

NARRATING GENDER: A FEMINIST APPROACH TO THE NARRATIVES  
OF THE TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCE

by  
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## DEDICATION

Police arrested dozens of gay rights activists Monday, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, after a protest that blocked entrances to the Idaho Senate chambers for more than two hours. The demonstrators wore black-and-white “Add the Words Idaho” T-shirts and covered their mouths with their hands, a symbolic gesture intended to call attention to a bill that would add four words — sexual orientation and gender identity —to Idaho law banning discrimination in employment, housing and business services. Below are the 44 arrestees from that day’s silent, peaceful protest, which blocked Idaho State Senate Chambers. The list includes people young and old, across the gender spectrum, gay, straight and bi, ages 18-80, religious leaders, students, parents and grandparents. But most importantly, it includes people who’ve faced cruelty and discrimination, lived in fear, feared for children or friends – and could not sit by any longer without doing something to end that fear. Judy Cross, Lee Taylor, Sharon Gregory, Ashley Thomson, Matt Montoya, Meredith Butts, Diane Tipton, Emilie Jackson-Edney, Rosie Luna, Pastor Marc Schlegel, Rabbi Daniel Fink, Deja Jones, Casie Briese, Rick Holm, Karen Kelley, Susan Gelletly, Hilary Rayhill, Ty Carson, Denaë Carson, Ed Keener, Jenna Preheim, Arla McEvoy, Jo-Ann Kachigian, Janine Watkins, Patricia McKernan, Nikki Leonard, Salem Djembe, Patrick Metz-Smith, Jeannete Bowman, Keith Blazor, Sheena Looslie, Daniel Gonzalez, James Tidmarsh, Evie Smith, Shelley Axtell, Tick Axtell, Gayle Woods, Gabriel Ibarra, Debbie Mallis, Donna Vasquez, Brian Topaz, Donna Harwood, John

Grubbs, Rev. Deborah Graham. I dedicate my thesis to these brave amazing people, and all the transgender people seeking understanding in a world plagued with ignorance.

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## ABSTRACT

Gender and identity are complex and often ubiquitous in nature. This is a study about gender and identity and the ways in which they manifest through the narratives of five transgender individuals, who all transitioned after the age of 45, who now live as women. This study about the transgender experience adds a significant and important perspective on gender, identity, identification, and the relationship between gender and identity. The most important conclusions are the lengths to which these people go to support gender social constructs, reinforcing the immense strength of the social construction of gender. The idea that social constructs are intensely powerful is of no great surprise to those reading this paper. However, the way in which this power manifests communicatively in narrative demonstrates a unique influence, one in which there is a full circle result. This thesis challenges the social construction of gender, the power of identification with social constructs, and the ultimate contradiction in reproducing these constructs while attempting to change them.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Identity is complex. Identity is simultaneously private and particular as well as social and duplicitous (Burke, 1937). Lawler (2008) suggests it is impossible to have a unified definition of identity because of the multiple ways in which individuals identify. For example, a college student's identity is not restricted to one who attends classes at University. College students may also be sisters, mothers, workers, friends, and lovers. Within each of these identities, there are sub identities: a sister may be learning to ride a motorcycle or a mother may be the coach of her son's rugby team. Many contemporary communication scholars understand identity as a process of construction, negotiation, and presentation (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Kuhn and Nelson, 2002; Tracy 2004; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). Identity then is not fixed nor essential in nature, but socially constructed, fragmented, and contradictory (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Tracy 2004; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004).

Identity is socially constructed through the communicative process of identification (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). Identification is a "discursive process implicating, shaping, expressing, and transforming" various identities discourse, for the purposes of this paper, is the process of creating identities through the narratives one tells (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). This particular type of discourse is not as simple as it may appear. Individuals may have preferred identities, which are more utilitarian and span across multiple contexts (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002), and some identities may only

appear in select contexts. For example, a mother identity may be preferred in private and public situations with a consistent narrative. However, individuals may also have preferred identities, which are unacceptable across multiple contexts (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). For example, a man whose female identity is preferred but socially taboo in most contexts. In the latter case, what is one to do when one's preferred identity is not accepted across multiple contexts?

This paper proposes that by studying the narratives of transgender individuals, whose preferred identity structures are not easily socially constructed and reconstructed through discourse across their life span, scholars will better understand the multiple ways identity, identification, and gender are intertwined. Because the elements on which identifications are formed are constantly changing (Weick, 1995, cited in Kuhn & Nelson, 2002), interpreting the life experience of the transgender person, scholars, educators, and transgender people might better understand identity for those whose identity does not meet social expectations.

Identities are presented in this paper as the narratives individuals tell others and themselves about who they are, who they are not, who they aspire to be, who they do not want to be, and how they came to be (Denis-Constant, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2010). Identity is constructed and reconstructed through narrative. The following is a literature review of gender binary systems, transgender identity, and narrative identity. In addition, a literature review of how gender is socially constructed, postmodernism, and postmodern feminism is offered as a lens through which to analyze narratives of this unique population.

### **Gender Identity: The Binaries**

The term gender identity refers to the ways in which individuals internally identify as male or female or somewhere along the gender continuum (Bolin, 1994). Kessler and McKenna (1978) found gender identity manifests between the ages of three and four, before children enter into elementary school. Individuals whose gender identity matches their biological sex are sometimes termed “traditionally gendered” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 29). In addition, behavior must match biological sex to be included in the traditional category (Howell, Nestle, & Wilchins, 2002). In her study, “Transcending and Transgendering” by Bolin (1994) in the book, *Third Sex, Third Gender*, the Western paradigm is presented, which suggest a male/female binary of oppositional differences in “behavior, temperament, character, emotions and sexual orientation” (p. 453). The symbolic representation of gender is reproductive differences of men and women and the primary basis on which biological sex is assigned. Further, as Kessler and McKenna (1978) stated, “Gender attribution is, for the most part, genital attribution” (p. 153).

Another system that falls along the gender binary is sexual preference. Sexual preference is the extent to which an individual is sexually attracted to another biologically sexed individual. In Western society, the sexual preference binary is heterosexual/homosexual (Meyer, 2004). It follows then, that traditional heterosexual relationships consist of male/female individuals whose gender identity matches their biologically sexed bodies, respectively, and homosexual/gay relationships consist of either Male/Male or Female/Female individuals whose gender identity matches their biological sexed bodies, respectively (Cashore & Tauson, 2009). Because research

suggests identity and identification can be difficult for individuals who do not fall into either one nor both of the traditional binaries (Bradford, 2004), the transgender person's narrative will help elucidate the ways in which "non-traditional" identities are expressed.

### **Transgender Identity**

The transgender individual usurps the Euro-American "principles of gender that are regarded as natural and inevitable: that is that there are only two sexes and that these principles are inviolable and are determined by genitalia" (Bolin, 1994, p. 454). Namaste (1994) refers to transgender as diverse individuals who do not live inside the normative sex/gender relationship. The transgender individual is pro-active in their identity creation because they are in constant negotiations with and within their biological bodies, internal identities, and the social expectations of their physical presentation. Transgender individuals have internal gender identities outside of the binary system, which equates men with male and women with female (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997).

Mason-Schrock (1996) states, transgender persons "believe they were born in wrong-sexed bodies and want to remedy the mistake, eventually through surgery" (p. 176). There is a sense in which the transgender person is transcending space and time, always reaching for the potential identity to which they ascribe. Theorists Elkins and King (1999) use the term transgender outside categorical placements. They employ the term as more of a bucket/catch-all term, rather than definer. The idea is that transgender identity is moving across and/or living beyond gender altogether.

Often times, the transgender person does not identify as either female or male, furthering the disconnect with their biological sex. For instance, transgender individuals

may lead a neither/nor existence, where they identify as neither male nor female (Cashore & Tuason, 2009). Their identity lies somewhere along the continuum of the binary system. The normative gender binary system, though, demands a presentation of identity that conforms to either one or the other gender identities. This demand is rooted in social norms: male or female.

In their article, “Negotiating the binary: Identity and social justice for bisexual and transgender individuals,” Cashore and Tuason (2009) make the claim that while the transgender person does not fit in with Western normative systems of gender, their sexual preference may not either. The binary for sexual preference is either heterosexual or gay/lesbian. It may be the case that, for example, a male to female transgender person, who gender identifies as female may be attracted to women. This further displaces them from normative culture. Judith Butler reaffirms this in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) when she states:

The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot exist—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender. (p. 17)

It can be understood then, the transgender person is breaking the “rules” on at least two levels: the gender/sex relationship and the gender/sexual preference relationship. This is detrimental to the transgender individual. Because they do not fit either binary, they are often told there is something intrinsically wrong with them and as they internalize these feelings, “they tend to initially think of themselves as sick or deviant” (Gagne, et al, 1997, p. 490). Telling their story through narrative is an important way in which transgender individuals reflexively come to understand their identities.

### **Narrative Identity and the Transgender Individual**

Narrative identity is concerned with how individuals use personal narratives/stories to make sense of the past and create a sense of personal unity across a wide variety of experiences (McAdams, 1993). Narrative research suggests that because of the multitude of identities across time and space, personal stories give individuals the opportunity to look back and put the pieces together; a personal puzzle representing one's lived experience. This is a process of identity formation in which individuals craft narratives from experiences, express these experiences in stories to others and to themselves, which act as tools to understanding the interaction of the self and the world (McAdams, 1993).

Narrative identity researchers adhere to McAdams' suggestion that identity is constituted by life stories (McAdams, 1993). Not only do the stories change, but also so does one's individual capacity to reason that which has happened in their lives. What did not make sense at 13 years old may make sense in the retelling of the experience at 30 years old. In telling stories of old and bringing those to the present, people can change the meaning of their experiences and actions (Widdershoven, 1993).

Stories and narratives are the "Once Upon a Time" with which every individual is familiar. Mason-Schrock (1996) states, "Stories are like containers that hold us together; they give us a sense of coherence and continuity. By telling what happened to us once upon a time, we make sense of who we are today" (p. 176). Narrative identity is the unity of one's life as it is experienced and expressed through stories that represent experiences (Widdershoven, 1993). Narrative identity is the result "of an interaction between personal experiences and personal stories, entwined with stories of others in

ordinary life” (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 8). As people tell stories, they choose what details to focus on and what details are meaningful as a complete narrative up to the current place in life. In other words, stories give life to implicit meanings associated with individual experience; explicitly, personal lives and identities are made available to others. Together, these stories weave into the fabric of a life narrative.

This is particularly important for the transgender individual because the transgender individual is interested in changing their biological representation to match that of their gender identity. For the transgender person, stories/narratives of the past can help create an understanding of the present and the goals to which they aspire to have a more coalesced identity (Mason-Schrock, 1996). Narratives can help the transgender individual who once thought of themselves as deviant or wrong reflexively work out their past identity alongside their current and changing identity in the present. Further, this thesis demonstrates that narrative is the *only* means by which to self-present because, for the transgender individual, their biologically (birth) sexed bodies negate their preferred identity.

