation followed this rough patch that provoked both Emma and Jordan to reevaluate the relationship and eventually, they both decided that they were willing to "try" to work through the transition together. Currently, Emma and Jordan are married and plan on buying a house.

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<sup>3</sup> All participants and their partners have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Jordan began seeking medical interventions for the transition six years into the relationship (three years prior to the interview). He began with a small dose of injectable testosterone and had a double mastectomy two years after starting testosterone. The top surgery was made possible, financially, by a large inheritance he received after the death of a family member. Plans for future surgeries include a revision of the top surgery (some problems occurred) and a metoidioplasty—a medical procedure that involves releasing the clitoris, often enlarged from testosterone, and moving it forward to more closely resemble a penis.

### *Keri*

Keri, age 29, has also lived in the Midwest her entire life. She has an open and understanding relationship with her family. She explains that her parents have been accepting of both her and her brother—who is gay. She came out as “lesbian” in high school, although she describes herself as being “indifferent as to the sex or gender of the person.” Her educational background consists of a bachelor’s degree. It was during college that she met her partner, Damien.

Keri and Damien began a lesbian relationship after meeting online eight years ago. Damien came out as transgender to Keri six to eight months into the relationship. Because Keri cares more about a person’s character than his/her sex/gender, she says, “The transition hasn’t really affected me.” At the time of the interview, Damien had not begun injectable doses of testosterone, but was using over-the-counter testosterone supplements and was able to grow facial hair and pass full-time as a man. Damien plans on getting testosterone injections but is waiting until he is able to save enough money to schedule a hysterectomy—due to the effects that testosterone has on the uterus, it is best

to remove it within five years after starting testosterone injections; he is also planning on having top surgery (when he has the money). Additional bottom surgeries are currently undecided but considered inevitable. In the state in which Damien resides, legal marriage for trans-people requires proof of bottom surgery. Keri and Damien consider themselves to be married—they have exchanged rings, own a home, and share finances—but they are awaiting surgery in order to legalize the union.

### *Hannah*

Hannah, age 22, is from a very small town in the Midwest. She attended cosmetology school and is currently a practicing beautician. In terms of religion, Hannah's family was "not polarized either way." However, she has been involved with the church since middle school when she founded a youth group that she "really identified with." Hannah has remained close with her family during the transition, explaining that "[my family was] uncomfortable at first even when we came out as just being a lesbian couple but you know, they grew accustomed to that and they've been really supportive through this."

Prior to her current relationship with her trans-partner, Bryce, Hannah identified as heterosexual and dated only men. Hannah began this first lesbian relationship with her "best female friend" four years ago while in high school, though they have known each other since kindergarten. Bryce came out as transgendered about six months before the time of the interview, about three and a half years into the relationship. Hannah admitted that she "wasn't really surprised" because of "his more masculine tendencies." However, she was apprehensive about the transition because she knew that it would be "a long grueling process." At the time of the interview, Bryce had been taking injectable

testosterone for about two months. Bryce is planning and saving for top surgery and a metoidioplasty; further bottom surgeries are still undecided.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board of Illinois State University, a research flier describing the study was distributed to initial contacts in the trans-community. The flier was distributed with the instructions that should someone be interested, they should contact me directly via e-mail or telephone. At the time of the interview, informants were asked to sign an informed consent (if the interview was conducted in person) or give oral consent to participate (if the interview was conducted via telephone), which was audio recorded. Each participant was given a copy of the informed consent to keep. Interviews were held in a variety of locations and at various times of day, all of which were chosen by each individual participant.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the experiences of partners of transsexuals during the transition. The three female partners of trans-men participated in one initial interview; further information was requested and received via e-mail. All interviews, which lasted on average between one to two hours, were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees and transcribed, verbatim, for analysis. I used an interview protocol with a list of guiding questions to steer the discussion toward topics related to the research; however, participants were encouraged to tell their stories and answer questions freely in as much time as needed. Additional probes (i.e., “Can you give me examples?” and “Can you tell me more about that?”) were used where clarification was required. Follow-up emails generally consisted of eight to ten questions surrounding three to five specific topics that were addressed during the interview but



needed further clarification or detail. Participants provided one paragraph responses per topic, thus adding one to two pages of text to their initial interview transcripts.

Qualitative research lends itself nicely to the investigative nature of this study. For this specific topic, a lack of previous scholarly research has left a significant gap within the literature. Through exploratory research, we began with broad research questions, such as “how do partners of transsexuals experience transition?” and allowed the data to direct the research to more specific questions later on (see Appendix B for the complete Interview Protocol).

Due to the nature of qualitative research, data collection and data analysis took place simultaneously. During the process of transcribing the interviews, I began analyzing the data and looking for areas that needed exploration or clarification in follow-up interviews. The biggest advantage of this is that the data began to take shape at an early stage, which allowed me to draw on analytic categories during initial phases of the research. The benefit of this structure was that I avoided sifting through vast amounts of unfocused data, wasting both time and energy (Chamaz 2001). This simultaneous activity allowed for what Pidgeon and Henwood (2004) refer to as “constant comparison.” This process of constantly sifting through the data allowed me to become familiar with the similarities and sensitized to the nuances and complexities that existed within the data (Pidgeon and Henwood 2004).

The data were coded based on emerging patterns and themes relevant to the above-mentioned guiding research questions. “Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data,” according to Charmaz (2001, 341); thus, I allowed the coding schemes to materialize from the data

themselves. Line-by-line coding strategies forced me to build theories from the ground up by focusing on the actual collected data. By looking assiduously at the data, I was less inclined to infuse personal assumptions or inferences into the data (Charmaz 2001). Charmaz (2001) notes that each concept should earn its way into the final analysis. Keeping this in mind, I was forced to consider concepts in a new light that inspired creative thinking. Line-by-line analysis also gave a sense of direction to the types of things at which a researcher should look more closely, thereby providing new leads within the data and allowing the research to become increasingly more focused (Charmaz 2001).

Following line-by-line coding, I began focused coding, which gave the abstract code a concrete specification within the data (Charmaz 2001; Lofland and Lofland 1995). Because these initial codes encompassed a wide range in terms of a variety of topics, focused coding followed. Focused coding refers to the process of sifting through the large amounts of initial codes and focusing on codes that tend to be more productive or common (Charmaz 2001; Lofland and Lofland 1995). These codes were clarified in a more selective and conceptual manner. Others, which were less productive, were collapsed or removed from the analysis. Focused coding allowed me to begin categorizing my data in terms of common themes and patterns. Once I specified these codes and their properties, I began thematic memo-writing, in which making comparisons within the data became the main objective (Charmaz 2001; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Marshall and Rossman 2010; Pidgeon and Henwood 2004). Memos, according to Pidgeon and Henwood (2004), serve to stimulate theoretical sensitivity and creativity as well as establish a channel through which the researcher's emerging theoretical musings

become public. Memo-writing is considered to be the intermediate step between focused coding and composing a preliminary draft (Charmaz 2001).

Qualitative research hinges on the contribution of the researcher him/herself. We, as sociologists, are the instruments through which raw data are transformed into socially relevant analyses. Through creative interpretation we produce meaningful results that we then communicate to an interested audience. In this way, findings can be impacted by personal biographies. Unfortunately, these biographies can sometimes result in biases (see Fine 1993). To reduce the amount of biases of this particular research project, we embedded a system to keep these biases in check. Mainly, the thesis committee served to monitor biases. They questioned and/or rejected any analyses or conclusions that did not accurately represent the data.

### Findings and Discussion

Based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with three partners of transgendered individuals, I found that the non-transitioning partner's experience of transition is multifaceted and dependent on a range of factors. The three participants in this study each had different experiences that were affected by factors such as: previous sexual orientation identity (lesbian, bisexual/queer, and heterosexual), the timing of their partners' disclosures, the speed at which their partners transitioned, a change in or assumption of new gender expectations after the transition began, and the ability to adopt a new sexual orientation label. Further, the variety of the participants' experiences allowed them each to identify and articulate a multitude of challenges and opportunities that they attributed mainly to the transition. While the results of this study are not

generalizable to the larger population, they are a testament to the variety of experiences faced by non-transitioning, cissexual partners of transsexuals. Furthermore, these results provide an understanding of the complexities of this experience and serve to extend the scope to which we can understand the experiences of non-transitioning, cissexual partners. Throughout the Findings section, I will present the major themes that emerged from the interviews while drawing on accounts from the informants themselves to illustrate the diversity and complexities of their experiences.

#### Effects of Prior Sexual Orientation Identification

The degree of difficulty of the transition was closely linked to the flexibility the non-transitioning partner expressed in terms of sexual orientation identification prior to her trans-partner's transition. One non-transitioning partner, Keri, who identified with "queer" or "bisexual" tendencies prior to her partner's transition expressed lower levels of distress during stages of identity renegotiation than the other participants; Emma, who identified strongly as "lesbian," experienced more disruption in the initial stages of her partner's transition; finally, Hannah, identified as heterosexual her entire life until she began a lesbian relationship with her current partner who then transitioned. As a direct result of Hannah's situation (which begins in and returns to a heterosexual identity, with a brief foray in lesbianism), she expressed less distress before and during the transition than Emma.