The transgender individual is breaking the relationship between sex and identity. They change their sex to align with their internal identity. They are also challenging the relationship to the body, one that is participatory, rather than necessary, in regard to sex organs. They also challenge the norms of the Western sexual binary because of their dynamic position(s) along the binary system. They allow themselves to navigate between male and female. Because of its emancipatory objective, the Postmodern lens allows for the participant’s narrative to become more than just recreations of identity, but also subversions of rational thinking: binary systems.



### **Postmodern Theory**

Postmodern theory, like any theory, can be interpreted in multiple ways. Taylor (2005) notes some postmodernist's goals are to emancipate through systemic change while others aim to create change by subverting modern rationality. Modern rational thinking helped establish the ways in which gender norms are created and perpetuated. It is this reality that must be subverted for emancipation and for a more balanced and equal communication around issues of identity and gender to occur. This researcher is concerned with the darker side of the enlightenment (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), in that the enlightenment did not only fail to emancipate individuals to define themselves as they see fit, but the whole aim of the project was misguided and reproduced the exact chains from which it sought freedom; prescribing begets prescribing, which leads to institutionalizing. From the beginning, the enlightenment further suppressed the voices already being suppressed because privileged minds created the new rules.

While Critical Theory has hope for a re-guided post-enlightenment perspective, the post-modernist theory emergent in this paper is not only skeptical of the enlightenment, but skeptical of some level of fixedness or stability, or some grand theme under which very structured norms exists in it of themselves. To further specify, Alvesson and Deetz (2000) offer six foci of postmodernism theoretical research: (a) the centrality of discourse, (b) fragmented identities, (c) the critique of the philosophy of presence, (d) the loss of foundations and master narratives, (e) the power/knowledge connection, and (f) the existence of a hyper reality (p. 266).

For this research, the centrality of discourse is the idea that transgender has no normative language, and therefore no normative place outside of the presentation of

their situated narratives. Their fragmented identities push beyond binary identities into multiple ways of seeing and understanding oneself. Transgender has no natural presence, as West and Zimmerman (1987) note, “things *are* by virtue of the fact that men are men and women are women- a division perceived to be natural and rooted in biology, producing in turn profound psychological, behavioral, and social consequences” (p. 128).

Fraser and Nicholson (1989) note the man who introduced postmodernism into discussions of social science, Jean-Francois Lyotard, who thought, “The postmodern condition is one in which ‘grand narratives of legitimation’ are no longer credible” (p. 86). The grand narratives to which he referred are the meta-narratives, which create norms and rules; these rules determine acceptable social behavior in society: tools for legitimating proper practice in postmodern society.

My claim, then, is that there is no truth or rule to which one can point for creating conditions in which particular legitimate or illegitimate discourses exist. Rather, postmodernism calls for a multiplicity of discourses both at the meta-level and smaller, local level. There is not one discourse, there are many discourses, in fact, and it is those who participate in these discourses that decide what is legitimate and real or not (Fraser & Nicholson, 1989). It is the transgender individual’s subjective narrative that can draw awareness and challenges to both local and hyper-realities. Lyotard (Fraser & Nicholson, 1989) further stressed what holds society together is not one method of communicating, where all involved are conscious of any one particular method. Rather, there is a “social bond” which, is, according to Fraser and Nicholson (1989) “a weave

of crisscrossing threads of discursive practices, no single one of which runs continuously through the whole” (p. 88).

The goal for the postmodern social scientist is not to get it right, but rather respond to social conditions, which manifest at the individual and are produced and reproduced contingently and contextually. It is here that Critical Theory wants us to act and provide direction and orchestration (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Postmodernism resists the orchestration in it of itself and insists “organizing against domination both props up and solidifies dominant groups-it creates its own forms of domination” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 273). What emerged in the experiences of the transgender individuals interviewed in this study is how their organization against gender norms actually solidified the gender norms. I, as a postmodernist, do not want to engage with the already established discourse, norms, and claims. I believe by doing so, one reifies the normative orchestration and re-subordinates the oppressed parties. I am searching for new discourses regarding sex and gender similar to Teresa Ebert (1991) in her work “The ‘Difference’ of Postmodern Feminism,” in which she and other feminists call for a feminist postmodern practice that articulates the postmodernist resistance while acknowledging the significant role gender plays in our accounts/discourses/narratives of reality.

### **Postmodern Feminism**

Postmodern feminism, as with other postmodern theories, varies across contexts. While many postmodern feminists agree with Simone De Beauvoir, in that the woman has been cast as the Other, and the other is the abstraction of Maleness, the focus shifts from deconstruction to rejection of the Maleness or Femaleness. It is essential to

challenge, but also refuse the binary viewpoint where boys must behave in a certain way and girls behave in opposition and in an equally demanding manner, where there are no other options (Ebert, 1991). The focus is on liberation from having to be either male or female. Postmodern feminists are critical of what I call “soft” feminism in that soft feminism reinforces the (perceived) inherent differences in men and women. Soft feminism seeks to unveil inequality and the universality of patriarchal social and political practices. The aim is to equalize the difference between men and women. A problem I find here is that there is no such thing as an equal difference between men and women. Equalizing the difference between men and women is not my goal, rather celebrating and highlighting the difference will provide liberating moments where difference can live on its own merit. Man is not woman and woman is not man and neither will ever be the other, a fact to be celebrated not equalized or further problematized. Ebert (1991) attempts to break this problem down, “To simplify a complicated philosophical issue, we can say that difference between is a quest for certainty” (p. 892). The certainty for which soft feminism searches is in opposition to the aims of postmodern feminism. Postmodern feminism is seeking one certainty, the certainty of difference. This is found in language through which narrative is used to describe personal experiences rich with legitimate contribution to meaning making systems in particular cultures and communities.

Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), notes that gender becomes troublesome when it is produced in an unintelligible form, i.e. forms that do not follow the heterosexual matrix society creates. For example, a woman-bodied masculine heterosexual person or a man-bodied feminine football watching homosexual person is

unintelligible to Western notions of gendered beings. This is similar to the problem raised above when certainty is sought between differences rather than celebrated and explored. For Butler, then, gender is not a given or based in stability and continuity. Rather, gender is something one does in situated moments and the only continuity is that gender performance is continuously changing (Butler, 1990). I am interested in the transgender narrative that highlights the moments where gender is changing and celebrating the lack of cultural cohesion.

Post-modern feminism acknowledges, however, that language is another institutionalized norm. As Butler (1990) notes, “The linguistic fiction of ‘sex’ ... is a category produced and circulated by the system of compulsory heterosexuality in an effort to restrict the production of identities along the axis of heterosexual desire” (p. 26).

Postmodern feminism is non-universalist, embracing contrasts, and replaces “unitary notions of ‘woman’ and ‘feminine gender identity’ with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation” (Fraser & Nicholson, 1989, p. 101). Language is nothing but a series of sounds and/or signals to which individuals give life from their positioned reality. Language does not represent some “thing,” rather, language represents lived experience. It is through words that we can better understand individual perspectives. As Postmodernist Jacques Derrida (2002) intimated, through experience, meaning is created. By taking a postmodern lens to the narratives of transgender individuals, scholars will better understand the influence of social norms, language, sexual orientation, and identity creation.

### **Social Construction of Gender**

Gender refers to cultural norms of femininity and masculinity “based on a web of socially constructed meanings that differentiate humans on the basis of perceived physical, social, and psychological differences” (Rakow, & Wackwitz, 1988).

Individuals are not born into gender, rather individuals are born into cultures where they “learn gender identity through interactions with others and are socialized to assume a gender role” (Allen, 2011, p. 40). They then perform this role throughout their lives to varying degrees.

Gender identity is generally engrained by the time one enters into elementary school. Although most people’s biological sex matches their prescribed gender, conceptions of gender vary across time and culture (Allen, 2011). There are societies in which gender is not linked to language or action, some societies accept multiple genders and some are genderless (Rackow & Wackwitz, 1988). Many scholars have come to agree that gender is not something we have, but something we do, over and over again in one setting or another. And these settings are not neutral ground but saturated with gendered assumptions and expectations (Hess, 2001). It is through this lens that researchers can observe the transgender experience to learn more about cultural impacts on identity development. Further, we can learn more about the interconnectedness of gender and identity and the power of social construction by focusing on two objectives in the research: Can one separate gender from identity? What are the ways to emancipate humans from the socially constructed binaries? This study opens a door to understanding that individuals are as much defined by their biology as they are their cultural norms. When this connection is highlighted, it can then begin to deconstruct.

The aim is to help to redefine gender constructs or at the very least, lessen the grip the binary currently holds.

This study will seek to elicit the narratives of the transgender person not only from their past experiences, but also from the present moment reinterpreting the past. The participants in this study most likely have socially sensitive mechanisms for understanding the power of social norms, developed over time as they have lived in both the socially constructed male world, as well as the socially constructed female world. This will enable them to interpret everyday verbal and nonverbal experiences dictated by socially constructed norms with greater insight as to how powerful they truly are. Feminist scholars across a range of disciplines have been adding to our understanding of voice through work that interrogates relations of power at various levels—from language to talk to stories (Rakow & Wackitz, 2004). Further, Rooney (1996) tells feminists there are two kinds of stories. One is the story where women are trapped and written into “myriad stereotypes, traps, and dead ends” (p. 1) and the other is “told to feminists, about feminists, and takes feminism as its theme” (p. 1). By providing a more critical account of their experiences, guided by the researcher’s interview questions, the transgender individual may offer interpretations of social norms that run counter to society at large and how there is liberation from these chains because they have seen the stories from the lens of both male and female. Postmodern feminism sees that the individuals in this study, living as male and identifying as female, were trapped on a meta level. By listening to their stories, all scholars can see a fuller view of the power of the social construction of gender and the binary system. The following section lays out the researcher’s approach to the semi-structured interviews.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

To better understand the ways in which identity is formed through narratives, an interpretive/qualitative method using narrative interviews was utilized in this study (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The aim of this research is to investigate the life experience of transgender individuals and their process of creating meaning through narrative about experiences with family, friends, doctors, co-workers, and individuals within social contexts in which they live. The participants met with the researcher at a suggested location agreed upon by both parties. In all cases, this was a local restaurant with a private room for meetings, reserved by the researcher.

The purpose of this study is to better understand identities, and specifically how gender plays a role in personal identity as understood and narrated from the past until the present moment. One way research has been successful in learning about identity is through personal narratives. Narrative identity refers to the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others. By looking to the past, individuals can better make sense of the present. Transgender individuals are unique in that their internal/gender identity does not match their biological birth identity. The narratives of transgender individuals will help researchers across all fields of academia understand more fully the relationship of gender and identity.



### **Semi-Structured Narrative Interview Procedure**

This study was qualitative in nature and an open narrative interview method was utilized to elicit personal narratives from participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The narrative interview creates a setting that encourages and stimulates interviewees to tell a story (or stories) about significant events in their lives (Bauer, 1996). The research was guided by participants retelling of the past in recorded interviews and subsequent analysis. Interpretive/qualitative research with the combination of constructivist theory allows for theory to emerge from the data itself (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Social construction theory (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) views human development and identity development as a process through which individuals undergo continuous change. Unique biological, environmental, cultural, and social contexts are the major determinants of identity development. The method of narrative interview is the basic idea of reconstructing both private and social events from the perspective of the transgender person as direct as possible (Bauer, 1996) and gain insight to their own ideas of reality and self as they emerged through the stories of their lives. I aimed to allow personal theories of gender to emerge from direct questions such as, "What does gender mean to you? When did you first realize your gender identity?" (See Appendix A).

The semi-structured interview was adopted from a study conducted by Cashore and Tuason (2009) wherein they interviewed bi-sexual and transgender individuals coming to understand their identities and interactions with others in the process. The interview questions aided in understanding (a) the process of coming to understand their gender identity, (b) their comfort/discomfort identifying somewhere along the gender

binary system, (c) the experiences of oppression/validation and exclusion/welcomeness from family, friends, co-workers, etc., (d) and the changes they personally went through both physically and emotionally in regards to biological sex alignment surgery. The questions I asked were not limited to those referenced above because with the open interview method the hope was particular questions/answers would lead to exploratory narratives. In addition, I was open to questions from participants about the research and aims of analysis.

When conducting and analyzing the interviews, it was important for me to consistently be aware of my status as a heterosexual woman (Price, 1996). This acknowledgment of my own perspective was the foundation of my ethically based study in that I aimed to reflexively recognize and consider my own biases and prejudices (Ely, 1991). Given that the narratives told in this research are about the sensitive experiences in individuals' lives, it was important to come from a place of aiming to understand transgender issues. As Price (1996) explains, "The pre-understanding that guides narrative research can be based on general life experiences" (p. 281). In this case, the understanding I had about transgender issues was from both general life experiences and personal relationships with individuals who identify as transgender (though, those interviewed are not personal friends). I was also very aware of what I could not understand and how I might come to understand through the interviews.

As a heterosexual woman, I was also aware of assumptions about sexuality. This research is not centered on issues of sexuality, but I was strongly aware that sexuality is a large part of identity. Many of the participants expressed their interest in both men and women and I was cognizant to keep the interviews very professional and as benign as

the subject matter would allow. During at least two of the interviews, sex became a large part of the dialogue. I was as efficient as possible to steer the conversation back to the issues under investigation without alienating the participants.

### **Participants**

I first met one of the participants while editing a publication honoring women and their service to the local community. It was through this relationship that I discovered the beauty and ubiquitous nature of the transgender journey. I mentioned the project in confidence and she offered to initially serve as a central contact. She was gracious in contacting other transgender individuals, asking their permission to give me their contact information. She gave me a list of people she knows through the Transgender Community Center. The volunteer participants were contacted primarily through email requesting their participation and important contribution to understanding identity. In all, I interviewed five transgender individuals who have completed the surgery after the age of 42. Two of the five had children. Four of the five are white, the fifth immigrating to the United States at three years of age. Each participant was in a heterosexual marriage that ended in divorce, during which they identified as transgender individuals. (This was prior to surgery. Often post surgery trans individuals identify as their newly aligned sex organs.) All of the participants were employed in a small, very conservative city in the Pacific Northwest. They all continue to reside in this city. Sexual orientation was discovered in the interview process, but not the foci of the project. All participants were advised they would be given pseudonyms for the final project.

## **Interviews**

The interview questions guided the participants to share their life journey of the transgender experience. Narratives of the decision to fully transition by electing to have sexual alignment surgery and the subsequent journey offered insight into the role gender plays in identity. I was cognizant of the personal and sensitive nature of both the process of narrating the past and living as a transgender individual. I studied at length the issues surrounding the transgender experience and took/take very seriously the courageousness of their decisions to transition from a long established life to a new life. It was my duty as the interviewer to be mindful to be emotionally distant and at the same time, close enough to be both understanding and critical toward the interviewees and their narrations (Bar-on, 1996). Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Contact began in December 2011, after approval from the Boise State University Institutional Review Board, through email addresses provided by the central contact. In a script provided to all potential participants, I outlined the goals of the project, the process by which I would obtain confidentiality, and recognized the sensitive nature of the study (Appendix B). Once email confirmation was obtained, I asked each participant for their preferred method of communication, for example, phone, email, text, etc., and used that method to set up initial interviews and follow up contact, if necessary. Each interview was conducted face to face. Before the interview, I presented a consent form, read through it with the participant, answered any questions and addressed any concerns put forth by the participant. Once an understanding of the research was established, I asked each participant to sign and date the consent form.

### **Data Analysis**

After conducting five interviews, I transcribed the recorded narrative data verbatim, resulting in more than 100 pages of transcription. After transcribing, I read each interview independently while taking notes in regards to particularly intriguing issues, experiences, reflections, and observations. My aim was to focus the data from the grand interview transcription to workable and manageable data to be compared and contrasted with all other data compiled (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The focusing of data process allowed for themes and organizational patterns to emerge from which conclusions were drawn (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

I identified an initial list of codes based on the content of the participants' responses. Once this list was compiled, the codes were indexed into core ideas or themes that were shared by each participant. From there, patterns and uniqueness emerged from the narratives of identity development in the transgender experience.

In analysis, themes and experiences were identified, compared, and contrasted to find commonality and uniqueness amongst transgender individual life stories. Following a loose model of Grounded Theory, taken from Corbin and Strauss (1990), I divided my findings into concepts and categories. The concepts, in my research, related to the common experiences among the interview participants. "The incidents, events, happenings are taken as, or analyzed as, potential indicators of phenomena, which are thereby given conceptual labels" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7). Further, when analyzing the interview transcripts, I looked for thematic categories across the stories told among the participants. "Categories are higher in level and more abstract than the concepts they represent. They are generated through the same analytic process of

making comparisons to highlight similarities and differences that is used to produce lower level concepts. Categories are the ‘cornerstones’ of developing theory” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7). The categories that emerged related to common experiences resonating across the emergent narratives such as: realizing the disconnect of their sex and gender, coming out to their community, deciding to have the surgery, and making the transition after surgery.

I then applied categories/themes to reveal common tension-filled moments across the stories in the interviews. The findings below reveal four emergent categories that demonstrate collective tension-filled moments in the life narratives of the transgender women who participated in this study. The first tension I identified is Illumination vs. Elimination wherein the transgender individual experienced moments of acute awareness of an illuminated female gender and an eliminated male gender simultaneously. The second tension I identified is Fight or Flight when they decided whether to fight for their gender or end their lives. The third tension is Post Surgery Affect where the participants describe their feelings about their newly constructed bodies. The last emergent tension is Separation of Gender and Identity wherein I asked the participants if they can separate their gender from their identity.

The following chapter presents the collective narrative of the women participating in this study organized around the emergent categories that reveal four tension-filled moments in the collective narrative of transgender experience among these women. It is through analysis of the findings that the propositions emerged for the final discussion chapter.

### CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

In this section, I describe the findings of the interviews with the transgender participants. I identify and elaborate on four specific tensions emergent in the collective narrative of the transgender experiences of the women participating in this study. Overall, the findings indicate gender and identity are both interdependent and separate constructs that influence how participants interpret who they are in the world. While scholars recognize that identity is plural (Allen, 2011) and fragmented (Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004), this study demonstrates gender is also plural and fragmented. Both gender and identity are socially constructed pluralities of meanings and norms that emerge anew in any given moment.

The transgender individuals in this particular study lived lives in which their physical presentation to their respective external worlds was, for many years, a male presentation. They lived lives according to the hegemonic binary system in which women present themselves as heterosexual female women and men are heterosexual male men. In short, the participants presented as heterosexual men whose gender characteristics were in accordance to the normative male model. However, the participants' internal gender identities were far from the external gender display. They each had fixed male gender roles following the hegemonic norms in society reinforcing the male/female binary. Yet, each struggled intensely as they internally identified as female, thus fighting against the precise binary oppressing their internal female identity.

Their external identity was fixed, presenting in all their public action. Internal identity was fixed also everywhere they went, although not public. Yet, they felt their true identity, the melding of the two, was nowhere.

In the sections below, I identify four crucial tension filled moments in the collective narrative among the transgender women that emerged across all of the interviews. In these moments, two interesting things happened. First, the binary assumptions about gender were exposed to be false, and, instead, the plural constructions of gender became apparent. Second, in these moments, the transgender participants uncovered that the tie/relationship between gender and identity was more complicated than simply male identity/role versus female/identity/role. Rather, the participants demonstrated that how a person identifies can be both male and female simultaneously.

In the first section, I identify the tension Illumination vs. Elimination wherein the transgender individual experiences moments of acute awareness of an illuminated female gender and an eliminated male gender, simultaneously. In this multi-dimensional moment, the individual's identity as a female subverts the normative culture of gender identification, highlighting a connection previously unknown, yet eliminates two very important and seemingly distinct identities: comfort with the current male identity being portrayed, as well as the future identity as a "full bodied" woman, the ultimate convergence of identities. In these first moments of awareness, the participants were strongly aware of the identification with femaleness, as well as the impossibility of living life as a woman. In this multi-dimensional moment, the individual's identity seems to exist yet not exist.



The second tension I identified is Fight or Flight. The “fight or flight” response is the body’s primitive, automatic, internal response that prepares the body to “fight” or “flee” from the perceived attack, harm, or threat to one’s survival. When experiencing excessive stress, whether from internal worry or external circumstances, a bodily reaction is triggered, called the “fight or flight” response. Each participant narrated a particular moment in their lives where they faced only two options: to fight for their true gender representation or commit suicide.

The third tension is Post Surgery Affect. I asked each participant what they felt when awakening from their alignment surgery. Each individual discussed how they had lived with a disconnection and displacement from their penises while fantasizing about the connection they would have with a vagina. They had an imaginary participation with a vagina, a body part as an artifact foreign to their specific genetic makeup. Each participant felt a melding of their external and internal identities after waking up from their surgery. They felt relief at having the penis removed and found that the vagina gave them balance and a sense of normalcy.

Interestingly, the participants spoke about their surgery as more of an after thought than a huge moment in their lives. It was as if the surgery was like taking off a bandage of a healed wound. The surgery was more of a counter balance than a be-all-end all solution to the problem of their disconnect with their bodies. While an imperfect representation of self, the vagina was certainly a closer identifier, and because there exists only one other sex organ, the vagina became the default structure.