An example from Emma, who identified as a lesbian prior to her current relationship, shows how commitment to a prior sexual orientation identity can lead to heightened difficulty as a romantic partner transitions. Emma spent several years struggling to come to terms with her lesbian identity despite feeling rejected or

unsupported by her religious family. Because of this, her partner's disclosure and the prospect of continuing their relationship as her lesbian partner transitioned from female to male were distressing to her. Remembering this point in her life, she used adjectives such as "sad," "resentful," "miserable," and "depressed" to describe her emotional state. During the months following Jordan's disclosure, Emma remembers going through a period when she and Jordan were both "lying to each other" as she pretended to be comfortable with his transition despite being resentful of Jordan's new, male identity while longing for her lesbian partner.

We went through a lot of back-and-forth where I would lie and say that I was cool with it and then he would start to get more comfortable. And then he would [realize that I wasn't being honest]. And then I would be like, 'I can't deal with this,' and we started this sort of tug-of-war sort of thing with each other. Neither of us were being ourselves and saying what we felt because we were trying to say whatever we thought we were supposed to say to make the other partner feel more comfortable. Um, and so we actually we split up for awhile... We were both miserable, you know? I remember one time we were having sex and I just started crying in the middle of it and I don't even know why. I was just sad. I was just really depressed. (Emma)

[Prior to the transition, Jordan] was really depressed and sad and he was difficult to be in a relationship with at that time cause it took a lot of emotional work on my part to, you know, to try to be supportive and tiptoeing around things [that we weren't comfortable talking about]. (Emma)

During this time, Emma was trying to come to terms with the loss of her lesbian partner, Carey, as well as the loss of her lesbian identity, which led to her feelings of sadness, depression, and resentment towards Jordan. As a response to this as well as trying to come to terms with the impending transition, Jordan was also depressed and sad. Emma wanted to be supportive of the transition for Jordan's sake but knew that if he transitioned, it may mean that their relationship would end. Emma's knee-jerk reaction

was to end the relationship because that was the “easier” option than to try to renegotiate her own sexual orientation identity.

I was as supportive as I could have been at the time, like I’d tell him, ‘Yea, you need to do this.’ But obviously he could tell that I wasn’t...I didn’t fully mean it. It’s kind of a weird thing. I was supportive, I did want him to do whatever was necessary for him but within the context of our relationship and me being his partner, I was like, ehheheh....I don’t really necessarily want these things for him. (Emma)

I did not want to be in a relationship with someone who was transgender, you know? That’s ultimately why I decided to leave...it was easier for me to just walk away. (Emma)

Keri, on the other hand, had a much less restrictive understanding of her own sexual orientation. By this, I mean that she did not consider herself limited to dating *only* women or *only* men. Rather, she identified as lesbian, but considered herself “indifferent as to the sex or gender” of her partner. Though she did not identify as “bisexual” or “queer” prior to the transition, her understanding of her own sexual orientation was much more flexible, thus causing much less stress for her (in terms of her own identity) as her partner transitioned from female to male. Further, she admits that she was much less invested in her lesbian identity, which is why the “transition hasn’t really affected [her].”

Lastly, Hannah identified as heterosexual prior to her current relationship. She started her first and only (to date) lesbian relationship with her current partner, Bryce, who later came out as “trans” and quickly began transitioning from female to male. Hannah says that she “wasn’t really surprised” by her partner’s disclosure because he always exhibited more masculine tendencies and related more to other males in his life, rather than females. Bryce’s masculine disposition pre-transition is what Hannah believes facilitated her ability to begin a lesbian relationship with her partner (pre-

transition) and remain in the relationship as he transitioned. In other words, Hannah's previous identity as a heterosexual woman made dating a more masculine lesbian and later, a trans-man less distressing (in terms of her own sexual orientation identity). Prior to Bryce's disclosure, Hannah didn't necessarily identify with the lesbian identity but used it out of convenience because that's how others saw her and Bryce. She says, "That's just how everyone identified us...we used the term lesbian, obviously, [because] I was a girl and I was dating a girl" but admits that if she was questioned about her sexual orientation, she would identify as heterosexual.

Participants in this study also discussed the difficulties in choosing a label for themselves and were often resistant to labels in general. Emma joked about considering herself "post-label" and Keri explained feeling pressured from people outside the GLBTQ community to choose a label.

Yea [I felt pressure from] people I didn't even know! And I'm like, well I haven't even thought about that [because] I'm not one to just label myself, [but] I guess I'll label myself for you. (Keri)

I know a lot of people [who] if they began in a lesbian relationship, it's because they identify that way and *I challenge them not to get stuck in that label, sometimes those labels can be very damning* as far as [thinking], 'this is what I am and I can't change that.' (Hannah, italics added)

Participants tended to adopt more fluid understandings of their own sexual orientations and their respective labels as the transitions progressed. As noted above, Emma had some difficulty pre-transition, however, eventually she adopted "queer" as a new sexual orientation identity label as a direct result of her current relationship with a trans-man, as did Keri. Two participants admitted that should their relationships end, they would revert to dating women and identifying as "lesbian" (Emma and Keri) and

one said she would revert to dating men and identifying as “heterosexual” (Hannah). Thus, all three claim that they would revert to their previous sexual orientation identifications. This finding suggests that sexual orientation identity labels adopted during the transition were considered instrumental and indicative of the *relationship* rather than the participants’ overall identity or orientation. This is a novel finding, as previous research does not extend its analysis past participants’ current identity labels to include actual or projected labels/orientations post-relationship.

Consistent with the abovementioned findings, other researchers have found that the non-transitioning partner’s investment in a sexual orientation identity prior to the transition can influence the degree of difficulty that person has during transition (Anastasia 2006; Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Pfeffer 2008; Zamboni 2006). In other words, long-term and/or deep commitment to a “lesbian” identity pre-transition can cause considerable distress as the lesbian-identified partner attempts to come to terms with dating a trans-man. However, previous research includes mainly sexual orientation minority women partners of trans-people (i.e., lesbian, bisexual, or queer)—there is one exception, though, which is a study that includes cissexual women of men who disclosed their transsexuality within heterosexual relationships (Erhardt 2007). In fact, other research posits that individuals who identify as bisexual or who are most comfortable with fluidity are better equipped to manage identity conflicts that the transition may provoke (Brown 2009; Brown 2010; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009).

Prior research indicates that the transition often compels non-transitioning partners to seek out sexual orientation identity labels that are broader in definition and more appropriate to their specific situations (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). However,



as seen above, there are seeming contradictions among participants' adopted sexual orientation identification labels and their actual attraction tendencies. These contradictions could simply stem from a clear lack of an appropriate sexual orientation label for non-transitioning partners of transgendered individuals, as indicated by previous research (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). The lack of an appropriate sexual orientation label for partners of trans-people can be particularly difficult as the attempt to negotiate the complexities of their changing identities (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). The results of study suggest that sexual orientation identity labels adopted during the transition were reflective of the participants' *relationships* rather than the participants' overall identities or orientations.

#### Timing of Disclosure

The findings of this study suggest that the feelings the trans-partner's disclosure evokes for the non-transitioning partner is more reflective of his or her willingness to continue the relationship than the timing of the disclosure, as previous research indicates (Bischof et al. 2011; Erhardt 2007; Nuttbrock et al. 2009). In fact, two of the three participants in this study did not find out about their partners' intentions to transition until at least three years into the relationship. The absence of feelings such as betrayal or mistrust by the non-transitioning partner was what facilitated the continuation of the relationship and compensated for the length of time that had passed within the relationship prior to the trans-partner's disclosure.

Despite reports of shock at the disclosure and confusion surrounding what it meant to date a trans-man, Emma did not report feeling betrayal nor did she feel that her partner's previously undisclosed identity was a breach of trust in any way. As a result of

the shock and confusion surrounding the disclosure and transition, Emma and Jordan separated for a period of time. After which, Emma ultimately determined that the love she felt for her partner was more important than his sex and she was willing to renegotiate her own sexual orientation in order to continue the relationship. Secondly, three and a half years into the relationship, Hannah admitted to not being surprised by her partner's disclosure. Because Hannah had always seen Bryce as more masculine, his desire to transition was also not seen as a betrayal. Furthermore, Hannah admits: "I definitely think that having a history of heterosexuality helps me to adjust 'back' to dating a male." In this case, then, her past sexual orientation identity played a more crucial role in facilitating a relationship with a trans-man than the timing and manner of disclosure. Finally, Keri learned of her partner's trans-ness less than a year into the relationship, thus for her, it was not as much of a shock, nor was it seen as a breach of trust. Actually, Keri admits that it was a relief once Damien disclosed his desire to transition because she thought that masculinity seemed to "fit" him better. Therefore, timing and nature of disclosure can affect the willingness or ability of the non-transitioning partner to continue the relationship, but more important are the feelings that longevity generates, such as feelings of betrayal or dishonesty. Despite two of the three participants having been with their partners for at least three years and one report of shock, feelings of betrayal were not present and did not discourage the cissexual partners from staying in the relationships.