The fourth tension I named Separation of Gender and Identity. I culminated each interview with the question: “Is there a difference between gender and identity?” The

transgender individual simultaneously highlighted the separation of gender and identity and the interdependence of gender and identity. Similar to the first category, aspects of identity are illuminated and eliminated via sex organs, biology, experiences, and social norms. This question asks the participant to identify if she thinks there is a separation between the two. At the very least, the participants brought forth the contradictions regarding gender and identity in their narratives.

### **Illumination vs. Elimination**

In this section, I show the tension of Illumination and Elimination emerging from the narratives of the participants in this study. Here the transgender individual experiences a moment of acute awareness of an illuminated female identity and an eliminated male gender, simultaneously.

Erin remembers the illumination of her female identity, or at the very least, the disconnect with her male identity. She was in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 7 or 8 years old:

“I can remember getting in trouble and being sent to the cloak room, and that was a cool thing because I snuck around and tried on little girl coats. That was pretty neat and there were girls in my class that I didn’t want to play with, I wanted to BE them. I remember, at that age, I just felt that it wasn’t fair not being able to be a girl and forced to be a boy. I knew this would never change. And I was always in fear of being found out. I put it away but it would never stay away.”

In her mind, at such a young age, Erin did not want to be a boy; she learned she wanted to be a girl because Erin was drawn to the pretty coats and the activities in which young girls were participating. Because the “pretty” coats and “girl” activities meant being female, and other activities meant being male, Erin was not comfortable identifying as a boy. “I was able to touch my femininity through the softness of female

things. Always alone, never in public.” Erin simultaneously experienced identifying with what was designated “girl” or “female” as being something to hide, something about which to be ashamed. Her joy and release when playing with girls in her class or touching “pretty” things eliminated Erin as a boy.

Jenn had a similar experience, recalling the first time she realized her internal identity did not match her physical identity.

“I distinctly remember seeing a girl.... With shoulder length hair... with a blonde streak right down the middle, and thinking, oh, that is so cute and also thinking there is absolutely no way my mother would ever allow me to do this. I remember being very saddened by this fact, that I would never be able to express myself that way. I certainly had inkling that I don’t like this male role at all.”

Jenn saw in one of her peers, a color of hair and was drawn to the expression of some sort of identity. Something inside her five-year-old self told her the coloring of the hair was only for girls. The external designator of a blonde streak in hair created a fracture for Jenn. She was acutely aware that she “...would never be able to express myself that way” because the power figure in her life would never allow it.

Jenn also reported that she did not feel like a boy because of the way they interacted.

“I didn’t really care for the banter they would get into... the competitiveness that just did not really feel they were friendships I could really trust. If I was feeling something and needed to discuss it, I just did not feel I could do that with a guy... it was the sort of emotional intimacy that is not present with guys.”

Because Jenn wanted to express her feelings and find intimacy in interactions, she learned that she identified more closely with the female gender.

And later, when Jenn turned 11, just after her parents’ divorce, her awareness heightened. “I remember getting more and more distaste for the things that were

happening to me, and I certainly remember going and taking a pair of tweezers and removing all the hair off my legs. Which took hours.”

Jenn’s body was doing exactly what it ought to do biologically and developmentally speaking, yet she despised the results as they alienated her from her from the meanings and gender presentations with which she identified. Despising the hair on her legs yet loving the calm she felt cross-dressing were moments of illuminating her internal gender and eliminating any connection she felt with her male development.

Liz had a similar experience when she first felt disconnected with her physical body. Liz was very close to her niece, Trina, who was only 2 years younger than Liz, and the two of them spent long days playing together. Liz felt so close to Trina, as if they were sisters. Her mother often made clothes for Trina, who lived 20 miles away. Liz’s mother would make Liz (as a young boy) put on the dresses to see the length, size, etc., because Liz and Trina were so close in stature. She thought it was, “so cool,” although she never spoke about it. She felt so comfortable in the dresses and wanted to keep them for herself. “But I didn’t say that... I could never admit to it. I just knew I was wrong.”

I asked Liz how she knew it was necessary to keep that feeling a secret.

“I don’t know, how does one know how to breathe? It is kind of instinct based on little things you hear everywhere, I guess. My mom caught me once, as a child, wearing my sister’s clothes. She didn’t say anything; she just walked out and gave me a look that I knew if I ever told, I would be alone the rest of my life.”

Then later, as a teenager, she became overwhelmed with the confusion the illumination/elimination conflict saturating her life.

“I would get up and put boy clothes on, thinking, God, this is just totally wrong, but I would do it anyway because that is what I am supposed to do. ...So when I had a conversation with myself it would be more like, ‘I wish this were prettier, this was silkier... And you just know you can’t go down that road unless you are totally alone.’”

Liz paused for some time before continuing,

“You know, I look back at it and think, it’s like an actor...it’s like you know people assume you’re this character when you’re really not, you are a completely different person. So, all my memories, all my experiences, all my everything, I was conforming 24 hours a day, seven days a week to what I was supposed to be, a boy. And then when you finally say ‘To hell with this job, I want to quit,’ you know, you change.”

In Tiffany’s memory, her identification process came in the form of interactions with her two younger brothers, and later on the school yard.

“I knew I was different from my brothers... They watched this TV show called “Combat” and I could not stand to watch it. It was so sad. Then we played these games of war with kids on the street and I would stay back in the hospital and be one of the nurses or doctors. I did not want to be one of the soldiers running around. I like helping my mom bake and things like that.”

“But it was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade that I really knew I wanted to be a girl. I met Claire, she and I could really talk and I could share things with her that I could not share with boys. I never told her but it may have been that I felt so close to her that I felt more like her than I did the boys.” Tiffany could not communicate with boys as intimately as she could with girls but when she moved to upstate New York in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, she modified her communication skills. “I changed. As I got older I really stifled who I was, a lot, because I knew it was wrong. I knew it was sick. I settled in and played football and I fought a lot.”

After Tiffany had narrated her experiences as a child, I asked Tiffany, “If I had met you in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and I asked ‘Who are you?’ what would you have said, and what would you have wanted to say?” Tiffany laughed and took some time to reflect.

“I would have told you I liked baseball and that I like Patricia Kiley and I was really into science and wanted to become a scientist. And what I would have wanted to say was that I wished there was some way I could become a girl. If I could have just said anything, I mean, I used to just dream for decades there would be different fantasies, but one what that aliens would come to earth and they had a way to change gender back and forth. So, I could switch and live my life as a woman and then when I had to see my family, I could switch back and I would never have to tell my family.”

“Looking back on it...I really just did not have a clue of how I was supposed to interact in life and was just looking around at how other guys were doing it and trying to act like them. I was so tall at 13, I was really afraid I was going to be well over six feet tall and part of me was scared because then I could never really be a woman if I was that big. Looking around is how I learned to act. I was hugely unhappy so I got into a lot of fist fights and played sports. I was mean. But I always knew what was going on. I knew I did not want to be doing that. And I was really sad about it. It was horrible.”

Tiffany’s emotions started to emerge as she stopped me before moving on to my next question. “Something else happened in 6<sup>th</sup> grade that I think is relevant.” It was the late 1960’s and the cool word for kids to say was “homosexual.” One night, Tiffany asked her dad to define homosexual. “It’s when a man loves a man and a woman loves a woman. Why?” Tiffany did not respond verbally but this was the time that she had begun dressing in women’s clothing. Tiffany’s voice broke up as she finished the story,

“I started dressing and I have a feeling my dad found out about that because if I ever had any feminine behavior he was pretty brutal about it. He didn’t beat me physically for it, but would have been better had he because he ripped me to shreds emotionally.”

Finally, the disconnect became too much,

“I quit playing football; I did not like being that violent... I did it the honorable way. I went all the way through spring training, which is worse because there are no pads, but I made it through so they would know I was not a pussy.”

In college, Tiffany took her desire to be a woman versus the need to be accepted by society one step further.

“There would be times the gender thing would become so strong that I would accumulate clothes and I would dress more often... stay in the clothes longer... but I had facial hair, I didn’t like facial hair, but I was afraid to cut it because I thought it would make it too obvious to the rest of the world. I really did, I know that sounds ridiculous but I did. I thought it would be so obvious so I always at least had a mustache.”

Despite her distaste for facial hair, Tiffany used it to eliminate her female identity, illuminating even deeper, her disconnect with her male body as well as her dream to live as a woman.

Rachel narrates her childhood as one of disconnect. She was two years old when her family immigrated to the United States from South America and Spanish was her primary language throughout her childhood years. The language barrier was an additional factor in Rachel’s disconnect with her surrounding community. Because of the language barrier, Rachel found a love of painting at a very young age. She would seek to find portraits and emulate the skills she found in other’s work.

“The first time I saw a painting of a nude woman, I was so young but so taken by it. I mean, I was enamored, like wow, this is so beautiful, this is what I want. It was so clear, like I could really relate to the woman in the picture. But I couldn’t because boys dressed like this, did these kinds of things and girls did this.”

I asked Rachel what it was that boys did, and what did she adopt?

“Well, I was afraid, basically. I was alone. This is the thing that isolated me from the rest of the world and I basically saw how people saw and reacted to things, how mean they were to people who were different...And I learned, mainly because I felt I had to. I became very very good at being macho. Boys were

afraid of me. I was like the toughest person in school, all the way through high school. I had sex at 16 to prove myself. I eventually ended up having sex with hundreds of women... Guys looked up to me for that.”

All the while though, Rachel was secretly cross-dressing.

“It [cross dressing] was scary. I mean it felt good. It was kinda like one step closer to being one person for me, a woman. In high school, I didn’t have any money so I would steal stuff, not dresses... panties, underwear and it was only for a short time. Then I would feel guilty and hide everything or throw it away and go on and try to forget about it. But as time went on, it just became a normal part of me. I think by my 20s I was basically wearing female underclothes all the time.”

Fractured deeply, Rachel fell into depression and heavy use of alcohol and drugs as she moved through her 20s and into her 30s as she sought to eliminate the strong desire to live as a woman, and highlight her manhood.

The participants all highlighted distinct moments in their lives when they simultaneously felt illuminated—awakened to a new sense of themselves. Yet this new sense of them also illuminated a new sense of the way in which the world sees gender and sex. Suddenly, the socially constructed rules, by which our society is guided, were more powerfully present in their lives, if even on an unconscious level. Something inside them had been awakened, yet, simultaneously, because of the powerful socially constructed rules, the dream of living re-aligned, was eliminated. In the next section, the effects of living in this conundrum emerge when they are faced with fighting for their gender or committing suicide.

### **Fight vs. Flight**

In this section, the participant’s narratives turned to the tension when the pressure to either stay in the closet or come out became too intense and they had to make



a choice. They had to choose whether to continue living/presenting as a male while internally identifying as female versus taking flight and coming out as a transgender individual and begin the transition, changing their biological make-up. I start first with Erin.

The moment Erin realized it was possible to live as a woman and not be rejected by society occurred when Erin went on a work related workshop in Las Vegas.

“I went to Vegas and looked up lounges and stuff... and there was this lounge that was transgender friendly. I didn't even know they existed, I thought I was the only one, heaven forbid be there anyone else like me. I drove by the place five or six times, but never went in. That is how fearful I was.”

Erin returned home. Four months later she had another workshop in Vegas and this time went to that same club. “It was a revelation! I didn't even know they could do facial surgery to feminize men. So I started doing research online. It became very evident that I needed to do something.”

Being exposed to the possibility of living as a woman within an accepting society created hope for Erin, but upon returning home, the environment in which she lived did not support that particular dream. Erin began to fall into a deeper depression as the fracture inside her grew. “I mean, I went from not even realizing it was possible and then realizing I could lose everything. You know, I was living the American Dream... I had kids, grandkids, a house, cars, boats, a good job... I was living the man's dream.” Erin told her wife that she was cross-dressing. “And then my depression really started, my secret was lifted, but not really. My wife didn't understand and ignored it.”

At age 54, Erin was sitting at home in the middle of the night, crying in her office when her daughter came home and knew something was wrong. “I would have

offed myself that night if she hadn't been there... I scared myself." Erin sought out therapy and eventually was diagnosed as Gender Identity Disorder. She made the decision to divorce her wife.

"I realized there would be a change in family dynamics and that history of being a dad would, which I never wanted to be. I wanted to be a mom. So even as a dad it was difficult for me because I wasn't able to be what I wanted to be. I wanted to be the mom, not the bread winner, not the father who felt he could not be involved in my kid's lives because I was a guy, not like a mom who could be involved... Changing the dynamic to become the other mom was fully acceptable to me."

Erin's daughter accepted Erin's changes, but her son and Erin have been estranged for five years (at the point of this interview). "I just look at it as like, I could have been dead, you know. Would that have solved the problem? Maybe. But I didn't want to die, I wanted to live and I wanted to live in my true identity."

Erin made a difficult choice, considering her culture, age, marital status, etc. She chose to fight for her gender and a physical manifestation that more accurately aligned with her internal gendered feelings. She chose to fight but at the same time, chose to end a fight she had been battling almost her entire life.

Another participant, Jenn, described the same moment moving from flight away identifying in public as a mismatched gender, to fighting to identify with the gender that made more sense to them.

It was the summer of 2008 when Jenn decided she could no longer live inside her secret. It was the year her wife had gone on sabbatical in Germany.

"Over the course of the year, I had a lot more freedom than I previously did. I should probably put it out there that my ex is an extremely controlling kind of person, jealous and isolating, much more male than me."

Jenn went out frequently over that year dressed fully as a woman and had begun to make friends. Eventually she came out to two women who worked at a local bar. Each experience was positive for Jenn. “I don’t remember ever having a discussion with a woman who was not anything but positive, with the exception of my wife and mother. Men just don’t know how to be that intimate.”

Jenn picked up her wife from the airport and almost immediately expressed the issue to which her wife responded, “So does that mean you want to change?” Jenn paused a long time here in the interview. “I did want to change. I was presenting as extremely cold, depressed, introverted uh person who had this wall. You just looked at me and got nothing. Now I am completely different.” Jenn and her wife divorced not long after.

Their marriage was not as happy as it appeared. I asked Jenn what it was like, having the role of husband. She told me they rarely had sex and it was a very platonic relationship.

“We were married for 20 years and we may have had sex 20 times... Um, from my point of view, it was just plain wrong. It was like, hello, um no, I am here and you are the one who is supposed to be initiating everything, and by the way, this appendage that is attached to me is the wrong one.”

Consequently, they did not have children. “...I was very glad because I did not want to take on the role of father. I would have *loved* to have been a mother but my ex would not have allowed there to be a family with two mothers.” Jenn and her ex no longer have contact with one another.

Liz too came out to her wife first and she was immediately encouraged to seek professional help. “So, I started to talk to one, the first one I went to almost killed me, literally.” Liz saw the psychologist 7 times and was suicidal after that final visit.

“He only talked about curing me... after that last visit; he had ridden over any of my Christian beliefs that said suicide is wrong... He said you live in the role you are in and live that way because that is what your body says you are.”

Fortunately, on the way home from that appointment Liz pulled into the parking lot of a Catholic church, too hysterical to drive. Sitting in the cab of her truck, sobbing, a deacon came to her door. ‘I remember grabbing my steering wheel, crying, and I said, “God, why won’t anyone talk to me?’ and then there he was. And he was really great, he said, ‘Liz, you can’t be true to everybody else until you are true to yourself.’ So, he didn’t throw nothing at me, no holy water or anything.” Pausing here, Liz offered some reflection.

“You know, if I had talked to that first counselor first, before my ex-wife, I may have been able to live in silence, but once you open the can of worms, it is gone. Once you find out that your family is going to be totally against you, you can’t undo that. So that was the point that pushed me over, and it was scary.”

Liz shared this experience with her wife and at the time they weren’t sure how to move forward. Shortly after, Liz had a business trip to California. Her wife encouraged her to “go do things as a female, fully dressed.” Liz decided to try. She found a community in California that had weekend barbeques. She began attending, dressed as a woman but fully disclosing that she lived as a man in her home town.

“It was so amazing because I was among people that were doing similar things to what I was. There were all kinds of TG (transgender) people, and lots of them freak me out. I know that may sound crazy but it’s like there were cross dressers, transvestites, and drag queens, and everything. I wasn’t judgmental, of course.”

Liz was finding safety in her new community while feeling fractured by her life back home. She was checking in with her wife each evening, answering the probing questions with honesty and new clarity. “I said I did this and that, and she would ask me questions and I answered them truthfully. I said what I am finding out is that this runs a lot deeper than I suspected.”

Another variable in the equation was the daughter Liz and her wife adopted, who was now two years old. When she came back from California, not ready to leave her family, she began to make subtle changes. She shaved her beard and found a local transgender community center that hosted weekly support group meetings.

“I was still living and working as a male. I was going to TG meetings as female. I was still married and my wife and daughter were both in the house. It was hard not to cross paths. My wife knew but would be elsewhere when I got ready...my daughter helped me do my makeup. She was only two but thought it was cool.”

This schedule began to wear Liz down and she finally made the decision to transition and her wife wanted a divorce. “I mean, I would have stayed in that role, in that situation, should my wife had been ok. But she wasn’t. I truly loved her. I still do.” At this point, Liz begins to cry as she narrates. “So, that sent me over the edge. I am not going to stay in the grey.” Liz and her ex-wife remain good friends and talk often. They share custody of their daughter who now has two moms. “As soon as I transitioned, I became mom. It was so natural. She is good with it.”

Tiffany demonstrates that she too reached a moment of fight or flight. She recalled that beginning in 1988 she began a deliberate journey to make herself a man. After many failed love affairs and drug use, she needed a drastic change and was still terrified to come out to anyone.

“I always wanted to be a writer, so I picked one and began to emulate them. I chose Hemmingway. I quit my job as an accountant, began hunting and fishing. I came out West to fly fish... I was really consciously wanting to move to the West and learn how to be a man. It was conscious; there was nothing subtle about it.”

I asked Tiffany to elaborate on what it means to be a man.

“...For me, being a man was always about doing these things because I never really, at the elemental core level... never got it. I would talk with guys and the way they viewed women and I never got it. I used to think it was just bullshit they were telling each other... For me, it was always just a list of things to do.”

In 1991, Tiffany went back to school to become a biology teacher and then met her (to be) wife. “We got married in a stable and you could hear horses in the background. We took over a whole dude ranch and had horseback riding for the kids. But the marriage was not good.” Shortly after the wedding, Tiffany received a job offer in another state. Her wife stayed behind and in 1995, the marriage dissolved. Tiffany never told her wife about her gender identity. I asked her why she could not tell her. “She used to say, ‘I need you to be the man here.’ She wanted somebody to make all the decisions and take care of everything. I didn’t want that.”

For the next four years, Tiffany describes drinking heavily. However, she was seeing a counselor who encouraged her to begin living her life, while not at work, as a woman. “So I did. I started presenting as a woman in the evening. I would go home and switch genders and in the morning go back to my old self.” She began to run into people she knew in her small area of town and gave honest accounts of where she was in her life. “They got the 15 minute talk...I have known since I was very young and have struggled my whole life and deeply closeted about it.” She rarely found resistance within these encounters.

She began to gain confidence and finally made the choice. “I kept trying to imagine a life without going through transition and it was completely black.” At this time, Tiffany had been sober for over a year. “I talked to my sponsor, talked to God, and got my answer. I went to the endocrinologist and everything was fine. I began my transition.”

Tiffany did meet resistance when she told her oldest brother who began to leave threatening messages on her phone.

“He said, ‘I don’t know who you have been hanging out with up there,’ as if peer pressure made me do this, ‘but I think it is ridiculous and you better call me back.’ But finally we talked and between him and my other brother, we decided I would not tell my parents. So I only go home once a year, at Christmas, and when I go home, I go home as my old self, which is really hard... But I did it and it was miracle.”

As Tiffany, Jenn, Liz, and Erin all narrated the stories of the moments they stopped fighting the gender meanings that made sense to them, they highlighted the destruction that not living in their preferred gender created. Failed relationships, heavy drinking, and suicide were the pinnacle moments, given life in these narratives, the moved participants from flight to fight. Rachel’s story also demonstrates how devastating the flight experience can be and how freeing the fight could be.

Before Rachel came out to the public, she had tried to kill herself numerous times.

“I was 18 the first time. I couldn’t deal with it... I did heavy drugs many times. I would just do the craziest things and I just had no fear and that added to everyone’s view. Oh man, that is one tough dude... I showed no fear and guys respected that.”

She began to see a psychiatrist to whom she told everything.

“It finally hit home when she said to me one day, ‘Rachel, if you are dead, you lose everything, including your life. But if you do something, you may lose some things, not all of them, or you might lose them all but at least you can be alive, but if you are dead, there are no possibilities.’ And when she put it that way, I was like, Ok, I have nothing to lose and everything to gain.”

Rachel had married a woman to whom she was very close and had known about Rachel’s gender identity for many years. Yet, when Rachel initially told her wife, there was great confusion on her partner’s side. Rachel showed her the paintings she had done as a child, transforming her young boy-self into a woman.

“Remember I told you that I started using myself as a basis for drawing women, I pulled them out and showed her. I said, ‘See this is me, that’s me.’ That’s when she understood and began to be very supportive. “We were still married even when I started the living full time.”

Rachel still has great sadness over the loss of her marriage.

“I think, that personally if she was ok with being with a woman, we would still be married. I would have just loved it, but you know. I wouldn’t have to be hiding any more. And the rest of the world, all the crap I take at work with other people, would not matter. But, it didn’t work out that way, so...”

Rachel’s family was accepting of her decision to transition, for the most part.