Previous research indicates that the timing and manner of the disclosure by the trans-partner will inevitably influence the willingness and/or ability of the cissexual partner to stay in the relationship during his or her partner's transition (Bischof et al.

2011; Erhardt 2007). The earlier in the relationship the cissexual partner learns of his or her partner's trans-ness and any intentions to transition, the more likely it is that they will continue the relationship. Contrarily, relationships that achieve longevity prior to disclosure often leave the non-transitioning partner feeling shocked, confused, or betrayed by the disclosure, thus diminishing the likelihood that they will remain in the relationship (Erhardt 2007). Erhardt (2007) explains that betrayal and violations of trust are some of the most difficult emotions for the partners to overcome as they leave the non-transitioning partners feeling as though a trans-identity may be just one of many things their trans-partners are keeping from them.

The findings of this research indicate that while timing and manner of disclosure may indeed play a role in the non-transitioning partner's willingness to stay in the relationship, it is not the sole determining factor; rather, this process of renegotiation within the relationship is multi-dimensional and dependent on several factors. As mentioned above, the partner's prior experiences and commitment to a previous sexual orientation identity play significant roles in the difficulty of the transition for the cissexual partner. Further, participants in a similar study reported that the love they felt for their partners overshadowed the difficulty that arose from identity confliction (Brown 2009).

### Emerging Gender Expectations

The results of this study also indicate that transitioning partners tended to exhibit hetero-normative tendencies as their transitions progressed and they began being seen full-time as the other sex (and their relationships begin to resemble that of heterosexual coupling); this finding is consistent with previous research (Tesene 2011). Two of the

participants discussed a significant change in their relationships in terms of gender expectations and the responsibilities within the relationship. They remarked that their partners began to exhibit a desire to employ a more 1950s-style relationship dynamic (male breadwinner/female housewife) as a direct result of the transition. For both of these couples, the non-transitioning partners had previously been the main financial provider; it was not until after the transition began that this became a struggling point for the trans-partner who, consequently, began making efforts to assume the male, head-of-the-household status.

His joke is that women should be barefoot and pregnant in front of the stove... [which] he sort of joked about before but now that he's seen as male, I think it's affecting him more...he thinks that he should pay all the bills and I should just be doing laundry and dishes and cleaning...it upsets him sometimes that I know more about, you know, cars or the more masculine things that he should know about. So, he's sort of shifted to where he'll buddy up with my dad or my brothers to try to learn more of those aspects, so he is trying to shift more into that masculine role and into the head of the household. (Keri)

When asked if this change has been brought on by the transition, Keri explained,

Yea, I've seen him change as he passes more and as he lives longer in the male role...so, I think it's based on the transition solely because he's always had those thoughts but being able to put himself more comfortably into that role and seen in that role is helping him be more positive and *it validates it*. (Keri, italics added)

So, while Damien has always had these gendered assumptions, it was not until after the transition began that he saw himself as qualified to act upon them. Keri remarks that passing more as a man has validated this viewpoint and he feels more authority to act upon it. Accordingly, Damien has begun taking on tasks that are more consistent with social constructions of masculinity, such as working on cars, fixing the plumbing, and financially providing for his female partner. This was difficult for Keri at first because

she “felt like he was trying to take over the relationship versus working together.” Keri justifies this by saying,

I have to remember that he is also trying to build his identity and masculinity. [His taking over of these types of tasks] is a good thing for both of us overall as he is learning new things, and I can focus more on other things. (Keri)

Through a process of renegotiating, Keri has been able to relinquish some of these tasks/duties and allow him to take them over. The difficulty for Keri of giving up these tasks stems from her feelings of having less control over the organization of things such as paying the bills. She says, “It makes me nervous if I’m not paying the bills and I don’t have the budget set out on a plan; that would drive me nuts.” Renegotiation within this specific aspect of the relationship has depended mostly on good communication between Keri and Damien. For Damien, meeting these types of gender expectations helps him “feel like [he] has more of a place or a purpose [within the relationship],” according to Keri. Now that Keri understands where Damien is coming from, she says, “We’ll have those discussions and make the adjustments accordingly.”

Hannah also discussed her partner’s desire to be a financial provider within the relationship. Bryce has been less successful in his own client-based profession; because of this, Hannah has assumed many of the financial responsibilities within the relationship. Hannah explains that Bryce has “really [been] working hard to build [a client base] up, and I think it makes him feel a little emasculated, you know, that I’m able to succeed pretty quickly [as a beautician].” This success has allowed her to be seen as the financial provider. Hannah recognizes that this tension would probably still exist if they remained in a lesbian relationship simply due to the difference in demand for their jobs (there is more demand for hers; therefore, she is more successful). This dynamic does appear to

have been in place prior to the transition. However, Hannah admits that “it was never something that we really thought too much about before but I think that that has become a need for him, you know, to be providing and that sort of thing.” Therefore, while Bryce did exhibit some of the same tendencies, such as “wanting to always be the strong shoulder to cry on” pre-transition, his new desire to be the economic provider was seen as being legitimated by the transition. His subsequent inability to assume that role, then, was described by Hannah as “emasculating.”

Emma contends that she did not have a similar experience in terms of her partner attempting to assume a more dominant role within the relationship. If the relationship dynamics had shifted in a way that resembled anything other than complete equity between them, Emma admits that she would have a problem with that. In fact, she spent a great deal of time discussing her views on feminism and the importance of the relationship being egalitarian. Because Emma’s mother was in a previous marriage with a man who was physically and sexually abusive, equality within relationships is something about which Emma feels strongly. Emma notes that this equity can be found in all aspects of her and Jordan’s relationship. They each provide, financially, for themselves, and discussions of future career moves take both parties into account. Emma plans on going on to get a doctoral degree and is aware that Jordan may need to make sacrifices such as moving and/or finding a new job but wants to consider his thoughts and feelings because she is “not into being some sort of matriarchal asshole.” Emma also discusses equity in terms of their sexual relationship:

I’m not the dominant one and he’s not the dominant one. I feel like, sex—just like every other part of our relationship—should be equitable and I would never consider myself, just because I happen to physically be on top of him, to be

controlling him [or] telling him what to do. For me, that doesn't work. And I don't think sexually I would enjoy that very much. (Emma)

Emma suggests that this emphasis on equality is a somewhat new aspect of the transgender relationship. This reiterates other research that suggests that there are generational differences between younger trans-people and older generations of trans-men and trans-women (Nuttbrock et al. 2009). The difference, Emma explains, is that younger generations tend to be more queer in their sexual orientation and ambiguous in terms of gender expression and gender identity while older generations place more emphasis on hetero-normativity. This conclusion came from her experience attending a support group with older trans-people and their partners. She explains,

They didn't even want to acknowledge the fact that they were trans. You know? It was like, 'I'm a man and I've always been a man and I'm gonna completely ignore the fact that I was born female and that I've gone through this whole transition thing. (Emma)

However, Hannah's and Keri's experiences with hetero-normative ideals expressed by their partners suggests that this may not be a generational difference, but yet one more example of the complexities of the transition experience. However, Keri did discuss generational differences in terms of "knowing the [politically correct] terms for transsexuality" and "being educated on the transgender experience," and Hannah expressed the importance of finding support groups for people her own age. Additional research is needed to further examine the impact of generational differences on the transition experience.

#### Effects of Speed of Transition

Two of the three participants discussed the advantage of their partners transitioning slowly, and the third listed her partner's quick transition-related decisions as

one of the most significant struggling points of the transition. Both Emma and Keri pointed out that their partners' slow transitions were one of the key factors in their ability and willingness to stay with them during the transitions. In both of these cases, the slow transition allowed the cissexual partner time to grieve the loss of her lesbian partner and come to terms with her partner's new masculinity. For Emma, the transition caused her considerable distress as she doubted whether or not she would be attracted to her partner as a man. The slowness of the transition allowed physical changes to occur slowly and Emma could adapt to them more easily. For both Emma and Keri, the unhurried pace of the transition allowed time in which to grow accustomed to new pronouns and names; furthermore, the elongated time frame allowed for a period in which mistakes (using "she/her/hers" rather than "he/him/his") were permitted.

I think it's helped me too that his transition has been slow, like, it started with letting me know and then gradually getting the hair cut shorter and just gradually going through that process. (Keri)

He decided to start slow and take a very small dose; that was something that he did for me, basically...I appreciated that. Because I don't know what would've happened if he would have taken a higher dose, like how quickly the changes would have happened, if I would have been able to adjust. I almost feel like, he transitioned and I transitioned with him, you know? For me, taking it slow was so incredibly helpful. (Emma)

Hannah, whose partner was not as far along in the transition as the other two participants, could not comment to such an extent on the speed of the transition; however, she did discuss the difficulties associated with her partner's quick decision to transition. Once Bryce decided that he wanted to transition, he drafted a public disclosure on the social networking site Facebook, and sent it to everyone that he and Hannah both knew.

He wrote an extensive note on Facebook and tagged everyone we knew in it just to really get it out there and be like, 'this is what's going to happen.' And, I was



not entirely comfortable with that, I thought he was a little, maybe too like, jumping right to it. I mean, not that he shouldn't but I felt like maybe he could have gone a little more slowly into it... so that kind of caused a little rift. [Beforehand], there was mention of [this type of disclosure], but I wasn't really aware of how in-depth it was going to be [and] I'm like, 'there was a better way to do that!' (Hannah)

Because of the quickness at which Bryce made this decision and publicly "outed" himself, without fully discussing the details of the disclosure with Hannah, Hannah says, "We talked about it and he was really supportive [and said], 'I'm gonna talk to you about things as they go along,' sort of keep me in the loop basically. [*Laugh.*]" In short, this experience, then, led to a renegotiation of Hannah and Bryce's communication strategies, as he is now making efforts to include her in discussions regarding his transition.

It should also be noted here that for each of these participants, financial aspects of the transition made a slow transition the only option. Emma's partner, Jordan, was the only one to have had any surgeries at the time of the interview. His double mastectomy was only made possible by a large inheritance that he received after the death of a family member. Perhaps if the trans-partners in this study had the means to readily afford the pricey procedures, these transition processes would be marked by an entirely different set of concessions.

### Challenges

Participants in this study encountered a range of individual challenges as well as some broader societal issues that directly impacted their experiences during their partners' transitions. As a result of these challenges, the participants developed coping strategies to respond to these various challenges during the course of the transitions. Challenges for the participants included questioning sexual orientation identifications,

fearing drastic physical and emotional changes to their partners, the lack of a support system that meets the specific needs of the participants, safety concerns, the prospect of leading double lives, pressures to get married and have children, complexities of legalities and logistics of transitioning, and the effects of living in a small town during the transition.

The first example of questioning sexual orientation identity as a result of the transition and the difficulty of letting go of a lesbian identity comes from Emma. Emma, who was deeply invested in her lesbian identity pre-transition, discussed struggling with the prospect of being in a relationship with a partner who wanted to be a man. This finding supports similar research performed on women partners of trans-men that maintains that individuals who are particularly invested in a sexual orientation identity before the transition—particularly lesbians or heterosexuals—have a harder time accepting the transition (Anastasia 2006; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). This dissonance between identity and behavior must be rectified by either changing his/her sexual orientation identity label or ending the relationship.

I didn't know that I wanted to be in a relationship with [a trans-man] because...that changes me personally and my own sexual [orientation]...I think that's where the problem was, it's like, okay, fine, you want to transition but I'm in a relationship with you, so what does that mean for me?... I had just become comfortable with the fact that I was a lesbian, you know? I was embracing that aspect of myself and coping with that coming from my crazy-ass family [*laughing*]... So, it was just very difficult for me because I was really invested in that lesbian identity and ... I had to struggle so much as a teenager coming to terms with my sexuality as not being attracted to men and then all the sudden ... [I'm] with someone who wants to be a guy. (Emma)

Emma's initial response to this challenge was to lie and act as though she was comfortable with the transition, which led to a "rough patch" in their relationship and

eventually ended in a temporary separation. As a result of the separation, Emma began renegotiating sexual orientation and its meanings, implications, and restrictions. From this, she emerged with a new understanding and acceptance of her own sexuality (details about this can be found in the “Opportunities” section below). In terms of the three participants in this study, this specific challenge of renegotiating sexual orientation identity was unique to Emma; neither Keri nor Hannah were as invested in a lesbian identity pre-transition.

All three of the participants discussed a fear of drastic physical and/or emotional changes to their partners (mostly as a result of the testosterone). Previous research indicates that this fear is rooted in the grief non-transitioning partners feel as a result of “losing” their partners during the transition (Zamboni 2006). This point is illustrated by Emma:

I was just sad. Um, and then I was just really depressed, and like, I don't know...I can't remember feeling that sad other than when somebody I know dies or whatever...it wasn't like somebody died, but part of me felt, you know, kind of resentful for this new Jordan-person, you know, I missed Carey, which is his birth name. I felt like he was going to be a different person. But now I realize that that was silly. (Emma)

Emma had doubts about the ways in which the transition would change her partner (physically and emotionally) and whether or not she would still be attracted to him. In an attempt to alleviate these concerns, Jordan began to transition slowly; he started on a low dose of testosterone which allowed changes to occur slowly and Emma was able to adapt more easily. She adds that, “Jordan is exactly the same as he used to be with respect to the type of person he is; he's just a very good, genuine, good-hearted person and that hasn't changed.”

Keri and Hannah also anticipated changes in their partners as a result of the testosterone and the fears that they had as their partner began to transition. For Keri and Hannah, though, these fears were centered more around emotional changes to their partners rather than physical changes.

I was afraid with him going on testosterone cause they always say like, you get the mood swings, and the anger issues [and] he'll want to have sex all the time. (Keri)

They say like, 'as you take testosterone, things that were there that were just minor annoyances before start to come to the surface.' (Hannah)

At the time of the interview, Keri's partner, Damien, has not begun taking injectable doses of testosterone (he does take over-the-counter testosterone supplements) so the changes have not been that drastic yet, although she admitted that she does welcome the change in sex drive calling it, "a nice change of pace" as Damien had always been "a person who was very slow to come to intimacy." For Hannah, these changes have also not been that drastic as her partner, Bryce, has just recently begun the injectable doses of testosterone. Nevertheless, Hannah has developed a coping mechanism (one that she has learned through counseling) to respond to the fact that Bryce is "starting to get more edgy." Hannah explains:

I'm to the point where I'm starting to voice my opinions about stuff too...throughout counseling, it has been found out that I'm very much a people-pleaser and don't usually express my wants and needs so that was kind of a challenge that [my counselor] gave me to really, you know, make my voice be heard. And now it's just a matter of, I'm gonna shoot back at you when you get frustrated or angry. [*Laughing*] ... we were never disagreeing before and if you don't disagree, things don't get solved, so I think that has been a big help. (Hannah)

Therefore, by making personal changes, such as building up her own self-esteem and willingness to speak her mind, Hannah has been able to manage this particular

challenge brought on by Bryce's transition. Managing this challenge has been made easier for Hannah because of her access to a counselor who is familiar with trans issues. For Hannah, this has been an important resource during these early stages of the transition. Because the transition can be emotionally taxing, these sources of support can be particularly helpful.

This lack of a support network that met the specific needs of the non-transitioning partners was another challenge discussed by two out of the three participants in this study (Emma and Hannah). This has been a common theme in previous research as well (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). One example of this comes from Hannah, who discussed the difficulties of not having a solid source of support as she and Bryce enter the transition. She admits that it would help her to be around others who are in similar situations and with whom she could share experiences.

I feel like it would help [to have a support network]. Even before the transition, it was nice and sometimes refreshing just to hang out with other gay couples just because even if you're not talking about [being gay] or mentioning [being gay], these people 'get it,' you know? (Hannah)

Hannah has tried utilizing online sources to network with others but has been discouraged, as most resources seem to be targeted at female partners of male cross-dressers rather than partners of transitioning trans-people. Hannah explains, "it would be very rewarding to find a group/forum of like-minded people simply for the dialogue it would provide." She points out that finding others who are in a similar situation would be beneficial but, more specifically, she would prefer if those people were also similar in age to her and Bryce.

Emma also discussed a clear lack of support for her during the transition, as all of her attempts to network and create a support system for herself (i.e., online forums, friends, family) failed. She says of other partners on online forums,

I felt like they weren't being honest... they were all like 'well, I love everything and everything is fantastic!' [And] I was like, 'well I must be a big bitch because this isn't very easy for me. (Emma)

In terms of friends and family, Emma says,

[It] was really frustrating cause my straight friends, my gay friends, my lesbian friends, they were all telling me, 'why are you in this relationship? You need to end this relationship. You need to end it.' And even my mom was like, 'you like girls, why are you doing this?' So, no, I didn't really have anybody. So that's kind of unfortunate... really the only person I had was Jordan. (Emma)

The lack of support made the transition difficult to deal with for Emma, but because Jordan had a strong support network she was able to "piggyback" off of his network to get the support she needed. Additionally, Jordan was described as being helpful to her throughout the course of the transition. When asked if there was anything she could think of that Jordan could have done to be more supportive, Emma admits that, "No, I really can't. He was awesome. He really was."

This particular challenge is not only problematic on an individual level for these participants, but it exists as an issue on a much larger, societal scale as our collective ignorance about transsexualism often creates unfriendly spaces for trans-people and their romantic partners. This is true both in and out of the GLBTQ community. Other sources point out that partners of trans-men and trans-women often feel alienated or rejected from the GLBTQ community as their relationships begins to take on more hetero-normative qualities (Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Zamboni 2006 ). The best example of this can be seen from Emma, who has become much more critical of the

GLBTQ community as a result of her experience during her partner's transition. She points out that much discrimination and stereotyping exists within the GLBTQ community, and she personally experienced some hostility that led to her feel alienated from the community as a whole. If a non-transitioning sexual orientation minority partner is established within the GLBTQ community, the flexibility of that community will directly impact the level of difficulty of the transition (Brown 2009; Zamboni 2006). Emma, who was previously very invested in her lesbian identity and the community, had a hard time when the community was not as open to fluidity and change as she had hoped.