“My nephew, who is an adult, got all religious on me and basically said I am making a holy mistake. I told him I would have killed myself and that is murder so I avoided the biggest sin of all. My mom does not speak English all that well, but she heard me. She will always love and adore me.”

Rachel’s father passed away a month before she planned to travel to Thailand for her surgery. He never learned about Rachel’s transition experience.

### **Post-Surgery Affect**

After participants narrated these very personal stories, we transitioned to discussing how they began to fight through their alignment surgery. I asked participants



what they felt when awakening from their alignment surgery. Each individual described how they had lived with a disconnection and displacement from their male body and the new connection with their female sexed body. Interestingly, an unexpected tension about their old body emerged after the surgery. Below, I begin again with Erin's story first.

I asked Erin what it was like when she came out of surgery and the drugs wore off and she could feel her body.

“It was like coming home. You know a penis on my body was a novelty... I never even took one look at it before surgery. And I felt it was something that was used to discriminate against me; you know by having it and by not having it gave me peace. So I just felt a sense of coming home I guess.”

She paused for some time, and then released a heavy sigh. “This is the way it should have been before and to have to go through this for the last 50+ years is something that has finally been corrected.”

Erin felt like a woman before the surgery and I asked her if she felt more like a woman now or a total person.

“Both. My gender mind was finally starting to match my gender physiology... I think the surgery was just another milestone in my womanhood: the diagnoses of hormones, the name change, the beginning to living full time as a woman, the surgery; all of those are milestones on my path to womanhood.”

She said it was more about getting rid of the hormones. “It's what's up here than down there. My sex organs aren't going to define me but it needed physiological balance.” Erin followed that with concern about her maturing womanhood.

“I don't really know what it is, womanhood. Because I wasn't socialized as a girl, I worry about a lot of things with regards to being in the community of women. They can be so close with one another, and I am still guarded, like I was as a male. I still question my womanhood, I guess, because of my history and wonder am I truly living as a woman fully.”

I asked Erin if she questioned her identity as a woman or being/acting as woman.

She said it's more about putting away the maleness than trying to perform a woman.

"I meet so many women that I respect and every woman I come in contact with will be observed as a model for me. There are lot women I have great respect for and I don't know that I want to be exactly like them but there are certain traits that shape me. It's still about putting maleness away. I have done a lot of that. I don't know if performance is right, because I don't like performing as a woman because it identifies woman. I am not trying to do a performance."

Jenn too described what it was like after her surgery.

"In some ways it was very important [surgery] and in other ways it is kind of like an afterthought. I mean, after all, it was a year after I had went living full time. It is nice because I can legally change my gender marker, I am legally a female. It had a lot to do with my own internal feeling for myself."

Jenn had recently performed in the play, "Vagina Monologues" when I conducted this interview. Jenn was cast in the play as one of the leading actresses.

"It certainly made doing the Vagina Monologues easier. I cannot imagine having done the play, it would have freaked me out going up there and talking about my vagina if I didn't actually have one... yeah, sure, you are onstage, you are acting, you are not necessarily talking about yourself but still it would have been awfully weird to do that."

Jenn also talked about the taking away the maleness rather than performing some "thing."

"There is this internal perception that doesn't change, really. I sort of chafe when I get people who say, 'So how was it when you became a woman?' What was it like when you stopped pretending to be someone else, now there is a fair question. There are things I consciously try to do, I know people watch me move and they know my gender history by watching me move. Women just don't move like that. Hopefully those things are going away."

Jenn has 200 hours of electrolysis, and laser surgeries, and hormones to take, and is enrolled in a voice class.

“They asked, ‘Who do you want your voice to sound like?’ And I just wrote, well, me... I just want my voice to have a new voice that matches my internal voice but I definitely don’t want it to be a copy of somebody else’s.”

When I asked Liz what it was like to awake from her surgery, she was brief and to the point.

“Surgery was out of convenience so I didn’t have to take any more pills. But it was simple and it turned out my insurance covered it. Next thing I know, I am awakened it’s done and they have me all sewn and closed. I did awesome and had no problems. I was where I belonged and I knew if I did have a relationship it would be nice to have the right plumbing.”

I also asked Tiffany to talk about what it was like for her to wake up with her new body.

“Um, so when I used to look at myself in the mirror, it just looked weird... And then when I started doing hormones and growing breasts, it looked less weird but it still looked weird. But then after my surgery, it looked right. I don’t know how else to say it. I have had the experience twice before, when I knew I was a woman. But this time, when I had a vagina, and I started to feel it, it was a completely familiar feeling.”

Tiffany said she is less worried about her being/acting as woman these days than she originally was. “I thought for a long time, ‘I am falling down on the job, like I am not being enough of a woman, but it’s just a matter of becoming who I am. Ok, so I am a woman and I am not the world’s most feminine women and I am ok with that, now. I wish I was prettier of course, you know. One thing about being transgender you get to form who you want to be.”

Rachel was quick to tell me how she felt after surgery.

“As soon as I healed, the only thing I said to myself was, ‘You need to lose a little weight. Everything else fits perfectly.’ The only thing I worry about sometimes is the way other people view me because when you live 50 years a certain way it is going to affect you... You are not going to be able to get rid of certain things. I am not the shy type. When I see something I want, I go for it. I

remember my ex saying, 'women don't do that.' I am like, no, YOU don't do that, I do. I mean, just because I changed my body to what I feel it should be, does not mean that this goes away. The external is less important. This is still me in here."

### **Reflections on the Relationship between Gender and Identity**

At the end of the stories, I asked the participants to reflect on gender and identity. This section highlights the tension between the two.

Erin responded, she didn't believe there was a difference between gender and identity. She stated,

"I don't think so, no, I don't think so. My identity has always been a woman but I had to put that away and present as a gender male but my identity has never changed with coming out and with living as a woman and presenting as a woman."

Jenn responded differently stating there was a definite difference between gender and identity. Jenn stated,

"Yeah," laughing, "Yes!" Ok, so my gender identity is my sense of how I fit into the world in terms of interactions that are taken to be typically male or female. I mean, yes, I am comfortable with and feel that my interactions with the rest of the world are more closely associated with those that are on average like the female population. Unlike, what on average we tend to think of the male population? On the other hand, not all men are alike and not all women are alike and nor should they be. I can say I identify as female, which is short hand for saying, 'my feeling about how I should interact with other people and how I feel about a lot of things are more similar to the average female than the average male. But, identity in general? I mean, there are certainly other things to that make up, my career, I am a member of the scientific and academic communities. There are many things about me that have nothing to do with gender."

Liz stated,

"No, gender, I think I use the term gender as your true self. That is why I have a gender identity disorder. It's what I had. It identifies one gender but you are physically the other. So, gender I take it as mental, that's how I look at it. May not be right but you have to somehow distinguish between them. My gender was always female."

Whereas Tiffany responded,

“Yes [there is a difference between identity and gender]. So, to me, the thing is, there is a core central identity of who we really are, call it a soul or central identity, but it is the center of who we are. Then you start putting these layers on the outside of that and really close to that core is gender. It is one of your basic things. And then you might add on other little pieces like race might be a component or what I do for a living, or where you live, being an old hippie... Those are peripheral components of identity but there is something central within those confines that is beyond all other labels... So, like I said I couldn't be happy until I got my gender situation arranged, that is true, but I still need to find some way of synthesizing the rest that makes sense with my spiritual being. So, gender is really important but it is only one piece of it.”

I then asked Tiffany, “What transcended from Steve to Tiffany?” She smiled deeply and sighed,

“Most of it. My career, my spirituality, my AA, my yoga. I thought the gender thing would be a big deal, and it is, but once it is all said and done, it really is about finding... finding some way for me to be happy and serene and content about my life. And the gender thing was just one step and now it is a spiritual journey. But in the end, who I am is, well, I am who I am and it more complicated than gender.”

And Rachel responded,

“This is complicated...because it is subjective. Identity is how you view yourself. It doesn't have anything to do with the way other people viewed me because it was false. It was the way I wanted them to see me. It had to do with the mask I was wearing. Gender wise, I didn't feel right until I got the surgeries and got the things that I needed to do and I feel comfortable in my genderism. As a woman I feel totally comfortable with that. I don't feel any regrets, I don't feel the need to have a penis, I don't have a need to be anything other than who I am. It's actually pretty simple, other people like to make it more complicated than it really is. It is like you are talking about two different things that are related but they are not fixed with each other. So, yes.”

The transgender individuals in this particular study lived lives in which their physical presentation to their respective external worlds was a male presentation. In short, the participants presented as heterosexual men whose gender characteristics were

in accordance to the normative male model. However, the participant's internal gender identities were far from the external gender display. They each had fixed, hegemonic positions in their worlds, reinforcing the normative binary. Yet, each struggled intensely as they internally identified as female, thus fighting against their physical assignment on binary oppressing their true identity. External identity was fixed everywhere. Internal identity was fixed everywhere. Yet, they felt their true identity, the melding of the two, was nowhere. And they had to make a choice. They chose to fight for their gender presentation to more closely align with their internal feelings. In the next section, I will synthesize the stories from these brave participants and how their experiences help communication scholars understand gender, identity, and identification.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

This is a study about the transgender experience which adds a significant and important perspective on gender, identity, identification, and the relationship between gender and identity. The most important conclusions to explore in this final chapter is the lengths people will go to support gender social constructs, reinforcing the immense strength of social construction of gender. The idea that social constructs are intensely powerful is of no great surprise to those reading this paper. However, the way in which this power manifests communicatively in the collective narrative of the participants, demonstrates a unique influence. This final chapter will demonstrate how this thesis challenges what “transgender” means, the power of identification with social constructs, and the ultimate contradiction in reproducing these constructs while at first glance, they are challenging them. Below, I first offer an overview of the findings. I then synthesize the data and explore three important themes of theoretical significance. I conclude with the limitations of the study and future directions for research.

### **Overview**

Work on transgender persons focuses upon what transgender actually means. As mentioned in the literature review, Mason-Schrock (1996) notes that transgender persons “believe they were born in wrong-sexed bodies and want to remedy the mistake, eventually through surgery” (p. 176). This was demonstrated in the collective narratives in the findings. Participants felt “wrong” about who they were and who they wanted to

be. They felt they were acting in the roles that were prescribed to them based on an appendage. Yet, as Ekins and King (1999) note, the transgender person is transcending space and time, always reaching for the potential identity to which they ascribe. They use the term “transgender” to highlight how this experience is outside categorical placements (see also Cashore & Tuason, 2009). This study adds to understanding what transgender means by demonstrating the power of identification through narrative, when the physical representation does not suffice in expressing the dynamism of identity. The transgender person does not identify as either female or male, amplifying the disconnect with their biological sex, and there is no construct with which they identify. In this study, the narratives of the participants fill in that gap providing a narrative of identification that aids in understanding what a transgender construct might be.