I feel like the [GLBT] community should be a lot more open than it is...it's really frustrating and I think that's why we feel like we don't fit into the lesbian/gay community here...because we're way more open about [transgender] stuff so I would like to find a new queer space to go to but I haven't figured out where that is. (Emma)

All three of the participants point out that this widespread confusion about transsexualism and/or gender variance has affected their transition experiences in one way or another. As a result, Keri and Damien have begun making efforts to educate the community by organizing "Transgender 101" sessions with other support groups and by participating in panel discussions on transgenderism. Hannah and Bryce have also been charged with educating others as their small town acquaintances have expressed "polite curiosity" in terms of Bryce's transition. Emma has also expressed a desire to educate others, as well as make herself available as a resource to other non-transitioning partners.

Ignorance and fear on a societal level can be seen as root causes for another challenge faced by at least two of the three participants: safety. Violence against transgendered individuals has, unfortunately, been an issue for several decades.

According to the Human Rights Campaign (2011), one out of every thousand homicides in the United States is an anti-transgender hate crime. As such, Keri worried about safety before and during the transition. She explains that these concerns were rooted in the fact that she and Damien were both from small towns. Fortunately, they had never experienced any situations in which their safety was put in danger, but this could be attributed to Keri's "better to be safe than sorry" approach to the transition. In an attempt to alleviate these concerns, Keri and Damien enhanced their communication strategies. Routinely, they discuss in great detail where they are going, what they are doing, and who is involved, in an attempt to avoid any potentially dangerous situations. Keri is actively engaged in all aspects of Damien's transition. She explains that she does this to "keep track of things" for him, but this can also be viewed as an attempt to help monitor and avoid any potentially dangerous situations. Her active involvement and their increased level of communication with each other are ways that she has acted to alleviate safety concerns. She explains:

We like to make sure that we both know what's going on and how things are working because ... it's nice to know what's going on and who's involved because it ends up being a pretty small world out there so you don't know who you're interacting with that may not know [about the transition]. (Keri)

Like Keri, Hannah also worried about safety and the reactions of those around her and her partner, Bryce.

I was actually expecting some negative feedback, you know, with it being a small town and everything, I was expecting negative feedback, I was nervous as far as like, you just don't know what people are capable of. And I just didn't know how anyone would react to that. [But] it's just kind of a polite curiosity for everyone. It's not common in our area to have this kind of thing and so I think that more than closed off, people have just been really curious. You know, they don't understand the process and they're just wanting to know. (Hannah)



Despite the fact that neither Hannah nor Bryce had experienced any safety issues, concern about people's negative reactions was something that seemed to permeate all aspects of the transition for Hannah. Because they are from a small town that has little exposure to transgenderism, Hannah fully expected and prepared herself for negative reactions from friends, family, and other community members. She continuously remarks that she is "surprised" that people reacted so positively to Bryce's transition.

This heightened focus on safety and potential judgment led to another challenge for Keri: leading double lives. This closely relates to what Brown (2009) refers to as "strategic disclosure." However, there is a difference in agency here; for Brown's (2009) participants, they were in control of the degree of disclosure, including when, where, and to whom. Disclosure—either full or partial—was a tool used to create or maintain their identities. For Keri, though, matters regarding disclosure were left up to her partner. For example, due to a lack of acceptance by Damien's grandparents, Damien was obligated to maintain some aspects of his female identity, sometimes dressing as a woman and always maintaining feminine pronouns and his female birth name. This latter challenge is particularly difficult for Keri as she must be constantly diligent about which pronouns and names she uses in reference to Damien. She admits that sometimes they forget who knows the "whole story" so constantly policing their speech is a must. These confusions could be problematic if one or the other accidentally "outs" Damien in a situation that could be potentially dangerous, uncomfortable, or detrimental in any way.

[A challenge] I foresaw—and luckily we made it through—[was] living double lives...like, he had a male side of the closet and a female side of the closet and depending on if you're seeing the grandparents or what was going on, that's how you dressed and that's how you acted and we, still to this day, are going through somewhat of a challenge [because] his family—his mom and his aunts and his

cousins—are accepting of it more and more each day and they are trying to say the right pronouns but whenever we are around the grandparents, it’s still ‘she’ and they refuse to even call him ‘Damien,’ they still call him ‘Denise,’ and he’s gone by Damien since fifth grade. So, that’s definitely a challenge just with that flipping back and forth because then you slip up later and you don’t wanna get anybody confused. (Keri)

Keri is careful to make the distinction between family and friends, though. They deal with this particular challenge—by entertaining his grandparents’ instance on seeing him as a woman by dressing that way and using those pronouns—because it occurs within the family. Friends who were less accepting were more likely to be cut out of Keri’s life.

I know with friends, you pick and choose. I’m a person that’s not judgmental and [the transition is] just, it’s one part of me; it’s not all of me. So if you’re gonna choose to judge and define me on one part of me, maybe it’s not worth my time to be around [you], maybe you can find another friend. (Keri)

This limited disclosure makes it difficult for Keri to explain why, after eight years, she and Damien are only “essentially married” and why they do not have children. Keri says they feel pressure from their families (mostly grandparents) to have children. Often, when they tell people that they can’t have children, they get the impression that Keri and Damien have fertility issues, which can be awkward. Keri jokes, “If they only knew it was more than just shooting blanks.”

When you try to [tell] someone [that] you have been together almost eight years and are just ‘essentially married’ they start to wonder and then you have to create a story to ease their mind. It is hard to tell the total truth as I don’t feel it is my place to out Damien if I am outing myself and that happens hand in hand. (Keri)

For Keri and Damien, “essentially married” means that they consider themselves married but have not obtained a legal marriage certificate due to state-level restrictions on

same-sex marriages. (Damien is still legally seen as a woman because he has not yet changed the gender marker on his birth certificate from female to male.)

For Keri, a few of the main issues that have spanned the entirety of the transition concerned legalities and logistical details of the transition, including state-specific qualifications for civil unions or marriage, the requirements for changing name and gender marker, insurance policies, and financial aspects of sexual reassignment surgery. Keri saw it as “difficult” to separate her and Damien’s individual challenges. Because Keri was so involved with Damien’s transition process, she explains, “Many of his challenges also became personal challenges to me as well.” Keri explains that Damien thought that, logistically, the transition “wasn’t a big deal;” therefore, she took it upon herself to do research to prepare them both for some of these issues in the future. Her extensive research was one way that she was able to cope with this particular challenge.

Lastly, all participants discussed the challenge of being from small towns where people often had limited knowledge of the trans-experience. As a direct result, participants worried about their own and their partners’ safety. Two of the three participants also struggled by not finding adequate sources of support or communities in which they “fit.” Furthermore, there were enforced limitations on access to marriages and/or civil unions that were directly related to location. This finding is consistent with previous research (The Dominion Post 2006).

### Opportunities

For the most part, the participants in this study were upbeat and positive about their experiences with their partners’ transitions. They each were able to identify opportunities afforded by the transition experience, and the three participants agreed upon

two positive outcomes of their partners' transitions: 1) blending into a hetero-normative society and 2) gaining new perspectives on life, sexual orientation, and relationships as a result of their partners' transitions.

All participants described the benefit of "blending in" (Emma), "being seen as 'normal' in people's eyes" (Keri), or being able to "live a normal life" (Hannah) as they begin to pass more as heterosexual couples. Feelings of normalcy are seen as a welcome change, but Keri points out that the benefit goes much further than social acceptance, as "you worry less about safety and people being judgmental or what might happen" as a result of not passing as a heterosexual couple. This finding is consistent with previous research that highlights heterosexual privileges of the transition, such as no longer having to be continuously alert to potential homophobic threats (Brown 2009). This is congruent with participants discussing safety as a concern going into the transition. Once the trans-partner begins passing and living full-time as another sex, these safety concerns are reduced.

To a certain extent, it's actually kind of nice passing. Cause I remember when we were seen as a lesbian, you know, people are pretty nice for the most part, but they stare at you like you're doing something wrong and that got annoying after a while. But now, they just look at us like we're a straight couple. And it's really weird blending in all the sudden and have people treat you *like you're one of them*. (Emma, italics added)

Being seen as a lesbian in the past has led to feelings of exclusion and alienation. Passing as a heterosexual couple allows Emma to feel like she's "one of them." This "us-versus-them" mentality was not as strongly stated by any of the other participants; however, they all discussed it on some level.

All participants stated the frequency at which people often forget or neglect the Transgender aspect or section of the GLBT community. Experiences gained during transition have given the participants a new perspective in regards to the lives of trans-people that they were unaware of prior to the transition. This finding supports other research that indicates that a partner's transition can prompt a reconsideration of one's own sexual orientation, which can result in increased openness and fluidity (Brown 2009). Some participants also discussed a change in the way they think about their own sexual orientations. Participants in this study saw this new perspective as an opportunity or positive outcome because they appreciate their own increased openness and acceptance that has resulted from their partners' transitions, which they may not have achieved if it weren't for this specific experience.

It's kind of an interesting; [the transition] gives us a different perspective as far as relating to the GLBT community. Because sometimes, when you read books or magazines or websites or whatever it's sort of like the "T" falls off [of GLBT]. It's made into something that it's not, like, it's all about being a drag queen or that sort of thing and so, it's kind of given us a perspective where, [transgenderism] can be normal. *You can live a normal life.* (Hannah, italics added)

Emma explains that this new perspective has allowed her to positively reevaluate her own sexuality and gender identity. As a teenager, she remembers "trying to force [her]self into the heterosexual box," and because she didn't "fit" there, she resolved that she was lesbian. Her experience during Jordan's transition, however, has shown her that sexual attraction doesn't have to be so restrictive—if it's not A, then it's B. Rather, while she can "appreciate the sexiness of whatever gender happens to be there," she also "cares a lot less about the physical features [of a partner] now than [she] used to." Emma

recognizes the extent to which she has grown individually and feels a tremendous sense of accomplishment.

[Gender identity and sexuality are] things that I hadn't really thought about before. And it's nice that his transition really sort of opened up my own eyes for myself. I'm a lot more open sexually and [in terms of] my gender; I think that's very cool. It was a good experience for me. It was hard in the beginning but now I think I'm in a better place, you know? I just feel more content with myself too. (Emma)

We're all guided by social norms with respect to sex, like, 'you're not supposed to be attracted to this, you're only supposed to be attracted to that.' So for awhile, I don't think it was that I wasn't attracted to those things, I felt like I wasn't *supposed* to be attracted to those things. So I felt guilty for being attracted to Jordan, you know? Or when I was attracted to guys, I'm like, I'm not *supposed* to be attracted to guys cause I'm a lesbian. So, now I sort of said, 'fuck all those stupid norms, I'm gonna do what I like and like what I like' and all that and say, 'screw it.'...At some point ... I allowed myself to be attracted to those things that I would not have allowed myself in the past. And that actually has been really good for me, it's been very liberating, if you will, to just be like, 'you know what? We shouldn't try to box ourselves in.' And, for a long time I felt like I was trying to force myself into the heterosexual box and I didn't fit there...and then so I'm like, 'okay, I'm lesbian.' And then I just realized that the lesbian identity was just as restrictive. (Emma)

This experience has allowed Emma to not only reevaluate her self and her own understandings of sexual orientation but, further, she has emerged with a new understanding for social norms regarding "accepted" forms of attraction and the restrictiveness that social norms often imply. Her ability to recognize these limitations has seemingly allowed her to free herself from them.

#### Participant Advice for Other Transitioning Couples

One of the complaints among the participants in this study was that there was a significant lack of information, support, or advice that applied specifically to their situation: the romantic partner of a transgendered individual who was transitioning. Over and over again, the participants stated that they needed more support before and during

the transition than what they were receiving. Participants in a study conducted by Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) also gave the same type of advice, saying that support groups for partners of trans-people was an integral part of their coping mechanism and should be sought out by partners in similar situations. Some expressed that even having someone who didn't necessarily go through the transition but was open and understanding would have sufficed. However, this type of support was subsidiary to that from others who were in similar situations. While it is beyond the scope of this project to attempt to set up such a support network, I have compiled a list of recommendations or advice from the participants in this study for both non-transitioning and transitioning partners. Below are suggestions from partners at various stages of the transition.

Prior to giving advice for other non-transitioning partners, all participants were careful to note that before beginning the transition, the non-transitioning partner should seriously evaluate whether or not s/he is willing to be in a trans-relationship. They argue that there is no shame in *not* being willing to enter the transition. Each of the participants gave these disclaimers, as they all recognize the difficulties of the transition and encourage others to think realistically about their commitment to the relationships and their ability to adapt to the inevitable changes.

It's your choice, it's what you're comfortable with, but you have to make that decision for yourself and you shouldn't pressure yourself into it either. (Keri)

Some people wouldn't be able to handle being in a relationship with someone who's trans for a variety of reasons and some people may be fine with it. (Emma)

After having done this, the participants advised other non-transitioning partners first and foremost to keep all lines of communication with their partners open and honest. Communication was listed as the single most important aspect of the transition.

According to the participants, good communication meant: 1) validating one another's feelings and concerns, 2) making decisions/working through issues together, 3) openly expressing one's thoughts, and 4) asking questions. Each of the participants pointed out that the transition happened to her as well as her partner. In many ways, it was a team effort. This may be one of the reasons that communication in the form of expressing their own wants and needs was so important—because the non-transitioning partner should never feel as though they are just “along for the ride.” Furthermore, while communication within the relationship is extremely important, participants also suggested that other non-transitioning partners work hard to build a support network outside of the relationship.

Lastly, Emma encourages those who *are* willing to transition and who are enjoying it to not to be ashamed of that. She suggests, instead, allowing oneself to not only accept the changes but to embrace openly the enjoyments that come along with the transition.

Don't feel like any feelings that you're having or wrong whether you're sad or enjoying something. If you're enjoying it, enjoy it and don't feel bad; like what you like. So many people [think], 'I'm *supposed* to feel sexual attraction 'this' way and I'm only supposed to have sex 'this' way...' so when they do anything outside of that, they feel uncomfortable. So, that just fucks with your head and it's not helpful for anyone. (Emma)

For transitioning partners, the participants suggested ways in which they could be more supportive of their partners. The participants had two main pieces of advice for the transitioning partner: 1) transition slowly and 2) consider one's partner in terms of the transition—his or her feelings, concerns, and wants.



As mentioned above, two of the participants suggested transitioning slowly and the third discussed quickness surrounding the transition as a difficulty of the transition. Therefore, slowing down the transition and allowing the non-transitioning partner to ease into the idea of continuing a relationship with a trans-man is helpful, perhaps especially to non-transitioning partners who previously identified as lesbian or heterosexual.

Be honest with each other and take whatever time is necessary to get there. Don't necessarily feel like you have to rush into stuff because that may make one person really uncomfortable. For me, taking it slow was so incredibly helpful. (Emma)

Secondly, the participants suggested that the transitioning partner consider their relationship apart from the transition. Keri remembers having to "pull Damien out of that selfish mindset." By this, she is referring to Damien getting caught up in the transition and what *he* wants and how it affects *him* without realizing that the transition was affecting them both.

Yes, your whole life is about your transition right now but your whole relationship does not have to be. You know, you can do other things that do not pertain to [the transition]. (Hannah)

You'll be focused on, this is I want to do, this is how I want it to be done, I'm ready for this step or I'm ready for that, [but] if you're in a relationship, it's not just you. Sometimes [transitioning partners] get so focused, it's exciting and it's fulfilling, [it's] what you wanna be in your real life and who you see yourself as but you have to remember that it's not just you [in the transition]. (Keri)

Lastly, all participants pointed out that one thing that seemed to be "missing" from their relationships during the transition was romantic gestures. For some of the participants, this was something that was present before the transition: "the romantic gestures are kind of dying off" (Hannah). Or, it was something that they were hoping the transition would provoke:

[One thing] that I expected would improve as [he began] being seen more as male is the romance side of things...like, a card or flowers or anything like that, I expected that to go further and it hasn't...that's the only expectation of mine that's probably [been lacking]. (Keri)

### Summary and Conclusion

Many of the findings of this study are consistent with previous research; however, there are several ways in which my study advances the current literature on partners of trans-identified individuals. Below, I summarize the findings while highlighting the ways in which my study contributes to the existing scholarship. My primary research question was: what are the experiences of partners of transsexuals as their partners transition? In other words, how do non-transitioning partners experience their transsexual partners' transitions? The extent of the variances among each of the participant's experiences is a testament to the complexities of both romantic relationships and the transition experience. Some of the factors that affected the transition experience for the participants in this study include: the effects of prior sexual orientation on the difficulty of transition, timing of disclosure, emerging gender expectations, and the difficulties of adopting a new sexual orientation label. For each of the participants, the difficulty of the transition was closely linked to the flexibility the non-transitioning partner expressed in terms of sexual orientation prior to their trans-partner's transition. For example, the one participant who was deeply invested in her lesbian identity experienced the most disruption as her partner transitioned from female to male; she also reported the most personal growth as a direct result of her partner's transition. This study also found that sexual orientation identity labels that were adopted during the course of

the transition were conditional and reflective of the situation or relationship the non-transitioning partner was in rather than being a true reflection of their identity. This is a novel finding as most of the previous research investigated non-transitioning partner's sexual orientation identification within the relationship but does not extend the scope of analysis to account for potential changes should that relationship end.

Previous research also indicates that the timing and manner in which a partner discloses his/her transgender identity is a determining factor in whether or not the relationship will experience dissolution soon after disclosure (Erhardt 2007). The findings of my research, however, indicates that while timing and manner of disclosure may indeed play a role in the non-transitioning partner's willingness to stay in the relationship, this process of renegotiation within the relationship is multi-dimensional and dependent on several factors. For example, two of the three participants learned of their partner's trans-identity after at least three years into a lesbian relationship; despite this longevity, however, the relationships were maintained. This finding is a contribution to the literature in suggesting that the *feelings* (i.e., confusion, shock, betrayal, violation of trust) that the disclosure evokes are more effective in predicting the termination or continuation of the relationship rather than the timing of disclosure as previous research indicates.