The findings of this thesis propose that the narratives of transgender individuals demonstrate how the elements on which identifications are formed are constantly changing (Weick, 1995, cited in Kuhn & Nelson, 2002), but that as the life process continues the surgery was almost an end goal that participants thought would end the battle of never fitting into the social construction of gender. However, drawing on postmodern theory, an important contradiction emerged.

In particular, when one considers that human beings will remove their genitalia and replace it with another, the palpable strength of social construction emerges. Participants thought that surgery would be the answer to a more cohesive existence within the gender system, and in many ways it was. However, when participants note how they felt post surgery, an incredible contradiction emerges. In the findings, participants’ stories represented a collective narrative that they felt the surgery was “an



afterthought,” but are relieved to have a more concrete identity and “not live in the grey.” Thus, the very gender constructs they aimed to escape with surgery were actually reinforced by the surgery. While always identifying with femininity, these individuals needed to materially and symbolically transform their body in order to fit with social constructs and norms. From this contradiction, we learn that gender and identity, while connected, are not inextricable. In fact, participants identified with both male and female norms, but came to feel that their material body did not symbolically match with what they most closely identified. Over time, because they did not feel comfortable in society, they came to negatively identify with their physical body and its symbolic meaning. In other words, while scholars have long understood identity to be fragmented and plural (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004), this study demonstrates that gender is also multi-faceted and plural

### **Misidentification and Disidentification: The Extremities of Symbolic Dissonance with Our Bodies**

The participants in this study all were born with male genitals. None of them reported hating their penis until later in life. However, all of the participants reported feeling a disconnect with their identity and the gender construct enveloping them early in life, approximately between the ages of five and seven. What they initially recall is they did not identify with the ways other boys were acting and the ways in which they were expected to act. Rachel at age five, recalled, “Back then, I was trying really hard to be what everybody expected me to be.” Because they did not identify with the ways boys were acting, all participants noted searching—they searched for something with which to identify. The default was with female/girl ways of enacting relationships, and

their identity. However, participants note that this was not a perfect fit. For example, one participant notes about her post surgery experience, “I just felt it wasn’t right being forced into something that just didn’t fit.”

In essence, the transgender person does not have a choice to be an identity of their own because there are no alternative social gender constructs with which to identify. They can only be a boy or a girl. Participants narratives highlight that if it were possible to wave a magic wand and make all social construction of gender disappear, the transgender person would not have come to hate their biological bodies.

When first reading the data, it appeared that gender and sex and identity were inter-related and co-dependent, however a closer analysis highlights that biology, a penis, really has nothing to do with the transgender person’s identity outside of social construction. It could be a neutral appendage. However, over time this appendage becomes deeply symbolic because it segregates the transgender individual into symbolic practices, roles, and norms that feel unnatural. This identification process with the penis begins to isolate the individual from “safe” or “natural” states of being.

For instance, Erin, having a penis, was segregated into roles: football player, boyfriend, husband, soldier (she was drafted into Vietnam), and aggressive manager. Erin landed, rather, felt forced into these categories solely based on her genitals. Without a penis, she felt she would not have been segregated into these categories. However, she felt that her physical body now did not match with the social constructs and meanings with which she identified. All of the participants experienced similar segregation based on their genitals.

It is important to be clear that I am not making the claim that some of the participants did not identify with being a boyfriend, husband, soldier, etc. For example, I am not making the claim that while being a husband, Erin, or any of the participants who married, did not enjoy the love they felt from their partner, or satisfaction from completing military accomplishments. Rather, what is important to note here is with what participants identified and how these identifications were tied to one gender or another with no room for a third or fourth gender construct option. For example, Erin who was a father and a husband wanted to be the caretaker and take on the nurturing role in the family as well as be an accomplished soldier and business leader. The culture within which she lived did not allow for a multi-layered construct wherein all the qualities she sought were permitted equally. In this way, Erin's gender options were limited, and therefore Erin's identity options were as well.

Due to the power of social construction and the deeply defined sense of gender in our society, participants did not find any social constructs that provided the level of intimacy they sought in their marriages, working relationships, friendships, or physical activities that were "appropriate" for the male gender. This arguably could be true for all males, yet for these participants it was particularly powerful because male gender norms did not make room for the particular aspects of relating to others that the study participants sought. Participant's narratives demonstrate that Western Society demands congruence with binary gender constructs. Yet, if we accept that identity is fluid and dynamic (Trethaway & Ashcraft, 2004), then this study demonstrates how fluid gender is as well. Gender, for the transgender individual is simultaneously both male and female and neither male nor female. Identity and gender are connected, but not

synonymous. Identity is plural, fragmented, and dynamic. Gender here is fluid and fragmented, and dynamic. It is the constructs that do not change. For the participants, the gendered constructs were so constricting and the symbolic meanings were so mismatched with their biology, that it was enough to drive them to almost end their lives.

It makes sense then that over time, when the crisis of misidentification becomes so desperate, the default culprit of this mis-identification, this alienation, would be the penis. But in reality, the penis would have absolutely no bearing on the identity of the transgender individuals if the penis had not become symbolic of gender and the roles one is to play within one gender or another. Participants all felt that there could be no penis if they were to continue living. Rather, there could *only* be a vagina because of the binary polarization of gender. We live in a hegemonic binary system, wherein there are two genders, two sex organs, two sexualities, etc. The participants did not “choose a vagina,” rather “they did *not* choose a penis.” The vagina was a default neutral organ that desegregates the participants from the male gender roles and activities that did not suit their internal identifications. Postmodern feminism suggests that through stories, we can know a community. The transgender experience defies our Western narrative structure. The transgender narrative defies Western structure because they actively speak both the he and she experience and the non-he and non-she experience. Their narratives can show scholars the need for more language structures around gender, which is liberating scholars from the Western narrative paradigm.

Postmodern scholars argue that while people are agents in choosing what is meaningful in their lives and how they identify, they are never fully free-agents

(Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). Postmodern scholars also argue humans are always already implicated in the present by forces. Thus, the transgender participants are agents of their own bodies, their own futures. However, they are implicated and grapple with the immense strength of socially constructed gender constructs. They identify as women to the extent that they do not identify with how men are expected to act (macho, impassionate, unemotional) and the roles they play (not wanting to be the father who is uninvolved or the breadwinner). They identify with the socially constructed roles, interactions, artifacts, and ultimately the meanings of womanhood that they are willing to make the choice to fundamentally alter their biological body in order to match with those identifications.

### **Societal Alignment Surgery: Getting It Close Enough**

The weight and significance of the experience of participants cannot be minimized here as they spent their life savings. So, the question then becomes, why would participants pay upwards of \$30,000 to change their bodies and choose a vagina (or not choose a penis)? By virtue of the monetary exchange, participants made a conscious choice to change their biologically sexed bodies, they are making a choice for themselves. They are, in one sense agents for change, and in another agents for reinforcement of social norms.

The transgender person makes a choice to have a biological sex change or an “alignment” in order to align with social constructions. But in choosing the default biological organ, the transgender person does not have a choice in which gender to choose, the vagina is a default. It is a default to allow the transgender person to more happily exist in a society that would otherwise segregate them and their penis to

expected roles and behaviors and institutions in which they find extreme discomfort. Such discomfort that it drove them to seriously contemplate and even attempt suicide. So, in a sense, the vagina is a ticket to a party to which they would otherwise not be invited.

The transgendered individual's choice in gender is implicated in that there is really no option for him or her. This leads back to the power of social construction of gender. These individuals were so unhappy in the male gender role that they, finally, changed their bodies to release them from that role. Yet, when I asked each participant about the surgery, they spoke as if it was an afterthought. Yes, they were happy the penis was gone, and yes, that makes sense as it was a relief. The appendage that had taken on the demonic role/power of segregating them into places that made them feel horrible was gone.

Jenn said, "In some ways, it (surgery) was very important and in other ways it is kind of like an afterthought... It is nice because I am legally a female. I legally cannot go into the men's bathroom." They risked their lives to change their bodies. They spent all their life savings to change their bodies. They lost family and friends to change their bodies. Yet, they speak about it as an afterthought?

This is an extremely important finding to note because it highlights that our physical presentation, our material bodies, communicate who we are to others in such a powerful way that the participants of this study were willing to fundamentally alter their bodies to perpetuate gender constructs that did not really fit, but were close enough. The surgery was an afterthought because it was not for the individual, but for society. Transgender participants aligned their physical bodies not only for themselves, but also

for us, for society. In many ways, it could be considered a mutilation of their body for the sake of others, an act of utility. They changed their bodies for us, for a society whose social construction of gender is so strong it cost participants over \$30,000 to get it close enough to the right party, yet in many cases this act cost them their relationships, employment, civil rights, etc. However, it bought them a new chance a life that was a better fit, even if not quite the right fit.

Post-operative, in their minds, they did not change; their identities did not change. Their body changed to match the social expectation surrounding their desired behaviors and interactions. Living for over 45 years as men, they acted for us, for society, desperate to hide their true feelings; true desires to have intimacy, softness, and emotions that did not match any of the social constructs available. But female was the closest option. Through the surgical removal of the penis, the symbolic construct and all the expectations were removed and replaced by the new placement of a vagina. They are now more easily allowed to live as they always dreamed yet still captured by social constructs.

Postmodern Theory aids here in that postmodernist's goals are to emancipate. We live in a culture where gender norms are created and perpetuated on a moment to moment basis deeply rooted in a rigid binary system. It is this reality that must be subverted for emancipation toward a more balanced communication where there are equal opportunities for all narratives representing differing identities. This study demonstrates the need to create a new identity construct(s) that does not require surgery. This is a large change, but it begins with new language; again, language being the gender construct for the participants. As participants narrate, they begin to break the

mold and not only set themselves free but also set scholars, who have the opportunity for developing more sophisticated theories about difference and the limitations of the human condition, free from constraint. This also can help human rights activists free in their own narratives, wherein they are not limited solely to two options for identifying.

As participants in this study narrated their experiences, the contradiction of escaping and reinforcing gender constructs also provides an opportunity to push beyond binary identities into multiple ways of seeing and understanding oneself. Transgender is less about transcending time and space, and more about creating a category that transcends the binary.

### **The Violence of Reinforcing the Hegemonic Gender Binary**

The third and final contribution for this study focuses on how the transgender person simultaneously both breaks the hegemonic order of gender while reinforcing the same binary constructs that enslaved them for more than half of their lives. They reinforce the societal party invitation: men are allowed to this party, women are allowed to that party. I want to make clear that I am not blaming the transgender person for the perpetual binary systems dominate in our culture. Rather, this is a demonstration of the power of social construction and the contradiction that comes from sexual realignment surgery. Our social construction of gender alerted these people at a very young age that if they did not conform, they would be ostracized and condemned. Thus, they conformed. In doing so, they oppressed how they identified and how they related to others. Performing and presenting in this way became too painful. In order to live in a society within their own body in a way that was not oppressive, they went to the extreme of physical alteration. This choice actually reinforced the current binary gender options.