Two of the three participants in this study discussed emerging hetero-normative gender expectations as a result of the transition. Within these relationships, the trans-partner made efforts to assume a head-of-the-household position after he began passing full-time as male. This meant that he began exhibiting a desire to be the financial provider within the relationship and/or learn and accomplish more masculine tasks such

as fixing the car or plumbing. Lastly, sexual orientation labels that were adopted during the transition (e.g., “queer”) tended to be indicative of the *relationship* rather than the participant’s overall identity or orientation. All participants admitted that despite their current relationship and the adoption of a new label to address this relationship, they would all revert to dating the gender they preferred pre-transition (i.e., women).

This project also aspired to determine the challenges and opportunities the non-transitioning partners face as a result of the transition, and how partners respond to them. Participants in this study reported feeling the impact of a range of personal challenges as well as societal issues during their partners’ transitions. Participants developed several coping strategies to handle the challenges provoked by the transitions. Challenges for the participants included questioning sexual orientation identification, fearing drastic physical and emotional changes to partner, the lack of a support system that meets the specific needs of the participants, safety concerns, the prospect of leading double lives, pressures to get married and have children, complexities of legalities and logistics of transitioning, and the effects of living in a small town during the transition. The challenges have spurred change, though, both individually, for the non-transitioning partners, as well as within the relationships. Non-transitioning partners have enjoyed the advantages that have come with being seen as part of a heterosexual couple, such as feelings of normalcy or fitting in and feeling more relaxed in public, as they no longer have to be diligent in monitoring potentially anti-homosexual sentiments. Furthermore, participants also reported feeling satisfied with a newfound openness in terms of their own sexual orientations as a result of the transitions. Participants also cited the ways in which the relationships were now better than before the transitions. For example, the

couples developed more effective communication strategies, and trans-partners were generally happier once they began their transitions, which, in turn, increased the levels of satisfaction within the relationships. Understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by partners of trans-men during their partners' transitions as well as the coping mechanisms they use is a crucial element to providing support services to address their specific needs (i.e., support groups, therapeutic strategies).

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the experiences of partners of trans-persons and the meanings they associate with things such as sexual orientation, gender, gender expectations, and labels are dependent on social, cultural, and structural forces (Epstein 1992; Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010; Turner and Stets 2005). As a result of the transition, the participants in this study sometimes went through a process of renegotiation of sexual orientation identification categories in order to justify or explain shifting sexual attractions. For example, Emma identified as a lesbian and was not attracted to men or male bodies. However, as her partner progressed through the transition, Emma described having to go through a process of renegotiation as she came to terms with her partner's increasingly masculinized body. A social constructionist perspective maintains that people use socially constructed categories in order to understand and explain behaviors (Epstein 1992; Tesene 2011). These categories allow individuals to identify acceptable behaviors associated with things such as sexual attraction. Utilizing this theoretical perspective, we can understand that Emma's shift in behavior—being romantically and sexually involved with a trans-man, which is diametrically opposed to her lesbian identity—forced her to begin identifying as “queer” (rather than lesbian) in an attempt to compensate for these behaviors.

As with any research project, there are limitations we must recognize. One such limitation was the lack of triangulation. Triangulation refers to a technique that approaches the research questions from several different angles—sometimes with different types of research methods—in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the social phenomenon at hand (Denzin 1989). Triangulation was not utilized due, mainly, to time constraints surrounding the research project, which did not allow for such an extensive interviewing process. Other limitations include a low sample size, restrictions based on geography (the sample was drawn from a limited area), and a lack of diversity within the sample. Due to the specificity of qualifications for participation and the limited availability of potential participants at the time of data collection, this study only includes the experiences of three women partners of trans-men. Due to the lack of attention given to male partners of trans-people, variation within the sample could have benefited this study greatly. However, due to the exploratory, qualitative nature of this study, the results were never intended to be generalizable. Rather, they should be read and understood as a starting point for future research in this area.

To better understand the experiences of romantic partners of trans-persons and to effectively provide them with services, which are currently lacking, such as support groups and therapeutic techniques appropriate for this specific population, further research is needed. Future research with larger, more diverse (including various age, racial, and ethnic groups) samples that include male partners of both trans-men and trans-women and female partners of trans-women would greatly increase scholarly understandings of this population.

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APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring the experiences of partners of trans-identified individuals before, during, and after the transition process. We encourage you to read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate.

This research is being conducted by Kara Harvey, graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Illinois State University as part of her Master's Thesis project. This study is under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Gerschick, Dr. Diane Bjorklund, Dr. Susan Sprecher, and Dr. Virginia Gill, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Illinois State University.

### Background Information:

The goal of this research is to increase academic understandings of the unique experiences of partners of trans-identified individuals. The research will explore the challenges and opportunities partners of transsexuals face during the transition process and how they respond.

*If you agree to be in this study, we ask you to do the following things:*

Participate in up to **two** face-to-face or telephone, in-depth, semi-structured interviews about your experiences during the transition at a time and location that will be mutually agreed upon by you and the researcher. We will ask you to reflect upon the way the transition has affected your romantic relationship (if at all) with your partner, support network(s), and personal life.

For ease of analysis, the researchers prefer to audio-record each interview. Each recorded interview will be transcribed (using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality) for the purpose of data analysis. You may choose not to be audio recorded. In this case, however, interviews may be slightly longer as the researcher will be taking hand-written notes.

The results of the research will be published in the form of a graduate thesis paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at one or more professional meetings.

### Participant Qualifications:

To participate in this study, you must have been involved in, or are currently involved in, a romantic relationship with a transsexual partner who transitioned *during your relationship*. In other words, your relationship must have been initiated BEFORE the start of your partner's transition. Participants will not be chosen based upon factors such as age, sexual orientation, education level, or socioeconomic status.

### Risks and Benefits of Participation:

The study poses no foreseeable risks to you. Should you decide, at any point, that you would not like to continue, the interview will be terminated. You may also refuse to answer any question during the interview.

The benefits of participation are that you will be contributing your personal experiences to a gap in the research literature. Currently, the input from partners of transsexuals remains unexplored in the research. Another benefit is the opportunity to tell your story and reflect upon your experiences. Your voice may assist others in a similar situation and could contribute to an expansion of services available to partners (e.g., therapeutic techniques, support networks).

Confidentiality:

The information gathered during this study will remain **confidential**. Audio recordings, informed consent forms, and any other identifiable information will be kept in a locked cabinet that only the researchers will have access to during the study. Pseudonyms will be given to each participant for use on transcriptions and final reports. All audio tapes will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is **voluntary**; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation and/or refuse to answer any question **at any time** during the interview. Refusal to participate or discontinued participation will **not** affect your current or future relations with Illinois State University.

Contact Information:

Any questions concerning the research project can be directed to Kara Harvey (via e-mail: [kjharve@ilstu.edu](mailto:kjharve@ilstu.edu) or telephone: 309.438.7745) or Dr. Thomas Gerschick, faculty advisor for this project (via email: [tjgersch@ilstu.edu](mailto:tjgersch@ilstu.edu) or telephone: 309.438.3734). If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Research Ethics & Compliance Office at Illinois State University (309.438.2529).

Statements of Consent:

I have read and understand the above information. I have asked any questions or I have voiced any concerns and received answers.

***I consent to participate in this study.***

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

***I consent to be audio recorded for this study.***

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B  
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Interview Protocol

IN-PERSON: Give Informed Consent Form; allow time for participant to read and ask questions. Obtain signature(s). If consented, turn on tape recorder and proceed with the question below.

TELEPHONE: Explain to the participant that the conversation is being recorded and ask him/her to give oral consent to being recorded while I read the Informed Consent Form; read the consent form; allow the participant time to ask questions; obtain oral consent for participation and/or audio recording. If consented, continue the interview while recording. If not, turn the recorder off and proceed with the interview.

#### Research Questions:

- What are the experiences of partners of transsexuals as their partners transition? That is, how do non-transitioning partners experience their transsexual partners' transitions?
- What challenges and opportunities do the non-transitioning partners face as a result of the transitions? How do they respond to these?

#### Interview Questions:

1. Before beginning the interview, I would just like to confirm that you are currently involved in or were involved in at one point a romantic relationship with a transsexual partner who transitioned *during the relationship*. By this, I mean that your relationship was initiated BEFORE the start of the transition.
2. Also before beginning, I would like to clarify the term that you prefer in reference to your partner (i.e., transsexual, trans-identified, transgender, trans, trans-man, trans-woman).
3. Would you please begin by telling me a little bit about yourself (age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education level, work, where you are from, children).
4. Are you currently in a romantic relationship with a trans-identified individual?
  - a. YES – Would you please share with me a little bit about your partner?  
NO – Would you please share with me a little bit about your previous, trans-identified partner?
  - b. How and where did you two meet?
  - c. YES – How long have you been together? Is your relationship formalized through marriage, civil union, domestic partnership, commitment ceremony, etc.?  
NO – How long were you together at the time of your break-up? Was your relationship formalized through marriage, civil union, domestic partnership, commitment ceremony, etc.?

5. Can you please describe for me when/how you find out that [he/she] was transsexual?
  - a. Reflecting back, can you take me through the conversations following your partner's disclosure? Was it a series of conversations?
  - b. What was your initial reaction when you found out that [your partner] was transsexual?
  - c. Other researchers have found that the nature of the discloser often affects the couple's ability to endure the transition. Do you think that the way in which you found out about your partner's desire to transition (including timing) affected your willingness to stay with your partner as s/he transitioned?
  - d. Was there any disagreement between the two of you that transition was the best option?
  
6. How far into your relationship did [your partner] begin to transition?
  - a. How far along in [your partner's] transition is [he/she] right now? Does your partner intend to have SRS as part of his/her transition?
    - i. Have you and your partner discussed financial aspects of the transition? If so, what have these conversations been like?
  
7. What types of challenges did you anticipate going into the transition?
  - a. How did the reality of the challenges match your expectations?
  - b. What types of challenges arose, if any, that you *didn't* anticipate?
  - c. How have you dealt with these challenges?
  
8. What types of opportunities did you anticipate going into the transition?
  - a. How did the reality of the opportunities match your expectations?
  - b. What types of opportunities arose, if any, that you *didn't* anticipate?
  
9. Have there been new roles/responsibilities that you have taken on as a result of your partner's transition?
  - a. If so, can you please describe for me what those have been? Examples?
  - b. Why those?
  - c. How do these new responsibilities make you feel?
  - d. How have you handled these new roles/responsibilities?
  
10. Have you shared with friends or family the details of your relationship?
  - a. *YES* – Has this been helpful? Have they been understanding/supportive?
    - i. Did your relationship with your family/friends change over the course of your relationship with your partner?
    - ii. Can you please explain for me how you determined who to tell and who not to tell?
  - b. *NO* – Have you had other sources of support during this process? What were they?
  - c. How has having these sources of support made you feel?

11. In what ways has your partner supported you through this process?
  - a. Can you please share some examples?
  - b. In what ways do you think he/she could be/could have been *more* supportive?
  
12. How have you supported your partner through his/her transition?
  - a. Can you please give me some examples of this?
  - b. In what ways do you think you could be/could have been *more* supportive?
  
13. Thinking back to before your partner started his/her transition, how has your relationship changed throughout the transition?
  - a. Can you please give me some examples?
  - b. Looking back on the expectations you had for your relationship pre-transition and comparing them to the ways that you've seen your relationship actually change, how has your relationship met these expectations? How has it differed?
  - c. Others have discussed changes in power or equity within the relationship. Have you noticed any changes like this in your own relationship?
  
14. Where do you see yourself in the future, let's say in 6 months to a year?
  - a. What about 5 years?
  - b. When you picture your future, do you imagine yourself with your partner?
  
15. After having started/gone through the transition with your partner, what advice would you give to other partners of trans-identified individuals who are just beginning the transition process with their partner?
  
16. What advice would you give to the transsexual partners?
  
17. Is there anything else that you would like to add that hasn't already been discussed?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. May I contact you again if I come across something that I would like additional clarification about?

***Contact Information for Follow-up Interviews:***

Contact at:

Best time to contact:

Do not contact after:



CHAPTER II  
EXTENDED METHODOLOGY: REFLECTION ON  
CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

During this study, there have been several hurdles I have had to overcome. Some of these were challenges that were anticipated and specific to this research project alone, such as an extremely short timeline and my own inexperience conducting interviews, while others were more broadly related to the study of “partners of transsexuals” in general, such as limited access to the community and inability to find participants who met the specific requirements of this project. Nonetheless, each challenge allows for the opportunity to grow and evolve in ways that allow for future improvements. This chapter will detail the abovementioned challenges and lessons learned from them while recognizing the ways in which I would change the project if I were to do it again.

As mentioned above, this was my first time conducting a qualitative research project as well as my first time interviewing informants. Despite being eager for this new experience, I was quite anxious going into this phase of the research. My largest struggling point that I see as a direct consequence of my newness to the field was lacking both the ability to effectively draw out responses from some participants AND the ability to restrain others. For example, when a participant gave a particularly longwinded response, I often struggled to effectively and strategically return to the various areas that she touched on to probe for further information. I was reluctant to interrupt the flow of

the response to probe as I wanted to give the participant the freedom to finish her response. At the end of the response, though, I then had several comments/areas that needed clarification and had a difficult time returning to each of these points in a way that was comprehensive and systematic. From this, I learned the value of follow-up interviews! Following up on these topics gave me the ability to explore those obscure comments that I may not have been effectively captured during the initial interview. More importantly, though, when I listened to the audio recordings, it was clear to me that I tended to go into the interview with preconceived ideas about themes that would emerge or how I thought participants would respond to my questions. Because of this, I often steer the discussion back to these specific topics without allowing the interviewee to veer too far off my predetermined course. A skilled interviewer should possess the ability to guide the discussion while also allowing the interviewee the freedom to explore unexpected turns in the conversation. This is a skill that I need to develop further. For this research project though, I was able to compensate through the use of the follow-up e-mails with participants.

Secondly, I learned, and was amazed by, the sheer richness of qualitative data. For this particular project, I was able to obtain enough information from three participants to fulfill the requirements of a master's thesis—an unlikely task. The complexities and nuances of each of the participants' stories provided through-provoking material that advanced the existing scholarship in a way that I was not expecting. During the initial stages of transcribing and coding, I was overwhelmed at the amount of data I had to work with. Once I began coding, I became fixated on the larger themes that emerged across the interviews while overlooking the more intricate and subtle nuances of

partners' experiences of the transition. At the insistence of my committee, I returned to the data to mine it further. Wanting to be thorough, I re-read each of the three interview transcripts and re-coded in light of already having read (and coded) them all once before. In doing this, I was able to see connections between some coding categories, collapse others, raise others to the main discussion, and eliminate some that no longer had a place in the discussion. Each time I read through the interview transcripts, I learned more about the participants themselves, their experiences, and the complexities of the transition and was able to add further detail to the paper itself. In short, I learned the importance of being thoroughly and exhaustively invested in the data.

A third lesson learned during this project was that accessing this specific community is difficult due simply to the fact that it is mostly underground or hidden. Luckily, though, I was able to connect with certain people within the community who had prior relationships with my thesis chair. These connections proved invaluable. While this specific challenge was anticipated, the inability to find a reasonable number of participants for the project was *not* expected. The specificity of qualifications for participation in this study coupled with the relatively small trans-community in the area resulted in having significantly fewer participants in this study than intended. For example, to participate in this study, the relationship between a trans-person and a cissexual person must have begun *before* the trans-partner started the process of transitioning AND the relationship must have lasted through at least some portion of the transitioning process. This poses several challenges. As explained in Chapter I, women or men who are highly invested in "restrictive" sexual orientation identities have a much harder time adjusting to a relationship with a partner who changes sex. Furthermore, this

study also intended to give priority to male partners (it was the hope that a majority of the participants would be male) due to a current lack of attention given to male partners.

However, only women responded to the research flier and the objective of shedding light on the experiences of male partners of transitioning partners had to be abandoned.

If I were to conduct this study again, I would make more efforts to include a diverse sample; in particular, I would: 1) increase the amount of time spent on data collection and analysis; 2) expand the geographic location from which to draw participants; 3) work closely with an individual who is a member of the trans-community to make use of his or her contacts as well as collaborate on effective strategies to approach the community as an outsider; and 4) target male partners, specifically. Timing constraints surrounding this particular research project did not allow for an extensive period of data collection and analysis. In fact, only two to three months were spent on these stages of the research. Furthermore, this project was focused mainly in the Midwestern United States; expanding the focus to include states or cities outside this area could greatly increase the sample pool. As an outsider of the trans-community, it is possible (and honestly, quite probable) that I was not using the most efficient strategies to gain access to the community. Initially, I planned to send a flier to my contacts, hope for the best, and, magically, the participants would materialize. This was not the case. As the days passed and potential participants were nowhere to be found, I began getting creative in my approach to the community. I contacted several trans-support groups that advertised support for partners/spouses, joined listservs to distribute my information, and basically expanded my contacts to anyone who had any type of connection to the community. Unfortunately, these strategies proved fruitless and the challenge of doing

research within a community in which I was an outsider resurfaced. Having someone who was a member of the trans-community (e.g., a trans-person) collaborate with me on aspects such as wording in e-mails or on fliers may have increased my success rate in accessing potential participants. Future researchers should take into consideration the value of social capital in this area of research and use all resources necessary to leverage support for their research. Lastly, because no research has yet looked directly at male partners of transsexuals, this is a population that needs scholarly attention. It seems as though male partners of trans-men or trans-women are a minority within the trans-community. Therefore, promoting the research in a way that targets men specifically would benefit this study greatly.

While there are several challenges when conducting research on the experiences of non-transitioning partners of transsexuals, the challenges should not overshadow the value of this area of research. The experiences of partners of transsexuals can provide us with worthwhile insights if only we give them the opportunities to share their stories with us. There is a great need to better understand the dynamics of romantic relationships during these unique and life-altering circumstances.