If there were other gender constructs available, they would not need to suffer the social, mental, and physical pain of surgery. These participants transcend the current constructs of gender and highlight the need to alter the social constructions. Gender is not binary, but multiple. They bought the right outfit for the party they wanted to attend. They all at once transcend gender, while reinforcing its static nature.

We can look at the transgender experience as being something hugely unique. But the reality is, this is a universal experience; a participatory conforming process through which we all go. As a feminist scholar, the narratives of the transgender experience opens doors previously closed to the academic canon. As scholars, we have at our hands the ability to challenge social constructs, not only in our research, but in our classrooms and our communities. The transgender narrative construct is an active construct, dynamic at all levels, and one, as a postmodern scholar, to be celebrated. We can look at the transgender experience as not only liberating for those trapped in societies demands, but also in our own academic constructs of good research.

### **So What Is a Postmodern Feminist to Do?**

Postmodernists are concerned with the following: (a) the centrality of discourse, (b) fragmented identities, (c) the critique of the philosophy of presence, (d) the loss of foundations and master narratives, (e) the power/knowledge connection, and (f) hyper reality (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 266). I cannot conclude my study without staying true to the foci I intended to use to discover the hopeful emancipatory nature of the transgender experience. As a postmodern feminist, I must complicate the findings just a bit by revisiting postmodernity's concerns because the emancipation was limited in scope.

From the collective narrative of the transgender participants in this study, it was evident they lived their lives with fragmented identities. In order to lessen the fragmentation, they all made the decision to change their sex. And while on some level it looks as if they are emancipated from the deep fracture, I see they are further trapped by the gender institution's grand narrative. These women were living as individuals with penises who felt the deep desire for intimacy, for relationships, for pretty clothing, for motherhood, and other things deemed "feminine" in larger society. It was the grand narrative that told them they were wrong sexed. As a postmodern feminist, the claim can be made that we should celebrate a body with a penis who wants to "wear pretty things," have intimate relationships, and otherwise perform femininity. But the women in this study were collectively desperate to conform to a society that was ostracizing them because they had a penis.

At first, the collective transgender experience critiques the philosophy of presence or any traditional notions of reality. And that is a beautiful thing. I celebrate the courage these women had to make their identities known; coming out to their friends and family as a male sexed individual wanting to have the socially constructed experience of women. What courage it must have taken, such courage I hope to never have to muster. The individuals in this study though, all attempted to land in the traditional notion of reality where individuals experiencing the social construction of what it means to be a woman must definitively have a vagina. They are now participating in the power/knowledge system that rejected those most of their lives attempting to match their narrative to the Grand Narrative of gender and sex.

Their narratives try to present a unified identity with being a woman but they still struggle to fit. Jenn said she knows people watch her moving and that “women don’t move like that...hopefully that is going away.” And Jenn was worried that if she didn’t have a vagina she couldn’t authentically play a part in the Vagina Monologues. Tiffany reported feeling like “I am falling down on the job (of being a woman).” And she said, “once it is all said and done, it really is about finding... finding some way for me to be happy and serene and content about my life. And the gender thing was just one step...” I say it was one giant step to conform to the master narrative where artificial constructions of signs, aka the social constructions of the penis and vagina, are more real than the signs themselves (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). For these transgender individuals, their gender is bodied. And this is the source of much of the tensions emerging across their life stories.

Why can’t we celebrate a feminine penis? Why can’t we have feminine penis talking about the sexism illuminated in a production of the Vagina Monologues? Because the master narrative disallows it. The same master narrative that will never fully accept the male to female transgender individuals no matter how hard they try to master a woman’s physical presence or attempt to alter their voices. The transgender conformity has engaged with the already established discourse, norms, and claims, and has reified the normative orchestration and has re-subordinated the oppressed party, themselves. This demonstrates the need to create room for and celebrate alternative narratives and allow them to stand on their inherent worth alone. In the next section, I expand upon the limitations of the study as well as the opportunities brought forth.

### **Limitations and Future Action and Research**

For this study, I was able to interview five transgender individuals. While the results were enlightening and powerful, one cannot help but wonder how the study would have been altered with more participants. Also, the age demographic of the participants was limiting. Each participant is now between the ages of 49-60. They all hail, generally speaking, from the same generation, wherein language for transgender did not exist. With an ever-growing population of transgender people in our country, diversifying the age would most certainly show more about our contemporary cultural norms around sex and gender. Adding to the total number of participants would also affect the results of such a study.

All of the participants transitioned in Idaho. While the focus of this study was not acutely on sexism, or heterosexism, it could have been interesting to see how heterosexism exists in Idaho, one of the reddest state in the union. I could have asked more specifically about the discrimination these folks experienced. As mentioned above, with more diversity in age, the shift (or lack) of cultural norms in Idaho may have been illuminated.

All of the participants were educated through college. Each participant had at least a college degree, with at least two post-bachelor studies. There is an inherent privilege with education; interviewing transgender folks with a barrier to education is a great future study to see how privilege affects access to resources. The suicide rate amongst transgender people is very high, and I wonder if and how access to education affects that rate.

All of the participants are male to female. They each had their penises removed. In a female to male transition, the vagina is replaced by a penis. It would be interesting to see if the vagina became a negative symbol for the individual seeking to become male sexed. Was the vagina a neutrally charged symbol? The vagina is inherently less obtrusive than a penis. Does the addition of a more obtuse appendage make it more significant? Does the addition of cultural symbol of masculinity, strength, dominance, affect the mindset of a female to male transgender person? Is there a sort of, what I would like to term, “Tarzan Effect.” Does the penis not only symbolize power, but does it also empower the female to male transgender person in an oppositional way compared to the male to female experience.

Finally, while I have made the claim, or inferred that because there is a lack of third or fourth gender, the default for the participants in this study to have a vagina, I did not set out to actually land on this conclusion. Because this was not necessarily the aim of my findings and I was not aware of the results during the interviews, I did not directly ask the participants if they feel they belong to a third or fourth gender or if they believe gender is actually irrelevant. In many of their responses, to other less direct questions, we as researchers can make inferences as to their thinking, but for a more accurate depiction of the transgender experience, this direct question is essential for future studies.

Feminist scholars have long argued for the inclusion of narratives other than white men (Rakow & Wackwitz, 1988). There have also been critiques of feminist scholarship by feminists and other critical communication scholars that “warns of the danger of simplistic presentations of voice that essentialize a feminine nature and

common experience, thereby obscuring differences” (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004, p. 105). This study offers freedom for developing more sophisticated theories about difference and the limitations even some of the most liberated views of society offer. Irigaray (1985) argued, for man to discover something in the woman, not within view, that is not of his own fantasy or assignment. This study allows the scholar to see beyond male and female, beyond penis and vagina, beyond belonging and not belonging. This study exemplifies the dynamic reality of the human existence and the importance, as Hardman and Taylor (2000) put it, “to hear, record, and help others hear some of the breadth and strength of the voices of women often not heard” (p. 3). This study shows critical scholars, from each and every canon, that voices are not male or female, that experience is not male or female, that even motherhood and fatherhood is not female or male. All experience is situated and significant through the lens of the speaker and all voice is to be protected and revered.

The LGBTQ population is growing by the minute, especially in the younger generation. It is imperative for scholars to listen, to read, the elicit the narratives of this particular population, not only for the good of the LGBTQ folks, but also to protect and preserve communication scholarship as relevant and proactive. Look around your classrooms, your campus, and your community. Many in this population are presenting their identity to a culture trapped in rational thought. Many are hiding their identity in fear of others trapped in rational thought. And, still, many are unaware of their identity for fear of surrendering rational thought. We have reached a space in time to liberate our research. We can be a part of a historical movement more powerful than words can express, because words are now just being connected to make space for such liberation.

Communication scholars have a duty to their canon to question rational thought and liberate themselves, their students, and their community. When we, as communication scholars, can begin to see ourselves as less of a gendered population, produce genderless research, create genderless communication, we will blaze trails in academe, as well as blaze trails for those who cannot blaze for themselves.

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APPENDIX A

**Interview Questions**

### Interview Questions

1. Can you contextualize your life a bit? Where you grew up, parents, family, etc.
2. Do you remember a time in your childhood that you realized a disconnect with your body?
3. How did you come to realize this disconnect? What did you do about it?
4. What kind of relationships did you have growing up?
5. Did you marry?
6. As a married man (if applicable) how did you manage your multiple roles? Did you identify as a husband? Father?
7. To whom did you come out to first? What was that conversation like?
8. Was there a moment that you recall knowing that you were going to make the commitment to surgery? Can you replay that for me?
9. What did your friends and family think? How did you attempt to articulate your situation?
10. How old were you at the time of surgery?
11. What was it like when you awoke after surgery? Did you feel differently?
12. Is there a difference between gender and identity? Can you separate them?
13. Is there anything I have not asked you that you feel needs to be shared?

APPENDIX B

**IRB Approval Letter**



**DATE:** January 31, 2011

**TO:** Jamie Lange (PI)  
Natalie Nelson-Marsh (co-PI)

**FROM:** Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
c/o Office of Research Compliance

**SUBJECT:** IRB Notification of Approval  
Project Title: *The Transgender Persons Narrative Identity*

The Boise State University IRB has approved your protocol application. Your protocol is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance (#0000097) and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46).

**Review Type:** Full Board  
**Approval Number:** 008-SB11-028  
**Annual Expiration Date:** January 30, 2012

**Your approved protocol is effective for 12 months.** If your research is not finished within the allotted year, the protocol must be renewed by the annual expiration date indicated above. Under BSU regulations, each protocol has a three-year life cycle and is allowed two annual renewals. If your research is not complete by **January 30, 2014**, a new protocol application must be submitted.

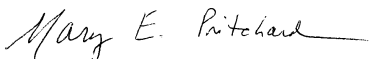
About 30 days prior to the annual expiration date of the approved protocol, the Office of Research Compliance will send a renewal reminder notice. The principal investigator has the primary responsibility to ensure the ANNUAL RENEWAL FORM is submitted in a timely manner. If a request for renewal has not been received 30 days after the annual expiration date, the protocol will be considered closed. To continue the research after it has closed, a new protocol application must be submitted for IRB review and approval.

All additions or changes to your approved protocol must also be brought to the attention of the IRB for review and approval before they occur. Complete and submit a MODIFICATION/AMENDMENT FORM indicating any changes to your project.

When your research is complete or discontinued, please submit a FINAL REPORT FORM. An executive summary or other documents with the results of the research may be included.

All relevant forms are available online. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, 426-5401 or HumanSubjects@boisestate.edu.

Thank you and good luck with your research.



**Dr. Mary E. Pritchard**  
Chairperson  
Boise State University Institutional Review Board